

A Phenomenological Examination of Nontraditional Student Insight  
on Retention at a University

Submitted by

Tawna Lynnette Schmidt

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctorate of Education

Grand Canyon University

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Approved

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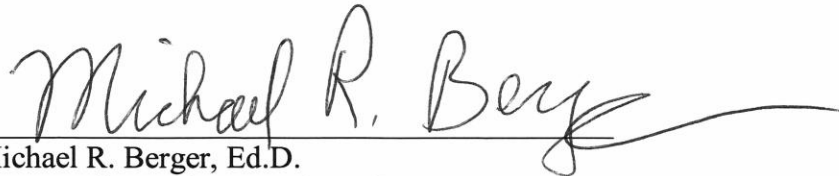
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April 25, 2015

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## Abstract

With the nontraditional student population growing at a staggering rate, this study was conducted to contribute to the literature on the reasons nontraditional students remain enrolled in a university, despite having to overcome multiple challenges not typical of a traditional college student. The problem statement of this study stated: *It was not known how nontraditional students perceived factors and events that motivated them to stay enrolled in postsecondary courses and persist to attaining a degree.* The research questions were (1) How did a nontraditional student stay motivated to remain enrolled at a university? (2) What were the positive and negative experiences that influenced a nontraditional student to remain enrolled at a university? and (3) What perceived obstacles or challenges did nontraditional students experience that resulted in the decision to withdraw from a university before goal completion? Ten nontraditional students at moderate or high risk of dropping out were interviewed for this qualitative phenomenological study. The theoretical framework of Bean and Metzner's conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition was utilized in the study. The data were analyzed utilizing Moustakas' modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis, with thirteen themes emerging in the analysis. The theoretical implication of this study is that there are compelling reasons nontraditional students have to remain enrolled in college, despite the presence of obstacles that often lead to attrition rather than persistence. Additional research is warranted on nontraditional student retention that focuses on qualitative studies and methods of supporting these students to assist in their challenges.

*Keywords:* adult learner, nontraditional student, higher education, college, university, postsecondary institution, attrition, retention, dropout

## **Dedication**

This dissertation and degree is dedicated to my family. First, I could not have completed this degree without the support of my husband. He believed in me and my ability when I doubted myself. He sacrificed time with me, took care of cleaning the house, cooking dinner for our boys, and supported the countless and endless nights and weekends I spent studying. Second, I could not have completed this degree without the support of our two sons. There were many nights they were out with friends during their high school years, only to come home and find me still studying in the middle of the night. They would say, “Mom, are you still studying?” It reminded me of when they were little and on a trip they would say, “Mom, are we there yet?” Third, I could not have finished this degree without the support of my mom. She was my rock in earning this degree, the same as she is for my life. And last, I could not have finished this degree without my dad looking over me from heaven. He taught me independence and the importance of integrity. He taught me that I could be anything and anyone that I wanted to be. He made me who I am today by being an amazing role model during the 26 years we had together. My faith kept me strong while earning this degree and through the completion of this study, with the unwavering belief that “...with God all things are possible.” Matthew 19:26

## **Acknowledgments**

A sincere thank you to my committee members, Dr. Homburg, Dr. D'Urso, and Dr. Shutay, for their belief in me and their support throughout this study. Also, for the support of all my dear friends, who trudged me forward when I was straying from focus. The one support in my life that will miss me working on this degree is my little Yorkie dog, Bear, my study buddy who will miss laying on my lap during the countless hours of sitting at my desk while I studied.



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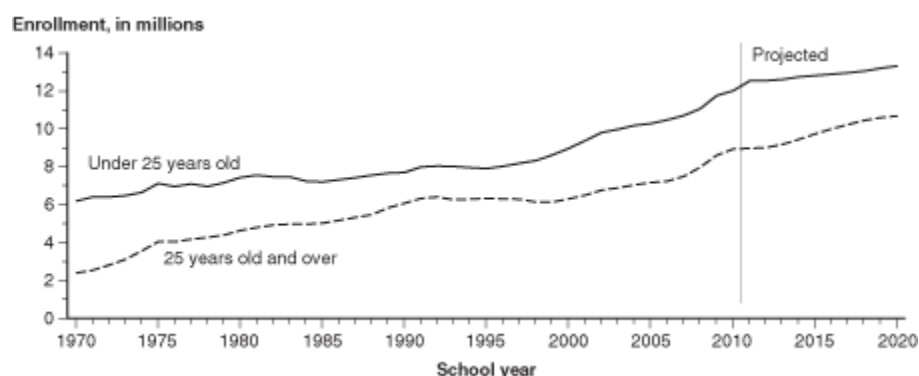
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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### Introduction

Nontraditional students, referred to as adult students or adult learners, are increasing rapidly at colleges and universities across the country (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011). Since the 1970s adult students attending Australian universities is also on the rise (O'Shea & Stone, 2011). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2012), in recent years, the percentage increase in the number of students age 25 and over has been larger than the percentage increase in the number of younger students, and this pattern is expected to continue (see Figure 1). Between 2000 and 2010, the enrollment of students under age 25 increased by 34%, while the enrollment of students 25 and over rose 42% during the same period. From 2010 to 2020, National Center for Educational Statistics projected a rise of 11% in enrollments of students under 25, and a rise of 20% in enrollments of students 25 and over.



