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Pathways to Degree Completion of Female Nontraditional Students: the Role of Institutional Intervention at a Public Four-Year Research Institution

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PATHWAYS TO DEGREE COMPLETION OF FEMALE NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS:

THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL INTERVENTION AT A PUBLIC FOUR-YEAR RESEARCH INSTITUTION

by

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ABSTRACT

Female nontraditional students are returning to undergraduate studies in increasing numbers. Limited research has been conducted about how female nontraditional undergraduate students enrolled in public four-year research institutions perceive their educational experience. This qualitative interview study describes the lived experiences of female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies at one four-year public research institution located in the southeastern United States. The phenomenological design captures the distinct personal experiences of the study's participants within the study site and helps to answer to the study's overarching research focus: How do female nontraditional undergraduate students perceive their experiences at a public four-year research institution and the institutional initiatives designed to attract and retain them? Thirteen female nontraditional undergraduate students' responses to the research questions provide a deeper understanding of the phenomena from the participants' perspectives. Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging provides a conceptual framework for analyzing how female nontraditional students approach and adapt to the enrollment in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution of higher education. A thematic analysis of the interview data reveals three major themes that the college-going experience is a complicated process for female nontraditional students, that the campus experience matters to female nontraditional students, and that institutional support in both academic and social belongingness areas is key to the satisfaction and ultimate completion of degree among female nontraditional students. The findings from

this study can encourage conversations on public four-year campuses directed toward improving how institutions assess, develop, and implement programs and services to influence academic success among female nontraditional undergraduate students. These findings are significant for universities similar to the study site and for researchers who want to understand female nontraditional students across institutional types. Recommendations for educational practice focus on the development, availability, and accessibility of programs and services to encourage retention and academic degree completion among female nontraditional undergraduate students.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Female nontraditional students are returning to complete undergraduate degrees at four-year institutions in ever-increasing numbers. As these students return to institutions of higher education, administrators seek ways to provide guidance to the policies and programs aimed at recruiting, retaining, and encouraging academic completion for the female nontraditional students. The focus of this research is on the female nontraditional students' perceptions of their experiences as undergraduate students at a public four-year research institution and the institutional factors that provide support for these students in the academic pathway. Female nontraditional student exhibit unique characteristics, motivations, and needs that require understanding for the development of institutional policies and programs that address these differences and promote and facilitate the academic success of this group of nontraditional students. The intention of this study is to use the perceptions of the participants concerning their experiences on campus to inform the institution as to which of the institutional factors offered at public four-year research institutions are most effective in producing improved academic success rates among female nontraditional students.

Data issued by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) in 2017 indicate that the over 40% of the postsecondary students are nontraditional students. Furthermore, female nontraditional students comprise over 60% of the nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate programs in higher education. The NCES projects

that by 2025 an enrollment of female nontraditional students in higher education will surpass 6 million students. At present, female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate education number over 3 million nationwide. The enrollment numbers of female nontraditional students are rapidly becoming an important component of the undergraduate student body and as such compose a group presenting both academic and financial concerns to four-year institutions of higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, Projection of Education Statistics to 2025, 2017). And yet, post-secondary institutions persist in focusing the majority of their policy and program efforts on those students from age 18 to 24 who comprise their traditional collegiate population.

As a part of this issue, female undergraduate students are influenced by factors unique to their circumstances. Administrators involved with enrollment, academic services, financial resources, and student affairs at postsecondary institutions can benefit from the recognition and understanding of these unique characteristics in order to realize how policies and programs can influence the academic pathways of female nontraditional students (Kasworm, 2010). Analyzing the characteristics of female nontraditional students provides institutions with a more descriptive picture of the issues facing female nontraditional students. Studying the factors that influence the academic pathways of female nontraditional students can contribute to the development of effective methods for increasing persistence, retention, and completion rates among these students.

Research has been conducted about the factors that contribute to college students' adjustment and success in college. Regardless of the age of the student, all must successfully transition and adapt to college life if they are to persist through the completion of their educational goals. Whereas the traditional student generally moves

from the role of high school student to college student, nontraditional students are more likely to be transitioning from the role of employee or stay-at home parent to that of college student. Many nontraditional students are not leaving a role behind to move into a new role but are often adding another role into their existing lives. Research shows that being able to effectively negotiate these multiple roles is critical to their success as a student (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Renn & Reason, 2013; Schuldt, 2011).

Public four-year research institutions face challenges in determining the factors that affect retention of female nontraditional students and in using the information to enhance the academic experience of these students to encourage retention and completion. While researchers have investigated the motivations and impediments for nontraditional students in postsecondary education, current research surrounding the issues faced by public four-year research institutions in developing an academic environment to provide support and encouragement for female nontraditional undergraduate students is limited (Lin, 2016). A study of the perception of institutional initiatives from the viewpoint of female nontraditional undergraduate students can yield findings that enhance our understanding of this phenomenon. This understanding, in turn, will enable the policy makers at public four-year research institutions to ensure that programs and policies directed towards female nontraditional students are implemented in a positive and constructive manner for all concerned.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the academic experiences of female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution in the southeastern United States. Additionally, the study examines how

public four-year research institutions influence the pathways of female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate coursework. Some institutions have developed programs and initiatives designed to increase the retention and academic completion among female nontraditional students. Research indicates that the efforts to encourage and support female nontraditional students improve completion rates among these students. However, there is little research that specifically focuses on public four-year research institutions and the policies and programs these institutions offer. This study seeks to discover how the female nontraditional students describe their educational pathways, specifically, their perceptions of the factors that influence their academic experiences and their perceptions of the institutional initiatives designed to help them.

This study will contribute to a body of scholarship on a topic that has limited current coverage in the literature (Lin, 2016) as well as inform four-year institutions as to how female nontraditional students perceive the educational pathway at a public four-year research institution. The results of this study will be important for four-year campuses, particularly large public campuses, because it can provide administrators with information about the needs of female nontraditional students as they consider the development of initiatives designed to encourage the academic retention and completion of this group.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

1. How do female nontraditional students describe their undergraduate academic experiences at a public four-year research institution?

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2. What are female nontraditional students' perceptions of the factors that

influence their academic success at public four-year research institutions

3. How do female nontraditional students perceive the institutional initiatives

designed to address their academic needs?

Background

Nontraditional students (25 years of age or older) are rapidly replacing traditional

students (under the age of 25) as a majority on campuses of higher education institutions

(NCES, 2017). Of the nontraditional students enrolled in postsecondary education, over

60% of these students are female. With the decline in enrollment of traditional students,

postsecondary institutions recognize that the nontraditional student population presents

an opportunity for the growth in enrollment in higher education (NCES, 2017).

The enrollment of nontraditional students on college campuses contributes to the

financial health of the institution and provides a means to develop an educated and

trained workforce necessary for continued economic growth (Pusser, Breneman,

Gansneder, Kohl, Levin, et al., 2007). The workplace of the 21st century presents rapid

technological changes which require nontraditional students enrolling in higher education

to seek higher levels of academic and technical knowledge to remain relevant in the

workplace.

The following statements support the need for higher levels of skill and

knowledge for nontraditional students (Pusser, et al. 2007).

- Over 60 percent of the U.S. population, or 65 million people between the ages of

25 and 64 had no postsecondary education credential in 2004.

- Demographic shifts are expected to worsen the gap between qualifications and job demands, creating a shortage of qualified workers.

- Growing numbers of adults are participating in postsecondary and work-related courses; yet as many as 37 million more adults are interested but unable to participate.

- Nontraditional students are financially independent, work part time or full time, have dependents, and must juggle many responsibilities with school.

- Nontraditional students have lower postsecondary persistence and completion rates than traditional students.

- Understanding the unique needs of nontraditional students is critical to designing higher education systems and policies that support this population and promote their success.

In 2007, Kaziz noted that nontraditional students composed 45% of the undergraduate enrollment in higher education, yet postsecondary institutions continued to focus their efforts on traditional age students. Nontraditional students require different policies and programs to encourage persistence and completion of academic goals. Data provided by the National Center for Educational Statistics in 2017 confirm the increasing enrollment of nontraditional students in postsecondary education. The enrollment of students over the age of 24 years is expected to increase by 15% between the fall semester of 2014 and the fall semester of 2025. These increases translate into an enrollment increase of nontraditional students from 20.2 million in 2014 to 23.3 million students in 2025 in a period of eleven years. The projected increase will occur on top of

the 32% increase in enrollment at institutions of higher education from 2000 to 2014 (NCES, 2017).

While nontraditional student enrollment in postsecondary education is expanding rapidly, undergraduate enrollment of traditional students aged 18 to 24, which rose by 33% between 2000 and 2014, is expected to rise by 13% between 2014 and 2025. From figures provided by the NCES researchers project that the percent of nontraditional student enrollment will increase steadily over the next decade while the percentage increases in enrollment of traditional aged students begins to slow.

Thus, the composition of enrollment numbers at postsecondary degree-granting institutions is beginning to reflect higher enrollment numbers on the part of the nontraditional students and specifically female nontraditional students. Several factors offer explain this phenomenon. A share of the changing situation can be attributed to the trend including a declining rate of population growth among individuals from 18 to 24 years of age (NCES, 2017). More significantly, the growth of female nontraditional student enrollment in postsecondary education can be attributed to the heightened level of awareness of the importance of a college credential linked to work stability, financial support and related life opportunities (Kasworm, 2003). More female nontraditional students possess a greater sense of urgency concerning the restructuring of jobs in the workplace. Many of these jobs now require additional technological skills and recognition of the globalization of the economy which impacts the work lives and personal lives of adults. Additionally, adults in the workforce exhibit increasing expectations which require access to new knowledge through collegiate participation (Kasworm, 2003). These factors contribute to promoting the return of female

nontraditional students to institutions of higher education to earn academic degrees and certification credentials.

As the enrollment numbers of nontraditional students are increasing in postsecondary education, it should be noted that not all types of institutions are affected equally by the changing composition of student enrollment. In fall 2015, there were 17.0 million undergraduate students attending degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States. Some 10.5 million undergraduate students (62%) attended four-year institutions, while 6.5 million (38%) attended two-year institutions (NCES, 2017). From fall semester 2000 to fall semester 2015, four-year public institutions of higher education saw an increase in enrollment of 25% while enrollment at four-year for-profit institutions increased by 166% and enrollment at four-year private nonprofit institutions rose by 27% (NCES, 2017). The enrollment of female nontraditional students reflects these trends in institutional choice. Enrollment of female nontraditional students is strongest in the two-year institutions and community colleges, as well as non-profit four-year institutions and for-profit institutions.

This study, however, will focus on their experiences at public four-year research institutions. This, in turn, may provide information as to how to attract female nontraditional students and provide them with support to complete desired academic goals.

Additionally, the level of enrollment (e.g., full-time, part-time) is uneven among nontraditional students and traditional students. Of the undergraduate students at four-year institutions in fall 2015, 8.1 million attended full-time and 2.5 million attended part-time (NCES, 2017). Female nontraditional students are more likely to be enrolled on a

part-time basis regardless of the type of institution. As with other nontraditional students,

female nontraditional students identify time, personal, and professional constraints that

direct them towards part-time academic enrollment. At four-year institutions, the

percentage of full-time undergraduate students enrolled in fall 2015 who were traditional

students (under the age of 25) was much higher at public and private nonprofit

institutions than at private for-profit institutions. At public and private nonprofit four-

year institutions, 11% of the full-time undergraduates were over the age of 25. At public

four-year institutions 86% of full-time undergraduates were under the age of 25. At

private nonprofit four-year institutions 89% of full-time undergraduates were under the

age of 25. At private for-profit four-year institutions, however, just 31% of full-time

undergraduate students were under the age of 25. In fall 2015, the percentage of part-

time undergraduate students under the age of 25 was higher at public four-year

institutions and private nonprofit four-year institutions than at private for-profit four-year

institutions.

The accumulated data show the growing impact of female nontraditional students

in postsecondary institutions. While their position in four-year for-profit institutions is

still significant, their role in four-year public and private nonprofit postsecondary

institutions is expanding. As such, institutions of higher education find it essential to

identify the female nontraditional students, their motivations, goals and needs. By

identifying the unique traits of female nontraditional students, institutions begin the

process of developing policies and practices designed to support these students and to

encourage retention and degree completion.

Significance of the Study

There is a need for further inquiry that will identify the institutional factors and initiatives that effectively target the needs and challenges unique to female nontraditional students who enroll in post-secondary educational institutions. While research about this topic has been conducted on a limited basis within two-year institutions, community colleges, and for-profits, there is a gap in the research pertaining to public four-year research institutions. Currently, many four-year institutions focus on traditional students. Many of the published articles discussed in this study's literature review focus on the needs of adult learners in individual institutions and suggest possible interventions relevant to those specific contexts (Benshoff, 1992; Bowl, 2001; Flint, 2000). Although looking at specific interventions is meaningful, it is important for institutions to engage in benchmarking in order to determine and build on the policies and programs that have fostered the success of adult students at four-year institutions. Such benchmarking could foster the creation of services, policies, and programs offered to adults across the nation to the benefit of all non-traditional students. The research conducted and the data derived from this study can provide an understanding of the differences in academic experiences encountered by female nontraditional students in higher education. The research can provide insight into the factors that support and promote academic success for female nontraditional students in these institutions. The research results can provide guidance for public four-year research institutions as they attract, retain, and facilitate completion among the expanding numbers of female nontraditional students.

Leaders in both academic and student affairs are faced with increasing numbers of nontraditional students (Kipp, 2002; Lumina, 2006; NCES, 2017). As over 60% of the

nontraditional students returning to higher education are female, a deeper understanding of these students beyond the core demographic data at a institution could be useful to institutional leaders if universities are to better serve this specific population. This study investigates female nontraditional students' needs as considered in the literature and presents the results of a phenomenological qualitative study gained through interviews with female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies on the campus of a public four-year research institution. The study intends to determine the extent to which female nontraditional students' needs are being met in the pathway through academic completion at the institutions.

Nationally, total enrollment in higher education institutions is increasing with a total enrollment in degree-granting institutions expected to increase between 2006, the last year of actual data, and 2017 (NCES, 2017). As enrollment climbs, much of the student population will continue to seek education that offers an academic degree. "The number of associate degrees is projected to increase 8% overall; the number of bachelor's degrees is projected to increase 16% overall, and the number of master's degrees is projected to increase 28% overall" (NCES, 2008). Students seeking these degrees will consider the type of institution they would prefer to attend. Nationally, two and four-year institutions will see an increase, with the greater growth being seen at four-year institutions. The expected increase in the population of 25- to 29-year-olds plays a large factor in the future of higher education. Between 2006 and 2017, enrollment is projected to increase: 27% for students who are 25 through 34 years old; and 8% for students who are 35 years old and over (NCES, 2008).

Although these figures show that the number of nontraditional students is rising on postsecondary campuses, the increases do not necessarily mean that the programs, services, materials, and policies most likely to support their success are in place. Higher participation rates do not necessarily mean that issues and challenges related to academic success have been resolved (Schuetze, 2002). Nontraditional students at four-year institutions face issues in gaining access to, persisting in, and achieving success in higher education. These enrollment projections suggest important policy, curriculum, financial, and administrative implications for postsecondary education institutions. Dramatic changes have taken place in the composition of the student body to include more nontraditional students in the context of higher education; yet, institutions have not kept pace with the reality that they must serve a diverse student population that includes a diverse group of nontraditional learners (Flint, 2000; Schuetze, 2002).

Developmental needs, issues, and stressors for female nontraditional students differ considerably from those of male nontraditional students and younger traditional-aged students. When compared to male nontraditional students and traditional students, more female nontraditional students tend to have responsibilities of caregiving for children or other family members. Female nontraditional students may be single parents, work full-time, and may have concerns about their academic preparation and ability to juggle personal and professional responsibilities. There is a greater likelihood that female nontraditional students will enroll on a part-time basis. Therefore, in order to accommodate female nontraditional students, many aspects of higher education practice must be rethought and reconfigured. And, certainly, institutions are beginning to rethink academic and student affairs programs. The ability of any given institution to adapt

existing programs and develop new services to meet the needs of nontraditional adults will directly impact its success in attracting, retaining, and graduating adult students (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2006; Benshoff, 1992; Schuetze, 2002).

Current female nontraditional students are often workers who focus on learning new skills to adapt to today's workplace. Higher levels of education and training and a drive for lifelong learning are expected by employers, as confirmed by the growth projected in enrollments of 25- to 34-year-olds as described previously. Bailey and Mingle (2003) noted that between 1980 and 1997, 34 million new jobs were created that required some form of postsecondary education, while about 7 million jobs were eliminated that required only a high school diploma. Employers concur. In "Raising the Bar: Employers' Views on College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn," the Association of American Colleges and Universities surveyed executives in the private sector and reported that 96% of employers will put the same or more emphasis on hiring employees with bachelor's degrees in the future.

Leaders of higher education institutions are beginning to identify this shift in employers' expectations and to consider modification of plans. Higher education leaders will need to understand the knowledge society that is emerging as a construct demanding strategic action for creating better access to higher education opportunities (Brennan, 2008). Bowl (2001) suggested that an increase in access needs to be accompanied by a change in the culture of higher education institutions thus providing benefits to mature and non-mature students alike.

Even though institutions of higher education serve large numbers of nontraditional students, a gap remains between the need and the ability to provide and support relevant interventions. To positively affect the economy, higher education institutions and employers can increase their support for this market of students. Without this commitment, U.S. workers and the U.S. economy could be left behind in a global society. With most tomorrow's jobs likely to be filled by today's workers, how do we ensure adults at every level on the educational ladder are able to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to keep up with a rapidly changing workplace? (Bailey & Mingle, 2003).

Methodology

The focus of the research study indicated that a qualitative research design was the most appropriate method of inquiry. A qualitative design allowed for a deep investigation into how participants develop meaning and interpretations within their experiences and addressed the scope of the research questions. To develop the appropriate protocol and rigorous qualitative inquiry, a phenomenological interview study was conducted to determine how female nontraditional students explained a specific life experience (Glesne, 2016). This method of inquiry allowed for the researcher to investigate and describe the female nontraditional students' perceptions, assumptions, and experiences at a public four-year research institution.

Through the exploration of the female nontraditional students' perspectives of the academic pathway at a public four-year research institution, the participants were at the center of the study's overarching research question: how do female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies at a public four-year institution perceive the

institutional initiatives designed to promote their retention and academic success? A

phenomenological interview design was appropriate because of the study's deep focus on

a homogeneous population: female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate

programs at a public four-year research institution. According to Seidman (2006) "at the

root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other

people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9). The study's

phenomenological focus presented a lens that allowed for interpretations as well as

providing a description of a similar lived experience.

The study was conducted in the spring semester of 2019. The University of South

Carolina, a public four-year research institution, was chosen as the site. This institution

was chosen because of the limited amount of research concerning the experiences of

female nontraditional undergraduate students at public four-year research institutions.

Furthermore, the specific university site was selected using the definition of purposeful

sampling. According to Patton (2015), purposeful sampling reflects a method that

enables the researcher to identify cases that are saturated with information that applies to

the research questions (Patton, 2015). The University of South Carolina was also

selected for convenience. I am employed at the institution and had access to the site and

possible participants.

Data were collected through personal interviews with 13 volunteer participants

drawn from the designated population of female nontraditional students enrolled in

undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution. The participants were

asked to respond to a series of questions concerning the impact that institutional

initiatives had on their academic success. The interview questions were semi-structured

allowing for more probing questions and for more detailed analysis of the academic and social experiences of the female nontraditional students enrolled in a public four-year research institution.

The participants were queried about their perception of the academic pathway and the types and availability of institutional initiatives designed to increase retention and completion by the female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution. The participants were asked to identify their usage of the institutional initiatives and their perception of the effectiveness of the institutional initiatives in forwarding their academic goals. Furthermore, the accumulated responses to the questions were intended to discover patterns and trends in the data for the purpose of identifying how the perceptions of the institutional initiatives of the female nontraditional students correlated with their academic experiences at a public four-year research institution.

Once the data were collected from the participants, I analyzed and interpreted the accumulated results received from participant interviews using coding analysis. I employed a thematic analysis to determine and describe the participants' perspectives and perceptions (Roulson, 2010). Generally, thematic analysis provides the benefit of identifying themes among the participants' comments and reflections and minimizes the researcher's agenda (Roulson, 2010). Because I employed a thematic analysis, I developed categories, which are presented as a level of interpretation, within interviews and gathered themes across the interviews (Glesne, 2016; Saldaña, 2013). I used analytic memos throughout the study to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of my data (Saldaña, 2013).

Definitions of Terms

The following definitions for these terms will be used in this research study:

Nontraditional students – Undergraduate students who are 25 years of age or older and possess one or more of the following traits: delayed enrollment in postsecondary education, attend part-time, financially independent, work full-time while enrolled, have dependents other than a spouse, are a single parent, or lack of a standard high school diploma. These students are also referred to as adult learners.

Female nontraditional students – Undergraduate students characterized by the definition of nontraditional students and who identify as female in gender.

Traditional students – Undergraduate students who are usually 18-24 years of age, usually a recent high school graduate, dependent on parents, may work part-time, if at all, attend school on a full-time basis, reside on or off campus, and have no major family or financial obligations.

Persistence - The process in which an undergraduate student remains enrolled at a post-secondary institution from one academic term to the next (not including summer), until educational goals are attained.

Retention – The process within the post-secondary institution of encouraging undergraduate students to remain enrolled at the institution until students achieve their educational goals.

Completion – The process indicating that an undergraduate student has fulfilled all the academic coursework and activities required by the post-secondary institution to earn a degree.

Institutional initiatives – Policies and programs designed and developed by a postsecondary institution to reflect the intention of the post-secondary institution towards addressing undergraduate students' needs and challenges.

Summary

This study examines the perceptions of institutional factors and initiatives and how they affect the academic pathways of female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution. Institutions can utilize the findings of this study to provide a deeper understanding of the issues that influence the retention and completion of female nontraditional undergraduate students. The findings contribute to a body of research designed to enlighten policy makers and administrators at public four-year research institutions about the unique issues facing female nontraditional students. Public four-year research institutions can determine which of the initiatives are instrumental in promoting academic success among female nontraditional students. Additionally, this study and the findings will contribute to scholarly research in this area by increasing the body of knowledge with regards to public four-year research institutions.

The body of literature on nontraditional undergraduate students is growing, but research on the issues surrounding female nontraditional undergraduate students enrolled in public four-year research institutions is limited. The findings of this study are important for both a scholarly audience and practitioners in postsecondary education. Studying the female nontraditional students' perspective of institutional initiatives and the academic environment using a phenomenological study provided insight into the challenges faced by female nontraditional undergraduate students and a deeper

understanding of how institutions can support female nontraditional undergraduate students. Administrators at public four-year research institutions can use the findings to inform decision making about policies and programs designed to affect the academic environment for female nontraditional undergraduate students. With greater information and insight, institutional initiatives can be directed towards improving the academic pathways of female nontraditional student success.

The synopsis and the research questions presented in this introductory chapter provide a focus to the literature review presented in Chapter Two. Chapter Three presents a discussion of my methodological design, design choice, as well as how validity and reliability will be asserted. The findings of the study are presented in Chapter Four, and the conclusions are included in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

How do female nontraditional undergraduate students perceive the effectiveness of institutional academic initiatives designed to encourage their success? This review examines the existing literature and major viewpoints pertaining to the nontraditional students with specific emphasis on female nontraditional students in the published literature directed at understanding the nontraditional students and their unique characteristics, and the motivators, challenges, and institutional initiatives concerning nontraditional students which were described by researchers and scholars. This study examines three research questions:

1. How do female nontraditional students describe their undergraduate academic experiences at a public four-year research institution?

2. What are female nontraditional students' perceptions of the factors that influence their academic success at a public four-year research institution?

3. How do female nontraditional students perceive the institutional initiatives designed to address their academic needs?

The topic of nontraditional students returning to postsecondary education for undergraduate degree completion has attracted the attention of scholars and institutional administrators. Scholarly research articles and books, policy briefs, government reports, and institutional documents indicate interest in further research on nontraditional students in postsecondary education. Current research focusing specifically on the experience of

female nontraditional students in postsecondary education was less common. Researchers identify a need for greater clarity concerning female nontraditional students and their unique characteristics. Thorough descriptions of the current institutional initiatives for increasing retention and completion rates among female nontraditional students in postsecondary education could provide insight in the evaluation of the effectiveness of these methods.

The literature presented in this chapter represents over 50 reports, scholarly works, and other documents focused on nontraditional students with information noted on female nontraditional students where these students are mentioned. The literature was collected from the scholarly journals that report quantitative and qualitative research on nontraditional students and the factors that motivate nontraditional students to return to postsecondary institutions. The literature illustrates personal, external, and institutional factors that contribute to the increasing enrollment of nontraditional students in higher education. This literature provides the foundation for further inquiry.

The literature identifies facts pertaining to the personal, professional, and educational goals of nontraditional students. A review of the articles indicates the challenges and motivators influencing the postsecondary pathways of nontraditional students. The research documented in the articles notes differences among nontraditional students based on gender, age, and life experiences. Additionally, the literature identifies the initiatives that public four-year institutions of higher education provide to encourage and support nontraditional students in their educational endeavors.

This literature review is organized thematically, divided into four sections: Nontraditional Students Returning to Higher Education, Factors Affecting Retention and

Completion Rates of Nontraditional Students, Female Nontraditional Students, and Institutional Policies and Practices. In "Nontraditional Students Returning to Higher Education," I review the studies and research regarding the impact of nontraditional students returning to postsecondary education. Most of the works were published from 2000 to 2015 as current research findings and statistical data presented a more accurate and relevant description of the nontraditional students returning to college campuses. More up-to-date information also indicated the present and future impact of nontraditional students on postsecondary institutions. Historical references were included in this section as the past movements of nontraditional students to higher education set the stage for the current trend. Seminal works were described when the literature remained relevant to the current situation with nontraditional students.

Initially, the body of literature describes and explains the anticipated impact of the nontraditional students returning to higher education from the institutional, economic, social, and personal perspectives. I reviewed research describing the unique motivational factors that encourage nontraditional students to return to higher education, and the distinctive characteristics of nontraditional students which require attention and responses by postsecondary institutions in the development of policies and practices intended to serve the needs of nontraditional students. Studies provide descriptive analyses of the characteristics of nontraditional students in higher education including the distinctive personal and environmental characteristics that set nontraditional students apart from the traditional-age students. The literature reflects a broad coverage of nontraditional students returning to postsecondary education without considering gender differences.

In the next section, "Factors Affecting Retention and Completion Rates of Nontraditional Students," I examined the specific dimensions of the recent higher education literature to explain the factors which influence the retention and completion rates of nontraditional students in postsecondary education. A review of the literature indicated that nontraditional students are influenced by a complex interplay of internal and external factors. The literature notes that both internal and external factors present nontraditional students with challenges to their academic success.

In the third section, "Female Nontraditional Students," I reviewed articles and reports which identify traits, motivations, goals, and interests that are gender specific. Though the amount of current research conducted with a focus on female nontraditional students in postsecondary education is scant (Lin, 2016), there were some reliable research articles available for examination which identify the distinct traits of female nontraditional students. The available literature examines the factors that motivate female nontraditional students to persist and to achieve their academic goals in postsecondary education. This section of the literature review was meant to reflect the significance of gender differences in informing policy and practical guidelines directed at female nontraditional students

In the fourth section, "Institutional Policies and Practices," I examined the dimension of recent higher education research literature to explain the role of postsecondary institutions in the development of policies and practices to support returning nontraditional students. Research indicates that institutions develop and employ a wide range of programs in response to the needs and interests of nontraditional students returning to postsecondary education. The literature review included the

analyses by researchers intended to determine the effectiveness of these initiatives from the perspective of the nontraditional students. I concluded this section with a synthesis that illuminated which policies and practices are most effective for supporting retention and completion of nontraditional students.

In the "Synthesis," I briefly restated the critical conclusions from my review of each of the aforementioned sections and indicated how these may be organized or "fit into" a framework that provides a foundation for explaining and justifying my research questions. This foundation includes the elements of 1) the impact of nontraditional students returning to postsecondary education, 2) the factors influencing the academic retention and completion rates of nontraditional students, 3) the postsecondary education experience of female nontraditional students, and 4) the types of institutional policies and practices that support and encourage nontraditional student academic retention and completion. These elements are reflected in my research questions. The selected topics are utilized with the understanding that the gaps in the literature may be identified and recommended for further research studies. A discussion of Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging is included in this chapter to provide the rationale for using this conceptual model to interpret the study's findings.