*Figure 1.* Enrollment in Degree-Granting Institutions, by Age: Fall 1970-Fall 2020

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS), "Fall Enrollment in Institutions of Higher Education" surveys, 1970 through 1985; Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), "Fall Enrollment Survey" (IPEDS-EF:86-99); IPEDS Spring 2001 through Spring 2011, Enrollment component; and *Projections of Education Statistics to 2020*. U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), October, selected years, 1970 through 2010.



According to Roman (2007), “community colleges enroll nearly half the undergraduates in the U.S., with a high percentage of them being nontraditional students” (p. 2). In 2011, the Current Population Survey (CPS) counted 20.4 million people enrolled in college, up 4.5 million from a decade earlier. Forty percent of this growth can be attributed to an increase in 2-year college attendance. In 2011, there were 6.1 million students enrolled in 2-year colleges, up from 3.9 million in 2000, and in excess of 14.2 million students enrolled in 4-year institutions (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011) (see Appendix A).

Kim (2007) stated there are several definitions found in international literature for the nontraditional student. According to Bean and Metzner (1985), the traditional college students are between the ages of 18-24 and they attend a college immediately upon graduating from high school. Spanier (2001) defined the nontraditional student as age 25 and older. Jenkins (2009) defined the traditional student as:

. . . one with the mindset of someone just out of high school who goes to college just because it is the next thing to do (as opposed to going to work or something else), while nontraditional students have a different mindset. Here mindset refers to how students perceive education, its value, what is and is not important, and the general approach of what to learn and how to learn it. (p.1)

The U.S. Department of Education (2012) identified nontraditional students as those who have one of the following traits: delayed enrollment (a postsecondary institution is not attended during the same calendar year the student graduates from high school), full time employment, enrolled part-time in college, financially independent, a single parent, has not completed their high school diploma, or cares for dependents other than a spouse.

The nontraditional student faces multiple barriers that traditional students may not experience because nontraditional students are older and have different challenges and responsibilities (Jinkens, 2009). As the nontraditional student population continues to grow, it was important to identify the factors that defined nontraditional student persistence and the determination these students have to succeed.

With the various challenges nontraditional students experience, research was warranted as to why nontraditional students continue their enrollment in a postsecondary institution. Numerous strategies of student retention focus on traditional students (Brown, 2012). However, few studies were found that focus on the personal motives postsecondary adult learners experience as they continue to work toward their goal. A national movement exists to “increase the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees and credentials to 60% by 2025” (Lumina Foundation for Education, 2009, p. 2). Through increased awareness of the results of this study, higher retention rates of nontraditional students can lead to increased student retention resulting in earned college degrees or certificates.

The importance and impact of student retention on higher education campuses is not a new phenomenon. Adult learners are a growing population of students across the country (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011). They experience varied educational, personal, financial, and social needs from the traditional college student. While numerous studies have been completed on student retention in postsecondary education, the majority of these studies focused on the traditional student rather than the nontraditional student (Jinkens, 2009). It is imperative that institutions of higher education focus on these varied needs to increase the retention of nontraditional students on their respective

campuses. The expense of student dropouts in postsecondary education carries many factors, including the loss of revenue, prestige, and stakeholder trust for students and all involved in the enrollment and administrative process (Archer, Chetty & Prinsloo, 2014). This research study strived to increase the knowledge of the reasons nontraditional students remain enrolled in a university program despite facing numerous challenges outside the university campus.

### **Background of the Study**

According to Wyatt (2011), nontraditional students are a diverse group of people that are growing faster than any other population in higher education. The National Center for Education Statistics (2011) reported in their projections of education statistics 2020 that between 2013 and 2020 total college enrollment is projected to increase 5% for 18 to 24 year old students, 16% for 25 to 34 year old students, and 17% for students that are 35 years old or older.

The definition of nontraditional students in the context of university student populations has been a topic of discussion in recent research (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Age is the typical determining factor, with 25 or older being the defining characteristic (Bean & Metzner, 1985). However, other variables can be taken into consideration in addition to the student's age. This can include being an adult that has a family and employment responsibilities, life circumstances that may interfere with educational goals and degree attainment, as well as other variables such as residing off-campus, working full-time rather than part-time, and current enrollment in a non-degree occupational program (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Jones & Watson, 1990).

Colleges and universities continue to focus on student retention by addressing student challenges and needs through increased administrative support and broadening administrative roles and functions (Braxton, 2008). Student enrollment provides revenue to a college or university in the form of tuition and fees, and postsecondary institutions are accountable to stakeholders, parents, students and the state government for reporting student retention rates (Roman, 2007). A study completed by McGrath and Braunstein (1997) searched for answers to the questions often asked when students do not return to college. The questions were centered on predictors that may provide answers about student retention, such as demographics, academics, finances, and social influences. The study consisted of 353 voluntary participants. It revealed the grade point average of the first college semester played the biggest role in student attrition, and a secondary finding revealed peer perception was of high significance in student college course continuation.

According to Offenstein, Moore, and Shulock (2010), meeting President Obama's goal of more Americans entering college by 2020 is not the challenge, but college completion is a challenge. Traditional students leave college because of academic struggles, financial hardship, and social factors (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011; Tinto, 1993). Nontraditional student retention comes with different challenges, such as outside responsibilities that compete for student time such as work, family and civic duties (Kasworm, 1990). According to Onolemhemhen, Rea, and Bowers (2008), the most problematic lifestyle challenges of nontraditional students can be measured using five variables: marriage and family, employment, lifestyle stressors, academic funding, and family support.

Understanding the unique challenges of nontraditional students, and how their challenges differ from the traditional student, is the first step in determining approaches for retention. According to a 2010 report, *The Rising Price of Inequality*, nontraditional students comprised a significant number of the college population. Furthermore, these students are less likely to persevere and complete a degree program. Approximately eight million nontraditional students, or 21%, that are between the ages of 25 and 34 years old have started college and dropped out prior to attaining a degree (Schatzel, Callahan, Scott, & Davis, 2011).

Student retention strategies for nontraditional students explore a variety of notions why students do not return to college; however, few strategies have been developed to reach a possible solution. The pursuit of factors that increase student retention must remain a key target of research in postsecondary institutions (Craig & Ward, 2008). In 1975, Astin wrote,

Dropping out of college is a little like the weather; something everyone talks about but no one does anything about. This predilection for talk over action is reflected in much of the research on dropouts, which has focused more on counting, describing, and classifying them than on seeking solutions to the problem. (p. 1)

According to Schoefield and Dismore (2010), qualitative methods of exploring the reasons for low student retention in higher education institutions are needed for the creation of intervention strategies.

Few studies have been conducted on the retention of nontraditional students in a university setting and how outside influences play a role in a student's decision to

continue toward degree attainment. Nontraditional student retention is a challenge across the nation, which is decreasing institution revenue and creating questions centered on academic achievement (Roman, 2007). According to Jinkens (2009), properly identifying students as traditional or nontraditional is of utmost importance. While students can be identified as traditional or nontraditional by age, this may not be the best practice. Nontraditional students can experience life-altering events early in life, making them more vulnerable to complete a degree. This study utilized the guidelines of a nontraditional student of Choy (2002) and Horn (1996), which focused on challenges that lie on the outside of the college campus.

Schreiner (2009) conducted a study seeking information on the relationship between student satisfaction and student retention. The study included 27,816 students at 65, 4-year institutions. The study revealed that there was a direct correlation between student satisfaction and student retention. Furthermore, the results of the study indicated there was a strong correlation between institution reputation and student persistence. Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) completed a study with nontraditional students focused on analyzing the relationship between first-year experiences and course continuation into the second year. The results of the study revealed there was a much higher likelihood of a student dropping out at the end of the first year if they were employed during their course enrollment. Shelton (2012) completed a study on nontraditional student retention in a nursing program. The definition of student retention for this study was persistence in meeting the academic demands for continuation in the program. The study revealed that perceived faculty support was a determining factor in course continuation. McCann, Graves, and Dillon (2012) completed a study with 305 adult learners completing a survey

with questions centered on academic advising effectiveness, academic services, admissions and financial aid effectiveness, campus climate, instructional effectiveness, registration effectiveness, safety and security, and service excellence. The findings of this study revealed that adult students were motivated by strong faculty engagement, with cognitive stimulation and interest being the most dominant predictor of adult learner persistence.