Nontraditional Students Returning to Postsecondary Education

Nontraditional students in postsecondary education represent a rapidly expanding population in the evolving climate of higher education (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015). For the past thirty years, nontraditional students have returned to postsecondary education in increasing absolute enrollment numbers and in an increasing percentage of the undergraduate student population in relation to younger traditional

students (Choy, 2002). The return of nontraditional students to postsecondary education affects the students themselves as well as the institutions in which they enroll. Their ultimate academic success will contribute to changes in the workforce and economic growth as well as promoting personal goals such as self-satisfaction and encouragement of social and family advancement. Despite these shifts in higher education practice and the significance of nontraditional students in postsecondary education, scholars have been slow to give attention to the nontraditional student's presence and especially the impact of their enrollment in the nonprofit sector of postsecondary education (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007)**.**

Nontraditional Students

Nontraditional students, also referred to as adult learners (Cross, 1981; Deggs, 2011), are defined and described in the literature by highlighting several distinct characteristics. Nontraditional students are viewed as a heterogeneous group representing differences in age, gender, race, ethnicity, and religion as well as a variety of beliefs, attitudes, lifestyles, interests, needs, and goals. The lack of homogeneity among nontraditional students presents challenges to postsecondary institutions in the attempt to develop policies and practices that address the interests and needs of these students. Despite the challenges for postsecondary education, nontraditional students with their unique traits bring a diverse and enriching assortment of knowledge, skills, characteristics, and demographics to the postsecondary learning environment (Francois, 2013).

Nontraditional students are most commonly identified by researchers as individuals 25 years of age and older (Kasworm, 2003; Council for Adult & Experiential

Learning, 1999; Keith, 2007; NCES, 2017; Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, 2011). In addition to the technical description by age, researchers include additional traits in their descriptions of nontraditional students. Cross (1981) identifies adult students as individuals who return to school either full- or part-time while maintaining responsibilities such as employment, family, and other aspects of adult life. Researchers further define nontraditional students as individuals who are over the age of 25, have roles beyond that of a student (e.g., primary caregiver), are enrolled part time, do not attend college immediately after high school, are employed full time, and/or commute to campus (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Hagelskamp, Schleifer, DiStasi, 2015; Kasworm, 2003; Langrehr, Phillips, Melville, & Eum, 2015). Compton, Cox, & Laanan (2006) describe nontraditional students as individuals who possess at least one of the following traits: are financially independent from their parents, have dependents other than a spouse, are single parents, or do not have a high school diploma. Nontraditional students as described by Francois (2013) are over 25 years of age, have a minimum of three years of separation from college studies, are returning to seek an associates, bachelors, masters or doctoral degree; and are dealing with life changing or life transition crises. NCES (2017) employs a comprehensive description of the nontraditional students as an individual having one or more of the following seven characteristics: a) delayed enrollment in postsecondary education, b) attends part-time, c) is financially independent, d) works full-time while enrolled, e) has dependents other than a spouse, f) is a single parent, or g) lacks a standard high school diploma (Horn & Carroll, 1996).

For the purpose of this study, nontraditional students are defined by age in conjunction with the components included in the list provided by the National Center for

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Educational Statistics as the definition given by that organization includes the most comprehensive list of characteristics. Nontraditional students possess distinct characteristics which are reflected in the academic motivators as well as the challenges they face when returning to postsecondary institutions to continue their undergraduate education. Most institutions are beginning the process of identifying the differences in nontraditional students and developing a response to the differences.

Impact of Nontraditional Students in Postsecondary Education

The U.S. Department of Education (NCES, 2017) reports there were 17.5 million undergraduate students attending degree-granting postsecondary institutions in America in the fall of 2013. Among them, 31.2% were students who were classified as nontraditional students over the age of 25. Furthermore, female nontraditional students comprised 61.2% of the total nontraditional student population. This report mirrors early studies that female nontraditional students have become the fastest growing population in colleges and universities (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002).

In 2007 approximately 65 million individuals or 60% of the United States population identified as adults between the ages of 25 and 64 had earned no postsecondary education degree (Kazis, et al., 2007). This number provides postsecondary education with a picture of the future large number of potential nontraditional candidates for admission to their institutions. Enabling these nontraditional students to complete degrees provides the opportunity of financial growth for them and the economy as they can provide skills for many types of jobs (Pusser, Breneman, Gansneder, Kohl, Levin, et al., 2007). The impact of nontraditional students will be felt in postsecondary education for the next decade and beyond as record numbers

of these students enroll in collegiate undergraduate programs. Data provided by the National Center for Educational Statistics in 2017 detail the actual total enrollment in 2000 and 2014 as well as the projected total enrollment in degree granting postsecondary institutions in 2025. The enrollment of nontraditional students is expected to increase from 8.1 million in 2014 to 9.7 million students in 2025 in a period of eleven years (NCES, 2017). The enrollment of female nontraditional students is projected to increase from 5.7 million in 2014 to over 6 million in 2025 (NCES, 2017).

Choy (2002) presents data indicating that as much as 73% of all undergraduates are nontraditional in some way, making them the majority rather than the exception on today's campuses. As a result of the increasing enrollment of nontraditional students, the composition of undergraduates on postsecondary campuses reflects a change in age distribution, life experiences, and motivational influences among the undergraduate students. Institutions recognize the necessity of identifying the characteristics that distinguish nontraditional students and their needs in order to address the challenges to retention and degree completion for these students. The differences that exist among the group of students labeled as nontraditional present difficulties for institutions in their attempts to construct programs and services that support these students. The unique traits that identify nontraditional students consist of a range of factors including age and life circumstances.

Motivation of Nontraditional Students

A distinct set of motivating factors wields influence on nontraditional students in their return to postsecondary education. The increased nontraditional student participation rate in postsecondary education is deemed to be indicative of the changing

beliefs by adults over the age of 25 and our society about the importance of a college credential linked to work stability, financial support, and related life opportunities (Kasworm, 2003). Nontraditional students are identified as a diverse group with a complex set of traits, beliefs, internal demands and external pressures. Many of these nontraditional students bring with them unique needs that should be addressed by academic institutions, both inside and outside of the classroom (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). A wide range of personal and external factors motivate nontraditional students to return to postsecondary education. A study by Quimby and O'Brien (2004) describes the importance of the exhibited tendency of self-motivation in the decision-making process and persistence of nontraditional students. Nontraditional students recognize the importance of the learning material and its pertinence to the accomplishment of their goals (Jinkens, 2009). They are more serious about postsecondary education as they have identified a specific reason to attend college.

Nontraditional students cite career advancement, financial growth and stability, personal achievement, family influences, self-development, and life-long learning as motivating factors in their decision to return to postsecondary education (Brennan, Mills, & Shah, 2000; Hagelskamp, et al., 2003; Johnson, Taasoobshirazi, Clark, Howell, & Breen, 2016). The opportunity for greater financial earnings and stability are among the top three reasons listed by nontraditional students returning to postsecondary education (Brennan, et al., 2000). Work-related and financial motivators are commonly indicated as reasons to return to higher education. Nontraditional students mention that they seek degree completion to develop more stable financial support of their families. Nontraditional students are influenced to return to postsecondary education due to

changes in the workplace stemming from technological advances and the globalization of the economy (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014). Increasing expectations in adult work environment require access to new knowledge through collegiate participation (Kasworm, 2003)). Over 65% of the jobs in 2020 will require a postsecondary degree, and at least 50% of the fastest growing professions will require a postsecondary degree (Bowers & Bergman, 2016). While 85% of nontraditional students cite career advancement and achievement (Broekemier, 2002) as the main motivational factors for returning to higher education, other responses included family transitions, leisure needs, artistic interests, and education in the life areas of health, religion, and citizenship (Kasworm, 2003).

Postsecondary institutions examine these motivational influences to understand the nontraditional student's rationale for returning to an institution of higher education to earn academic degrees and certification credentials. Postsecondary institutions recognize the differences in academic interests and motivational influences between genders of nontraditional students and between nontraditional and traditional students. For institutions to effectively promote persistence, retention and academic success among nontraditional students, institutions must analyze and respond to the unique characteristics and traits of nontraditional students. In the next section, I discuss the factors that influence the retention and completion rates of nontraditional students. When institutions have a better understanding of this group of students and the factors that influence retention and completion, institutional policies and practices can be designed to address the needs of nontraditional students on their campuses.

Factors Affecting Retention and Completion Rates of Nontraditional Students

Relatively little is known about the persistence of nontraditional students seeking undergraduate degrees on more traditional campuses (Samuel, Brown, and Palmer, 2011). Additional data concerning four-year institutions and their nontraditional student population could provide needed guidance to the efforts of institutions. Research articles and documents are presented to identify and explain the institutional factors that have positive and negative implication for retaining nontraditional students and promoting their academic success. To provide a background, several terms should be defined and explained in the context of this research. From that point, the factors can be identified and analyzed as to the impact they have on the retention and academic completion rates of nontraditional students.

Understanding Persistence, Retention, and Completion

Persistence, retention, and completion are interrelated, yet each has its own key distinctions. Postsecondary institutions need a clear picture of the types and nature of the students who are enrolling and their different needs in order to develop and maintain policies and procedures to encourage persistence, retention, and completion. To successfully encourage and promote academic success among nontraditional students, institutions must address the differences in their needs and develop policies and practices that reflect the awareness of the impact of factors that support academic success.

According to Hagedorn (2005), persistence is considered a student measure and retention is defined as an institutional measure. Persistence is defined as the continuance of academic work in one or more than one institution towards achieving academic goals. Persistence in an academic pathway may direct a student to transfer, to stop from

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postsecondary education for a period, or to continue in an alternative curriculum format (Bergman, et al., 2014). Tinto (2017) describes persistence as another way of describing a motivational quality that encourages an individual to continue in pursuit of a goal even when challenges arise.

Institutions measure the retention of students to determine whether they remain enrolled at a specific college or university for educational purposes (Hagedorn, 2005). Retention represents continuous enrollment of a current student from one academic grading period to the next (Fincher, 2010; Hadfield, 2003; Shields, 1994). Retention may be a result of persistence; however, persistence does not imply that a student continues at the same institution, just that the student continues an education pathway. The difference in these perspectives is relevant to the institution's efforts to increase retention and completion rates.

Completion indicates that a student has fulfilled all the academic coursework and activities as well as institutional requirements established and communicated by the postsecondary institution. Findings from earlier studies suggest that nontraditional students were twice as likely as their traditional counterparts to leave school after their first year (Brown, 2002). In more current research, the findings indicate that nontraditional students are more likely to persist in higher education when compared to more traditional age students (Calcagnoa, Crosta, Bailey, & Jenkins, 2006). Postsecondary institutions should be concerned with strategies to increase retention rates of their students and practices and programs that offer encouragement for nontraditional students to stay, persist, and complete their academic degrees (Tinto, 2017).

Challenges to Nontraditional Students

Factors that impact a nontraditional student's persistence, retention and completion in postsecondary education develop from an array of sources, which create stress and present challenges for nontraditional students. In 2000, roughly two-thirds of working nontraditional undergraduates aged 25 or older reported that work was their primary activity, and among these nearly 70% combined full-time employment with part-time attendance (Berker & Horn, 2004). Those statistics continue to reflect the work-student ratio. Full-time employed nontraditional students make up a large percentage of the undergraduate population and nearly one-half received some sort of financial aid, including one-quarter who received aid from their employers. Nontraditional students deal with the stress of balancing multiple demands and roles at work, at school, and in their personal lives. For nontraditional students, returning to postsecondary education creates another role domain that competes for limited time, energy, and financial resources of these students (Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009). However, full-time work and part-time attendance combined with family responsibilities appear to be barriers to completing academic goals. Even though most employees who study thought it was important to earn a formal credential, 62% have not done so within six years (Berker & Horn, 2004). Among the nontraditional students who left postsecondary education, most decide to do so in their first year (Berker & Horn, 2004).

Several studies describe the challenges or barriers faced by nontraditional students. Cross (1981) produced a foundational study identifying the types of barriers perceived by adult learners. These types of barriers are defined as a) situational barriers "arising from one's situation in life at a given time such as job and home responsibilities"

(Cross, p. 98), institutional "practices and procedures that exclude or discourage working adults from participating in educational activities such as inconvenient schedules or locations, full-time fees for part-time study, inappropriate courses of study, and so forth" (Cross, p. 98), and c) dispositional barriers "related to attitudes and self-perceptions about oneself as a learner" (Cross, p. 98). Situational or personal barriers include those related to individual circumstances (e.g., marital status, presence of dependents), employment (e.g., full-time, part-time), and civic involvement. Institutional or structural barriers refer to aspects of the structure of educational organizations that impede nontraditional students' academic attainment and fail to meet their needs. These barriers include inconvenient class times and office hours, inadequate career planning for adults, and a lack of opportunities for campus involvement that accommodate interests and needs of nontraditional students (Fairchild, 2003). Dispositional or attitudinal barriers refer to intrapersonal attributes such as those occurring within an individual's mind. These factors are more difficult to define and measure and include such issues as the way the nontraditional students view their likelihood of success in an educational setting and how nontraditional students approach academic challenges in the context of their life experiences.

Bean & Metzner (1985) describe the challenges or barriers to adult students and examined how adult students cope with these issues. Their findings suggest that the difference between the attrition process of nontraditional and traditional students is that nontraditional students are more affected by the external environment than by the social integration variables affecting traditional student attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985). External or outside factors influence the decision by nontraditional students to drop out or

withdraw from postsecondary educational institutions. External forces including work and family responsibilities, financial limitations, and the amount of support from family, friends and co-workers have the greatest influence on the decision to remain in education among nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Deggs (2011) analyzed data from adult learners enrolled in an accelerated undergraduate degree program to the perceived barriers of nontraditional students. From the analysis, Deggs identifies three types of barriers including a) intrapersonal, b) career and job-related barriers, and c) academic-related. The challenges occur from issues internal to the individual's mind and method of perceiving and processing information, issues regarding the work environment, and issues stemming from the institution. The findings suggest that barriers are never extinct for nontraditional students, and they must put forth effort to overcome or manage barriers which emerge from their multiple life roles (Deggs, 2011).

The models highlighted in this section detail the barriers that impact the decisions of nontraditional students as they return, remain and complete academic goals in postsecondary education. These models reflect research conducted to interpret the barriers affecting nontraditional students as well to provide direction in developing methods employed to encourage nontraditional students to persist in postsecondary education.   In describing the motivators of nontraditional students, researchers indicate that some barriers can present both challenges and positive influences to nontraditional students.

Factors Influencing Academic Success of Nontraditional Students

Barriers or challenges to nontraditional students in postsecondary education were examined and analyzed for their potential positive influences on these students. The findings from academic studies suggest that some factors considered as barriers and challenges to nontraditional students also provide positive reinforcement and support for nontraditional students as they continue their postsecondary academic work.

Self-motivation and self-efficacy are significant motivators in overcoming barriers and challenges and encouraging persistence and degree completion among nontraditional students. The concept of self-motivation is a strong positive force in promoting the issues of retention and academic completion among nontraditional students. Goto & Martin (2009) found that goal setting and self-motivation are strong indicators of academic retention and completion among nontraditional student as they negotiated challenges while attending postsecondary institutions. Several studies (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Francois, 2014; Johnson, et al., 2016) describe the role that self-motivation serves in encouraging and supporting nontraditional students.

Nontraditional students rely less on extrinsic or external sources for encouragement and support. Much of their determination stems from intrinsic motivation or personal sources of support (Bye, et al., 2007). Nontraditional students require less academic encouragement as they are aware of their goals and promote their way through postsecondary education to accomplish the goals. Nontraditional students identify personal and professional goals as influences that provide them with a strong sense of purpose to achieve. Intrinsically, a strong level of self-motivation and determination provides essential support for nontraditional students in facing challenges and

encouraging them to remain in postsecondary education and to complete their academic goals (Bergman, et al., 2014).

Tinto (2017) suggests that institutions can improve persistence among nontraditional students and retention rates of the institution by encouraging a development of personal self-efficacy, a sense of belonging within the collegiate community, and a curriculum that reflects the strengths and interests of adult learners. Self-efficacy is determined by past experiences and relates to the individual's perception of themselves and their ability to control their environment to succeed in a specific situation (Tinto, 2017). Self-efficacy influences how a person addresses goals, tasks, and challenges. A strong sense of self-efficacy promotes goal attainment. Nontraditional students may return to postsecondary education with uncertainty and a general lack of confidence in their success. Building a sense of self-efficacy requires determination on the part of the nontraditional student and encouragement from institutional services. When institutions provide appropriate support to the nontraditional student as she encounters academic difficulties, the nontraditional student's sense of confidence grows, and her self-efficacy is strengthened.

Nontraditional student motivation to persist can also be determined by their perceptions of the value of what they are being asked to learn. Nontraditional students need to perceive the material to be learned is of acceptable quality and relevance to matters that concern them now and into their future to warrant their time and effort (Tessema, Ready, & Yu, 2012). Nontraditional students approach learning as an extension of life experience and application of those experiences (Bye, et al., 2007). Attention should be offered by faculty to promote autonomous behaviors and to

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recognize the nontraditional student as an active partner in a shared learning experience (Bye, et al., 2007). The curriculum and teaching methods employed towards nontraditional students should ensure that their life experiences are respected and that the approach is reflective of their academic and professional needs. Nontraditional students can be encouraged to reflect on additional benefits from undergraduate completion including self-improvement and personal advancement.

Jinkens (2009) found that time and money constraints have greater impact on the completion rates of nontraditional students than on the completion rates of traditional students. Nontraditional students possess more life and work experience and are more capable in dealing with complex issues than traditional students. They have more activities and responsibilities outside of the educational environment (e.g., work, families) than traditional students. Educational activities generally do not represent the primary activity of nontraditional students as they would for traditional students. Most nontraditional students report higher levels of intrinsic motivation for learning than did traditional students, thus supporting the finding that nontraditional students need less encouragement and support in the learning environment than the traditional students. The differences between nontraditional students and traditional students present challenges and opportunities for postsecondary institutions. Certainly, institutions may consider initiatives that are designed to reflect the differences and to address the diversity that exists on postsecondary campuses.

In reviewing the literature for positive influences on the retention and completion of nontraditional students in postsecondary education, the research of Cross (1981) is used to explain how situational, institutional and dispositional factors can be interpreted

as sources of challenges for nontraditional students in postsecondary education. The research identifies factors that present possible barriers to retention and completion by nontraditional students. The factors also represent positive influences on persistence, retention and completion for nontraditional students. Situational factors such as work and family responsibilities produce stress on nontraditional students, but these factors provide positive encouragement and support as well.

While balancing work and family responsibilities with education pursuits presents difficulties, the literature suggested that a family unit also provides a clear incentive to persist through completion in postsecondary education to provide greater financial support for the family. Nontraditional students recognize that persisting in postsecondary academic goals affords them the opportunity to serve as role models or to provide inspiration to family members. Full time employment represents a demand on the time and the energy of nontraditional students, but many of these students cite career advancement as a motivating and encouraging factor influencing their decision to persist and to complete an academic degree (Castles, 2004; Kazis, et al., 2007). Nontraditional students indicate that pride and a feeling of self-fulfillment contribute to their decisions to remain and achieve academic success in postsecondary education (Leppel, 2002; Markle, 2015). Support from family members and workplace peers offer essential encouragement for nontraditional students enrolled in postsecondary education (Castles, 2004; Leppel, 2002; Plageman & Sabina, 2010).

Factors within the structure of the postsecondary experience provide support to nontraditional students. The access and availability of financial aid support nontraditional students who lack the resources to persist to degree completion (Chen &

Hossler, 2017; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Encouragement and support of faculty who address the academic and personal needs of nontraditional students allows these students to engage in the academic culture (Castles, 2004; Lundberg, 2003). Availability of enhanced services designed to target and support nontraditional students provides a safety net for these students. Nontraditional students who juggle work, family and school responsibilities are encouraged by flexibility in the instructional delivery method, class schedules, class instruction techniques, and curriculum design as well as more articulated plans for obtaining credit for prior academic and work experiences (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). The availability of obtaining college credit for life experiences at for-profit institutions and the ability to transfer credits from previously attended institutions allows nontraditional students to reduce their course credit enrollment and thus reduces the length of the completion process. Shorter programs of study enhance the ability of the nontraditional students to complete at postsecondary institutions.

Researchers find that nontraditional students face institutional challenges stemming from a lack of class flexibility, the level and amount of coursework, the availability of transfer credits, and the acceptance of experiential learning credits (Ross-Gordon, 2011; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Other issues that provide difficulties or uncertainties to nontraditional students in their pursuit of continuing higher education and academic completion are family and work conflicts, financial concerns, academic unpreparedness, lack of sound academic advisement, and personal guidance (Berker & Horn, 2004; Chao, DeRocco, & Flynn, 2007).

Castles (2004) identifies three factors that affect retention of nontraditional students: social and environmental factors including family, friends, and work influences

that are already present in the adult student's life; traumatic factors including issues such as stress that arise in the course of study and must be dealt with by student with or without assistance; intrinsic factors which are internal to the nontraditional student including personal motivation level, approach to learning and other person characteristics. Support of the nontraditional student from family, work, and the postsecondary institution is a key element in projecting academic success. Self-confidence, hardiness, and coping strategies are essential personal components for retention and completion prediction.

Retention and completion issues have plagued institutions of higher education for decades. Institutions use research results to determine the factors which influence nontraditional students to persist through academic completion. The merit of the factors and their weight of influence are described and debated among scholars and higher education administration as institutions try to determine how best to retain students who are enrolled at present (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014). Factors influence nontraditional students in a variety of ways. Many factors produce both negative and positive sources of impact. Increasing the persistence, retention, and academic completion rates among nontraditional students requires that the institution understand the personal, structural, and attitudinal factors that impact these situations and that they design policies and practices to address these issues (Klein-Collins, 2011; Markle, 2015; Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Within the larger group identified as nontraditional students there are segments with unique characteristics requiring further examination for the purpose of this research study. In particular, the literature noted the existence of differences based on gender

(Bradshaw, Hager, Knott, & Seay, 2006; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Compton, et al., 2006; Lin, 2016; Markle, 2015). The postsecondary experience of female nontraditional students is unique within the group of nontraditional students. Female nontraditional students display distinct traits in the postsecondary education environment. Female nontraditional students perceive different motivators and challenges. For institutions to develop effective policies, programs and services, the needs of female nontraditional students must be considered separately from other segments of nontraditional students.

Female Nontraditional Students

Female nontraditional students represent one segment of the diverse nontraditional student population enrolled in postsecondary education. While female students account for over one half of students involved in higher education, limited research has been conducted about the traits and characteristics of female nontraditional students (Lin, 2016). Most of the pertinent literature concerning female nontraditional students was compiled over a decade ago. Thus, there is a need for current research and studies designed to gain insight into the needs of female nontraditional students. Institutions need an understanding of the unique traits of female nontraditional students if they wish to develop programs and services to foster their retention and academic completion. Institutional research could contribute to an understanding of the needs of female nontraditional students. There is a tendency to provide information about the characteristics, interests, needs, and goals of nontraditional students as a homogenous group without regard to gender or other identifiable differences. As there is a lack in the body of research and information in the area of gender differences, a limited number of

articles offer information recognizing differences in traits, motivation, and challenges in the postsecondary education experience based on gender.

The change in societal norms in society is identified as perhaps the single most important contributor for the number of adult women who enroll in postsecondary education (Compton, et al., 2006). For many years, the prototype of the women choosing to remain in the home as full-time mothers and housewives has been irrelevant. Many families are not able to support that notion economically even if they wanted to (Compton, et al., 2006). In the present, for most women, single or partnered, the choice is to be gainfully employed. Women in the workforce face the need for higher educational and skill levels.

Today, females represent more than 50% of the postsecondary education population. Female nontraditional students are defined as female individuals 25 years of age or older with one or more of the seven characteristics included in the NCES description. Female nontraditional students represent over 30% of undergraduate students enrolled in four-year postsecondary education and almost one half of students enrolled in two-year colleges (NECS, 2017). Female nontraditional students accounted for over 60% of the nontraditional student postsecondary education enrollment in 2014. Thus, these students represent a significant number of students within postsecondary institutions. Among nontraditional students, female nontraditional students present a quandary for institutions. Studies indicate that the distinct needs, goals, and experiences of female nontraditional students present exceptions that are often unrecognized and unanswered by institutions (Compton, et al., 2006). As institutions recognize the needs

of these students, policies and programs can be developed to address those needs and to provide the environment for academic achievement.

Female nontraditional students are subject to different motivational influences in considering the return to postsecondary education. Female nontraditional students are affected by different motivators and challenges in the postsecondary education experience. Their personal and professional lives have different bents and as a result, their decision-making process has unique perspectives. Female nontraditional students are affected by these variables in greater or lesser ways than their male counterparts.

Female nontraditional students are often influenced to enroll in college following key life transitions including divorce, work layoff, and children leaving the home (Bradshaw, et al., 2006). The return to postsecondary education by female nontraditional students reflects life and work changes necessitating the development of different perspectives and support systems provided by postsecondary education (Bradshaw, et al., 2006).

Female nontraditional students may return to college with low degrees of self-confidence and low self-efficacy due to limited exposure to academic experiences (Quimby & O'Brien, 2004). The lack of self-confidence can translate into difficulty in the academic arena including poor grades and lack of persistence. However, as their confidence level increases through exposure to academic success, female nontraditional students exhibited higher levels of self-efficacy and the greater assurance of their success in postsecondary education.

Female nontraditional students show determination in coping with challenges and in degree persistence. Female nontraditional students exhibit the desire to persist towards

degree completion and the willingness to expend considerable effort to accomplish goals (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). Female nontraditional students approach barriers and use coping strategies to negotiate these challenges (Leppel, 2002). Their life and work experiences prepare them to juggle several roles simultaneously while continuing in education. These students must develop a sense of belonging to feel engaged in an academic environment. They want to feel as if they are part of community of other students, academics, and professional staff who value their membership (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Tinto, 2017). Female nontraditional students who feel that they belong to a group or an institution are more likely to continue at that institution and to develop more determination to persist to degree completion.

Female nontraditional students indicate career enhancement and the desire to contribute financially and experientially to the family as reasons for returning to postsecondary education (Quimby & O'Brien, 2004). They identify the influence of family in returning to postsecondary education. Female nontraditional report that the support from their families to return and complete a degree was significant in their decision-making process (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2006). Female nontraditional students also reflect that completing an academic degree was important as it gave them the ability to serve as a role model for family members.

The lifestyles of female nontraditional students are more complex than those of traditional-aged students. As a group, female nontraditional students are characterized by diversity regarding number of children, age, marital status, work status, and income. Female nontraditional students balance multiple roles such as mother, spouse/partner, employee, and community members. Role conflicts can affect the overall educational

experience of female nontraditional students. A significant contributor to the role

complexity is responsibility for caring for children. Female nontraditional students

continue to bear most of the responsibility for childcare and for assisting with other

family members. Research supports the more optimistic viewpoint that despite having

more commitments and responsibilities and fewer social supports, the female

nontraditional student can successfully navigate the challenges of postsecondary

education (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002).

Markle (2015) conducted research to identify whether a gender difference is

evident in the persistence to continue with undergraduate postsecondary education and

ultimately graduate. The findings indicate that while the persistence rates do not differ

between female and male nontraditional students, the factors that influence persistence do

differ by gender. Persistence by both female and male nontraditional students is

positively influenced by a better academic performance (higher grade point average) and

by personal confidence in graduation (Markle, 2015). Female nontraditional students

who are enrolled part-time are more likely to persist than those enrolled on a full-time

basis. While female nontraditional students are affected by the interplay of their

personal, professional and educational roles, most do not consider the conflict of their

roles as a reason to withdraw from college but rather as a challenge to overcome in order

to persist and graduate (Markle, 2015).

The academic success of female nontraditional students at postsecondary

institutions may well depend on the ability of the institution to understand and

accommodate their unique dispositional, situational, and institutional needs (Carney-

Crompton & Tan, 2002). Although nontraditional college women reported their

awareness of moderate levels of barriers within postsecondary institutions, they also perceived strong levels of social support (Quimby & O'Brien, 2004). Female nontraditional students report challenges with institutional policies, including cumbersome transfer policies, limited financial aid and the difficulties of successfully completing studies while maintaining jobs and homes (Bradshaw, et al., 2006). While the presence of female nontraditional students continues to grow on college campuses, family, work, and financial barriers to completing a degree continue to exist (Bradshaw, et al., 2006). Female nontraditional students can benefit from institutional programs and services designed to reduce the impact of challenges for nontraditional students. Programs to facilitate transfer credits from past educational experiences, to provide access to financial aid for part-time enrollment, to offer alternative course delivery techniques, and to improve the availability and convenience of campus services offer viable options for female nontraditional students. Effective institutional planning and communication can promote better awareness of the policies and practices designed to support the needs of female nontraditional students and ultimately can provide greater accessibility to these initiatives.