### **Problem Statement**

It was not known how nontraditional students perceived factors and events that motivated them to stay enrolled in postsecondary courses and persist to attaining a degree. The intent of this study was to capture the perceptions of nontraditional students and prevailing themes or events that created the desire to stay enrolled in postsecondary courses and work toward degree attainment at one university in the Midwest. Institutions of higher education measure their internal efficiency through monitoring of student retention rates (Al Ghanboosi & Saleem, 2013). There are numerous factors that affect a student's decision not to return to college after the first year of completion, including circumstances at the institution as well as personal challenges outside of the institution. Tinto (1975, 1993) explored higher education attrition rates, and potential reasons that students withdrew from college. With postsecondary education being voluntary, students must make the conscious decision to commit to earning a degree. While students have the intention of completing a degree when they begin a program, many influences can impact this goal of earning a college degree, creating the decision to drop out. However, without a comprehensive model to examine this student retention rate and a method to explore specific reasons for the students dropping out, the problem will remain a global

challenge, costing institutions millions of dollars (Al Ghanboosi, 2013). This study explored the reasons nontraditional students made the decision to continue enrollment despite the outside influences and challenges that can create the desire to dropout.

According to Craig and Ward (2008), practitioners and educators must continue to overcome the challenge of student retention and target the factors that are creating the high percentage of nontraditional students dropping out. Through the investigation of emerging patterns with the utilization of qualitative research, the student attrition challenge can gain clarity, be addressed and possible intervention strategies can be created (Schoefield & Dismore, 2010). Understanding why students make the choice to spend time and money on attending college, then make the decision to not continue toward their original goal of earning a degree, is essential information for the educational administrators and stakeholders if a change is to be made. Student retention plays a critical role in the success of a postsecondary institution, both financially and socially, and high student dropout numbers can prevent an institution from achieving its goals (Fincher, 2010). This study contributed to the current body of research in determining the reasons students drop out of college before degree completion by developing a common theme through the transcription of personal interviews of nontraditional students at one university and their experience of why they remain enrolled in courses. The impact of this study made a contribution to postsecondary institutions nationwide and globally. The student voices needed to be heard for college leaders to be able to implement service and program changes in their institutions that will focus on keeping the students enrolled in their courses. If decisions are made without listening to the students, missed opportunities for specific insight may play a role in nothing changing (Wyatt, 2011).



### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how nontraditional students perceived the factors and events that motivated them to stay enrolled in postsecondary education and persist to attaining a degree at one university located in the Midwest. It was the intention of the researcher to expand the body of knowledge to understand why nontraditional students continue their enrollment at a university, which would potentially increase nontraditional student retention. While nontraditional students face multiple barriers and risk factors that are not encountered by traditional students, many beat the odds and overcome these challenges to degree attainment (Al Ghanboosi & Alqahtani, 2013). This study was conducted on one Midwest university campus with 10 nontraditional students who met at least two of the nontraditional student criteria of Choy (2002) and Horn (1996) (see Appendix E). Participants in the study were screened to ensure they met the defined criteria for the study of a nontraditional student.

According to Tinto (1973), socio-demographic, academic, social, and financial factors affect students. Through the exploration of the perceptions of nontraditional college students, the researcher probed the lived experiences of these students and gained insight to the factors that influenced their personal decision to remain enrolled in college and that motivated them to persist to graduation and obtaining their degree (Moustakas, 1994). The intent of the researcher was to utilize this insight to improve college and university nontraditional student retention rates, and more specifically, to meet the educational needs of the nontraditional student.

## Research Questions and Phenomena

The research questions in this study were a guided exploration of the personal experiences of nontraditional college students. The questions were designed to allow the researcher to gain knowledge of nontraditional students' perceptions of the reasons they continue coursework despite their potential challenges of being a nontraditional student through sharing of their lived experiences. The phenomenological research questions in this study explored the direct perceptions and exploration of the lived experiences of 10 nontraditional students that were currently enrolled at a university. Each research question was written to probe the lived experiences of each participant to enhance the knowledge of obstacles they had experienced and overcome during enrollment, and obstacles they may have still been experiencing and working to overcome as they strove toward degree attainment.

The overarching research question for this study was: How do nontraditional students perceive factors and events that motivate them to stay enrolled in postsecondary education and persist to attaining a degree at one university located in the Midwest?' The following sub questions guided this study:

- R<sub>1</sub>: How did a nontraditional student stay motivated to remain enrolled at a university?
- R<sub>2</sub>: What were the positive and negative experiences that influenced a nontraditional student to remain enrolled at a university?
- R<sub>3</sub>: What perceived obstacles or challenges did nontraditional students experience that could have resulted in the decision to withdraw from a university before goal completion?

Nontraditional students face multiple challenges in their effort to earn a college degree. Despite these barriers, understanding the significant reasons they remain enrolled provided insight into possible strategies they utilized to overcome their challenges and persist to degree attainment. Furthermore, gaining insight on the factors that can be overcome by gaining insight into the personal challenges, on-campus challenges, and challenges not attributed to either, such as employment, may increase student retention for nontraditional students. Analyzing the positive and negative experiences of students may also lay a foundation to create a strategy to assist these students in overcoming the feelings that come with these experiences and possibly contribute to the student dropping out.

### **Advancing Scientific Knowledge**

With the rise of adult learners in the postsecondary education sector enrolling at an all-time high, factors that increase their chance of success must be a primary focus (Roman, 2007). However, few studies have been conducted on the needs of adult learners that could increase the attrition rate of these students (Monroe, 2006). According to Wild and Ebbers (2002), student retention has been an identified challenge for many decades, and one that has a direct impact on institutional revenue. Student degree attainment not only has a direct impact on the student, but on society as a whole. Therefore, the findings from this research advanced the body of knowledge by addressing the gaps in current research in reference to student retention and specifically, nontraditional students. In past years, traditional students were considered to be students younger than 24 years of age, whereas nontraditional students were considered to be students that were 24 years of age or older (Jinkins 2009). However, a study completed by Jinkins of 30 faculty members

revealed that age may not be the defining factor of how to classify a student, but life events of the student provide a more accurate description. Increased knowledge on nontraditional student retention and factors contributing to the reasons students continue or dropout on a university campus can assist postsecondary institutions with targeting the challenges that are increasing the student dropout rate. Focusing on the reasons students are able to stay motivated in their academic endeavor will further enhance the overall body of knowledge.

According to the American College Testing program (2007),

How we educate and train our youth to be successful postsecondary students and workers is one of the most critical questions of our time. We cannot compete globally without a high percentage of our citizens succeeding in college and in the workplace (p. 1).

College completion rates are stagnant or falling today, particularly among young Americans, a trend that threatens to undermine the nation's global competitiveness and further exacerbate inequality in the nation's income distribution. In the past, efforts to ensure academic quality, access, and student success in higher education have produced among the highest college completion rates in the world (United States Congress and Secretary of Education, 2012). Nontraditional students experience different challenges than traditional students. When addressed, their positive and negative experiences can be used as a driving force to increase student retention because the needs of the student can be met.

According to McKinney and Novak (2013), community college students are an extremely diverse population that makes it difficult to develop a conclusive theoretical

model to evaluate student retention. Furthermore, nontraditional university students fall into this same category. In guiding student retention, one of the most accepted and widely used models of student integration is Tinto's (1975, 1993) model of student retention, which focuses on educational expectations and experiences in the academic realm. However, this model is often criticized for not addressing the needs of ethnic groups and student diversity, both of which are important factors in the college setting when referencing retention (Rendon, Jalamo, & Nora, 2000). According to Bean and Metzner (1985), nontraditional students are not typically involved in the social environment on a college campus. Because of the absence of key components in Tinto's model, researchers often use the constructs that apply, and utilize other models to fill the deficiencies.

Bean and Metzner (1985) addressed community college retention with their model of nontraditional student attrition. This model has been useful for researchers because environmental factors are taken into consideration, such as being employed while attending, life circumstances, family responsibilities, and financial obligations and challenges, all of which nontraditional students face during their college attendance (McKinney and Novak, 2013). Development of an understanding of how to assist students in overcoming these outside challenges allowed postsecondary institutions the opportunity to offer programs to address the needs of nontraditional students. While Tinto's model of student retention has been a foundational model in studying student persistence, as educational trends have changed, additional conceptual models have been developed and used by researchers through integration with Tinto's model. Nontraditional students were not an exploration of Tinto's model. However, his research

laid a foundation for Bean and Metzner (1985) to expand the focus to nontraditional student retention.

### **Significance of the Study**

With the rise of adult learners in the postsecondary education sector enrolling at an all-time high, factors that increase their chance of success must be a primary focus (Roman, 2007). However, few studies have been conducted on the needs of older adult learners that could increase the attrition rate of these students (Monroe, 2006). When students leave a postsecondary institution prior to graduation, it is a significant loss of tuition and fees for the institution, as well as a loss of future support in contributions (Peterson-Graziose, Bryer, & Nikolaidou, 2013). Taxpayers are spending \$240 million each year to support student loans and grants for students that left college prior to attaining a degree (Schneider & Yin, 2011). The trend of students dropping out of college continues to be problematic and costly to the institutions, which ultimately affects the public (Swail, 2004). In a study conducted by McCann, Graves, and Dillon (2012), 305 adult business students were given a survey to measure the correlation between student satisfaction and student retention. The importance of this study was to understand the significance of degree attainment because future jobs require a skilled workforce that has the ability to acclimate to change (McCann, Graves, & Dillon, 2012). The results of this study indicated there was a strong correlation between student satisfaction on campus and student retention. Therefore, nontraditional learner priorities and their satisfaction on a college campus must be of utmost importance to the administrators and stakeholders if they are to increase their student retention rates (Schreiner, 2009).