Institutional Policies and Practices

After examining the student side of this issue, I now consider the role of institutions in addressing the academic pathways of female nontraditional students. Institutional policies and practices directed towards nontraditional students are reviewed. The institutional initiatives are examined for their impact on the retention and completion rates of nontraditional students. The institutional initiatives having the greatest positive influence are noted, as well as other initiatives that offer promise in encouraging

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nontraditional students to persist to academic completion. Attention is given to the

obstacles faced by postsecondary institutions in their attempt to provide support for the

academic achievements of nontraditional students. Institutional policies and practices

recognized by researchers, students and administrators for their contribution to support of

nontraditional students in higher education are discussed.

Institutional Policies

Nontraditional students represent a heterogeneous group with a diverse set of

needs, motivations, and challenges (Pusser, et al., 2007). Postsecondary institutions must

understand the issues affecting the nontraditional student population. With an

understanding of the nontraditional student population and the factors that pertain to their

postsecondary experience, postsecondary institutions can offer support to the academic

success of nontraditional students (Pusser, et al., 2007). Past research suggests that

public four-year institutions have attempted to maintain existing plans with the outcome

of serving traditional undergraduate students while ignoring the growing mass of

nontraditional students enrolling on their campuses (Kasworm, 2010). In so doing, most

postsecondary institutions have done little to investigate and improve the relationship

between nontraditional students and the university environment. Four-year public

institutions indicate a notable lack of sufficient policies, procedures, and services

designed to effectively support the success of nontraditional undergraduate students

(Kasworm, 2014). Given societal needs for a well-educated workforce and changing

student enrollment patterns, postsecondary institutions face important challenges in

realigning the undergraduate mission and environment in support of a more diverse

student population including nontraditional undergraduate students (Kasworm, 2010).

Experts indicate that the United States system of postsecondary education can and must do a better job of improving adult learner access and success (Kazis, et al., 2007). Approximately 23% to 65% of the undergraduate population at regional four-year universities and community colleges are nontraditional students (Kasworm, 2010). Institutional enrollment of higher percentages of nontraditional students suggests that these campus environments have adopted policies and adapted practices to reflect the trend of nontraditional students. Institutional policies, programs, and special services targeted towards nontraditional students positively affect the enrollment trend at public four-year institution and two-year community colleges (Kasworm, 2010).

Generally, public four-year institutions serve nontraditional students through a continuing education format rather than providing these students with support in the undergraduate degree programs within the campus framework (Kazis, et al., 2007). For-profit and two-year institutions show a more aggressive approach in serving nontraditional students. Public four-year institutions which intend to offer nontraditional students the opportunity to complete academic degrees should consider developing policies and programs that reflect the academic institutional goals of accessibility, affordability, and accountability towards nontraditional students (Kazis, et al., 2007). As a component of a plan to encourage nontraditional students, postsecondary institutions must practice an ethos of campus inclusiveness towards nontraditional students (Bradley & Graham, 2000).

Establishing a sense of engagement among students in postsecondary education has long been linked to retention and completion rates (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1982). Astin (1984) in his seminal research suggested a movement toward developing

student involvement or engagement as a means of improving the academic outcome for the student. Research indicates that nontraditional students are often not included in the different aspects of college life. Astin's recommendation that institutional administrators consider programs and policies in terms of encouraging student involvement is applicable to nontraditional students as well as traditional students. Tinto (1982) notes in "Limits of Theory and Practice in Student Attrition" that inclusion in the college environment increased the likelihood of retention and completion. Bean and Metzner (1985) note that nontraditional students lacked social integration within the institution. More current research findings present information indicating that students who are closely engaged in college life are strongly influenced to persist through academic completion.

Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2003) cite support for the factor of student engagement in improving postsecondary academic outcomes of nontraditional students. Their research indicates that the burden of responsibility for retention was shared between student and institution (Braxton, et al., 2003). The authors state that while an institution should exhibit integrity and commitment to student welfare, it is incumbent upon the student to understand the type of institution in which the student is enrolled and to understand whether the institution best suits the student's needs (Braxton, et al., 2003). Davidson and Wilson (2013) indicate the importance student engagement in postsecondary education for encouraging retention. While this body of research produced prominent findings, it is important to note that researchers including Astin and Tinto based their studies on traditional-aged students.

A campus environment that encourages co-curricular and extracurricular activities with the intent of increasing retention of students denotes effectiveness when targeting

traditional students. While the terms co-curricular and extracurricular are often used interchangeably, the types of activities encompassed in these terms are different in intent and in experience. Co-curricular activities include activities, programs, and learning experiences that complement what students are learning in their classes and include participation in student newspapers, musical performances, art shows, mock trials, debate competitions, and mathematics, robotics, and engineering teams and contests. Extracurricular activities may be offered or coordinated by the institution but may not be explicitly connected with academic learning. Athletics, both intercollegiate and intramural, are typically considered to be extracurricular activities.

Co-curricular and extracurricular activities do not tend to provide nontraditional students with academic encouragement. Nontraditional students derive a sense of engagement based in their academic learning in the classroom, not through out-of-class and college initiated social experiences (Kasworm, 2014). The academic engagement of nontraditional students recognizes them as adults and connects their current worlds of work, family, and community to the academic content of the classrooms (Kasworm, 2014). Most nontraditional students note that a strong relationship with a faculty member, which is established within the classroom, provides them with a strong level of class-related interpersonal interactions. Many female nontraditional students indicate that they share personal information with their advisors and professors. They note that they place a high value on the support of faculty members (Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, 2011). Although some of them value their student peers, most note their limited time and interest in participating in activities beyond the classroom and with their peers (Kasworm, 2014).

Graham and Gisi (2000) examine the effect of different types of college experiences such as work, course-related activities, and involvement in clubs and social organizations to determine if the traditional ideas about college involvement pertained to nontraditional students. Learning outcomes are affected by engagement in course and related learning activities. However, nontraditional students were more influenced by involvement and satisfaction in the learning environment. The nontraditional student's sense of the college's core values and their perceived concern for nontraditional students appears to have more of an effect than the amount of time nontraditional students spent with campus social activities (Bradley & Graham, 2000; Graham & Gisi, 2000).

While academic and social integration influence student retention and have been used as predictors of traditional student retention, institutions continue to seek additional factors to encourage retention and completion when addressing nontraditional students on campus. Institutions are investigating the unique position of nontraditional students and developing programs and services that reflect an understanding of the needs of nontraditional students and that support the inclusion of nontraditional students in the campus community (Davidson & Wilson, 2013). Postsecondary institutions that identify the needs of adult students and offer services and programs to support the academic experience of nontraditional students indicate that the retention of these students is important to the institution. Institutional initiatives, directed towards serving the needs of nontraditional students, represent a wide range of options. Postsecondary institutions continue to search for the combination of services, programs and practices that best match the needs of the nontraditional student group and are also reflective of the mission and resources of the postsecondary institution (Davidson & Wilson, 2013).

Programs and Initiatives Serving Nontraditional Students in Practice

Policies that espouse inclusion and engagement reflect a postsecondary education environment that is concerned about the academic success of female and male nontraditional students. The attitude of inclusion further encourages the development of programs and services designed to support the needs specifically identified by nontraditional students. Interestingly, there is little reference in the literature concerning the specific needs of female nontraditional students. In general, nontraditional students are considered as one entity for the purpose of institutional policies and programs.

For programs and services to be effective in meeting the needs of nontraditional students, institutions should analyze the nontraditional population and determine which programs and services are appropriate for serving the needs of female and male nontraditional student groups. Offering a program or service for which there is no demand represents a misuse of resources by the institution. The literature suggests that the needs of nontraditional students be correlated when designing programs and services for these students. Programs and services designed for nontraditional students mentioned in the literature include those related to the topics of institutional selection, enrollment, academic advisement, academic support, financial support, curriculum options, and institutional engagement (Chao, DeRocco, & Flynn, 2007).

While the choice of institution influences the postsecondary experience of nontraditional students, many of these students do not comparison shop to determine the institution best suited to their personal and professional needs (Broekemier, 2002) because of location or geographic restrictions. Due to social and economic factors, nontraditional students have a higher likelihood of searching for potential institutions

within a close geographic area (Borekemier, 2002). Nontraditional students require

access to institutional information which presents them with information that offers

options and guidance. Adult students may choose smaller institutions that present fewer

barriers or challenges to the academic success of nontraditional students. Older

nontraditional students may choose community colleges initially and then matriculate to

four-year institutions (Stokes, 2006). Often these students may choose to enroll in the

more welcoming for-profits without possessing information concerning the academic

financial merit of this decision (Stokes, 2006). With their need for academic

encouragement, this group of students may choose private four-year institutions that

represent a smaller environment and a less intimating academic path.

Nontraditional students indicate their choice criteria in selecting an institution for

enrollment included the availability of desired programs of study (majors) and days/times

that needed classes are available, locations of course offerings, cost, and faculty

reputation for high quality teaching (Broekemier, 2002). Adult students require

information concerning the academic rigor and reputation of the postsecondary institution

as well as the data concerning degree completion rates and career placement upon

graduation (Wyatt, 2011). These students often need comprehensive academic

advisement explaining and clarifying academic requirements, course options, transfer

agreements, and credit for experiential learning (von Lehman, 2011). Nontraditional

students require financial guidance including explanations of the cost of the institutional

programs and the types of available loans, grants, and the financial responsibilities

inherent in the financial options (Chen & Hossler, 2017). They need curriculum options

that offer alternatives to the traditional classroom approach, including flexibility in course

offerings, class times, locations of classes (including distance learning), types of instructional methods, and length of academic terms (Wyatt, 2011). Nontraditional students value support services such as remediation, academic counseling, tutorial services, and social services and support on campus and in their lives outside of education (von Lehman, 2011).

The results of one study (Kazis, et al., 2007) indicates that nontraditional students value academic reputation of the institution as well the availability of flexible coursework, the opportunity of future employment, the convenience of the campus location, and personalized attention prior to enrollment. Institutional factors perceived by nontraditional students as supportive include the availability of financial aid; the encouragement and support of faculty; the availability of enhanced student services; the type, location and reputation of the institution; the structure of the curriculum (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002); and the availability of transfer credits from previously attended institutions. Nontraditional students express concern as to their academic preparedness and the availability of tutors and advisement, the time flexibility of classes, the financial burden of higher education, and the balance of the demands of work and of school (Hagelskamp, et al., 2013). Institutions must recognize and address these issues with policies and practices designed to reflect the interests, needs and goals of nontraditional students.

Stokes (2006) indicates that in order to succeed in supporting nontraditional students through to academic completion, institutions of higher education must become more customer-centric organizations that are better equipped to meet the changing needs of their customers, particularly in respect to access and affordability. The goals of access

and affordability should encourage the development of institutional initiatives to allow

nontraditional students to obtain easier transfer of academic credit from institution to

institution, allow more flexibility in course offerings and degree programs, and provide

more supportive financial aid policies for students studying less than full time.

Postsecondary institutions are encouraged to employ more flexibility in granting course

credit for life experiences, more financial guidance concerning loans and grants, and

more campus support for the unique needs of adult students (Bowers & Bergman, 2016).

While this section does not provide a comprehensive list of all services and

programs offered at postsecondary institutions, these examples show initiatives that are

employed by postsecondary institutions to address the needs as communicated by

nontraditional students. According to the literature, postsecondary institutions face

challenges in providing programs and services to nontraditional students. Not all

institutions have the ability to provide a wide range of programs and services.

Postsecondary institutions should consider the types of nontraditional students enrolled in

their student body and attempt to provide those services and programs that can best

address the needs of the nontraditional students. Institutions must consider how to

balance the needs of the nontraditional students with the mission and the resources of the

institution.

Issues Faced by Institutions in Developing Policies and Practices

Institutions face a number of challenges when developing policies and practices

designed to address the needs of nontraditional students. Challenges stem from a lack of

understanding of the characteristics of nontraditional students and how these students

differ from each other and from traditional students on campus. Challenges issue from a

lack of response from the institutional culture in the development of academic programming that reflects the needs of nontraditional students. Institutions face concerns as declining funding opportunities restrict budgets and thus, the development of programs to encourage nontraditional students to remain and complete academic degrees.

Research findings illustrate to administrators in the postsecondary institutions that nontraditional students do not represent a homogeneous group. Research studies on nontraditional students reveal a highly diverse population that is not easily defined. Beyond the issue of gender differences, nontraditional students reflect a range of ages (25 and older), interests, life experiences, motivational influences, needs, and education, personal and career goals. According to Kawworm (2003), it is imperative for each institution to understand its unique nontraditional student population and to develop an institutional database to define both global and specific adult student profiles. Nontraditional students often have jobs, families, community involvement, financial problems, and other external issues that compete with their academic involvement for their time, money, and energy. For these students, attending college means constantly juggling competing priorities. Nontraditional students are a complex and unique group of individuals. Institutions of higher education often treat them as a unit and develop and implement programs as if they are all the same. Plans with this design will not address the complex set of characteristics and needs of this group. Institutional programs and policies must be designed with this knowledge. Institutions should seek to understand the motivation, needs, and traits of nontraditional students and address them accordingly.

Four-year institutions face internal obstacles to serving nontraditional students in a way that facilitates their access, persistence, and success. One of the primary

difficulties in four-year institutions arises from the mission of postsecondary education which is steeped in traditional student needs. "The needs of adults are typically reinterpreted by those with power when they are expected to fit into policies, programs and practices designed for full time students between the ages of 18 and 22" (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001). The shift in the postsecondary population to include more nontraditional students can be viewed as a threat to the traditional way of doing things.

In addition, institutions have difficulty coming up with academic programming that is relevant to and timely for nontraditional students' lifestyles. In fact, it has even been said that programming for nontraditional students is systematically ignored in higher education (Sissel, et al., 2001). Institutions often have a disconnect between their systems and functions and lack administrators who take an active role in raising questions about institutional policies, procedures, programs, practices, and data-collection processes as they relate to nontraditional learners. When institutions are not aware of the needs of nontraditional students, a lack of coordinated effort is the inevitable result. Institutions must plan specifically for nontraditional students' needs instead of assuming that those needs are being met by the services, programs, and policies intended for traditional students.

Institutions grapple with the challenge of developing programs and services to support nontraditional students with declining institutional budgets. The reduction in state and federal budgets has resulted in limited resources to serve the nontraditional student population. Many institutions have no choice but to make up increased costs by increasing tuition and fees. Nontraditional students are less able to make up this difference with financial aid than are their traditional counterparts. Additionally, most

student aid policies favor traditional students attending full-time. Limited financial aid exists for part-time students, a category which includes many nontraditional students. The challenges to institutions in providing programs and services directed toward nontraditional students are evident. Yet, institutions remain committed to discovering methods to promote educational achievements by nontraditional students.

Best Policies and Practices

Despite the challenges in providing programs and services to nontraditional students, many institutions remain motivated to serve this group. Postsecondary institutions value the ideals of open access, support of all students, and egalitarianism (Sissel, 2001). "Best practice" programs in postsecondary education are identified as those employing these following criteria when serving nontraditional students: a) commitment to the student and the student's welfare; b) commitment to the education of all students; and c) commitment to the development of social and academic communities to assist nontraditional students in their integration (Braxton, et al., 2003).

Postsecondary institutions make progress toward becoming adult-friendly because they recognize that by serving the nontraditional student population they are providing a fairer and more balanced access to education and to the personal, economic and career benefits that go with attainment of higher education in light of current technological, economic, and global advancements (Sissel, et al., 2001). Research indicates that postsecondary institutions, particularly community colleges, are making great strides in serving nontraditional students (Flint, 2005).

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Guidelines Developed by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL).

Some postsecondary institutions endeavor to remove barriers to nontraditional students by implementing the guidelines described by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) as the Principles of Effectiveness for Serving Adult Learners (Klein-Collins, 2011). Institutions that implement these principles are referred to as Adult Learning Focused Institutions (ALFIs). From the outset in 1999, the ALFI principles were designed to address the learning barriers of nontraditional students suggesting a variety of policies and practices. The ALFI principles represent a comprehensive program designed to engage nontraditional students; to provide assistance in overcoming barriers in time, place, and tradition; and to create better access to postsecondary educational opportunities (CAEL, 1999). The guidelines recognize that nontraditional students need to be aware of programs that meet their needs and need to know how to access these programs.

The CAEL guidelines recommend that institutional strategies acknowledge the goals of nontraditional students and describe how the institution is prepared to help the nontraditional student attain these goals. Following the principles, institutions should offer curriculum and financial options and flexibility to nontraditional students. Institutions should develop a means for granting credit based on life experience and supply academic support to nontraditional students to encourage their academic development. Institutional technology should provide relevant information that enhances the learning experience for nontraditional students. Institutions should develop relationships with employers to enhance the educational opportunities for nontraditional students. Institutions should provide guidance for nontraditional students through

postsecondary pathways encouraging the achievement of academic and career goals. Institutions should create a campus climate that indicates respect for the unique traits of nontraditional students.

When the ALFI principles are fully integrated in the postsecondary environment, the principles help ensure that nontraditional students can succeed in their academic endeavors and attain their educational objectives (CAEL, 1999). Colleges and universities can assist nontraditional students by using these principles as a guide to recognizing nontraditional students' learning needs, addressing their barriers, and honoring the experience that they bring to the learning environment (CAEL, 1999). With these strategies, colleges and universities can offer the way for nontraditional students to succeed in postsecondary learning and degree completion.

Institutional Initiatives Addressing the Needs of Nontraditional Students

A number of institutions or program units have a history of adaptation to the needs of the nontraditional student population (Ross-Gordon, 2011). For other institutions or programs this effort is more recent. For an institution to succeed in engaging nontraditional students, its mission must inform all aspects of its operations, from its course delivery formats and scheduling to its curriculum, resources, and student services (von Lehman, 2011). Nontraditional students must be able to identify which degree they plan to earn and which courses they must complete to earn it. Nontraditional students must be able to access the required courses at times and places that fit with their busy lives and schedules.

When nontraditional students choose an institution and course of study, they need clarity in determining where they stand in terms of educational progress and what

coursework they will need to reach their educational goals (von Lehman, 2011). Institutions should develop a clear articulation of credit from other postsecondary institutions to improve nontraditional students' understanding of their academic progress (Hardin, 2008). By constructing a database of pre-evaluated courses from other accredited institutions, evaluation of transfer credit can be streamlined. As a result, nontraditional students can determine very quickly how many credits they can transfer to an institution and where they stand in their progress toward earning a degree. Institutions should consider credit for prior learning to reflect the life experiences of nontraditional students and to accelerate the advancement degree completion process (Harmes, 2008).

Curriculum and classroom factors designed to meet the needs of nontraditional students represent an important institutional component in encouraging retention and degree completion. Faculty play an essential role in creating supportive learning environments for nontraditional students by incorporating theory and research on adult learners in their classrooms and by advocating for programs and services that target the needs of nontraditional students on their campuses (Ross-Gordon, 2011). The design and the delivery of educational programs are important to successful undergraduate experiences for nontraditional students. According to Harmes (2008), the availability of online courses is a strong factor among nontraditional students when considering academic programs and services. Selecting locations that provide more convenience for nontraditional students is a best practice for serving these students. As nontraditional students are more self-directed, more flexible course formats and distribution methods are well-suited to their needs.

While most nontraditional students are described as mature and motivated (Lin, 2016), they tend to require support and academic assistance. Recommendations for supporting the academic success of nontraditional student include institutional initiatives that focus on their distinct needs, are readily available, and are clearly communicated to the nontraditional student group**.** Institutions that establish an office for adult services staffed with advisors who are trained to address the needs of nontraditional students provide a strong message of encouragement to this group (Hardin, 2008). By employing advisors and enrollment counselors to address the interests and needs of nontraditional students, the institution can foster a stronger relationship between the nontraditional students and the institution (Hardin, 2008).

Institutions may develop a campus-wide orientation program to address concerns of nontraditional students (Hardin, 2008). Re-entry programs enable nontraditional students to develop confidence in their academic abilities and to provide nontraditional student with methods to manage stress in the academic environment (Hardin, 2008). Institutions create academic support services for nontraditional students with academic deficiencies to ease the transition to postsecondary education (Hardin, 2008).

Institutions adapt curriculum and coursework to the needs of nontraditional students. Alternative course delivery methods including weekend course offerings and expanded distance education programs provide flexibility for nontraditional students (Hardin, 2008). Consideration is given to the development of accelerated coursework to enable nontraditional students to complete courses on their schedule (Donaldson & Graham, 2002). Career counseling and placement services are oriented towards the needs of nontraditional students (Hardin, 2008).

Faculty members are encouraged to create a climate of inclusiveness and belongingness for nontraditional students (Hardin, 2008). This sense of belonging in the postsecondary environment can be fostered by faculty within the classroom by structuring the learning experience to reflect the life experiences of the nontraditional student and by encouraging communication among nontraditional students and their classmates (Hardin, 2008).

To facilitate the process of providing support for nontraditional students, clear communication with undergraduate nontraditional students is recommended to allow for access to programs and services (Harmes, 2008). Hardin (2008) recommends that institutions redesign their website and other communication tools to reflect the interests and needs of nontraditional students and to support their inclusion in the institution.

Research points to a need for institutional change if nontraditional students are to thrive within a system that purports to be directed towards widening participation (Bowl, 2001). Studies conducted at postsecondary institutions on the topic of nontraditional students can foster a better understanding of nontraditional students and their needs (Brown, 2002). Institutions can design and offer programs that address these unique needs as a vital part of the educational community. Policies and practices that encourage the academic integration of nontraditional students through orientation, advisement, and academic support enable these students to remain in postsecondary education and to complete degrees. Institutions can recognize the unique characteristics of nontraditional students and develop a more flexible and open attitude concerning these students and their needs.

The postsecondary education community can incorporate the perspective of the nontraditional student in order to provide support and encouragement for these students. Programs and services can be established to meet the needs of the nontraditional students on campus. The services that incorporate the interests and needs of nontraditional students throughout the institution include academic advisement, financial guidance, simplified registration and enrollment processes, financial accessibility and guidance, and curricula and coursework modifications.

For the institutional plan to be successful in addressing the needs and interests of nontraditional students, clear communication with nontraditional students is essential to provide these students with access to the available programs and services. Postsecondary institutions can consider incorporating the guidelines of CAEL as well as examples from other institutions and research studies when developing policies and practices designed to encourage and support nontraditional students. The institutional goal of supporting education attainment is important for expanding the personal well-being and career path for nontraditional students. The ultimate goal of degree completion and academic success for nontraditional students is reliant upon the role of postsecondary institutions and the policies and practices these institutions employ.

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Synthesis

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Nontraditional students represent an expanding segment of the student population enrolled in postsecondary education. In 2014, there were 17.5 million undergraduate students attending postsecondary institutions in the United States (NCES, 2017). Over 30% of students enrolled in higher education or about 5.25 million students are considered nontraditional students. Notably, female nontraditional students represent

over 60% of the nontraditional group. This means that there are over 3 million nontraditional female students enrolled in higher education. The projections for enrollment of nontraditional students through 2025 indicate the numbers of nontraditional students will continue to increase on college campuses. The enrollment of these nontraditional students represents a trend that will continue to have a large impact on postsecondary campus environments and the success of postsecondary educational institutions.

By definition nontraditional students are 25 years of age or older and exhibit at least one of the following characteristics: a) delayed enrollment in postsecondary education, b) attends part-time, c) is financially independent, d) works full-time while enrolled, e) has dependents other than a spouse, f) is a single parent, or g) lacks a standard high school diploma (Horn & Carroll, 1996). As a result of these characteristics, nontraditional students come to higher education with a different pathway or educational projector than the traditional age students. Nontraditional students do not follow the traditional pathway of high school graduation, college degree completion, and work force employment. Nontraditional students exhibit different motivational influences, academic needs, career interests, and goal orientations from the traditional student population. They do not represent a homogeneous group as nontraditional students exhibit a diverse range of traits. In particular, the trait of gender plays a role in establishing differences in motivation, persistence and degree completion among nontraditional students.

Nontraditional students deal with challenges that restrict and discourage their decisions to remain in postsecondary education and to complete an academic degree.

Female nontraditional students are affected by challenges faced by the entire group but are impacted in different degrees and are influenced by their own set of unique issues. Institutions recognize that employing policies and practices designed for traditional students are not successful in encouraging retention and degree completion among nontraditional students. When institutions explore ways to remove those barriers, they facilitate the academic achievement levels of the nontraditional student population. This institutional goal is important for individual economic well-being, personal career growth, and for strengthening our nation's overall economic competitiveness (Sissel, et al., 2001). In the next decade, nontraditional students, specifically female nontraditional students, will likely represent a significant new source of enrollment and revenue for colleges and universities.

Postsecondary institutions have attempted to attract and manage the retention and degree completion of nontraditional students by employing the institutional policies and practices without considering any differences in needs and interests that are unique to gender. One size does not fit all, and the needs of many of nontraditional students are not met. Thus, they may withdraw or drop out of higher education before degree completion. As the increasing enrollment of nontraditional students creates more impact on total undergraduate student enrollment, postsecondary institutions recognize the importance of matching their policies and practices to the needs and interests of nontraditional students.

Female nontraditional students represent a significant part of the undergraduate student population in postsecondary education. While female nontraditional students are found in all types of institutions of higher education, their enrollment numbers have been consistently concentrated in two-year and four-year for-profit institutions, nonprofit two-

year community colleges, and four-year private institutions. As female nontraditional students seek to attend institutions of higher education, female nontraditional students deal with challenges and motivators that vary in type and scope from those that male nontraditional students face.

Postsecondary institutions can identify and define the unique traits of female nontraditional students as well as their interests, motivational influences, and needs in order to attract and promote academic success among these students. While institutions must be careful to remain true to their mission and their underlying resources, provisions and plans can be developed that best suit the female nontraditional students and the resources and culture of the postsecondary institution. Postsecondary institutions not only will increase enrollment numbers but also will realize an improvement in the retention and completion rates among nontraditional students. Institutions and the nontraditional students they serve will be able to contribute to the workforce and the economy by the development of this plan.

Colleges and universities recognize that the significant size of the nontraditional student populations will have profound impact on postsecondary education. Institutions realize that the nontraditional students have unique needs and that nontraditional students face barriers that differ from those of the traditional student. Institutions are examining policies and practices that can reduce the barriers faced by nontraditional students in postsecondary education. By developing and offering programs and services targeted for nontraditional students, institutions provide support for nontraditional students and encourage the nontraditional student population to achieve higher levels of educational attainment. The institutional goal of supporting education attainment is important for

expanding the personal well-being and career path for nontraditional students. Additionally, the institution promotes higher education attainment that strengthens our nation's workforce and overall economic competitiveness.

Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this study was to learn more about how female nontraditional undergraduate students enrolled in a public four-year research institution perceive the experience and the institutional factors that provide support for these students in the academic pathway. As a new phenomenological work, study examined the students and their lived experiences. The understanding of these experiences was derived from an emic perspective with meaning emerging from the data rather than by imposing meaning through the application of predetermined models or theories. Rather than testing theories against data collected, the work instead focused on generating new concepts. Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging (2012) proved to be a useful theoretical construct when organizing and analyzing portions of the data. Strayhorn's model identifies the basic human need for belonging. While belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis, the need takes on heightened importance in certain contexts and times (Strayhorn, 2012). Sense of belonging is, at the most basic level, whether or not students feel respected, valued, accepted, cared for, included, and that they matter, in the classroom, at college, or in their chosen career path (Strayhorn, 2012). Sense of belonging is related to college students' cognition, affect, and behaviors (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012). In other words, students can think, feel, and act like they belong. For example, a student who thinks (*cognition*) and feels (*affect*) that they belong in class is more likely to show up to class (*behavior*) than a student who does not think and feel that they belong. Sense of

belonging is a basic human need and motivation (Strayhorn, 2012). That is, *everyone needs to belong.* The concept of belonging produces positive outcomes and determines the satisfaction of individuals who involved in the process. This model was used to identify factors that encouraged a sense of belonging among female nontraditional undergraduate students and to examine how those factors affected the students.

Conclusion

The literature suggests several gaps that exist including limited current information concerning how public four-year institutions of higher education provide programs and services with female nontraditional students in mind. There were articles and studies concerning two-year institutions such as community colleges as well as private four-year institutions and for-profit institutions but few concerning public four-year institutions. While community colleges, for-profit institutions, and private four-year institutions represent vital components in higher education, these institutions are not responsible for educating all female nontraditional students who express interest in higher education. Many female nontraditional students elect to study at public four-year institutions. Public four-year institutions are generally larger in enrollment size and are behind other institutional types in recognizing and developing policies and practices designed to meet the needs of female nontraditional students. These institutions are no longer able to ignore these students. Enrollment of female nontraditional students is essential to all postsecondary institutions. The academic success of female nontraditional students in higher education represents advancement for the female nontraditional students, the postsecondary institutions, and the economy.

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CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine and describe the perceptions of female nontraditional students regarding the factors that influence their retention and academic success in undergraduate study at a public four-year research institution. The research study seeks to provide a better understanding of the issues and challenges from the perspective of female nontraditional students that affect their pathways towards reaching their academic goals. Additionally, the research will enable personnel and administrators to proceed from a more informed perspective as they develop policies and programs directed toward female nontraditional undergraduate students to influence their retention and completion. The literature on nontraditional students enrolled at postsecondary institutions indicates the main points and the gaps that exist in research concerning the characteristics of female nontraditional students and the factors that influence their collegiate retention and completion.

This chapter describes the study's research method and includes discussions of the following topics: (a) methodological design, (b) research design, (c) positionality, (d) research site and participant selection, (e) method of data collection, (f) data analysis and coding, (g) issues of trustworthiness, (h) ethical considerations, and (i) limitations of the study. The chapter ends with a summary.

Methodological Design

The study was based in the tradition of phenomenology as it focused on researching the lived experiences of the research participants. This approach allowed the researcher to investigate how an individual comes to understand the world based on her perceptions and experiences of any given phenomenon (Glesne, 2016). The participants and their interpretations of their lived experiences represented the basis of this study, which made it appropriate to conduct the investigation using a qualitative interview study design (Glesne, 2016). The research questions used in this design allowed for the collection of appropriate information from the participants who represent female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate study at a public four-year research institution.

Phenomenological research represents an in-depth inquiry into a topic with a small number of participants who share common characteristics and/or experiences. Phenomenological research involves studying a small number of subjects to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Phenomenology becomes hermeneutical when its method becomes interpretive rather than purely descriptive. Through this research, I attempted to identify and explain the experiences and perceptions of each participant and to examine similarities and differences across cases. I based the study around the transitional event of female nontraditional students' enrollment in undergraduate postsecondary education. My goal was to understand how participants make sense of these experiences by applying phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophies. The research design allowed for the findings to address and to answer the study's three research questions.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach for the collection and analysis of pertinent data. The research design chosen for this study corresponds with the study's problem, purpose, research questions, choice of site, and research sample (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). As my intent was to examine the subjective experiences of female nontraditional students, a qualitative research approach is an appropriate method. A qualitative research approach is a process of inquiry that seeks to understand a problem by forming a detailed picture of the problem, which is accomplished through studying the problem in its natural setting (Creswell, 2013). According to Holloway (1997), this type of qualitative method provides a form of inquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live. Researchers use qualitative approaches to explore the behavior, perspectives, and experiences of the people they study. Qualitative research, also called naturalistic inquiry, was developed within the social and human sciences, and refers to theories on interpretation (hermeneutics) and human experience (phenomenology). Studies utilizing qualitative research methods employ various strategies for systematic collection, organization, and interpretation of textual material obtained while communicating with people directly or indirectly through observation (Malterud, 2001).

Naturalistic researchers obtain data primarily through two different methods, qualitative interviewing and observation of participants during the interview process, that may be used jointly or independently (Glesne, 2016). Qualitative interviewing is the process of obtaining data through questioning. Observation involves watching and documenting participant behavior. This study uses the paradigm of qualitative research

to examine the relationship between the institutional initiatives and the academic success of female nontraditional students. Information concerning a specific participant perception and behavior cannot be answered through observation. Thus, I used in-depth interviews to allow the participants to discuss and explain their responses in order to obtain the desired information. Interviewing provided for more thorough questioning and reflection by the participants. In order to determine the usage and perception of institutional initiatives and programs among female nontraditional students, I conducted semi-structured interviews to collect and analyze data stemming from participants enrolled in undergraduate studies a public four-year research institution. The objective of this approach was to uncover more in-depth and personal reflections concerning the institutional policies, services, and programs directed towards supporting academic retention and completion among female nontraditional students enrolled at a public four-year research institution.

Positionality Statement

As I was the primary interviewer responsible for collecting data in this research study, it is important to explain my positionality as well as my relationship with the research site, participants, and topic. For over 30 years, I have been involved in postsecondary education. In addition to performing duties as a classroom instructor, I served as a student advisor and a departmental administrator during my tenure at a private non-profit four-year women's college. I worked directly with female nontraditional students in developing programs, coursework, and services to meet their needs and to support the completion of academic goals. The relationship with this student group sparked my interest in the research topic. I recognized that the increasing enrollment of

female nontraditional students in postsecondary education will play an influential role in the growth, development, and sustainment of four-year institutions. Additionally, I became aware that the needs and motivations of the female nontraditional students differ from those of the traditional-aged female students. I recognized that the female nontraditional student had more roles to perform and more internal pressure to play all of their roles well.

I developed an interest in researching the perception of the female nontraditional student's experience at a public four-year research institution while attending classes at this type of institution. I noted differences in the policies and programs offered by the public four-year research institutions in the approach and management of initiatives for female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies. These differences piqued my curiosity as to how female nontraditional students perceive the academic experience at a public four-year research institution and how the institutional initiatives offered to them influence their academic pathways.

I recognized that my experience with female nontraditional students and the topic of the study could be a source of researcher bias. Researchers seek to provide transparency as means to support objectivity in the process and to ensure credibility in their research. To avoid the interference of personal bias, I purposefully developed a means of gathering, coding, and analyzing data that included the elements of transparency to prevent researcher bias. I employed these measures to reduce bias and to promote objectivity. The methods are discussed further in this chapter in the section "Issues of Trustworthiness."

Research Site Selection

To ensure that the site provided me with enlightening and explanatory data, I employed both purposeful and convenience sampling to identify my research site. The research site was chosen using Patton's (2015) description of purposeful sampling as a method that allows the researcher to identify cases that are saturated with information that closely relates to the research questions. The purposeful choice of the site for my study was appropriate because the focus of my research was the female nontraditional undergraduate student's perception of the academic pathways at a public four-year research institution. To fully explore the female nontraditional student's perception of the experience, I determined that the female nontraditional students who participated were currently enrolled in an environment where they could have interactions with institutional initiatives designed to influence their academic pathways.

The University of South Carolina was selected as the site for this study because the institution is a public four-year research institution. Female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies at the University of South Carolina in the academic year 2018-2019 numbered around 700 students or approximately 5% of the female undergraduate student population and approximately 2.5% of the undergraduate student population. This enrollment number allowed for an adequate population from which to draw a sample. Convenience sampling also was used in this research study. As noted in my positionality statement, I am a student of this institution which afforded accessibility to my study site, making it convenient to select the University of South Carolina as the research site. Therefore, my site was selected for convenience as well as purposeful intentions.

Participant Selection

Qualitative researchers use purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) in order to seek out specific participants who can provide in-depth data in reference to the topic being studied. Thus, the qualitative researcher has a specific purpose in choosing a sample. The logic of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases, with the objective of yielding insight and understanding of the phenomenon being investigated (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Through purposeful sampling, the rationale for choosing participants is more important than the actual size of the sample (Patton, 2015). Determining the number of participants for a study is a subjective decision made by the researcher, dependent upon the time and resources available (Patton, 2015). Based on the time and resources available for this study, my goal was to recruit a total of 8 to 12 volunteer participants.

To ensure that the participants selected for this study had the experience and the knowledge useful to the research, a criterion sampling model was employed. Criterion-based sampling uses predetermined criteria set by the researcher to select participants with the most knowledge on the topic being studied (Patton, 2015). Criterion sampling works well when all the participants studied represent people who have experienced the same phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

For this study, the criteria used to identify the target population of female nontraditional college students included the characteristics determined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2017): a female student who is 25 years of age or older who delays enrollment in postsecondary education; works full time while enrolled; is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial

aid; has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others); is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents); does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school). Members of the population from which the sample was drawn were 25 years of age or older and exhibited one or more of the other characteristics. By including more than age as a characteristic, I sought to find a group of participants that would have a wider range of life experiences.

The population for this study included female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate coursework at the University of South Carolina, a public four-year research institution located in the southeastern part of the United States. Shelley Dempsey, the director of On Your Time (OYT) Initiatives with the approval of the Provost, provided the means of communicating with the group of students who met the criteria. Female nontraditional undergraduate students in the university database who met the criteria were solicited by email for voluntary participation in the study (See Appendix B). If deemed necessary to increase the level of participation, snowball sampling was considered. Noy (2008) defines snowball sampling as the process by which the researcher access informants through contact information that is provided by other participants.

Data Collection

Data collection began in the spring semester of 2019 when all required documentation for the study was obtained, including approval from the researcher's dissertation committee, approval by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), and consent from the participants. The data for this study were obtained through the utilization of in-depth,

semi-structured interviews that drew upon the concept and characteristics of responsive interviewing. During the data collection phase, 13 female nontraditional students were interviewed individually for a scheduled time of 60-90 minutes. All interviews were conducted during spring semester 2019 at the participants' university. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. By recording the interviews, the researcher was able to transcribe the interviews and conduct a thorough analysis of the collected data. Participants were informed about this process and how the information would be handled after the analysis was completed. Participants were provided with the transcriptions to ensure the accuracy of their responses to questions.

The process of recruiting participants and completing the interview process took approximately two months. Participants were given options for interview appointments during a one-month period in the spring semester of 2019. Reminder emails were sent to encourage participation and to confirm appointment dates, times and locations. Prior to the interview, a copy of the interview protocol was emailed to the participants (See Appendix A).

Due to the emic nature of my study, a semi-structured interview protocol was appropriate as the interview presented the potential to elicit detailed descriptions from the participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). According to Ralston (2010), semi-structured protocol begins with an interview guide, or list of open-ended guiding questions, being semi-structured allows the researcher to probe, asking follow-up questions to get more detail from the participants. This method offers researchers the opportunity to clarify statements and to probe for additional information (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The participants may lead the conversation and may provide more information as a result.

Semi-structured interviewing employs a list of open-ended questions which allows the researcher to decide which questions to use as the conversation evolves. The design of my study encouraged participants to describe their own experiences and to explain how they derived meaning from these experiences. The semi-structured interview design provided an effective method for allowing the participants to share pertinent and relevant information.

Prior to collecting data, the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (IRB) was contacted to seek and obtain approval regarding the features and instrumentation of the study. The application for IRB approval was sent to the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board for their review and approval. The application included details concerning information about the research study, its purpose, the methodology employed, the site choice, the sample selection, the plans for data collection and data analysis, means of preserving privacy and confidentiality as well as the ways in which the information could be applied and be of benefit to the university and other researchers. The application for IRB approval also included documents such as the survey questions and letter of invitation to participate in the study. The UofSC Institutional Review Board determined if this study met all the conditions of survey research involving human subjects, including whether full disclosure was needed, whether participation was voluntary, and whether the study data would remain confidential for exemption from institutional oversight.

Based upon Exempt IRB approval (See Appendix C), documentation of formal consent was not required from all participants. Participant consent was based upon the potential participant reading the recruitment letter and volunteering to participate in the

study. Before the interviews possible participants received an email with request to

participate in the study (See Appendix B) and a copy of the interview protocol (See

Appendix A). The participants were informed of the research procedures, duration,

benefits, and risks. The recruitment letter thoroughly documented how confidentiality

would be maintained, specifically in reference to the audio-recordings and transcriptions.

Initially, 17 individuals expressed interest in participating in the study. Four of the

prospective students cancelled due to time limitations and personal issues. I scheduled

and conducted a 60 to 90-minute interviews with 13 participants. The interviews were

held in Room 110 of the Thomas Cooper Library. The participants were informed about

the nature of the research. Each participant was asked to approve the use of recording

and transcription devices before the interview began.

There was minimal risk to the participants as to a potential loss of confidentiality,

since the interviews were recorded, and no identifying information were elicited during

the interviews. The researcher was the only individual who listened to the recordings.

Participants were assured of the anonymity of their comments and opinions and the

security of the data collected. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants. No identifiers

were shared unless anonymity could be guaranteed. Furthermore, risk of the loss of

confidentiality was minimized by the destruction of the recordings, transcriptions, and

master list at the end of the study.

I utilized a semi-structured interview to elicit responses from female

nontraditional students who participated in the study. Both structured answer and open-

ended questions were developed by the researcher to allow the participant to fully explain

an individual point of view about the effectiveness of the policies, services, and programs

offered to female nontraditional students to encourage academic success. For each interview the same list of question guided the conversation. In keeping with the semi-structured interview design, I used follow-up questions to probe the participants to expand their answers and did not necessarily ask all participants the same questions or in the same order. I took notes during the interview to record non-verbal forms of communication, such as pauses or hesitations in answering questions. All notations of hesitation represented pauses for the interviewee to reflection and not the result of a reluctance to answer. Upon the completion of the interview, the interview responses were transcribed. To ensure completeness and to promote trustworthiness, the transcripts of the interviews were sent back to the individual participants by email asking the participants if they would like to provide clarification and to verify the accuracy of the narratives. None of the participants indicated issues or differences with the transcribed interview document. They approved the transcriptions as written. Two participants sent in additional comments to be included with the transcription concerning the initiatives and environment of the institution.

Unit of Analysis and Instrument

The unit of analysis consisted of responses to interview questions from female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution. My purpose was to understand the female nontraditional undergraduate student's perception and experiences at this type of institution. The individual interview questions and protocol were utilized (See Appendix A).

The interview questions were developed as open-ended queries that would allow the participants to answer the questions without restrictions for the types of answers

given. In this way, I was able to create a level of understanding of their perceptions and develop knowledge about their experiences. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide the participant in discussing the topic and also to allow the individual participant to lead the conversation and include those insights and responses that she felt were important. While not every interview question directly relates to every research question, the interview questions did need to connect back to the research questions.

Data Analysis and Coding

The challenges throughout data collection and analysis are to make sense of large quantities of data, to reduce the volume of information, to identify significant patterns, and to construct a framework (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Qualitative data analysis involves working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and ultimately deciding what you tell others about the research (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982). I used inductive analysis of data to determine the critical themes that emerged from the data. Thematic analysis includes searching for themes and patterns in the collected responses to divide the data into categories by codes or labels (Glesne, 2016). Thematic analysis allows the researcher to interpret the data collected by interviews with the participants. The goal of thematic analysis is to achieve a better understanding of a social phenomenon and to reveal underlying complexities (Glesne, 2016).

Most qualitative studies depend on responses to interview questions. As each participant responded to the interview questions, I analyzed those responses and compared them for relevance to the research questions. Upon completion of each interview, I created a copy of the transcription in Word, resulting in oral and written

formats of the same interview transcript. In one format, participant responses to each question were displayed verbatim in paragraph form separated by each question. In the second format, a table was created in Word with separate cells and columns for the questions, the participant's response, notes taken during the interview, and keywords identified. Each complete thought from the participant was copied from the approved transcript and separated individual into cells, and notations involving key words of thematic importance were recorded.

I reviewed the responses of the participant and used analytic memos to develop tentative ideas about categories and relationships within the data. The process of categorization allowed me to see similarities and differences in the responses. Additionally, I was able to define the categories and to group and compare data by category (Maxwell, 2013). Analysis begins with identification of the themes emerging from the raw data. This process is also referred to "open coding" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). During open coding, I identified and tentatively named the conceptual categories into which the recorded phenomena would be grouped in order to identify themes that cut across the preponderance of the data. The goal was to create descriptive, multi-dimensional categories which would form a preliminary framework for data analysis. Words, phrases or events that appeared to be similar were grouped into the same category. These categories were gradually modified or replaced during the ongoing analysis. As the raw data were broken down into manageable chunks, I identified these data chunks according to their speaker and context.

As Saldaña suggests, coding is more than just labeling the data (2013). Coding allows for the linkage of thoughts, ideas, and perceptions among the data. Several rounds

of coding were required before the development of themes. After the transcriptions were finished, I began the process of coding the responses in order to give concrete form to the meaning of the interviews. Once transcribed, I reviewed each transcription while listening to the audio recording of the corresponding interview. This allowed the researcher to verify the transcription, correct any errors, add notes regarding inflection, tone, and analysis, and maintain a close connection to the data.

The first round of coding was completed using descriptive coding, defined by Saldaña (2013) as summarizing data in one-word terms or short phrases using mostly nouns. At times, the best way to code data is to quote the participant instead of describing the phrase; in these cases, I used in vivo coding instead of descriptive coding. In vivo coding, also referred to as, "literal coding," "verbatim coding," "inductive coding, "indigenous coding," and "emic coding" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 91) "refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 91). When it seemed more appropriate to capture the participant's exact words, I employed in vivo coding or literal coding.

Beyond descriptive and in vivo coding, I considered other forms of coding for the data, including values, emotion, and evaluation coding (Saldaña, 2013). Values coding assesses a participant's values, attitudes, and belief systems which represent her perspectives or worldview (Saldaña, 2013). Values coding is appropriate for studies that explore cultural values, identity, intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences.

As I reviewed the transcriptions of the interviews, I referred to my analytical memos and journal entries for deeper understanding. I noted an emotional response and reflection from a participant. I returned to each interview to consider emotional

responses and found emotional comments from several of the participants. These comments contributed to the basis of emotion coding which enabled me to more fully recognize and understand the female nontraditional student's experience. Emotion coding labels the emotion recalled or experienced by the respondent (Saldaña, 2013). This type of coding is particularly useful for studies that explore intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences and actions.

Using several methods of coding led to a sense of connectivity and the development of themes among the data. As themes emerged in the data, I referenced these themes to the three research questions. In this manner, the process of interpretation addressed the focus of the study and provided answers to the research questions. By employing multiple rounds of coding by using different approaches, I was able to fully develop a concept of the female nontraditional student's perspective.

Once I was satisfied with the process of my initial rounds of coding, I reviewed the data with a focus on developing categories called pattern coding. The process of developing pattern coding involves pulling together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis and functions as a meta-code (Saldaña, 2013). Once categories and subcategories were developed, I explained and documented them using analytic memos and tables. The descriptive and in vivo codes were pulled and organized to illustrate how salient the category was throughout the interview.

In addition to analytic memos, I also employed several other tactics to help organize my data and coding process. I employed a codebook which is defined by Saldaña (2013), a compilation of the codes, including their content descriptions and a brief data example for reference. This helped me organize the coding process. I used

Microsoft Excel to generate my codebooks. I used written documents for both my categories and my themes.

After all the interviews were coded for categories and subcategories, I then used thematic analysis to identify themes across multiple interviews (Glesne, 2016; Saldaña, 2013). However, these steps and stages were fluid and did not occur in lock-step order. For example, in the second interview, a new category emerged titled "social or institutional belongingness." I had missed it in the first interview and had not coded for it. Once I realized it, I went back and coded the first interview for a similar category. I went through my codes using subsequent rounds of coding to ensure validity and saliency to each of my categories and themes.

I completed the codebook, the categories, and the theme coding using a lengthy, reflective, and complicated process. Instead of using a traditional qualitative research software, I elected to use Word and Microsoft Excel to organize my codes. I chose to use these programs because they forced a connection and constant contact to the data that could be avoided using more convenient qualitative software. This gave me more control and continuous access to the data. It also forced me to use consistent, documented codes using my codebooks. Initially, I developed a codebook that listed all the categories pulled from the transcript codes captured in the comments I created in Word. These data produced approximately 90 categories and over 550 coded data excerpts. Most of the coded data and most of the categories developed into themes. Data that were not part of a theme were documented and saved should they be needed for other kinds of research with different research questions. The outliers in this research study were examined and

considered when analyzing the data, but the group of participants was noticeably homogeneous.

The categories were then reviewed using pattern coding (Saldaña, 2013) to create themes. This required that I return frequently to the transcriptions and analytic memos for deeper understanding, reflection and authentic interpretation. These steps were critical to ensure both validity and reliability. Gradually, the categories began to develop into nine meta-categories, or subsidiary themes. These subsidiary themes then developed into the final themes: 1) College-Going Experience, 2) Campus Experience, and 3) Institutional Support. These themes are fully described and connected to the research questions and existing literature in Chapters Four and Five.

Appropriate methods of data analysis depend upon the participants' responses and a review of the best means to determine and develop a pertinent set of valid and reliable information that would enable me to understand the female nontraditional student's perception. As I continued the data analysis process, I remained flexible and considered the development of new categories when deemed appropriate. I coded all transcribed responses using consistent coding procedures. The categories of data were reviewed and mined to create themes. While some of the coded data and categories were not appropriate to provide for the development of themes, the coded data and categorization of the data were maintained in case they were pertinent to future research.   As I analyzed the collected data, I was mindful that data coding and interpretation require a maintenance to standards that ensure trustworthiness, transparency, and objectivity.

A comprehensive account of the analytic process is described in Chapter 4 including the description of the applied analytic procedures and rationale.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers recognize the pitfalls of subjectivity within the research process and findings. Thus, they seek to provide transparency as a means to support objectivity in the process and to ensure credibility in their research. The concepts of trustworthiness are essential to both quantitative and qualitative research. In seeking to establish the trustworthiness of a qualitative study, Lincoln and Guba (2000) suggest that validity and reliability are assessed in a different manner from quantitative research. In quantitative research, the research is considered valid if it clearly reflects the world being described and is deemed reliable if two researchers studying the same phenomenon have similar observations. Trustworthiness in qualitative research focuses on how well the researcher provides evidence that her descriptions and analysis represent the reality of the situation and persons studied (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Throughout the research process, qualitative researchers must seek to control for biases that may develop through the design, implementation, and analysis of the research study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). In this research study, my goal was to use standards to promote transparency in the process as well as trustworthiness in the research results.

Validity, or credibility, indicates whether the findings of the study are accurate and credible from the viewpoint of the researcher, the participants, and the reader (Bloomberg &Volpe, 2016). Validity becomes a key component of the research design as the researcher seeks to test for the validity of the conclusions reached not just to verify conclusions. In this case both methodological and interpretive validity are being

considered. Researchers may adopt established methodological techniques as a means to

prove validity or to justify their choices and decisions. Thus, the researchers are

providing a means for allowing the scholarly community to measure the trustworthiness

of their findings. While qualitative validity or credibility can be described in many ways,

this type of validity occurs when the researcher checks for accuracy in the findings by

employing specific procedures (Creswell, 2013). Validity was achieved in this study by

employing the practices in qualitative research to ensure that the study measures what it

purports to measure (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Analytic memos (Creswell, 2013;

Saldaña, 2013), member checking (Creswell, 2013) and other recommended methods

were considered and employed where they are deemed useful in ensuring both

methodological and interpretative credibility.

Qualitative reliability or dependability refers to the extent that the research can be

replicated by other similar studies (Creswell, 2013). The type of qualitative research I

conducted does not include the study of enough subjects and experiences to provide for a

reasonable level of reliability. I served as the sole researcher and conducted this study

among a small number of participants. In qualitative research the goal is not to eliminate

inconsistencies but to ensure that the researcher understands when they occur

(Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Thus, I documented my procedures and adopted methods

to ensure reliability across the interviews and analysis when possible. I used methods

such as a journal to include detailed accounts of how all the data were analyzed and

interpreted (Bloomberg, 2016) and analytic memos to document my reflections and

interpretations of the data throughout the coding process (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2013).

Other methods that were employed included the development of a codebook to record the

concept of the categories (Saldaña, 2013) and the review and assessment of the transcripts for inaccuracies during transcription to ensure that coding schemes and categories of data are used consistently (Glesne, 2016).

While promoting objectivity is difficult, I endeavored to ensure that the findings were the result of the research, rather than an outcome of the biases and subjectivity of the researcher. The concept of confirmability corresponds to the notion of objectivity in qualitative research. Confirmability or objectivity in the research findings can be increased by using analytic memos, journals, member checking, and reflexivity in the process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

The research questions and interview protocol of this study encouraged the participants to fully describe their personal experiences within a specific setting. The participants' responses and my own reflection of the data recorded in analytic memos allowed me to capture the resulting data. Analytic memos are used to strengthen the trustworthiness, validity, reliability and credibility of the data (Saldaña, 2013). To promote trustworthiness, I used analytic memos in the coding and analysis of my data. These memos documented my reflections and interpretations of the data throughout the coding process.

Additionally, I used member checking to assess for the accuracy of the data collected and to promote trustworthiness. Member checking is to ensure the participant's story and description of events are accurately recorded by the researcher. Participants were asked to review the transcript of their interviews, to make any additional or clarifying comments, and to confirm that the transcription was an accurate representation of their responses.

Reflexivity is described as by Denzin & Lincoln as the process of reflecting critically on the individual as researcher (2011). I documented reflexivity through analytic memos, as well as through a defined and transparent coding process. Reflexivity in the data collection and analysis process of this study supported trustworthiness.

These methods provided the ability for building transparency in the research process. In order to ensure trustworthiness, it was important to consider and employ sound methods to minimize potential researcher bias. Researcher bias can be reduced, and objectivity increased by using these practices.

Research Ethics

In any research study, ethical issues relating to protection of the participants were of concern (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The researcher is responsible for informing and protecting respondents. This research process involved voluntary participation. The participants were informed about the study's purpose. Additionally, the participants were instructed about the ways in which the information would be handled. Although there were no anticipated serious ethical threats to any of the participants in this study, safeguards were used to ensure the protection and the rights of the participants. Informed consent was a priority throughout the study. Consent to voluntarily proceed with the study was required from each participant. The rights of the participants were of primary importance when deciding on how to report and use the data.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) process determines if ethical standards are met in the research process. Prior to participant selection and data collection, I submitted an Exempt IRB application to the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board for approval of the research study involving human subjects. This study met the

conditions of survey research with human subjects including full disclosure, voluntary participation, and confidentiality for exemption from institutional oversight. In the interest of ethical research, I employed safeguards to ensure not only the integrity of my study but to protect the participants. The researcher provided anonymity to the participants thus ensuring that there would be no repercussions for individuals within the On Your Time (OYT) Initiatives program and the university. I assigned pseudonyms in place of student names. Identifiers that could allow for the connection of specific interview responses to individual participants were withheld. Violation of confidentiality was a risk but was unlikely due to the nature of the collection process. Data entries were reported in aggregate form. Storage of research records and data was secure, and the researcher had sole access to this material.

Limitations

Limitations of the study are the characteristics of design or methodology that impact or influence the interpretation of the findings of the research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). A phenomenological interview study design provided a greater understanding of the perceptions of the female nontraditional students regarding their experiences in undergraduate educational pathways. However, there were limitations inherent in this type of study, and these limitations should be acknowledged. The possible limitations of this study included the size of the research sample, the lack of transferability of research results among areas of the institution and to other types of institutions, and the existence of potential researcher bias.

The research sample in this study was intentionally limited. The research study focused on the perceptions and experiences of the female nontraditional students

presently enrolled in undergraduate studies at the University of South Carolina and did not account for how the female nontraditional students enrolled in other areas of the institution at the chosen site perceive their experiences. I investigated the female nontraditional undergraduate student's perception of institutional initiatives at a public four-year research institution. This type of restriction imposed a limit on the amount and type of data. I recommend that more research using other units of measurement be used in future research.

By interviewing female nontraditional undergraduate students enrolled at a single institution, the data may not be transferable or generalizable to other parts of the institution or to other institutions. The intent of this study was to fully and deeply research a single institutional context; however, this may limit the application of my findings to other institutions. The aim of my study was not to provide knowledge that could be transferred or generalized to other institutions, but to inform public four-year research institutions as well as higher education scholars about the perceptions among female nontraditional undergraduate students concerning their experiences at the institution and to encourage additional research and discussion on this topic.

As indicated in my positionality statement and in the ethics section, I have been personally involved with this topic for some time. For this reason, I had my own assumptions about how female nontraditional students might perceive the educational experience at the University of South Carolina. I attempted to minimize subjectivity in the research process, but I recognized that this could be a source of bias and provide a possible limitation to the findings of the study. As stated in the "Issues of Trustworthiness," my goal was to use standards to promote transparency in the process as

well as trustworthiness in the research results. For that purpose, I employed such tools as analytic memos, member checking, journals, and reflexivity to reduce the likelihood of researcher bias and to increase objectivity.

Summary

Chapter Three presented an overview of the methodology for this study, including the topics of methodological design, research questions, research design, positionality, research site and participant selection, method of data collection, data analysis and coding, issues of trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study.