The graduation rate of 50% remains steady, even though postsecondary institution enrollment continues to increase. In real numbers, approximately 2,800,000 students graduated from high school in 2013, 1,850,000 will attend college, but only 925,000 of these students will earn a bachelor degree (Center for the Study of College Student Retention, 2013). Obtaining insight into the possible causes for such statistics and the reasons that students choose not to remain enrolled contributed to the body of knowledge for increasing student persistence.

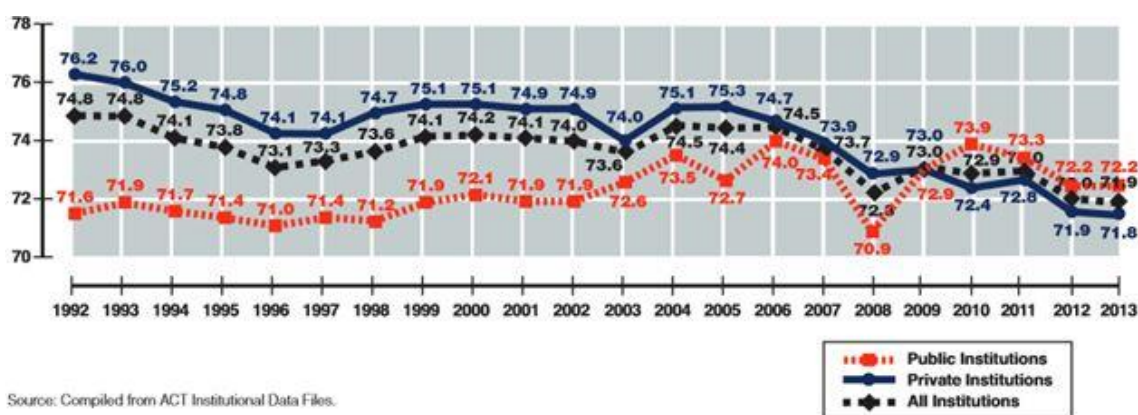
According to Pontes and Pontes (2012), nontraditional undergraduate students are likely to encounter greater obstacles than traditional students that can create restrictions in degree completion. A case study completed by Orgnero (2013) explored the challenges of one adult, male who returned to college after a 15-year hiatus. The participant shared that he believed college re-entry would be a simple process, yet surprisingly found it to be the opposite. By the second semester, the participant experienced the realization that he had extreme gaps of knowledge from the years he had missed. He struggled to stay caught up in his classes, spending countless hours studying just to avoid falling behind. He also started to doubt his ability to succeed, even though just months earlier he had been overly excited to be returning to college. The results of this study revealed the challenges and overall difficulty adult learners experience during college enrollment. While the results of Orgnero's case study revealed a positive outcome for the participant, this did not come easily and without obstacles. The participant had to alter his life to make time for the additional study time that was required. He had to develop new skills in technology and learn to use the library in an entirely different way than his college experience fifteen years earlier. He felt he was competing with students that were much

younger than him, instilling in him a fear he had not felt in quite some time. The participant persevered because he did not want to look back and have any regrets ten years down the road. Another study completed by O'Shea and Stone (2011) emphasized the challenges faced by adult women when they return to college seeking a degree. Many of them have been out of school for an extended time, creating a vulnerable feeling when they were around other students, and highly susceptible to failure. While O'Shea and Stone's study explored the triumphs and achievements of the participants, it also explored the challenges and struggles of these nontraditional students. The results of this study also revealed the underlying challenges encumbered by nontraditional students when they returned to college. Initially, the students in the study returned to school as an avenue to create a better life for themselves and their families through the attainment of a vocational degree. However, at the exit interview completed for the study, the goal had altered and degree attainment was more of an accomplishment of personal satisfaction for the female participants. Hardships along the way included financial stress, created from a lack of income in addition to added expense for the college tuition. Support and transition services, such as counseling, learning support, and career guidance, were also not available, increasing the difficulty of starting college after a break from school. These students had less chance of success because, in addition to the missing college support, they also had responsibilities and children at home that needed their attention.