To perform my research, I employed phenomenological methodology to support the study's focus on female nontraditional undergraduate students and their perceptions of the factors that influence their retention and academic success at a public four-year research institution. Phenomenological research is appropriate because it serves as an interpretive process when researching the lived experiences of the research participants, thus allowing the researcher to investigate how an individual comes to understand the world based on her perceptions and experiences of any given phenomenon (Glesne, 2016). This type of research methodology provided insight into the overall research question: how do female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution perceive the institutional initiatives designed to promote their retention and academic success?

As the research participants and their interpretations of their lived experiences represented the basis of this study, it was appropriate to conduct the investigation using a qualitative interview study design (Glesne, 2016). The study employed a qualitative

semi-structured interview protocol, which allowed me to probe and encourage participant-oriented discussion of the research topic.

The University of South Carolina was the site for my research and represented a purposeful choice. Participants were selected by criterion sampling from a group of female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies at the institution by an email request for volunteers. Each participant represented a self-selected volunteer who responded to the email and indicated willingness to be a part of the study.

I employed procedures to ensure validity and trustworthiness including analytic memos, member checking, and reflexivity. Data coding and tools for analysis of the data were developed after the data were collected, reviewed, transcribed, and checked for completion and accuracy. Positionality of the researcher, ethical considerations, and research limitations were identified as essential topics for consideration in the research process. The researcher considered the impact these issues have on the research process and used appropriate methods to mitigate any problems or complications resulting from these issues.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to understand the academic experiences of female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution in the southeastern United States. Additionally, the study examines how public four-year research institutions influence the pathways of female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate coursework. This chapter describes the study's findings in the following sections: 1) description of the study site; 2) description of the thirteen students interviewed, including demographic data, perceived challenges and support; 3) the results; 4) the three themes; 5) interpretation of the study's findings by the researcher; and 6) a brief summary.

For this study, I used thematic analysis to code the data and identify emergent themes. The findings presented in this chapter were developed thematically from the in-depth interviews conducted with 13 female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies at public four-years research institution located in the southeastern United States. The students were identified as females 25 years of age or older who exhibited the characteristics of nontraditional students. I completed in-depth interviews with each participant to focus on their lived experiences as undergraduate students at a public four-year research institution and analyzed the data by reflecting on the raw data and developing themes in relation to the three research questions.

In compliance with the Institutional Review Board approval (See Appendix C), the participants were granted strict anonymity. Therefore, the participant's identity was protected by using pseudonyms. While this research site is a large institution, every effort was taken to prevent identification of specific students related to their comments and responses.

Description of the Study Site

The University of South Carolina is a public four-year research institution located in the southeastern United States. The institution was selected using purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) as well as convenience sampling. The undergraduate student population in fall 2018 was 26,733 of whom 53% or more than 14,000 students are female. Female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies at the institution in the academic year 2018-2019 numbered around 700 students or approximately 5% of the female undergraduate student population and approximately 2.5% of the undergraduate student population.

The institution develops and offers services and programs to meet the needs and interests of a wide range of students. There is information on the website of the university describing the services and programs and providing contact information. Unfortunately, most of the information concerning the services and programs for nontraditional students is found on separate webpages with no links to enable a student to connect them. The website offers limited guidance or direction about the types and locations of the services and programs on campus. Female nontraditional students tend to get information about institutional initiatives that can benefit them from advisors, mentors, and fellow students. They also locate services and programs by searching the

institution's website for information. The services and programs used by the female

nontraditional students in this study include Carolina Core with a set of standards to

ensure that undergraduates share a common academic foundation for academic issues; the

Student Success Center for academic questions, tutoring, and support; Tau Sigma

National Honor Society for transfer students and their concerns; the Association of

Transfer Students (formed in 2018) to provide camaraderie among female nontraditional

students and assist with concerns; Garnet Gate which enables students to locate events

and organizations on campus; the Financial Aid Office which provides links to

scholarships, financial issues, and financial counseling; and UofSC Connect which allows

students to organize a plan for expanding their learning experiences beyond the

classroom and recognizes students for significant engagement and learning by offering

the ability to earn Graduate with Leadership Distinction.

Description of the Participants

Thirteen female nontraditional undergraduate students volunteered to participate

in the study and to share their lived experiences with me. The one-on-one interviews

provided participants with an opportunity to openly share their family, work, and

academic backgrounds; their educational aspirations, motivations and challenges; and

their experiences of attending a public four-year research institution. In this section, I

describe the thirteen individual interview participants in this study. The participants were

selected by using criterion or purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015). All participants are 25

years of age or older and met other criteria for being identified as female nontraditional

students. Descriptions of the participants were developed from the information provided

by the students themselves during interviews as well as the personal observations

maintained in my field notes and analytic memos during the interviews. All interviews took place on the campus of the University of South Carolina in a private study room located in the Thomas Cooper Library. Both the day and time of the interviews were scheduled based on the preference and availability of the participants. Therefore, the order of the interviews was random depending on the schedules of the participants.

Table 4.1 provides a brief descriptive overview of the participants with pseudonyms assigned to protect the anonymity of the participants. All demographic data were self-identified by participants. Thirteen female nontraditional undergraduate students participated in this study. As Table 4.1 illustrates, the participants represent a varied group of students. Their ages range from 25 to 61 years. The students' enrollment ranges from six hours to 18 hours of academic credit. Their workplace responsibilities vary among individuals from zero to 30 employment hours each week. Their family structure and responsibilities also illustrate their differences. Among this group, there are married and single individuals who may or may not have children residing at home with them. Their choice of majors represents a mixture of differences in interests and career aspirations.

While Table 4.1 highlights the individual characteristics of each participant, Table 4.2 identifies the commonalities discovered by looking through the descriptive data of the participants. Though the age range varies from 25 to 61 years, ten of participants are over 30 years of age and the average age of the participants is 36 years. Among that group, five are 30-37 years of age; four are 40-43 years old. Eleven of the participants are full-time students who are enrolled in 12 to 18 credit hours of course work per semester; ten are transfer students; ten students are upperclassmen; six have earned

Table 4.1 *Descriptive Overview of Participants*

M/C = Married with children living in the home
M/NC = Married with no children living in the home
S/C = Single with children living in the home
S/NC = Single with no children living in the home

Participant	Age	Student Level	Student Status	Major	Earned Degree	Work per Week	Family
Beth	30	Junior	Full-time	Engineering	BA	10-15	M/C
Susan	37	Senior	Full-time	Engineering	AA	0	M/C
Kim	25	Junior	Full-time	Political Science	--	30	S/C
Roma	43	Junior	Full-time	Mathematics	--	0	M/C
Kia	40	Junior	Full-time	Art Studio	--	0	M/C
Sally	40	Junior	Full-time	Sociology	--	0	M/C
Fran	25	Senior	Full-time	Computer Science	BA	25-30	S/NC
Tia	30	Senior	Full-time	Hospitality	--	0	M/NC
Randi	61	Senior	Part-time	Spanish	BA/MA	30-35	S/C
Pat	25	Sophomore	Full-time	English	--	20-25	S/NC
Alicia	33	Sophomore	Full-time	Tourism	AA	0	M/C
Darla	35	Sophomore	Part-time	Social Work	--	0	M/C
Anna	43	Junior	Full-time	Art Studio	AA	0	M/C

college degrees; nine are married; ten have children living with them; and five work between 10 and 35 hours per week while attending college; eight do not work outside of the home. The commonly chosen types of majors include those that provide professional competency and skill training to prepare graduates directly for the workplace, such as engineering, social work, hospitality, and education. While race was not a focus of this study, the racial composition of the thirteen participants was divided as twelve who identified racially as Caucasian, and one participant who identified as African American.

All thirteen of the students who participated in the research had a gap of three to twenty-years before returning to undergraduate education.

Table 4.2 *Participant Background Commonalities*

Commonalities	Number of Participants
Over 30 Years of Age	10
Full-time Students	11
Transfer Students	10
Upperclassmen Student Level	10
Earned Degree (AA, BA, MA)	6
Married	9
Children in Home	10
Work Responsibilities	5
Professional Major	8
Gap in Education	13
Identify as Caucasian	12

The following is an overview of each participant developed from their responses and comments, as well as my impressions. I chose a pseudonym randomly for each participant to protect their privacy throughout the study.

Beth is a petite, youthful 30-year old student who is married with one child under the age of two at home. Family is a priority for her. She struggled with her explanation about her concern for "her daughter's care and well-being" as she commutes over one hour to and from Columbia five days a week. She is soft-spoken but was forthcoming in her remarks. She has found it difficult to "give up the role of care-giver" for her daughter. She feels at a loss to describe how "sad she feels about missing her daughter's first steps, first works, and other firsts." Fortunately, her husband's work schedule is

flexible, and he has assumed many of the care-giving responsibilities. With some obvious effort, Beth has allowed friends and family members to share her daughter's daily care. But Beth insists that "dinner together at night is a must."

Beth attends college on a full-time basis while working as an intern in an engineering firm for 10-15 hours per week. She obtained this position through her faculty mentor and believes that she will continue to work there after graduation. She earned a BA from a four-year university but decided to "re-enter college to follow a different academic interest." She worked for six years in a position that "lacked interest and did not provide her with any motivation to continue." Sensing her dissatisfaction, her husband suggested that she pursue another career choice. Beth determined that she wanted to be an engineer, though she had resisted that major when her father suggested it when she first entered college. With support from her husband and other family members, she enrolled at a local community college and earned a two-year degree in engineering. She transferred to the university to complete a major in Civil Engineering. Beth is motivated, self-aware, and academically prepared. She is aware of her interests, skills, and what she likes and does not like in a work environment. As she stated,

> I worked in several intern positions and found some of the firms to be the essence of the old boy network." I knew that I would never fit in and never receive proper credit for her work. My faculty mentor recommended the internship where I am now employed. I feel comfortable with the work environment and will accept a permanent career position in this firm. I will continue to commute on a daily basis, but the distance and time will be well spent.

Susan is a 37-year old who transferred after earning an associate degree from a community college. She is a full-time student and does not work out of the home. Her academic goal is to "continue through a graduate degree." She started college as a traditional student but withdrew after suffering a traumatic experience during her first

semester as a college student. Susan was hesitant to describe this situation. We talked of

other aspects of enrolling in college. After a couple of minutes of conversation, she took

a deep breath and volunteered,

> The trauma I suffered stopped my life for many years. I married, had a family
> and enjoyed my life but I knew things were not right. I lost "faith" in myself and
> my future for many years. I felt disappointed with my life but was too frightened
> to move forward. My family finally reached a point where they pushed me to
> return college to put my past behind me and to look to a great future.

Susan returned to college after a gap of over 18 years to complete her degree. She

feels that she has come full circle. Using her inner core to pursue this degree has allowed

her "to regain my confidence and personal strength." To prepare for her return to a

college campus, Susan and her family spent time on campus before she returned as a

student to familiarize her with the campus and to allow her to develop a level of comfort

with her surroundings. She is married and has two children ages 12 and 14 living at

home. Family is a priority for her and "my nuclear and extended family members

support me completely." Susan is a determined and motivated student. She emotionally

offers her story as an example "personal renewal" and states that "earning her degree

from UofSC is essential to her well-being."

Kim is a 25-year old, who identifies racially as African American. She is a single

parent of one child under six years of age with developmental issues. Initially, she

answered the questions with short, cursory responses. As she grew more comfortable,

she began to expand her story. Kim became pregnant in her freshman year. She

withdrew from college to have her baby. She knows that she disappointed her parents

with that action. She decided to re-enter after four years to complete her undergraduate

studies both to regain her self-confidence and to prove to her parents that she is worthy of

their support and respect. Her parents are supportive, but "not fully vested in me

emotionally and not at all financially." Kim implies that her parents have not gotten over

their anger at her decision to have her baby. Her parents are both professionals, and Kim

believes that they could do more financially to help her and her daughter. The father of

her child is "not involved physically or fiscally with me and my child."

Kim works as much as 30 hours each week in several part-time retail jobs and is a

full-time student. She relies on her mother to assist her with childcare while she attends

classes or works. Financially and physically, attending college is difficult, but Kim feels

that "she must get a degree to be able to care for her child." Kim is the only participant

that indicated discomfort and unhappiness with her experience at the university. She

feels isolated, lonely and tired. She has made few friends during her latest enrollment

period. Yet, she is graduating in May 2020 and plans to continue her education by taking

some law classes at a technical school. She hopes to complete a graduate degree in the

future. Kim stated that "she has to do this for herself as no one will do this for me."

Roma is 43, is married and has three children living at home between the ages of

10 and 17. Her family is a busy one. She attends college full-time and so does her

husband. Though she does not work out of the home, there is plenty to do when she

returns from class. Roma was enrolled in college during her 20's and 30's. When she

decided to enroll at the university, she knew she needed to finish the job this time. As

she says,

> When I decided to return to school, I met with an advisor who told me I about
> how transfer credits work at the university. I had taken and completed over 100
> credit hours of coursework. The university for some reasons, good and bad,
> refused to accept most of these hours. Long story short, I will graduate with 185
> credit hours. I almost started all over again!

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While she was disappointed in the fact that her previous college credits did not apply towards the completion of her degree, but she understands that she made some bad decisions when choosing the institutions and programs she previously attended. For Roma, her family is a priority. Roma chooses day classes "to fit with my family's schedule." She states that "family dinner at night together, reading together are important activities in my home." If one of her children needs something, she is quick to admit that schoolwork takes a "back row." Roma proudly stated that "I will be the first person in my family to graduate from college." Her ultimate professional goal is to work as a math instructor. She receives grants from the National Science Foundation to support her financially. She and her family are involved with the programs and events available through the university. Roma glows when she states that she has "embraced the collegiate experience." She is enthusiastic about the experience and states that attending college has "enabled me to gain confidence and to move forward with determination."

Kia is 40, is married, and has 3 children, aged 13, 16, and 19. She is a full-time student and transferred to UofSC. At present, she is not working. When Kia returned to undergraduate studies, she chose a major that is very different from a major she might have chosen as an 18-year old student. Kia indicates that,

> I might have chosen a "safer" major that would have restricted my artistic nature. I began my return to higher education planning to major in English. Through a chance meeting with another student in a professor's office, I discovered an affinity for photography and changed my major after one semester.
> This was the best decision ever. I get up every morning with enthusiasm and interest in my day's work.

Though Kia had planned on enrolling in college after high school, she jokingly quips "life happened." She married and started a family at a young age. When her husband's work allowed the family to move back to the Columbia area, she was ready for

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a change. She began to consider enrolling in college when she was in her late 30's. Kia was diagnosed with depression and anxiety. She was taking medications that reduced her energy and interest levels and recognized that she needed "a goal to motivate me beyond these issues." Once her youngest child entered school, Kia was ready to head back to higher education. After an educational gap of twenty years, she arrived at UofSC with 30 credit hours earned while she was in high school. Kia says she was inspired to not looked back since she enrolled in classes and finds the university experience "daunting but rewarding."

Sally is a thoughtful, well-spoken 40-year old transfer student who is married with two children. One of the children is an adult and the other who is 17 will finish high school in the next year. Sally attends UofSC as a full-time student and does not work. She attended a private college following high school but withdrew due to personal issues. She was out of college for over 15 years when she decided to return. Sally's path to higher education was unique and as she puts it:

> I really had a strange childhood and upbringing. I never had a real nuclear family. I had a child as a teenager and at one point, we were homeless, living in a car, and without financial support. I to support my child and myself. I worked a variety of low-paying jobs and pieced together an existence. But I knew that these jobs could not give me the ability to take care of our basic needs and to provide for a future. So, I started looking around to go back to school and receive training or some sort of degree that could translate into a decent job. I went to a community college thinking I would major in something to do with computers or technology. I sought assistance to continue my education at a community college. I go nowhere as most of those programs required students to attend day classes, which I was not an option if we wanted to eat.

Sally married and moved to Columbia to attend the UofSC. She and her husband had another child. With her husband's support, she returned to higher education and completed 56 credit hours at a two-year institution and decided to move forward with her

educational plans. She says it is not surprise that she found her passion in working with and helping others. She believes that she can offer insight to others in less comfortable and downright poor circumstances. She opted for "a socially-oriented major" and knows this is the "right choice for me and my future."   Her goal is to earn a graduate degree.

Fran is 25, single, and ambitious. She is adamant about the fact that she has no plans to have children. She earned a BA degree in English Literature and found no career paths in the workplace that provided for fulfillment in that area. She decided to re-enter college after three years to move her education and career in another direction. She was quite upbeat in describing her discovery a degree option in Computer Science that allows her to incorporate her interest in the study of humanities. She raved about Digitalizing the Humanities and how this degree would move her forward academically.

Fran works two part-time jobs for up to 30 hours each week and is a full-time student. She feels the pressure of balancing work and school. She likes that her choice of major is more "career-oriented" and that her choice allows her to blend her two deep interests of humanities and technical concepts. She looks at this degree path as a "long-term prep for graduate school." Fran is savvy and has determined her interests and goals clearly. Fran is building her resume with a goal of earning a graduate degree from a prestigious institution where "they pay graduate students to attend." She would ideally love to attend a prestigious university in the northeast.   Fran says that going to a "big-time university would allow me to have bragging rights."

Tia is a quiet, 30-year old who attends UofSC on a part-time basis. She is married and has no children. She and her husband plan to start a family after "I have reached a few life goals" such as a Bachelor of Arts degree and possibly going on to

graduate school. Tia would like to enjoy a family while she is young and expresses disappointment that is not a possibility for her and her husband at the present. She is from out of state but moved to South Carolina when her father received a job transfer here. She enjoys a close-knit family relationship. She originally majored in biology and worked in the medical field for over ten years. Tia struggled to find a fit for her abilities and interests in the workplace.

Tia came in and out of higher education for several years and did not elect to continue until she decided to complete a degree. Tia transferred 96 credit hours of coursework from other institutions. When she enrolled at the university, she chose a major that allowed her to work with people and to give her flexibility if she and her husband decide to move. She loves majoring in Hospitality Management and is delighted that it will take just 30 credit hours in order to complete her degree at this institution. She was impressed with the fact that a lot of her coursework was accepted for credit.

Tia proudly identifies as being among the first generation of her family to graduate from college. She seemed genuinely please that she has returned to college and has made her way with a lot of effort on her part and a lot of sacrifices on the part of her and her husband. She reflected in a slightly frustrated manner that "some students seem to have it so easy." She states that she "had to make it on my own" and is proud that she will complete her undergraduate degree with no financial debt.

Randi is 61 and has earned both an undergraduate and a graduate degree. She is single and has two adult children, one of whom lives with her. She represents a unique participant as her enrollment in undergraduate education is based on solely her personal interest. When her husband died, she considered how she should continue with her

personal life and her professional development. Randi sounded sad and lost when she described how her marriage of over 30 years ended suddenly. She had retired early to spend time with her husband and travel. His sudden death shocked her and caused her to completely rethink her retirement options.

Randi completed her master's degree over 25 hears previously and had not enrolled in higher education during that time. Through friends and connections, Randi found part-time work that she enjoys, but she still felt that she had a lot of time to fill. She began to consider enrolling in an undergraduate program two years ago. She was accepted and decided to reduce her work responsibilities and to return to undergraduate studies to fulfill a life-long desire of "expanding my learning experience by increasing my competence in a foreign language." She chose Spanish as a major because of her interest in and personal ties to foreign countries where Spanish is the predominate language. She has good friends that own property in Mexico and some that travel annually to Spanish speaking countries. Randi spends several months each year in Spanish speaking countries for pleasure, to increase her fluency and comfort with the language, and to enjoy her friends. She has made new friends among this group and finds the experiences "daring and delicious."   Randi is quite impressive as she has become fluent in the language and comfortable with a new set of friends and experiences.

Though Randi has earned degrees, she is a degree-seeking undergraduate student because she values the dedication implied in earning a degree. She attends UofSC on a part-time basis and works between 30 and 35 hours each week. She enjoys the "mental stimulation" of learning. Her school and work life have given her a "new way of approaching maturity."   Randi is a life-long learner who loves the rigor and structure of

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college and is enthusiastic about her plans to enroll in another subject area once she completes this degree.

Pat is 25. She is unmarried and has no children. She attended another institution and decided to re-enter college after a two-year break to complete her degree in order to have more career opportunities. She was encouraged and supported in this decision by her boyfriend who is a doctoral candidate and her sister who completed college and has "a fancy job" in Washington D.C. As Pat states,

> One night my boyfriend and I were sitting around talking about issues and events with a bunch of his fellow classmates. One of the guys said, Pat, you are as bright as the rest of us. You need to get a degree and use it. He was right, I am very bright, and I always had a lot to contribute to the conversations or debates of this group. So, I decided to give it a try. This group of graduate students and friends have been so helpful and have pretty much shoved me into the role of undergraduate student.

Pat is a full-time student and works 20-25 hours each week in "a not-so interesting job." She knows that she needs this work to help with expenses and to keep her on track. Without a structured life, Pat feels she gets "unmotivated." Pat transferred to UofSC after a five-year gap in education between attending a two-year institution and enrolling in UofSC. She took off this time to repay school debt and to try and figure out what she wanted to do with her life. The group of graduate students that encouraged Pat are a great asset to her as they remind her to "keep pushing to completion." Pat's sister was also instrumental in getting her to enroll in higher education. Her sister has a job that Pat seems to envy for "its flashiness and level of income." Pat wants to have similar job so that she can "tell people about it." She and her sister are among the first generation of her family to complete a college degree. That is a huge issue for Pat, and she repeated this several times during the interview. Beyond the importance of having a prestigious

job, she believes that "education makes your life better." Even though Pat hopes to focus on a special career path, she describes herself as an "open learner." She plans to focus on one career path at the outset of her work, but ultimately, she is "open to and learning about all of the opportunities a college education offers."

Alicia is a 33-year old, full-time student who does not work out of the home. She is married and has one child, a 15-year-old son. Though she expressed concern about her son's focus on education when she is not at home to supervise his work, she knew she needed to find something for fulfill her need for intellectual stimulation. She feels that she "has always been there for him, to guide and to encourage." She worries that he will start to "drift away from focusing on his education." She closely monitors his computer and other devices for "unusual activity." So far, all is fine. This is a quandary for her as she clearly feels that "my job is school, and I am serious about my job." She struggles with this concern daily.

Alicia decided to transfer after attending two other institutions. She has earned two Associate of Arts degrees, but neither of the degrees led her to career or personal fulfillment. She just carried on with her work life and found little to inspire her in her choice of career. When she approached the university about transferring, Alicia was frustrated that none of her prior coursework transferred to UofSC. But after considering the words of the advisor, she understands that she made choices that influenced this situation. She attended public and private institutions; some fully accredited and some not accredited. She says that her institutional choices "seemed like good ideas but were actually just the easy way to continue in school." But all that changed when she enrolled at the university, as she states:

I decided to major in Tourism as that looked like a solid career choice if you live in South Carolina. I sort of added the minors Theater and Marine Science as I went along. I admit the combination of major and minors seems odd at first glance, I love the theater and acting so that was an easy decision. I wanted to go for it this time around. Then I "found" Marine Science after taking a class in that field that satisfied the Common Core requirement. I just fell in love with the subject. When she expressed her concern to the instructor about adding Marine Science as a minor, he sent her to Charleston to talk with several professional contacts in the area. Those individuals indicated that her choice of major and minors was viable and had great potential for "a career position on the coast of South Carolina." Alicia animatedly states that she feels like she "walked into this good fortune." Not only does Alicia love her academic choices, she loves the campus of the university and the atmosphere of the college. From the first day she arrived on the campus at UofSC, she felt "an electric shock of excitement from the energy perceived on the campus." She knew she had found her college and her place in higher education.

Darla is 35, married, and has four children, three of whom are under two-years of age. She is an extremely busy and harried sounding woman. Finding time to talk with her was difficult and could not be organized without at least some of the children being present. While that presented a challenge, Darla was determined to "speak about my experiences." She had attended several institutions prior to enrolling at the university. Darla took a seven-year break from higher education before starting back at a community college in Kansas. She transferred 57 credit hours to the university. This fact pleased her and gave her some level of encouragement about finally completing her degree.

Darla laughed when stating that for "the time being, it is no surprise that I am not working out of the home and attending college on a part-time basis." She sounded overwhelmed when she described blending her daily life and responsibilities with her attempt to complete class assignments and even to attend classes. Fortunately, her husband is supportive of her enrollment. Darla expresses how tired she is and how hard being in school is for her and her children. Rather cautiously, she mentioned her plans to

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return to full-time status next semester. According to Darla, the Social Work major

requires that she be enrolled full-time after her junior year.

While attending full-time presents conflicts and problems with her young family,

she rather doggedly states that she is intent on completing the degree requirements and

moving into her chosen career area within the next two years. She finds her professors

"helpful and knowledgeable and supportive." Darla is "not in college for campus life, but

for education." She seems truly determined and obligated to complete her college degree

and to matriculate to her career path. Her goal is to "be employable" and feels her life

experiences including having the demands of balancing her children's needs with college

work have prepared her for the finding her way through college to her career path.

Anna is a 43-year old transfer student. She is married and has one child who is

nine. She happily describes herself as a role model for her daughter, but she does feel

"some guilt for missing my daughter's activities." Her husband is retired and is "filling

in as Mr. Mom" at present. He now attends parent conferences and supervises all

afternoon activities. Anna say there has been a learning curve for him and their daughter,

but all are handling the change in status. She attends UofSC on a full-time basis and does

not work. She attended two institutions in the past and was pleased and grateful when

most of her classes transferred from other institutions. Her husband was in the military,

the family moved around the country. When possible, she enrolled in classes and

continued her undergraduate education intermittently over a fifteen-year time period.

Anna's lifelong goal was to complete her college degree. She put this off for 20

years. When she and her family returned to Columbia, she was eager "to get back to

class and figure out my life story." Her parents always wanted her to attend UofSC.   Her

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father earned an undergraduate degree from UofSC. He died in mid-life, and her mother was thrilled when Anna and her family moved back to Columbia. When Anna announced she was returning to class at UofSC, her mother was pleased and reminded her that her father wanted her to wear his class ring from UofSC. Unfortunately, her mother died shortly after they returned to Columbia so neither parent lived to see Anna enrolled and accomplishing the goal of college completion at the university.

Anna loves the University as her family is "a group of devoted and devout supporters." She proudly wears her father's Gamecock ring and thinks of him daily as she attends classes. She identifies herself as satisfied and "happy" at the institution. Her decision to enroll in higher education with a major in Art Studio was "an easy choice." She has always exhibited interest and talent in art. At this point in her life, she chose a major that suited her interest and personal goals. She is a proud honor student and states that her "GPA is super important to me." She is on track to graduate with Leadership Distinction through UofSC Connect. Anna says that she "found the best way to use my time and to move forward with combining my professional and personal interests." She smiles a lot and seems happy to live by the motto: "I want to be the best me."

The participants interviewed in this study provide a story of the experiences of female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution. This section summarized the participants' demographic characteristics and backgrounds as the participants describe themselves as well as my own observations as the researcher with the use of field notes and analytic memos.

Thematic Development

In the preceding sections, I described the site for the study and the participants included in the research. These topics provided the context for the following section which presents the findings of this research study. Chapter Three provided a description of the process of the thematic analysis including the rounds of coding through which I developed categories. Once the coding categories were established and all 13 interviews were fully coded, I determined themes and subsidiary themes across the interview responses by examining the responses and reflections of the participants. I used diagrams and highlighting to indicate words, phrases, and topics that arose in the interviews. Specifically, I was seeking similar terminology, language, and associations. As the themes developed, they were more deeply interpreted by referring to the original transcripts for interview responses and my notes and reflections. Using this process, the following themes were delineated and developed: 1) College-Going Experience: this theme includes a description of both the intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors and the challenges influencing the return of the participant to higher education; 2) Campus Experience: this theme details the participant's perceived lived experience once enrolled and attending an institution of higher education including the motivating issues and challenges from within the college community that impact this experience; 3) Institutional Support: this theme includes the perceived interpretation of the institutional programs and services designed to support the continuance to completion of female nontraditional students on campus.

This section provides a narrative of the themes constructed from the analysis of data to address the central research questions. The themes were grouped into three main

sections corresponding to the study's research questions: College-Going Experience, Campus Experience, and Institutional Support. The theme related to the College-Going Experience included responses and reflections concerned with intrinsic motivational factors such as self-awareness, determination, confidence, and self-fulfillment. Extrinsic factors such as family support, financial capability, academic preparedness, and work-related issues were included in the theme of College-Going Experience. The challenges and barriers to returning to higher education were also included in the theme of the College-Going Experience. The culture of the institution, the comfort and convenience of attending an institution, the academic community, the social connections, and the institutional services and program offerings make up the theme of Campus Experience. The theme of Institutional Support was developed by including responses based on awareness and understanding of institutional encouragement and on the perception of how these initiatives and programs contribute to the support or non-support for the continuance to completion of the female non-traditional student to higher education. Institutional Support includes programs that provide academic encouragement and support, financial support, and social belongingness or integration. Together these themes address the research questions of the study and form a picture of the perceived experience of female nontraditional students' returning to undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution.

Each theme provides insight to the experience and helps fully answer the overarching research question: how do female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution perceive this experience

and the institutional initiatives designed to support them? Each of these themes are

discussed in this section and are represented organizationally in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 *Themes and Subsidiary Themes*

Themes	Subsidiary Themes
College-Going Experience	Intrinsic Motivating Factors
	Extrinsic Motivating Factors
	Challenges
Campus Environment	Campus Environment
	Academic Environment
	College Support
Institutional Support	Academic Programs
	Financial Services
	Social Belongingness

College-Going Experience: Factors that Influence the Return to Higher Education

The first theme that emerged from the thematic analysis of the data provides the

connections between the motivational factors and the challenges that influence the female

nontraditional student's decision to return to higher education. This theme describes both

the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that provide encouragement and support for the return

to college. A discussion of this theme also includes a description of those factors that

present challenges to the female nontraditional student's return to college. The theme

details these factors and how the factors impact the process. Within this theme the

following subsidiary themes emerged: the intrinsic or internal factors that influence a

female nontraditional student's decision to return to undergraduate education. This first

theme highlights the importance of intrinsic or personal factors in the enrollment in

higher education. To understand the process by which female nontraditional students make the decision to enroll in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution, one must recognize and appreciate the significance of these factors.

Intrinsic Motivational Factors.

The decision-making process of female nontraditional students is complicated by multiple layers of internal and external influences. Several key intrinsic influences were mentioned by the participants who participated in the research. These are indicative of the way that the female nontraditional undergraduate student processes her complex world. The participants of this study are motivated by the opportunity to forward their personal growth and development. Susan did not work outside of the home for many years. When she decided to return to enroll in higher education, she described her feeling in this way:

> I needed to do something to move myself forward. Earning a college degree is a validation of my abilities and is very meaningful to my self-fulfillment. Ultimately, this accomplishment will impact my family as my children watch me work hard every day. I am making a statement for myself and my family. My children need to see that I can rise above the trauma and crises in my life. I am doing this for myself and for them.

Darla said that "life experiences make me prepared and driven or motivated and contribute to my self-confidence." Kia mentioned that "maturity and life experiences had given me the self-awareness to know what my goals are and help with the learning process."

Six of the women had earned degrees and had worked in other fields before deciding to return and pursue the completion of their studies or to change direction completely because of a better understanding of their goals and motives. These women indicated high levels of self-determination and confidence. Fran proudly stated:

Returning to college gives me a feeling of pride. Graduation will be a big moment of triumph for me. I returned to college to get my life back on course. After earning a BA, I found no meaningful employment and realized that I needed to go in another direction personally and career-wise. If not, I was never going to be satisfied with myself.

Kia wants more "official knowledge so she can feel more confident." Their confidence is founded on their ability to comprehend their strengths and to overcome their weaknesses. Most felt confident that they were making the right personal choice and one that would serve to fulfill their lives. Alicia is "personally driven and enthusiastic about my major." Anna is satisfied that her choice to return to college has allowed her to gain confidence. She knows that "I can do this." Anna wants to be the "best Me." Sally mentioned that she receives "validation from attending UofSC." She finds that "experience does matter." Roma feels that attending and succeeding in college has "enabled me to gain confidence and move forward with determination." Randi enjoys "the stimulation of being in class with interesting, curious people who push me to move forward." Pat believes that "education makes your life better." Susan's advice to other female nontraditional students, "Just do it."

Extrinsic Motivational Factors.

The participants of this study described full emotional lives that included the consideration of their families and the roles they fill in the family and in the greater society. Where children are present in the family unit, the participants indicated that family commitment came first for them. The phrase "my family is my top priority" was repeated often. Their actions and reactions to family issues supported that commitment. While they were energized by the collegiate experience and learning, the students were determined to "be there for their children and families." Anna is "setting an example for

my daughter." She is also here to honor her father, a UofSC graduate, and her family, who are "Big Gamecock Fans." Kia stated that "marriage and family are the most important things to me, and education is a close second." Alicia's husband and son offer great support. Her husband works to "reassure her when I have self-doubts. Alicia's priorities are family and then school. She does consider school to be "my job at the moment and is serious about my job."

Pat's parents are supportive with housing, food, and part-time work in a family business. Her boyfriend, who is enrolled in graduate studies, and other graduate students provide her with "a sounding board and support." Fran's family has made "financial contributions to tide me over." Her mother and friends provide "emotional support." Sally identifies her priorities as "school, then family and health." She is determined "to be a role model for my family and is motivated to make straight A's." Tia is motivated to earn A's as she feels that "earning an A is essential to a strong identify." Tia is married, but she and her husband are "putting off family until I reach a few life goals like a BA and maybe a graduate degree."

Husbands, family members, children, friends, and work and church community members form a web of support that provides encouragement for the return to college and provides the students with the ability to advance. In most reflections, the participants indicated that their children and other family members looked to them as a "way to move forward and obtain credentials for advancement of the family unit." By achieving a college degree, these students are not only likely to provide more financial stability for the family, but also these females seek to be the role model for the family. Roma related:

> I am proud to identify myself as a role model for children and young students on campus. I think they see what can be done through hard work and a positive

attitude. Because I work so hard, my children now think of college as a possibility and one that is not difficult to navigate. My husband is also attending college and so together we are showing the kids how to work out a support system for each other and the family.

After earning a BA and working for several years in a job she disliked, Beth was persuaded by her husband "to return to college and earn a degree in an area that would be better suited to my interests and skills." Susan's husband and mother-in-law provide "her biggest support by taking care of her children." She feels that she serves as "a role model for my children and my husband." As she stated, "my kids think I am amazing."

The participants, especially those who are pursuing new or different educational majors, spoke about previously working in jobs that were "boring and meaningless." The participants indicated that without educational credentials, their employment choices were limited and low paying without career advancement options. Kia would like to obtain a degree that allows her to contribute financially to the family, but she also wants to find work in an area that "stimulates my interests." Darla transferred from another institution after deciding her chosen major "did not offer certain employability." Her goal is "to complete a college degree and to expand my employment possibilities." She is "working school around my life."

Returning to higher education offered them the ability to re-think and retool their skills and to expand their interests. In some instances, the participants chose majors and fields of interest that they would not have chosen at an earlier time in their lives. A combination of self-awareness confidence, and career factors directed them to more professional or skill-oriented pursuits, such as engineering. The decision to return to college with a chosen career path also afforded them the ability to earn higher incomes and to advance the financial prospects of the family unit. As Kia stated, "completing my

college degree will allow me to work in an area that can provide a financial contribution to my family and to have my own income or money in the bank." Several participants addressed the concept of being able to support a child's needs or another family member's situation with a degree that would offer additional income and more financial independence.

Challenges to College Enrollment.

Though the intrinsic and extrinsic factors provided a strong foundation for female nontraditional students to enroll in higher education, most of the participants mentioned challenges caused by the same sources that provided encouragement and support. The participants in this study indicated concern over their family's needs while they are attending college. Beth worries "that I do not spend enough time with my child." Though she has solid support from her husband and family to continue her educational path, she is concerned about the childcare arrangements she has made. Kia's family is a priority. She describes herself as:

> A traditional homemaker, wife, and mother. I want to provide a home that is a safe place for my children and family as mother did for me. My mother was a nontraditional college student, so I now understand just what it took for her (mother) to be there for her family. My mother stayed up and worked on her studies long after we were asleep. She wanted to provide a more secure future for us. I wish I could thank her for all her efforts. I now see the sacrifices she made.

Alicia worries about her son's focus on education when she is not there to supervise his schoolwork. She plans to change her class schedule "to provide me the ability to respond to my son's schedule and needs." Darla is concerned about finding "a safe place for my children in daycare." She worries that she "may not be able to return next year due to the lack of childcare options." Anna feels "guilty for missing out on my daughter's activities and so I do homework with my daughter to share time together."

The financial commitment of attending college was a shock for most of the participants. Additionally, most of them found little to no resources that provided them with financial assistance other than federal loan programs. Most of them indicated that they had to "find" the sources outside of their family units. Some of the participants had spouses that were willing to work harder and to help defray the cost of the tuition. But most retreated to borrowing the funds. This presented a concern as several have children at or near the age of college attendance. Kia stated flatly, that "my children will have to figure out a way to pay for college." While she hopes they will attend college, she knows that she will not be able to financially support them through the process. Susan mentioned her meltdown when faced with additional fees related to one program on campus. She called her husband, cried and was told "to just go forward, we'll manage." While grateful for that statement, she recognized how slim the financial margin is for her family.

Five of the participants have chosen to continue working on a part-time basis. Some are in career-related internships or placements which may continue as full-time jobs after graduation. Several have "pieced together" two or more part-time jobs to help pay for tuition as well as living expenses. Money is a huge barrier even at a public institution. The participants do not qualify for state grants or scholarships as a traditional-aged student straight from high school would. They spend time searching for grants, scholarships, as well as low interest loans to reduce their debt. Tia is working full-time and proudly announced that due to hard work and determined efforts, she would "graduate with no student debt-a real feat."

The topic of family support and work led to the concern about time commitment and work-life balance. These students see their limited time being cut up into smaller and smaller pieces. They must decide whether to read a book to a 5-year old at night or to write an essay. Most choose the child. In any 24-hour day, they are torn time- wise between family, work, and school. While they understand the temporary nature of this dilemma, they are stressed by the decisions they must make in the present. Pat expressed concern about "the work-life balance and my level of stress." She endures long days with work and class. She is learning "to compartmentalize work stress, because class and learning are very important." Roma stated emphatically, that when she graduates, she plans to sleep, stating "I have not slept consistently for more than five hours total in a night in the past four years." Several of the participants indicated that they get less than six hours of sleep per night on a regular basis. They are weary, but forge on.

Interestingly, the majority of the women stated that they were no longer "hung up on earning all A's." As Darla put it "B's look like miracles to me." They place value on learning but not at the price of overachieving and overwhelming their lives. Susan does not earn straight A's "as family responsibilities do not always allow me to prioritize my schoolwork." If one of her children has a request for her time, she deems that to "be more important." Susan considers "mastering the subject matter to be more essential and strives to do my best." By consensus, the lack of time is their nemesis.

Campus Experience

The second theme evolved from my analysis of the responses by participants to questions concerning their perceived experience once they are enrolled and began attending classes on campus. This theme is developed around the comments and

reflections by the students about the campus culture, the physical aspects of campus, the social connections, the academic environment, and the support system and services provided by the college for them as they make the transition and return to higher education.

Campus Environment.

The culture of the campus of a public four-year research institution can be interpreted in many ways. Responses to questions on this topic included the attitudes and personality of the campus community, the physical components of the university campus, the social environment, the academic component, and the college support provided through services and programs. Most of the responses from the participants were positive and indicated that they enjoyed the campus environment. Most felt that they acclimated to the university within a matter of a few weeks as they became accustomed to the layout and size of the campus. Students stated that they felt comfortable and remarkably at ease with a "city campus that seemed to cater to traditional age students." Beth appreciates the "university setting and the Columbia area." While she preferred the setting of the two-year institution she attended previously, she is "satisfied with the campus and the opportunities here." Alicia fell in love with the campus on the first visit. She remarked, "I felt an electric shock when I arrived on the campus – I knew I was in the right place for me."

The participants indicated a positive sense of awe and respect for physical aspects of the USofC campus. They remarked on the attractive layout and the impressive buildings. Pat remarked that the campus was "so beautiful with flowers and dignified buildings." Anna stated that the campus was "all I thought a college campus should be."

She reflected on the neighborhood feel to campus and noted that "Gamecock Country was like an unspoken fraternity of learners." Roma found the university to be "convenient, the academics excellent, and most advice and help accessible." Randi loves almost everything about UofSC and feels that "the campus provides a great environment." Sally noted that "at UofSC there is something for everyone." Anna feels that the "campus is a safe environment and feels secure."

Over half of the participants stated that they and their families visited the campus before enrollment or the first week of classes to become familiar with the layout, to identify the buildings where their classes would be held, to find the bookstore, to locate parking options, or to just feel more comfortable and familiar with the surroundings. While Susan expressed no real concerns about attending a large university, she did take time to "walk the campus with my husband to familiarize myself with the campus and the buildings and the parking before I started classes."

Female nontraditional students indicated that they had "a hard time feeling comfortable with the campus environment." They were aware and at times overwhelmed by the size and layout of the campus. Participants indicated a concern for the number of students who were "not my age or probably did not share my interests." Sally felt isolated and that her "differences stood out." Kia voiced her concerns:

> Initially I was worried about the physical challenges coming from such a large campus. I admit that I was overweight and not in good physical condition. Being out of shape prevented me from being able to walk fast up and down the hills and I was late to class a few times. I was also a bit intimidated by the large size of the institution and the campus. It was a lot to take in and the orientation process did not prepare me for it. I do feel that the campus is safe and am adjusting nicely. I have even dropped a few pounds.

Kim expressed that "attending UofSC has not been a good experience for me." She stated that "at no time have I liked the experience of attending the university, though I was encouraged by several professors and did manage to make two friends." Sally felt "a loss of confidence when I transferred." She had "no knowledge of the campus and the college rules and policies." Pat and Alicia mentioned the parking complications.

Some participants indicated that they felt a bit out of place because of the difference in age between them and the traditional-aged students. Initially, the participants were concerned with the masses of traditional students and the lack of interaction with all student groups. Though most of the participants stated that traditional students did not ignore them, they also suggested that traditional students did not include them in activities or conversations. Alicia felt "isolated in the first month and did not know who or where to go for help." Randi indicated that "it was hard to get comfortable in class and on campus as traditional students were not interested in making friends in class." Fran said that "this time around I do not have as many friends in classes and because I am not living in a dorm, so it is hard to relate to the 18 to 22-year old students." Kia admitted to feeling "overlooked" by UofSC, not discriminated against but as if "no one sees me." The participant's level of comfort with the traditional students increased when classes allowed for nontraditional and traditional students to work together in groups. For the most part, the groups of students were supportive and appreciative of the skills that each contributed to the course assignments and discussions.

Participants did not feel particularly comfortable in the areas designated for relaxation as most of those areas were populated with younger students. Some expressed that they had a hard time making friends with students on campus. But they were quick

to note that they had little time to "hang around on campus and talk." Beth has made few

connections with other female undergraduate students at UofSC, but for the most part she

admits that she does not have the time "to develop relationships as I commute over an

hour each way to campus." They had a hard time finding meaningful groups and

organizations to join and thus to make friends and social connections. Tia felt apart from

the student groups and isolated. She made two friends in two years. In one class, the

other students referred to Tia as "the teacher's pet" and asked why she was in college.

Pat felt that "older students have more life experiences and perspectives, but few other

students want to hear them." She just "puts my head down, expresses few opinions, and

just gets it done."

One of the participants, Roma, was quick to note that she and her family had

embraced campus life:

> We attend everything we can – football games, concerts, plays, musical concerts,
> and group outings. We are going for it all – this is my chance to enjoy every
> aspect of college life and we are. Sometimes, this takes a bit of time wrangling
> and organization to get everyone on the same page. I always include my children
> in the activities. They need to see what college is all about.

Several of the participants have sponsored or joined the newly formed transfer

student organization which provides them with a means to get to know other

nontraditional students and to form social bonds on campus. Sally felt "no overt

discrimination or intentional discrimination based on age, but I notice the lack of

mingling among nontraditional and traditional students on campus."

The participants show pride in their attendance at the University of South

Carolina. Kim stated that "the university holds the reputation as the best college in the

state and one of the best in the nation." Tia suggests that UofSC is "a good value for the

money." They are aware of the growth and changes at the university and feel honored to be a part of this process. They were complimentary towards the administration and felt the Dr. Harris Pastides has been a boon to the university and they were delighted to be here while he served as president. They felt he will be "hard to replace." The students indicated that they were confident that their academic work and ultimately their degrees would reflect the academic integrity and strength of the University of South Carolina.

Academic Environment.

For the most part, the professors, instructors and other faculty members are perceived as well-prepared, interested, and capable members of the college community. Participants indicated that, with very few exceptions, the professors were interested and engaged with all students. Beth enjoys her classes and feels that "my professors have given me support and encouragement." Susan remarked that her professor's advice "provides a balance to the class assignments and the requirements of a demanding major." Fran noted:

> The professors are always willing to spend time to hear my concerns and to celebrate my wins. The professors are empathetic, kind, fight for students, understand and work with me. They are there for me. I could not be this successful without their support and knowledge.

Beth noted that "the professors care and are interested in students for the most part." Roma stated that "instructors are able to meet the students where we are academically." Anna has a "great connection with my professors and instructors and feels comfortable talking candidly with them." Alicia states that her professors are "top-notch." Pat feels that "the professors and students are enthusiastic and excited about learning and education."

Professors and instructors do not seem to recognize the nontraditional students as being different in any way. Several participants found that "odd." Anna is not able to take advantage of extra credit in classes as the sessions are often at time when she is unable to participate. Anna thinks:

> The professors don't recognize me as a nontraditional student. I know I wear jeans and casual clothing, so I guess I blend in and look sort of like the other students. After all there is a lot of diversity on campus. Several times I have had to remind professors that nontraditional students have children and that these responsibilities affect our ability to attend events in the evening and on weekends. I speak up now and let them know that we want to attend and be a part of the action, but it's not always possible.

As Kia mentioned, "When the professor makes a comment about partying or staying out late, I think, does he know that I am 40 and have children to supervise?" The students do not believe that these comments are meant to be negative, but they are somehow surprised that the professor "doesn't just know that I am older." When approached, faculty members are eager to assist and to help makes choices about the student's intended career field. The professors recognize the hard work of the students and are "advocates for their success."

Students in the classroom are not friendly initially but given time and experience around the female nontraditional student, they form loose bonds related to the classwork and course assignments. Pat says she does not even "understand the slang used by traditional students." Most of the female nontraditional students surveyed do not have the time to make social contacts outside of the classroom. They form social links with traditional students around the course requirements. In a few instances, the participants indicated some amount of hostility from traditional aged students. Beth reported that "a male traditional student chided me for taking the place of a more deserving traditional

student in the major area." Knowing that she had earned her place in the program, her answer was simple, "he should have made better grades to earn acceptance into the program."

The participants concurred that the learning environment was challenging but rewarding. The level of rigor in the coursework is commensurate with the goals and objectives stated by the faulty in their course plans. Beth indicated that "academic success is important to me, and I expect to earn A's but am not undone by a few B's." The classroom environment is evaluated as appropriate to the level of work and the level of the students. Kim is motivated but is not making great grades. She feels that "I am gaining knowledge and am learning more than my grades suggest." Kia made a C on a test and says that she "freaked." But she learned to balance her need for academic success with the reality that "one test grade does not make the semester." She also relies on her brother's motto: "C's get degrees." The classroom is perceived as "a safe and encouraging space that allows all students to grow and develop their skills and knowledge." Fran believes that "grades are a reflection of understanding and show my level of knowledge." She wants professors to know that "I am learning and understand the material."

Female nontraditional students do not miss classes unless it is unavoidable. Going to class prepared is a priority for them. They enjoy participating in the classroom discussions when they have information or experiences to share but are mindful that traditional students may not be interested in their contributions to the class. Several mentioned that they did not participate as much as they could as they felt that they were "overwhelming the other students and overtaking the classroom experience." For that

reason, they withheld some of their comments and opinions. Randi wants to be perceived as "a contributor, not but does not want to monopolize the class." Sally stated that "it is hard to not speak up and out, but I do not want others to stare at me and whisper, so I find a good balance."

The participants are enrolled primarily in day-time classes. This plan works better with the needs and schedules of their families. The participants repeatedly addressed the importance of family as a top priority. When children are present in the home, the students preferred day classes as a means of "being there when the children are at home." Three of the participants have taken online classes. Tia stated that she took online classes because this format "offered me a flexible way to earn credits within my family and work schedules." She took most of her Carolina Core coursework online as it was "more flexible but without face to face accountability, I had to work really hard for that A." Roma took online classes "for convenience but found them not as fulfilling, and the material is harder to learn on my own." She attempts to enroll in "day classes that fit into my family's schedule." Kia stated, "I would not take online classes unless there is no option." She believes that "I would do my own thing and will not work as hard as if the class were face to face with the instructor." Randi would not take an online class. She prefers "face to face interaction with professors and classmates." Pat also "likes the feeling of being engaged personally face to face." The participants indicated the importance of developing academic relationships with faculty as of more importance than time or location flexibility. Darla was the only participant that indicated her desire to take more online courses. She wishes:

> That UofSC would offer more online courses and degrees to provide students with family and work responsibilities with options to complete a degree. I think that

the university needs to make sure that the online courses are rigorous but reasonable for students – teach what we need to know and how we can best learn.

College Support.

Once female nontraditional students are accepted for enrollment, the first on-campus experience for most of them is the orientation process before starting the academic year. Most of the participants entered in the fall semester and went through orientation with a mixture of traditional, nontraditional, and transfer students. Fran stated that "the readmissions process was a real adventure." Sally purposefully entered in the spring semester and found this to be a good idea as "there are fewer new students and more time for questions and concerns without the crush of large numbers of student."

While the participants appreciated the opportunity to tour the campus, they felt that an orientation process geared or targeted toward the nontraditional and transfer students would be preferable. Anna suggested that orientation address the needs of the nontraditional students by understanding that "we are independent and don't need unnecessary information." Orientation should by tailored to nontraditional students and "introduce us to resources available to nontraditional students." Even the orientation walk could be developed around the needs of the nontraditional students. In several instances, nontraditional asked questions about buildings, services, and programs on the campus and found that the orientation guide had "little knowledge about information that would be useful to a nontraditional or transfer student." Sally mentioned that "the campus layout is confusing and the tour guides at orientation did not direct the tours towards the nontraditional transfer students or our concerns." She asked about the shuttle service and was told the guide had "no knowledge of how the shuttle worked and recommended that she just get a schedule and figure it out."

Randi says, "the admissions and orientation processes are not geared for nontraditional students and it is next to impossible to find a person to ask for information and if you find a person, they do not know the answer." Kia thought that:

> Requiring nontraditional students to take the same workshops on drinking and sex traditional age students was unreasonable. I feel that orientation for nontraditional students should be directed towards the needs of nontraditional students with topics like location of services for our support, shuttle and parking services, and other pertinent information that could benefit us.

The topic of academic advisement got a huge response from the research participants. Most students relied on the advice and guidance of the academic advisor yet found the advisors to be uninformed and sometimes unhelpful. Most of the students indicated a level of dissatisfaction with the First-Year Advisor. The female nontraditional students, whether transferring in 20 hours or an entire degree, perceived that "the first-year advisor was underprepared and less that helpful in guiding academic enrollment and course choices." Anna felt that her advisor gave her little "one on one treatment." She felt as if she were "self-advising under supervision." Anna knew she needed help and felt lost.

Darla felt that "the university should make sure that the advisement process is transparent so that we know what is expected and what lies ahead for us." Tia felt that the advisement process was good, but "not the first-year group." Pat's advisor initially gave her great advice and then "just disappeared." She had to find another advisor. According to Susan:

> My First-Year Academic Advisor basically told me here are the classes you are going to take and that was the extent of the advisement session. Honestly, I was scheduled for classes back to back on opposite ends of the campus. So, I had to figure out a way to cross campus in less than 20 minutes in order to be on time for the next class. I knew that this was my responsibility and that I should have taken the initiative to check timing and locations. But at that point, I was unaware of

the size of the campus and ended up being late quite a few times because of poor or inadequate scheduling advice.

Carolina Core ensures that all University of South Carolina undergraduate students share a common academic foundation. Students are given the requirements for degree completion which includes choices among the subject options. This seems like a good idea, but according to Tia, "it is confusing and probably not appreciated by nontraditional or traditional students as the goals are not clear." Beth found:

> Carolina Core to be confusing and hard to understand. My initial experience with academic advisement indicated a lack of academic understanding on the part of the First-Year Advisor, who did not guide me with accuracy. I am not sure if the advisor understood the system or was not interested in helping me to decipher the courses and how each met a requirement. Once I moved on to an academic advisor in my field of study, I felt confident and comfortable with the process. My department advisor led me through the process and explained how each course worked to fulfill a requirement and to enable me to master the course work.

Kia stated that "Carolina Core provided the worst information ever and was the most useless webpage I have ever been on." She felt that "my first-year advisor was either ill-informed or uninformed when she presented her plan for my academic path." Kim was not satisfied with the advice and assistance offered by her First-Year Academic Advisor. She stated that "Carolina Core is a nightmare." In two instances, advisors misadvised the participants, thus causing them to take classes that were unnecessary. The participants were "relieved to be assigned to an advisor in our majors." They perceived these advisors to have more knowledge and more understanding of their situations. They also indicated that as they began to talk with other students and faculty, they had "a greater sense of the requirement, workload, and physical issues concerned with making our schedules." For others, Carolina Core provided "an outline of the academic path from start to finish." Because Alicia likes to be prepared, this plan is "available to me

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anytime; provides flexibility, choices, and options in the way I make my schedule."

Darla simply stated her assessment of this plan, "Carolina Core makes sense in concept, but implementing it is difficult."

The health and well-being services offered on campus have been used by more than half of the participants of this research study. Kim, Sally, Roma, and Kia are complimentary towards the university for providing health care and other services and towards the staff members working in these areas. Female nontraditional students need both physical and psychological health care. The Counseling Center identified dyslexia for one student and was able to give her assistance with this. Among the students who have availed themselves of a variety of services, one stated, "I know that having this support has meant a great deal to my success." Without the opportunity to use the health care system on campus, some of them would have "withdrawn due to overriding emotional issues not necessarily related to academic work." Only one of the participants, Fran, expressed dissatisfaction with the services offered. She experienced some medical problems and was "very frustrated that the university staff did not understand and address my needs."

The female nontraditional students commented positively on the inclusion of well-being and safety for the students as an objective on this campus. Carolina Alert and other means of communication designed to provide to information to students about campus issues is well-received. They perceived the administrative staff to be concerned for their safety and well-being while on campus and around the area. Dr. Pastides' emails that "praise and celebrate the students and the campus community as well as those that express concern and sadness" are meaningful to the female nontraditional students.

This type of communication is perceived as "engaging, caring, encouraging, supportive, and respectful" by these female nontraditional students.

Institutional Support

The third theme evolved from my examination and analysis of the responses to questions concerning the knowledge and perceived value of the institutional initiatives that are provided to female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution. This theme is developed around the comments and reflections by the students about the academic encouragement and support, the financial support, and social belongingness on the university campus. My first concern was to determine what these participants knew about services and programs that are available to them. If they did have information about institutional support services directed toward their needs, I wanted to know about their use of the services and programs. Ultimately, I was interested in their assessment of these initiatives and the perceived value they attached to the institutional support. This theme highlights the reactions of these students to the services and programs available on campus to address their needs and concerns.

Academic Programs.

Over half of the participants had first-hand knowledge concerning the services and programs available for nontraditional students or for transfer students who are classified as nontraditional. When they were aware of the programs and services, the participants used the resources offered to them. Their biggest issue with institutional initiatives was the lack of knowledge and the inability to locate the appropriate programs and offices on campus that provided these services.

The first impression that the participants mentioned was the process of orientation that took place on campus before classes began for them. A few participants mentioned that the information given was lacking any focus or direction towards the issues that female nontraditional undergraduate students might face once classes began. The orientation guides were unable to answer questions posed by the participants about where they could go for academic assistance, parking, shuttle services, advisement issues, bookstore information, and other topics. They did not feel that they were being "ignored or belittled as students," but that the guides and other students and staff members they met "were in the dark just as much as we are." Several of the participants devoted a considerable amount of time and energy to locate the needed information by searching the UofSC website. After many hours, some found what they needed; some found that no information was available. Fran suggested that the university "has little interest in nontraditional students and thus has directed few resources towards nontraditional and transfer students." As she put it, "the university doesn't understand or appreciate our needs." She and others mentioned the need for affordable and convenient parking as "we don't live on campus and need some help with this expense." Fran also suggested that the university should "establish an office or program to deal specifically with nontraditional and transfer students to answer questions, resolve issues and concern, and address our lifestyle."