Understanding the potential factors on-campus and off-campus that contribute to nontraditional student retention may be of significance to community college administrators and policymakers to aid in prevention of nontraditional student withdrawal from their community colleges. The reality of community colleges is that 46% of the



students are over the age of 24, and 63% of them attend part time as compared to 22% at 4-year colleges (Barnett, 2011; Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Furthermore, according to Bailey and Alfonso (2005), community college students are at a high risk of non-persistence, which affects transfer to a university. The American College Test Institutional Data Files (2013) reported the national average of students that complete their first year of college, and do not return their second year in 2013 was 28.1% (see Figure 2). Student retention has been identified as a challenge, finding the answers on how to decrease the percentage of students that do not return for the second year is a research gap that warranted further investigation.



*Figure 2.* Percentage of first year students at four year colleges who return for second year. Copyright ACT, Inc., 2010, Used with permission of ACT, Inc.

According to Wyatt (2011), traditional students are being replaced by nontraditional students on college campuses across the nation. Because of this increasing number of nontraditional students, the differences and needs of this type of student must be considered so their various challenges can met. As the postsecondary institution student population continues to transition from traditional to nontraditional, additional

research may offer an increased understanding of the unique challenges nontraditional students encounter during their enrollment. This is of significance to the nontraditional student population to prepare them for potential challenges and confront them prior to enrollment. This study was also significant because it provided a better understanding to institutions of higher education about the distinct challenges of nontraditional students so that their needs might be better met, thus increasing the chance of degree attainment and preventing students from dropping out.

Numerous quantitative studies have been completed on nontraditional student retention. This study added to the body of knowledge through the contribution of a qualitative study and assisted college administrators, faculty, and stakeholders in identifying the challenges nontraditional students must overcome during their enrollment. Additional qualitative research was needed on the topic of nontraditional student retention because it brings a deeper understanding of what motivates the adult learner (McCann, Graves, & Dillon, 2012).

Schreiner (2009) conducted a quantitative study aimed at linking student satisfaction with student retention. While there is little research that links the two, common belief is that the two have a direct connection (Schreiner, 2009). The sample consisted of 27,816 students at 65 four-year institutions. Two methods of data collection were used in the study to measure the relationship between student satisfaction and student retention. The first method was a logistic regression analysis that utilized students' enrollment status (dropped out or returned) as the dependent variable. The second method utilized in the study was a hierarchical multiple regression analysis, with students' response to the question, "All in all, if you had it to do over again, would you

enroll here?" used as the criterion variable" (Schreiner, 2009, p. 3). The results of this study revealed student satisfaction was directly connected to student retention.

Schreiner's study also revealed student satisfaction occurs at various levels that can be strategically handled by understanding each level of satisfaction.

Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) conducted an explorative quantitative study with nontraditional students focused on analyzing the relationship between first-year experiences and course continuation into the second year. For this study, nontraditional student was defined as a student that is employed part-time or more, and dropout students were defined as a student that did not enroll for the second year of courses. Transfer students were excluded from the dropout student category. The sample consisted of 228 students, of which 174 were enrolled at a university and 74 were dropouts. Telephone interviews that asked specifically designed questions were used as the method of data collection. The dependent variable was the continuation of studies. The study analyzed the correlation between the quality of life on campus during the first year of courses with the continuation into the second year. The emphasis of the study was on the difference in this correlation between traditional students and nontraditional students. The results Gilardi and Guglielmetti's study revealed there is a much higher likelihood of a student dropping out at the end of the first year if they are working an outside job during enrollment. While other factors were considered in the study, such as age, gender, cultural background, and high school grades, none of these factors were as significant as being employed when correlating the dropout rate to student retention.

An exploratory study completed by Forbus, Newbold, and Mehta (2011) investigated the stress level of nontraditional students as opposed to the stress level of

traditional college students. The study also focused on the coping mechanisms used by each group of students in handling their stress. The sample consisted of 471 respondents, with 97 of the students being nontraditional. For this study, nontraditional students were defined as those over 24 years of age. Data collection consisted of a survey that was self-administered, structured, and undisguised as a questionnaire. The researchers specifically selected this instrument,

recognizing the fact that the instrument was meant to measure ideas and concepts that are abstract and non-observable, extra care was taken in designing the questionnaire in terms of proper phrasing of the questions, and a neat layout of the various sections. (Forbus et al., 2011, p. 113)

The results of the study revealed that statistically stress and coping mechanisms was significantly different for nontraditional and traditional students. However, when asked if they had a high level of stress in their life, the results indicated nontraditional students and traditional students experience similar stress levels. However, Forbus et al.'s study also determined the stress level for nontraditional students and traditional students was created for completely different reasons. In the study, nontraditional students indicated they experience stress because of work, school, and families. Traditional students indicated they experience stress because of academic and social concerns.