The initial advisement process with a First-Year Advisor yielded similar frustrating results. Of the thirteen students interviewed, one said that her first advisor was "amazing and very helpful." The remaining twelve students had less than positive comments about the initial advisement process. Most attributed the poor results to lack

of information and training on the part of the advisor. While they did not criticize the advisor, they felt that these individuals should have more knowledge and "a wider scope on what all types of students might need to encourage us in the first weeks of class in our first semesters." One student stated that "my previous experiences did not prepare me for the lack of assistance in answering my concerns both large, such as class scheduling, and small, such as where the closest parking might be for my classes." While they expected a larger campus to hold more challenges for them, they did expect guidance and assistance from the staff on campus. Often their questions were answered with "I don't know about that, but you can probably find it on the website."

Roma found it to be unsettling to discover that though she had completed over 100 credit hours of coursework at two different institutions, none of those hours would transfer into the university. As she says:

> I took a deep breath and asked why and was told that the advisor really did not know why, but that I could probably find someone on campus who could address that concern. The advisor could not say exactly who that person would be. I could never tell if the she lacked the information or was disinterested. I like to think she was just overworked and tired of answering questions.

Female nontraditional students faced complications and issues surrounding academic matters such as non-acceptance of transfer credits, poor advisement advice, and incomplete or inaccurate information, and yet they persevered.

Departmental or program advisors and faculty mentors offered essential guidance and support for female nontraditional students. Once the students were assigned to their program advisor, the situation improved significantly. As these students are academically goal-oriented, these staff and faculty members were more likely to be able to address their issues and concerns. The participants were satisfied with their program

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academic advisors, though some wished that faculty were designated as advisors. They respect the staff members, but they desire the contact with faculty outside of the classroom. In this capacity, the faculty serve more as mentors to the female nontraditional students. The demeanors of the participants changed when talking about the faculty-student relationships they had forged since enrolling at UofSC. Tia was very excited about the mentors within the academic community at UofSC and stated that "they have made a huge difference in my success in college." In this role, the faculty member can share experiences and encourage and foster academic growth and professional development in the student. Several of the participants observed that faculty mentors had sought them out and suggested classes and work experiences that would advance their career plans. Two student obtained internships and graduate assistantships in this manner.

Alicia recommended the Student Success Center in the Thomas Cooper Library which, "provides assistance and guidance for transfer students as well as help with all sorts of academic and other issues in and around campus." Tia has utilized the services in the Student Success Center. She also sought out opportunities and resources in the Tutoring Center and the Career Center. She feels that "the services are out there but most nontraditional students do not take advantage of them." Several students mentioned that they found the Student Success Center by talking with other students or by asking advisors for advice about academic concerns. While most of the participants felt comfortable with the level of instruction in the classroom, there were those who required some amount of counseling or tutoring in specific subject areas. Sally recounted:

> I had never written a paper of over three pages in length and needed assistance in developing a lengthier research paper for the first time. When I approached a

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worker in the Student Success Center, I was so grateful for the patience and helpful guidance that she offered to me. We started at square one and she and I worked together to construct my first paper. After one semester, I started to realize that I was comfortable with my skill level but was reassured to know that this type of service existed if I needed it.

Most of the participants entered UofSC with some amount of trepidation about the level of academic work. Though several have earned degrees from other higher education institutions, they did not know what to expect at a large institution. Within the first semester, they were comfortable and confident with their academic abilities.

The participants mentioned a concern with academic planning which included more than the class schedule for the next semester. For female nontraditional students, academic planning includes linking their interests and career goals to internships and experiential placement opportunities, mentoring for career and academic paths and decisions, and ensuring that the students have been presented with information designed to provide them with opportunities and options.

Though some of them had difficulties with advisors who seemed unfazed by the student's personal work and life schedule when constructing a class schedule, most of the participants recognized that they as students needed "to conform with the course offerings even when those classes conflicted with other elements in our lives." Kia mentioned that "my academic advisor in my program reviewed Carolina Core and my transfer credits and produced a map for my degree." That enabled her "to organize my path through college and gave me the information in a format I could understand." Darla suggested that "Carolina Core should be explained completely so that a student can understand and manage her academic pathway."

For the female nontraditional student, academic planning revolves around several semesters or even years. These students want to see a "bigger plan." They are searching for ways to incorporate work experiences or internships into their overall academic plan. For them the academic plan is a path from academic endeavors directly into a career situation. They are eager to avail themselves of productive and stimulating academic experiences. Pat used the Career Center to find an advisor to help her "plot a path from college to career." Two of the students are working in research areas with professors in their program areas. Not only are they honored to share this experience, they feel that this type of activity can "lead to academic and career-oriented opportunities." They seem excited about being chosen for these situations.

Financial Services.

According to Susan, "the greatest shock was the expense of attending college and the fact that no financial advice was offered other than through the Financial Aid Office." Scholarships for transfer students are particularly difficult to access as students must wait until they transfer to apply. That means they have no financial assistance in the first semester they transfer and must rely on personal or family resources or they must take on financial burden through loans.

Sally felt that "the linkage to financial assistance was poor." Sally continued, "transfer students are not qualified for scholarships until they have earned credits and a GPA at UofSC which makes it hard to apply before enrolling at UofSC." Kia stated that "financial aid for nontraditional students is hard to find." She indicated that "when a student transfers they have no GPA and no credit hours earned at UofSC, thus very few scholarships are applicable to transfer students." Kim felt "that resources for obtaining

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financial assistance were hidden in plain sight." Fran states that "the additional fees associated with my program of study puts a huge financial strain on me."

The participants indicated in their interviews "a huge concern for the debt level we are incurring." Several of them have the increasing financial pressure stemming from children who are approaching college age. For these participants, the options are few. One stated that when she realized her program area had additional fees attached to it, "I called my husband and burst into tears." He was reassuring and told her that "we will manage and work through the financial issues." She knows that she has placed a financial burden on her family. For that reason, she is taking as many hours as possible each semester in order to complete her degree in a shorter time. She also actively seeks work on campus and scholarships. Roma stated that for the most part "the Financial Aid Office offered sound advice."

Three students had obtained internship placements on campus and in the community. Beth decided to work in a career-related job that was recommended by her professor. The professor mentored her and helped her to pick an internship position that suited her interests and her career goal. She is pleased with this internship placement and works around 10 to 15 hours a week around her school and family schedules. When Beth graduates, she plans "to consider an offer from the firm where I am presently employed." Kia received assistance from faculty in "finding an internship opportunity that will work for me." She plans to pursue one of the options her professor recommended though she has never worked in this type of environment and feels that "it is "a bit outside of my comfort area." Other students mentioned assistance and encouragement from faculty in locating work positions. Internships and other part time placement help reduce the

financial burdens of the students. Three students have pieced together several part-time jobs to help with expenses. These are minimum wage jobs, and the students felt that the time they worked in the different jobs "encroached on the ability to find better career related positions." Anna stated that she wished the university had an office that could "connect nontraditional students with work that could help defray my costs."

Social Belongingness.

Social belonginess encompasses more that making friends and connections on campus. Several students mentioned the lack of identity for female nontraditional students and thus a lack of social belongingness or social connection within the campus community. "It's as if we are invisible," stated Kim. The students have a difficult time bonding and making social connections with other students. This is not necessarily reflective of the age difference as two students who are 25 were the most outspoken about this situation. Even when the traditional students are not indifferent towards them, they sense a "feeling of distance." The participants recognize that they have little time to gather with other students. They enter in conversations with students in class where it is appropriate but feel that few traditional students are eager to befriend them. More importantly, they feel overlooked and undervalued by the campus community. Roma indicates that "making friends takes time and can be difficult." She would like the university to be more "inclusive of some diversities."   Some groups feel marginalized and overlooked, she feels that this is "unintended." Roma suggested that "more organizations or promotion of the existing organizations is needed to make nontraditional students felt welcome." Sally noted that "small connections make me feel a part of

UofSC, sometimes just a former classmate saying my name and asking about my classes."

The participants indicated that there are few opportunities for them to join in with other nontraditional students. Most of these students are challenged with balancing a full-time academic workload with family and work responsibilities. Most organizations on campus are directed towards traditional students. Sally indicated that "it is hard to locate other nontraditional students on campus as they are not obvious." She suggests that "more events are needed to allow nontraditional students to meet and share our experiences." Susan suggests that "more activities should be provided to involve nontraditional students on campus." Most organizations and groups meet at times when the participants are less likely to be able to attend and fully participate in the activities.

Tia has attended some organization meetings and participated with Relay for Life. Darla feels that "the college should provide students with direct information concerning organizations and offices where we can get help, advice, or information." She has visited the Student Success Center and is planning on joining the Transfer Student Organization. Darla would like to see "more family-oriented events on campus to attract nontraditional students with families." Kim would like to see "organizations that encourage nontraditional students to meet and get to know each other." Alicia felt "welcomed by student organizations when I made an attempt to enter the social activity on campus."

Roma is "fully committed to the college experience – footballs games, intramural athletics – and has made many friends on campus in classes and outside of classes." She is among the handful of participants who have thrown themselves into campus life

including organization and activities. Most do not. As Pat said, "my job is college studies – that is why I am here, not to play but to perform."

Sally and Anna were enthusiastic about the newly formed Association of Transfer Students and Tau Sigma, the honor society for transfer students, but most were unaware of the existence of the organizations and activities designed for the female nontraditional student. Sally mentioned that she "had located a transfer career mentor through the Career Center."

Activities on campus are difficult for nontraditional students to attend. While some of the students indicated that they attend and try to participate in a wide range of activities, such as football, intramural sports, lectures, concerts, and presentations, most detach themselves from that aspect of the college community. While Kim knows she is missing out on a part of the college experience, she is also struggling "to maintain a work-life balance and has little extra time for extracurricular activities."

The participants expressed disappointment with the events scheduling process. Several responded with concern that the university does not take the nontraditional student into consideration when determining days and times for events. Anna stated, "I am unable to return to campus after 6 pm, yet many of the activities both academic and social that I would like to attend are offered when my children are going to bed or when I am occupied with family or academic responsibilities." "No one seems to realize that we do not necessarily live on or near the campus," said Beth. Thus, attending activities or events on campus is not convenient for these students. Even scheduling on the weekends can present difficulties for female nontraditional students. The children in their homes often have a full calendar of activities on the weekends and thus, as one participant

stated, "I will not ask my family to sacrifice time for university activities unless we are all included."

A sense of belonging on campus is important to these students. They are proud of their decision to attend the University of South Carolina. They want to feel as if they "matter to the campus community." Female nontraditional students want to be a part of a bigger picture on the university campus. Tia recommends that inclusivity be expanded to groups such as nontraditional students and transfer students and that they be encouraged to "join the conversation on campus." As Pat suggested, "There is a need for interconnectedness on campus with all programs, offices, and services prepared by knowing what each does and ensuring that they and the student body work together." According to Randi, "Advisors and staff should be well-versed in interconnections on campus and share information freely and know what is going on across this campus." She stated further, "UofSC should turn deliberate consideration towards improving communication among campus offices and programs to ensure that all students feel engaged in the campus community."

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Interpretation

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The following section is a discussion of my own interpretations of the study's findings and the parts of the study that I believe are most significance. This discussion of interpretation is broken into three sections: The Difficulty of Going, The Invisible Woman, and Do the Right Thing.

The Difficulty of Going.

Female nontraditional students are determined to succeed in higher education. These are not students who plan to disappear or just go away if the going gets tough.

They face whatever challenges or issues are in front of the them. They are hardy and tend to have realistic perspectives about higher education and its importance to them. Female nontraditional students lean heavily on their personal self-awareness and self-determination when making the decision to enroll in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution. These individuals are hard-working and determined students and learners. They appreciate support from their families but do not depend solely on that support. They recognize the importance of balancing family, work, and school. But they will succeed in school. As Sally stated, "nothing will keep me from reaching my goals of college completion."

Their proudest accomplishment is the completion of the degree at a public four-year research institution. They recognize the value of learning and the reward of a better financial future for their families. They recognize the merit of seizing the moment and moving forward economically, professionally, and socially. The campus of a large institution is intimidating but does not deter their return to higher education. They seek and find the resources necessary to support their college needs and carry on through completion.

The Invisible Woman.

At present, female nontraditional students represent approximately 2.5% of the undergraduate student body at the University of South Carolina. Statistically, these students represent a small part of the whole or about 700 students in 2019. Research studies and demographic data indicate that the numbers of female nontraditional students enrolling in four-year institutions of higher education will grow rapidly in the next five to ten years. The position of the female nontraditional undergraduate students at UofSC is

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less known and for the most part unheralded. Yet, they are achieving their goals and succeeding in the academic environment of a large public university. Recognition of their existence on campus could contribute to support and encouragement for these students. Once they have an identity, the university's communication system can clearly promote information about the programs including the contact information and the physical location of the services that benefit female nontraditional students. Recognizing female nontraditional undergraduate students as an entity on campus and identifying and addressing their needs and interests provides a strong message for their inclusion within the campus community.

Do the Right Thing.

The University of South Carolina has services and programs in place to provide support for female nontraditional undergraduate students. As stated above, the issue in not about the existence and value of these programs and services, but rather the lack of knowledge about where to locate and how to use these services and programs. As Roma mentioned the "bureaucracy at UofSC rivals the military." While there may be a perceived lack of assistance in certain support offices on campus, but she and others interviewed feel that this is due to a "lack of knowledge rather than disinterest on the part of the staff." When the female nontraditional students felt compelled to start their own organization to address their interests and needs, they were making a statement about an obvious shortcoming on campus. The institution has failed to recognize them and their need for socialization and inclusion within the campus community. Female nontraditional undergraduate students want to be accepted members of the campus group and have an inherent desire to belong and to be a part of something greater than

themselves. The institution can benefit by identifying these students and targeting them to ensure that they are informed about services and programs. An institutional plan can provide a means for these students to come forward when they have questions and concerns as well as to offer praise for their achievements and success. As the numbers grow, the established institutional plans can allow for the development and expansion of services and programs to meet the expanding needs.

A discussion of interpretations.

The preceding topics represent important interpretations that are derived from my research. There are several key points that can be made from the findings. First, I wish to discuss is how the female nontraditional undergraduate student perceives the experience of being enrolled in a public four-year research institution. These students clearly perceive the experience to be positive but not without issues. They are delighted to be a part of a large institution and to have the ability to continue their education with plans toward academic completion. There is the element of concern about balancing the personal, school, and work components of their lives. They recognize that their lives are complicated and at times they feel overwhelmed.

Understanding female nontraditional undergraduate students' academic pathways is complicated and nonlinear. Female nontraditional undergraduate students find it difficult to return to higher education and rely on internal and external sources of support. They face considerable challenges when returning and staying on to work towards degree completion. They have complicated lives and often do not integrate into the campus culture easily or at all. The size and scope of the campus community may inhibit comfort and the ability to form friendship groups. There are many personal and institutional

factors that can influence whether a student is successful and whether she decides to continue through academic completion at an institution. Support and encouragement of the female nontraditional undergraduate students is essential for her to achieve her academic goals. Academic, financial, and social considerations are important to these students. Among institutional factors, a sense of belonging underlies the strength of the relationship between the student and the institution. It is imperative for the institution to recognize the complexities of the female nontraditional students' lives and to build a program to serve the needs of the female nontraditional undergraduate students within the public four-year research institution.

Summary

Presented in this chapter are the findings of the phenomenological interview study designed to investigate the female nontraditional student's perception of the experience of enrolling in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution. The topics discussed in this chapter also included: 1) a description of the institutional site where the data were collected; 2) a description of the thirteen interview participants in this study using information provided by the participants during the interview and my personal observations during the interviews; 3) the study's results and the three themes that were developed through the thematic analysis; and 4) a personal interpretation of the study's results.

Each of the sections within the chapter build upon one another to illustrate the female nontraditional student's perception of the undergraduate experience at a public four-year research institution. The chapter provided an overview of the approach and framework used to analyze the data, descriptions of participant backgrounds, and a report

of the groups and themes analyzed through the participant data to answer the research questions.

The delivery of the overall purpose of this chapter was presented through the section titled Results. The following three themes were developed and discussed: 1) College-Going Experience, 2) Campus Experience, and 3) Institutional Support. Each of these themes connect to the study's research questions. These specific connections are discussed in Chapter Five, "Discussion and Implications."

As presented throughout the development and discussion of the themes, the female nontraditional undergraduate student's path is more complex that other student types. The study's findings illustrate a need for a plan for female nontraditional undergraduate students that requires recognition of them within the campus community as well as consideration of their interests, needs, and concerns to determine the development of programs and institutional initiatives to support them towards academic achievement and completion.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This descriptive phenomenological interview study describes how female nontraditional students perceive the lived experience of enrolling in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution. The research questions specifically address the female nontraditional student's relationship with the institution. The intrinsic and extrinsic factors that provide motivation and create challenges are identified. Elements of the campus environment and the institutional supports which encourage these students to move forward to completion are described. The aim of this research was to develop a rich description of how female nontraditional undergraduate students perceive the institutional initiatives developed and offered to them to affect their academic pathways. Their stories are significant because of how the findings relate to their academic success and the implications for administrators at the study site and for similar institutions.

This phenomenological study provided insight into 13 female nontraditional students' experiences while enrolled in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution. Three themes emerged from the data analysis: College-Going Experience, College Experience, and Institutional Support. This chapter includes addressing the research questions, recommendations for future research, recommendations for practice, relevance to the literature, and a summary with final thoughts.

Research Questions and Findings

This section will address each research question individually, drawing on the themes that emerged from the thematic analysis. Each of the following research questions will be connected to the study's findings:

1. How do female nontraditional students describe their undergraduate academic experiences at a public four-year research institution?

2. What are female nontraditional students' perceptions of the factors that influence their academic success at a public four-year research institution?

3. How do female nontraditional students perceive the institutional initiatives designed to address their academic needs?

The intent of the study was to discover and understand the college experience of female nontraditional undergraduate students enrolled at a public four-year research institution. For the purpose of this study, Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging provides evidence to support the interpretation of the findings from the responses of the female nontraditional undergraduate students enrolled at a public four-year research institution. Strayhorn's (2012) Model of the Sense of Belonging was used as a framework through which the evidence of the participant's experiences was examined and categorized. Themes that were identified in Chapter 4 will be woven into the discussion to provide a sense of the depth and breadth of the female nontraditional undergraduate experience at a public four-year research institution.

Research Question One: How do female nontraditional students describe their undergraduate academic experiences at a public four-year research institution?

The female nontraditional undergraduate students interviewed for this study described their experiences at a public four-year research institution in a variety of ways. Through their answers to the research questions, they indicated the factors that propelled them to and through the academic experience and how those factors shaped their undergraduate academic experiences. The factors were prominent in the theme of College-Going and helped to describe and explain the positive and negative influences surrounding the enrollment in higher education. The participants reflected on how these factors influenced their decisions to enroll in higher education and to continue towards academic completion. Intrinsic and extrinsic factors were described with references to both positive motivating influences and those that presented challenges. The importance of self-motivation, self-awareness, and determination were mentioned as intrinsic, or personal internal characteristics, that impelled female nontraditional students to return to higher education. They stated that these factors were developed through life experiences and maturity and were essential to their academic success. Family support including physical, emotional, and financial factors were listed as the basis of their extrinsic or external support systems. Without the emotional support of others, the students indicated they could not have returned or stayed for very long.

Female nontraditional students managed to balance families with outside work and academic work. Life balance was a difficult task for them. Ten of the thirteen student participants revealed that they prioritized their family's needs over most other

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commitments including class work on occasion. The students also suggested that they would sleep more, and stress less once college was behind them. These students were determined to push on towards academic completion to provide a better financial picture for their families. Equally important to them was that they provide a role model to their children and other relatives and friends. Self-worth was validated by their movement towards academic completion by twelve of the thirteen participants in this study.

The female nontraditional students faced challenges from the same sources that provided them with support. Family time and family needs often were at odds with the academic schedules of the students. Student participants indicated that they felt guilty for not spending time with their children and for not being able to take part in their children's activities. Commitments to observing family dinner time and sharing homework time were common means of dealing with this issue. Several students reflected that they would read a book to their child rather than complete a class assignment. Earning high grades for the sake of signifying achievement or self-worth was not nearly as important as shouldering family responsibilities to these students. Though they felt pride at earning high grades, they recognized their inability to "do it all."

Beyond their personal traits, the students identified campus characteristics that influenced their academic experience. They found the that the campus could be "physically and socially intimating." The size of the campus caused them to seek ways to navigate the environment. Orientation programs did not provide them with targeted information about the campus layout, shuttle schedules, or programs and services designed and provided for them. Advisement was confusing and often left them with

more questions unanswered. Once they were assigned to an advisor in their major, the situation improved.

Traditional students seemed indifferent to the existence of female nontraditional undergraduate students. Female nontraditional students did mention that they had little time to socialize with other students and thus, they took some responsibility for the lack of interaction with other students outside of the classroom. The participants found that the classroom was a comfortable environment and appreciated the academic rigor and integrity. They gave high ratings to the professors and instructors who taught them. The participants felt that their professors and instructors provided them with support and encouragement through positive feedback and mentoring. Their biggest concern and complaint centered on the lack of recognition in the campus community for female nontraditional undergraduate students.

The participants indicated in their responses that they felt comfortable in the classroom and were connected to their professors, mentors, and major advisors. These relationships provided the students with confidence and a feeling of satisfaction with the academic environment.   The respondents were able to overcome academic short-comings or lack of preparation by interacting with their instructors and asking for assistance from the instructor or other resource groups on campus. They were particularly downcast when answering questions about their presence on the campus. While they were tough and voiced sentiments that referred to not being concerned about being identified as "unique" students, several mentioned the lack of identity and the "invisibility" of their group. They often were curious and concerned about the locations and types of services that were provided for them. While the institution does have programs and services in

place to assist female nontraditional undergraduate students, these were difficult to locate. The essence of the issue seems to be the sense of belonging and feeling as if they matter to the institution.

Research Question Two: What are female nontraditional students' perceptions of the factors that influence their academic success at a public four-year research institution?

The female nontraditional undergraduate students indicated in their interviews that a variety of factors impacted their academic success at a public four-year research institution. In the theme of College Experience, students described the influences within the campus community that affected their ability to move forward with their academic goals. They mentioned both positive and negative influences from the college environment including the physical, academic, financial, and social aspects of the campus. The size and scope of the campus configuration caused reactions such as "an amazing and exciting place," "a very pretty campus," and "the campus looks like a university should look," and "a safe environment." Other remarks indicated concern as the campus layout was labeled as "too confusing," "too spread out to provide for ease of moving from one class to the next," "hard to navigate," and "a parking nightmare." The students were comfortable with the campus amenities and "felt at home" within a few weeks of enrollment. They quickly learned how to navigate the campus. Seven of the participants visited the campus before classes started to familiarize themselves with the campus layout and location of classes and other offices.

The students interviewed mentioned that they felt "out of place" when considering their position on a campus dominated by traditional age students. The

student participants mentioned being "ignored or overlooked" by other students and indicated a sense of "isolation or invisibility" when moving among the traditional undergraduate student population. The students found making social connections and friends difficult on campus. Even in the classroom, they noticed that other students did not engage them in conversations outside of the work for the course. While three of the students interviewed were actively involved with campus groups and organizations, the other participants indicated that they did not have the extra time to commit to social groups.

Within the classroom environment, the female nontraditional undergraduate students indicated academic support from the faculty, instructors, staff, advisors, and mentors. This level of support was essential to their well-being on the campus and strongly influenced their determination to continue and to excel academically. Faculty members were identified as "top-notch," "enthusiastic," "supportive," and "empathetic." Faculty and advisors were responsible for encouraging female nontraditional undergraduate students to achieve higher levels of academic achievement. Faculty and staff members enabled these students to locate internships, career-related jobs, and financial support. The students felt comfortable with the level of academic guidance. They were impressed with the learning environment and indicated a positive reaction to the "challenging but rewarding rigor" of their courses. Four of the students mentioned the fact that instructors did not recognize them as nontraditional students. The student participants commented that their instructors were supportive and in tune with their needs. Twelve students interviewed were enrolled in day classes and were not interested in taking classes in an online format. They preferred the fact-to-face environment of the

classroom. Strayhorn's model of belonging aligns with these comments and concerns by the respondents. When they are valued and feel as if others are interested in their well-being, they feel more a part of the group and thus, are more satisfied.

The female nontraditional undergraduate students interviewed for this research were most adversely affected by the confusion about programs and services available on the campus. They had questions and concerns about aspects of the college experience and had difficulty in locating the appropriate offices and individuals for support. They viewed orientation as an event that was not geared towards the needs and interests of female nontraditional undergraduate students.   For most of the students, the First-Year Advisor process was "confusing and less than helpful."   Two of the participants said that they were "self-advising." The students did not fully understand or appreciate the application of Carolina Core to their course planning process. All students indicated improvement in the advisement process once they were assigned to an advisor in their chosen major area. Services to provide for health and well-being received complimentary remarks. However, over one-half of the students who participated in the research indicated that they were unaware or unsure of how to take advantage of these services.

Research Question Three: How do female nontraditional students perceive the institutional initiatives designed to address their academic needs?

For the students who were interviewed, the problem was not the quality of the services and programs available to them but the lack of information about how to find the services and programs. Through the theme of Institutional Support, the institutional initiatives that affect academic pathway of the female nontraditional undergraduate are

described. The participants in this study mentioned the lack of clear information and guidance as an issue in their perception of institutional support on campus. For nontraditional transfer students, the process of academic planning and their orientation to the campus lacked focus on their interests, needs, and concerns. The students indicated that orientation guides as well as staff members often mentioned their own lack of knowledge or awareness when handling questions from these students. Female nontraditional undergraduate students were forced to "find" their way towards the sources of support and direction by talking with other students in similar situations. While the students did not think that the lack of information and direction was intentional, they were nevertheless confused and felt ignored or marginalized by the campus community. The most positive comments came from students once they contacted appropriate programs and talked with individuals who were prepared to guide them and address their concerns. Faculty members, departmental or program academic advisors, and mentors were given high marks for their interest, support and encouragement.   High praise was awarded to the Student Success Center as a clearing house for all sorts of issues surrounding the experiences of female nontraditional undergraduate students.   Here again, the sense of being a recognized part of the group is essential to the satisfaction of the students.

The female nontraditional undergraduate students were astounded by the financial commitment in returning to college. Three of the students indicated concerns and considered withdrawing when they discovered additional fees attached to the educational process. Four students mentioned the lack of scholarships for transfer students and for nontraditional students. Faculty mentors were instrumental in assisting these students to

find work on campus and in the community to support their educational decision to return to college.

Social integration or belongingness on campus was an issue for the students in this research study. As Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging (2012) suggests, the female nontraditional undergraduate students wanted to feel as if they belonged and were considered a vital part of the campus community. Their comments indicated a "sense of isolation" or a "feeling of distance" from the other members of the campus community. While the students understood that their lives were inherently different from those in the traditional student group, they were interested in having more presence on the campus. They recognized that their "work-life-family balance" prevented them from fully engaging in campus activities. They did encourage the university to consider ways to integrate their needs and interests into the college environment. The female nontraditional undergraduate students identified several sources of social support within the institution. The Student Success Center, the Association of Transfer Students, and Tau Sigma National Honor Society were mentioned as sources of support and a means of connecting with other nontraditional students. Over half of the students indicated that they were not able integrate into the campus community and take a more active role in the social environment due to family and work commitments. They recognized that the university could not completely address their time constraints. They recommended that the university consider providing more events that included families and event scheduling that addressed nontraditional students' lives.

Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging (2012) indicates that college students' sense of belonging matters because it is related to their academic success and emotional

wellbeing. Although there is more research and emphasis on sense of belonging in primary and secondary educational environments, increasingly, higher education leaders have begun to emphasize sense of belonging in college student populations. The success of college students is related in part to whether or not they feel welcomed in specific college environments, such as classrooms. Sense of belonging is related to a number of things, including college students' engagement and persistence, course grades, and academic motivation. The bottom line is this: college students who feel that they belong in your classroom are more likely to succeed.

Summary of Findings

The aim of this study was to answer the overarching research question: how do female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution perceive the institutional initiatives designed to influence their retention and academic success?

The first of the research questions addressed how female nontraditional students describe their undergraduate academic experiences at a public four-year research institution. In summary, the female nontraditional undergraduate students indicated a supportive educational environment and positive experience at a public four-year research institution. While they identified challenges, the students were motivated to move forward to achieve academic success. Along with these findings, the themes that described motivation, challenges, aspects of the campus environment, and institutional initiatives were used to answer the research question.

The second research question asks for female nontraditional undergraduate students' perceptions of the factors that influence their academic success at a public four-

year research institution. Female nontraditional students indicated that the factors

contributed both positively and negatively to issues and situations as they enrolled and

continued in undergraduate studies. Information gathered about the campus environment,

academic environment, and social forces on campus contributed to answering this

question.

The third research question asks how female nontraditional undergraduate

students perceive institutional initiatives designed to address their academic needs.

Female nontraditional students perceived that programs and services were helpful but

were underutilized due to lack of information about programs and services or that the

appropriate offices and individuals were difficult to locate. Findings related to the

institutional support including academic encouragement, financial programs, and social

belongingness were used to address this question

Synthesis of Themes

The themes that emerged from my research developed an interconnected

presentation of the female nontraditional students' perception. A combination of three

themes provided me with a better understanding of the female nontraditional student's

perception of her undergraduate academic pathway at a public four-year research

institution. There are still some missing pieces, and I provide recommendations for

research to continue to fully address this issue and for practice to guide the development

of initiatives in this institution and other institutions of higher education.

The first theme was "College-Going Experience" which included the factors that

influence the decision to enroll in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research

institution. This theme presents the personal, interpersonal, and environmental

motivations as well as the challenges that affect the female nontraditional student's decision to return to higher education and that have significant impact on the undergraduate experience. Female nontraditional undergraduate students make up a diverse group with a complex mixture of factors that influence them and their decision-making. For the most part, female nontraditional undergraduate students are highly motivated, self-aware, resilient, and positive individuals. They move forward to achieve their educational goals and are realistic about their situations. They express optimism in their comments about their undergraduate educational experiences.

The second theme was "Campus Experience" which included the elements of the campus environment, the academic environment, and college support that impact the female nontraditional students when they enroll in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution. Female nontraditional undergraduate students reflected that the campus could be physically and socially intimidating. There was concern that the institution did not offer orientation and academic advising that addressed the concerns and needs of the female nontraditional undergraduate student. Female nontraditional undergraduate students did respond that attending the institution was a source of pride and that the academic rigor of the institution was high and supported their career-related goals.

The third theme was "Institutional Support" and included the categories of academic programs, financial services, and social belongingness or social integration. Female nontraditional undergraduate students offered mixed reviews of the institutional initiatives that are developed and provided to encourage their retention and academic success. Their biggest issue with institutional initiatives was the lack of knowledge and the inability to locate the appropriate programs and offices on campus that provided these services.

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When they were aware of the programs and services, the participants used the resources offered to them. Female nontraditional undergraduate students found the services and programs were helpful, but they felt overlooked as a student group in the campus community.

Together, these themes describe a perception of the environment of a public four-year research institution from the perspective of the female nontraditional undergraduate student. As a researcher, I found some of these connections between themes and overarching concepts unique and critical for understanding the academic success of female nontraditional undergraduate students. I found it curious that even though the female nontraditional undergraduate students felt isolated and "invisible" on campus, they indicated in interviews that they enjoyed being on campus, were satisfied with their decision to enroll at the institution and were proud to attend the university. They felt confident, determined, and sure of their ability to complete their undergraduate studies. Only one student indicated that attending this institution was less than a positive experience, and even she was persisting through the academic completion of her degree.

The themes are interconnected. The theme "Institutional Support" which discusses the perception of the programs and services offered to encourage female nontraditional students is influenced by the themes of "College-Going Experience" and "Campus Experience." The theme of "Institutional Support" relates the female nontraditional undergraduate students' perceptions of institutional initiatives including academic programs, financial services, and social belongingness or social integration. The students' assessments of the services and programs developed and offered by the institution to encourage retention and academic completion are assessed through the lens of intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors and challenges discussed in the theme of "College-Going Experience." Personal motivation and self-determination affect the

needs and concerns of the female nontraditional undergraduate students and how they search for and use initiatives that the university provides for them. The challenges the female nontraditional undergraduate students also reflect their use and evaluation of these programs and services. The theme of "Campus Experience" includes those factors that influence the female nontraditional undergraduate student at the point of enrollment at a public four-year research institution. The concepts of the campus environment, academic environment, and college support reflect the perceived experience of the female nontraditional student from the outset of their academic pathway. If a student feels unsure of the campus, socialization process, academic advisement, classroom experience, or other support and encouragement, the need for greater institutional intervention and support is evident as the female nontraditional undergraduate student continues her academic experience.

It is particularly encouraging that the findings and the results of this study can affected future research and practice. This research opens the door for new research within the study site as well as other institutions of higher education. Now that this research has provided a better understanding of the needs of female nontraditional undergraduate students, the administration, faculty, and staff of the University of South Carolina can address ways in which the experiences of this group of students can be improved. The descriptions of the female nontraditional undergraduate student's perception of the University of South Carolina can inform how others might observe or address similar issues. The next section provides a discussion of my recommendations for research that can add to our knowledge of the topic and for practical applications in institutions of higher education.

Recommendations for Research and Practice

The purpose of this study was to add to an existing body of literature on the undergraduate experience at public four-year research institutions through the lens of the female nontraditional students as well as to inform public four-year research institutions about how female nontraditional undergraduate students perceive the institutional initiatives designed to affect their experience. This study's findings are important for public four-year research institutions because it can encourage administrators, faculty, and staff to have informed conversations about female nontraditional undergraduate students' needs and perceptions of how the institutions are impacting their experiences.

The study's implications to research and practice are presented in the following section. Three implications are discussed. First, the findings of this study indicate how the study's findings have developed areas for future research on the collegiate experience of female nontraditional undergraduate students. Second, the study's findings provide insight for practitioners at public four-year research institutions about how female nontraditional undergraduate students at one public four-year research institution perceive their academic experience. Third, the study's findings present a focus for the study site to improve the female nontraditional undergraduate student's experience at the institution.

Recommendations for Research

The study's implications provide findings for the development for future research on the female nontraditional undergraduate student enrolled at public four-year research institutions. Studies, such as those described, further the knowledge of female nontraditional undergraduate student perceptions and experience and could assist

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campuses in their efforts to improve retention for female nontraditional undergraduate students at public four-year research institutions. Although a reasonable body of research exists on female nontraditional undergraduate students' experiences, this literature is more commonly conducted with community colleges, private institutions, and for-profit institutions and relies on student data. The following recommendations suggest new possibilities for data, as well as a focus on the public four-year research institution. Areas recommended for further research:

1. *Studies should be conducted to investigate the female nontraditional student's perception of the undergraduate experience at other public four-year research institutions.* The understanding of the female nontraditional student's perception of the undergraduate experience at a public four-year research institution is limited to the results of this study. It would be informative to have data to compare among similar institutions. Therefore, additional investigation of the female nontraditional undergraduate students' perceptions within this institutional type is recommended. I recommend conducting research at other comparable public four-year research institutions in the state or in adjoining states.

2. *Studies should be conducted to determine the perceptions of staff and faculty concerning the female nontraditional undergraduate students at the study site as well as other public four-year research institutions*. This study's findings relate the perceptions of female nontraditional undergraduate students and are unexplored from the point of view of the staff and faculty. An analysis of the participants' data suggests that the faculty and staff are unaware or uninformed about the needs of female nontraditional undergraduate students. It would be helpful to collect and analyze responses from the

faculty and staff concerning these issues. Using this study's findings, research should be conducted to understand how these findings compare to the staff or faculty perception of the female nontraditional undergraduate student at a public four-year research institution. Using this study's findings to guide a framework, faculty and staff could be interviewed using questions guided by the three themes that emerged through this study's analysis.

3. *Studies should investigate whether other campuses have developed programs and services for female nontraditional undergraduate students to encourage engagement and reduce the feeling of isolation among these students and to determine the effect of these programs on female nontraditional undergraduate students.* This study's findings describe an isolated experience for female nontraditional undergraduate students. The student participants indicate a positive but somewhat removed experience for female nontraditional undergraduate students. It is unknown if similar experiences exist on other campuses. It is recommended that survey data be collected from administrators and staff to investigate if other universities have similar concerns and to determine what types of programs and services are being provided to female nontraditional undergraduate students to address this issue.

Recommendations for Practice

Because this is a single site study, one of the greatest implications to the study's findings is the importance and application to the student experience at the study site. However, these findings are valuable for practitioners at other public four-year research institutions. The following are ways the study's findings can be applied by practitioners both at the study site and on other campuses.

1. *Discussions with administrators, faculty, and staff should be facilitated at the study site to discuss and examine how female nontraditional undergraduate students perceive their experiences on campus.* This conversation could continue at other campus sites. Female nontraditional students comprise a diverse group with complex issues. Campus administrators and staff can benefit from analyzing their needs and interests to ensure that the types of programs and services offered to address these needs and to provide an encouraging environment for their continued academic success and accessible, available, and are reaching those for whom they are intended. Faculty who tend to have more regular contact with the female nontraditional undergraduate students can contribute to these conversations from classroom and advisement experiences with these students. A committee of administrators, staff, faculty, and female nontraditional undergraduate students could work towards identifying the issues that affect the female nontraditional undergraduate students and finding methods to resolve or address these issues. Inviting input from the female nontraditional undergraduate students would reflect their place and value in the campus community. Administrators, staff, and faculty can develop a more relevant approach by providing the female nontraditional undergraduate students with a campus identity, by developing an understanding of their needs, and by developing programs and services that address and offer support for their needs and issues.

2. *The study site campus should develop and fund programs that are designed to provide for an institutional landscape of inclusivity that will connect female nontraditional undergraduate students and traditional undergraduate students, staff, and faculty.* Female nontraditional students, other nontraditional students, traditional

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students, faculty, and staff can initiate conversations to provide a connection or linkage between and among these groups. A group meeting of volunteers can begin the process of encouraging students, faculty, and staff to better understand the female nontraditional undergraduate students and to search for programs that can provide for socialization and support on campus. The amount of money required to develop and offer programs may be negligible, but the outcome could be rewarding for all groups in the campus community.

3. *The study site campus should develop programs and services for female nontraditional undergraduate students that are designed to provide academic and financial support and encouragement.* By initiating conversations about female nontraditional undergraduate students on their campuses, institutions give them an identity within the campus community. This identity allows female nontraditional undergraduate students to recognize their place in the institution and feel less "overlooked or invisible." Programs and services such as financial aid programs, scholarships, and resources can be developed with input from female nontraditional undergraduate students. The types and timing of the programs and services can reflect the complexity of the female nontraditional student's lifestyle and needs. At present, the University of South Carolina does offer services and programs that include female nontraditional students, but the programs may be hard for a novice to locate and may not fully address the interests and needs of the female nontraditional undergraduate students.

4. *Faculty and staff at the study site should be trained and given regular information on how to help female nontraditional undergraduate students be successful and navigate the environment of the public four-year research institution.* Institutions

should develop a recruitment, orientation, and retention focusing on female nontraditional students. Female nontraditional undergraduate students indicated that the initial process of enrollment on campus was inadequate for their needs and interests. Orientation and academic advisement can be developed to address the needs of these students. Topics, campus tours, and advisement processes can be targeted towards their needs and interests. Female nontraditional undergraduate students respect the position of the faculty member or instructor. They find the level of academic rigor and classroom presentation to be high. They value the faculty-mentor relationship. Staff who provide support or advice can be prepared to provide accurate and focused information for female nontraditional undergraduate students. Faculty can be informed as to the issues that may impact the ability of the female nontraditional undergraduate student to participate in out of class activities and the academic progress of these students.

5. *Campus culture, policies, and procedures at the study site should be reviewed and modified to ensure that all students are receiving an equitable academic experience*. Female nontraditional undergraduate students can be provided with a smooth transition from admissions through graduation with programs and services that are targeted towards their needs. The experience of enrolling in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution can be facilitated by developing procedures and programs with the same amount of attention and care as those offered to the traditional student population. Inherent to this experience are the elements of orientation, advising, mentoring, access to services, and programs that are developed to reflect the differences and similarities between female nontraditional undergraduate students and the traditional student group.

Relevance to the Literature

As previously discussed in Chapter Two, there has been limited research on the support and encouragement for female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies at public four-year research institutions. While researchers have investigated the motivations and impediments for nontraditional students in postsecondary education, current research surrounding the issues faced by public four-year research institutions in developing an academic environment to provide support and encouragement for female nontraditional undergraduate students is limited (Lin, 2016). The findings of this study have developed new information with parallels to existing literature. This section is a presentation of these parallels and the study's relevance to existing research. The following areas of research will be discussed: 1) the profile of female nontraditional undergraduate students, 2) the motivations and challenges that influence female nontraditional undergraduate students, 3) the existence of programs and services for female nontraditional undergraduate students, 4) the impact of institutional initiatives developed and offered to female nontraditional undergraduate students, and 5) the relevance of Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging (2012) to the findings.

Overall the findings of this study are validated by the existing literature on the experiences of female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies at institutions of higher education. The demographics of the female nontraditional students in this study described a group of individuals 25 years of age or older who possessed at other characteristics determined to identify nontraditional students (NCES, 2017). The participants in the study exhibited shared and similar traits but indicated differences.

Nontraditional students are identified as a diverse group with a complex set of traits, beliefs, internal demands and external pressures. As in the literature, the female nontraditional students in this study described the factors that influenced their return to higher education as complex and complicated academic experience. They explained this through personal and interpersonal factors including personal motivation, family encouragement, career mindedness, and family and financial challenges. These assumptions are supported by the existing literature.

A wide range of personal and external factors motivated the participants of this study to return to postsecondary education. The factors they identified are mentioned in literature and include: career advancement, financial growth and stability, personal achievement, family influences, self-development, and life-long learning as motivating factors in their decision to return to postsecondary education (Brennan, Mills, & Shah, 2000; Hagelskamp, et al., 2003; Johnson, Taasoobshirazi, Clark, Howell, & Breen, 2016). The role of the family was highlighted by the female nontraditional students in the study. They referred to the importance of the family repeatedly and indicated that serving as a role model for their children and other family members was an important source of encouragement.

The findings of the study suggested that a high level of personal motivation was essential to their return to college and their resilience in the academic pathway. Studies describe the importance of the exhibited tendency of self-motivation in the decision-making process and persistence of nontraditional students (Quimby & O'Brien, 2004). Nontraditional students recognize the importance of the learning material and its pertinence to the accomplishment of their goals (Jinkens, 2009). They are more serious

about postsecondary education as they have identified a specific reason to attend college. The students who were interviewed responded similarly. They referred to their level of self-motivation and determination to return and attain their academic goals. As one respondent stated with vigor: "this is my job, and I intend to succeed."

The findings of this study indicate that female nontraditional undergraduate students face distinct challenges and barriers when returning to higher education. Several studies describe the challenges or barriers faced by nontraditional students. Cross (1981) produced a foundational study identifying the types of barriers perceived by adult learners including: a) situational barriers such as working hours and family responsibilities; b) institutional barriers such as inconvenient class times and office hours, inadequate career planning for adults, and a lack of opportunities for campus involvement that accommodate interests and needs of nontraditional students; and c) dispositional barriers such as the way the nontraditional students view their likelihood of success in an educational setting and how nontraditional students approach academic challenges in the context of their life experiences. The findings of this study mirror this model as the participants indicated all of these challenges through their responses. They continually struggle to find life-work-school balance.

Many of these nontraditional students bring with them unique needs that can be addressed by academic institutions, both inside and outside of the classroom (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). As in the literature, the respondents identified factors that affected their persistence, retention and completion in postsecondary education develop from an array of sources, which create stress and present challenges for nontraditional students. Nontraditional students deal with the stress of balancing multiple demands and

roles at work, at school, and in their personal lives (Goodman, et al., 2006). For

nontraditional students, returning to postsecondary education creates another role domain

that competes for limited time, energy, and financial resources of these students

(Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009).

Bean & Metzner (1985) findings describe the challenges or barriers to adult

students and examined how adult students cope with these issues. Their findings suggest

that the difference between the attrition process of nontraditional and traditional students

is that nontraditional students are more affected by the external environment than by the

social integration variables affecting traditional student attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

External forces including work and family responsibilities, financial limitations, and the

amount of support from family, friends and co-workers have the greatest influence on the

decision to remain in education among nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

The findings from other research suggest that barriers are never extinct for nontraditional

students, and they must put forth effort to overcome or manage barriers which emerge

from their multiple life roles (Deggs, 2011).

Self-motivation and self-efficacy are significant motivators in overcoming

barriers and challenges and encouraging persistence and degree completion among

nontraditional students. The concept of self-motivation is a strong positive force in

promoting the issues of retention and academic completion among nontraditional

students. Goto & Martin (2009) found that goal setting and self-motivation are strong

indicators of academic retention and completion among nontraditional student as they

negotiated challenges while attending postsecondary institutions. Intrinsically, a strong

level of self-motivation and determination provides essential support for nontraditional

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students in facing challenges and encouraging them to remain in postsecondary education and to complete their academic goals (Bergman, et al., 2014). Tinto (2017) reflects that institutions can improve persistence among nontraditional students and retention rates of the institution by encouraging a development of personal self-efficacy, a sense of belonging within the collegiate community, and a curriculum that reflects the strengths and interests of adult learners.

Increasing the persistence, retention, and academic completion rates among nontraditional students requires that the institution understand the personal, structural, and attitudinal factors that impact these situations and that they design policies and practices to address these issues (Klein-Collins, 2011; Markle, 2015; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Past research suggests that public four-year institutions have attempted to maintain existing plans with the outcome of serving traditional undergraduate students while ignoring the growing mass of nontraditional students enrolling on their campuses (Kasworm, 2010). In so doing, most postsecondary institutions have done little to investigate and improve the relationship between nontraditional students and the university environment. Four-year public institutions indicate a notable lack of policies, procedures, and services designed to effectively support the success of nontraditional undergraduate students (Kasworm, 2014).

Within the larger group identified as nontraditional students there are segments with unique characteristics requiring further examination for the purpose of this research study. In particular, the literature noted the existence of differences based on gender (Bradshaw, Hager, Knott, & Seay, 2006; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002**;** Compton, et al., 2006; Lin, 2016; Markle, 2015). The postsecondary experience of female

nontraditional students is unique within the group of nontraditional students. Female nontraditional students display distinct traits in the postsecondary education environment. Female nontraditional students perceive different motivators and challenges. For institutions to develop effective policies, programs and services, the needs of female nontraditional students must be considered separately from other segments of nontraditional students.

Institutional factors perceived by nontraditional students as supportive include the availability of financial aid; the encouragement and support of faculty; the availability of enhanced student services; the type, location, and reputation of the institution; the structure of the curriculum (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002); and the availability of transfer credits from previously attended institutions.

Factors within the structure of the postsecondary experience provide support to nontraditional students. The access and availability of financial aid support nontraditional students who lack the resources to persist to degree completion (Chen & Hossler, 2017; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Encouragement and support of faculty who address the academic and personal needs of nontraditional students allows these students to engage in the academic culture (Castles, 2004; Lundberg, 2003). Availability of enhanced services designed to target and support nontraditional students provides a safety net for these students.

Public four-year institutions which intend to offer nontraditional students the opportunity to complete academic degrees should consider developing policies and programs that reflect the academic institutional goals of accessibility, affordability, and accountability towards nontraditional students (Kazis, et al., 2007). As a component of a

plan to encourage nontraditional students, postsecondary institutions must practice an ethos of campus inclusiveness towards nontraditional students (Bradley & Graham, 2000).

Establishing a sense of engagement among students in postsecondary education has long been linked to retention and completion rates (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1982). Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2003) cite support for the factor of student engagement in improving postsecondary academic outcomes of nontraditional students. Their research indicates that the burden of responsibility for retention was shared between student and institution (Braxton, et al., 2003).

The available literature on female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies commonly focuses on community colleges, private colleges, and for-profit institutions. Research on the female nontraditional undergraduate students' experiences at public four-year research institutions is limited. This study represents an addition to the literature by providing the findings of a qualitative interview approach designed to describe the female nontraditional student's perception of the undergraduate experience at a public four-year research institution. The findings of this study were connected to existing literature further asserting the relevance and significance of this study. These connections are particularly important to both practitioners at public four-years research universities and those researching female nontraditional undergraduate students.

With regards to the theoretical implications for this study, the applicability of Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging (2012) is explored in relationship to the findings. Sense of belonging is, at the most basic level, whether students feel respected, valued, accepted,

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cared for, included and that they matter, in the classroom, at college, or in their chosen career path (Strayhorn, 2012). College students' sense of belonging matters because it is related to their academic success and emotional wellbeing. The findings of this study indicated that among female nontraditional undergraduate students enrolled in a public four-year research institution, social belonging is a strong factor in the successful adaption to higher education. The respondents identified clear preferences and needs for feeling recognized on campus and for feeling a part of the college community.

Thus, outcomes of this study are supported by the model of Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging. The findings of this study support the premise that female nontraditional student enrolled in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution have a high level of need for social belonging.

Summary and Final Thoughts

This phenomenological interview study illustrates how female nontraditional undergraduate students perceive their experience at a public four-year research institution and how they assess the institutional initiatives developed to provide encouragement and support through academic completion. Three themes developed: 1) College-Going Experience, 2) College Experience, and 3) Institutional Support. The theme of College-Going Experience includes the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that motivate and provide challenges to female nontraditional undergraduate students as they consider enrolling in higher education. The College Experience theme involves the factors within the campus community that impact the female nontraditional undergraduate student experience after enrollment on the college campus. This theme examines the impact of the physical and social elements of the campus environment, the academic guidance and support within

the campus community, and the types and level of support offered by the college community. The theme of Institutional Support includes the elements of developing and providing academic programs and support, financial services and advisement, and the issue of social belongingness or integration among and within the campus community.

The findings of this study show a disconnect between needs of the female nontraditional undergraduate students and the perception of the institutional support developed and offered to these students. While the university provides some amount of guidance and support, the students involved in the research indicated that there was insufficient means for them to obtain the information about these programs and services. Even more disturbing was the lack of knowledge on the part of the staff who are intended to be their link on the campus to the institutional initiatives provided for them to encourage retention and academic completion. Certainly, these are areas that need further study and investigation to provide recommendations for improvement.

The study's findings not only build upon a limited body of knowledge from the female nontraditional undergraduate student's perception but also indicate some pertinent information for the institution to consider when determining how best to attract and support female nontraditional undergraduate students on the campus of a public four-year research institution. There is an indication of an isolated and underserved group within the institutional community. This could be unique to the study site, but considering its potential implications to student success, the topic warrants both discussion within the study site, and further research within other institutional contexts.

The generalization of this study's findings is limited to existing literature due to the study's data being collected at a single site. Therefore, the results from this study

cannot be applied to other universities or students; however, the story this study tells illustrates the significance of the female nontraditional undergraduate student on the campus of a public four-year research institution and the importance of the female nontraditional undergraduate student perception of her experience. The stories of these 13 women illuminate topics that can have impact on the future success of one public four-year research institutions in developing and providing support and encouragement for female nontraditional undergraduate students at the study site, as well as providing information for other administrators, faculty, staff, researchers, and practitioners to use to benefit female nontraditional undergraduate students across campuses of institutions of higher education.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The interview protocol is based on the following research questions:

     1. How do female nontraditional students describe their undergraduate academic experiences at a public four-year research institution?

     2. What are female nontraditional students' perceptions of the factors that influence their academic success at a public four-year research institution?

     3. How do female nontraditional students perceive institutional initiatives designed to address their academic needs?

Person Interviewed (Pseudonym):
Date:
Interview Location:

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to help me with my research. As part of my study, I am interviewing female nontraditional students who are enrolled in undergraduate studies at a four-year public research institution. Specifically, I am interested in developing a better understanding of how you as a student perceive the institutional initiatives, programs and services offered to support the pursuit of your academic goals.

     The participant will be informed about the recording of the interview. If they agree to being recorded, I will proceed by turning on the recording device.

     If the interview participant does not agree to audio recording, but is willing to participate, I will take written notes. I will have a paper and pen at the interview location in case there is an audio recording malfunction or in case a participant wishes not to be recorded.

Start the interview:

The following open-ended questions will be asked. The sub questions under the numbered questions may or may not be asked.

Suggested questions for research study:

1. How long have you been enrolled at the University of South Carolina?

2. Are you a part-time or a full-time student?

3. What is your major and academic level?

4. Did you transfer to UofSC from another institution? If so, what type of institution?

5. Describe the personal factors and/or professional factors that encouraged you to enroll in college?

6. Describe the characteristics of the University of South Carolina that attracted you to enroll at UofSC (academics, convenience, financial)

7. How would you describe yourself as a student?

8. Describe your experiences at UofSC including
   a. the types academic services that were provided to you
   b. your experience with an academic adviser before/during your enrollment
   c. your experience with a financial adviser before/during your enrollment
   d. describe the academic and financial services that are available to you as a student
   e. describe your participation in extracurricular activities on campus

9. How do you define academic success in the classroom?

10. How academically successful are female nontraditional students at UofSC?

11. Describe your level of academic preparedness for UofSC. Describe the areas in which you were unsure or underprepared.

12. Describe the programs and services that supported your progress at UofSC.

13. Describe the level of academic support you believe UofSC provides for female nontraditional students.

14. How do you perceive the value of higher education in general (economic benefits, personally rewarding, professional advancement)?

15. What were the greatest challenges you faced in enrolling at UofSC? How did you deal with these challenges? Describe the programs/services that aided you in this situation.

16. Which institutional initiatives provide the most support to you? Describe additional initiatives that would be helpful to you academically, professionally, socially? Why?

17. Tell me about your employment status in the workforce?

18. Describe your marital status.

19. Describe any care-giving responsibilities you have, including children or other family members.

20. Is there anything that you expected me to ask that I did not ask you? Or anything else you think might be helpful for me to know about our topic today?

APPENDIX B

INVITATION LETTER

Female Nontraditional Students: The Impact of Institutional Initiatives

Date

Dear ___,

My name is Mary Hutto. I am a PhD Candidate at the University of South Carolina. I am inviting you to participate in a study involving your experiences as an undergraduate student at UofSC.

What is it like to be a woman nontraditional student at UofSC? This is what I am researching for my dissertation and I hope you can help me. The aim of this study is to examine how female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies at a public four-year research institution perceive the institutional initiatives that are offered to promote academic success. Specifically, I want to determine how the programs and services that are offered to you influence your academic experience at the University of South Carolina.

Participation in the study is voluntary. Personal interviews to collect data will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place and should last about 60 minutes. The interviews will be audio taped to ensure accuracy and to allow me to review the information collected in the interview. The recordings will be reviewed, transcribed and analyzed by the researcher, and will then be destroyed.

I will appreciate you sharing your experiences and insights with me. Participation is voluntary and you can decline to answer any question if you wish. Although you may not benefit directly from participating in this study, I hope that members of the university community will develop a better understanding of the needs of female nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate studies as they consider developing programs and services to address these needs.

Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept in a secure location. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed. Pseudonyms for all persons mentioned in all papers, presentations, and discussions will be used to ensure participant confidentiality.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at (803) 319-6794 or at huttome2@email.sc.edu or contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Christian Anderson at (803) 777-6702 or at anders77@mailbox.sc.edu. For questions about your rights as a research participant, contact the University of South Carolina's Office of Research Compliance at (803) 777-7095.

Please contact me at huttome2@email.sc.edu or on my cell at (803) 319-6794 if you wish to participate. I look forward to talking with you. Thank you for your consideration.

Mary Hutto
huttome2@email.sc.edu
PhD Candidate / Educational Administration
University of South Carolina

IRB LETTER OF APPROVAL FOR EXEMPT REVIEW

Mary Hutto
9 Highbourne Court
Columbia, SC 29204

Re: **Pro00086129**

Dear Mary Hutto:

      This is to certify that the research study *Pathways to* **Degree Completion of Female Nontraditional Students: The Role of Institutional Intervention at a Public Four-Year Research Institution** was reviewed in accordance with 45 CFR 46.104(d)(2) and 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7), the study received an exemption from Human Research Subject Regulations on **2/18/2019**. No further action or Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight is required, as long as the study remains the same. However, the Principal Investigator must inform the Office of Research Compliance of any changes in procedures involving human subjects. Changes to the current research study could result in a reclassification of the study and further review by the IRB.

      Because this study was determined to be exempt from further IRB oversight, consent document(s), if applicable, are not stamped with an expiration date.

      All research related records are to be retained for at least three (3) years after termination of the study.

      The Office of Research Compliance is an administrative office that supports the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (UofSC IRB). If you have questions, contact Lisa Johnson at lisaj@mailbox.sc.edu or (803) 777-6670.

Sincerely,

Lisa M. Johnson
ORC Assistant Director and IRB Manager