Wyatt (2011) conducted a qualitative case study focused on the reasons nontraditional students continue to pursue their education. The study explored the engagement level on campus in relation to overall motivation and satisfaction during their enrollment. The main focus of the study was revealed in the initial research question, "How does a university successfully engage nontraditional students?" (Wyatt, 2011, p.

16). The researcher did not disclose the number of participants in this study. The data collection consisted of two focus group sessions and in-depth personal interview sessions. In these sessions, “participants discussed student engagement and the collegiate experience as well as what they expected and needed from the institution to be successful in college” (Wyatt, 2011, p 15.) The results of the study concluded that nontraditional students place heavy emphasis on student engagement when they are making the choice to continue enrollment. Wyatt’s study also revealed that nontraditional students lead extremely busy lives, with attending college being only one of their multiple responsibilities. Therefore, the college environment and the message that is sent to the students on the importance of the student body to the college staff is a determining factor in nontraditional student retention.

Howell and Buck (2011) conducted a study on the correlation between student satisfaction and student retention. Furthermore, the researchers contended this correlation could be a discerning factor in assessing faculty effectiveness. The sample consisted of 1,725 adult students and 214 faculty members at five institutions of higher education. The students were enrolled in courses intended for nontraditional students seeking a business degree. The faculty members were specifically instructors for a business course in an adult business degree program. The data collection consisted of two survey instruments, one for the students and another for the faculty. Eleven research questions and hypotheses were the driving force behind this study. The results of Howell and Buck’s study concluded there was a connection between student satisfaction and student retention. According to the study, student satisfaction is directly related to classroom management and culture of the classroom.

Shelton (2012) completed a study on nontraditional student retention in a nursing program. The definition of student retention for Shelton's study was persistence in meeting the academic demands for continuation in the program. The sample included 458 nontraditional associate degree students enrolled in nine associate degree nursing programs in New York and Pennsylvania. The participants were either currently enrolled in their final semester of coursework for the program, or had dropped out of the program within the previous 9 months leading up to data collection. The data collection consisted of questionnaires that included four topics, including the student's background, academic self-efficacy, academic outcome expectations, and perceived faculty support. The study revealed that perceived faculty support was a determining factor in course continuation. In Shelton's study, perceived faculty support was directly related to student persistence and student academic performance.

McCann, Graves, and Dillon (2012) conducted a study to determine the impact of student satisfaction on retention. The sample consisted of 305 adult learners from an MBA program and adult degree completion program. The data collection consisted of the students completing a survey with questions centered on academic advising effectiveness, academic services, admissions and financial aid effectiveness, campus climate, instructional effectiveness, registration effectiveness, safety and security, and service excellence. The Adult Student Priorities Survey (ASPS) was utilized in McCann, Graves, and Dillon's study, along with demographic questions. The findings of their study revealed that adult students were motivated by strong faculty engagement with cognitive stimulation and interest being the most dominant factor of adult learner persistence.

Schomer and Gonzales-Monteagudo (2012) conducted a study to determine the potential correlation between social challenges of nontraditional students and student retention at a university. The comprehensive sample consisted of 160 nontraditional students. They were grouped into three categories, including first year students, last year students, and students who dropped out. Two students were selected for a case study after the 160 students completed a questionnaire and the answers reviewed by the researchers. According to the researchers, the reasoning behind selecting only two students for the study was because this enabled them to develop an in-depth narrative for each student, with the goal of “understanding students’ perspectives about their university experiences from personal, educational and institutional dimensions (Schomer and Gonzales-Monteagudo, 2012, p. 151). Biographical narrative interviews were conducted with each participant, utilizing an open approach that started with the early background of the student and continuing through their life cycle. The results of Schomer and Gonzales-Monteagudo’s study discovered there are many challenges that must be considered when referencing the correlation of nontraditional student social challenges and retention. Their study also revealed the support of friends, acquaintances, and faculty is essential for nontraditional students to progress in their course of study.

### **Rationale for Methodology**

In order to understand the reasons nontraditional university students continue their enrollment in spite of challenges, the researcher utilized a qualitative method of research. Qualitative research is a means of exploration into a social or human problem that creates general themes. This allowed the researcher to interpret the underlying meaning through the interpretation of the data. According to Hale, Treharne, and Kitas, (2007), the use of

qualitative research is particularly applicable when the researcher has the goal of understanding the personal perspective of an event or experience. Qualitative research engages the researcher to listen well to others' stories, which opens the door for the researcher to interpret and restate the subject's story (Glesne, 2006). Qualitative research is conducted in the natural environment of the participant to ensure the experiences and actions are in the same context as the daily setting (Seidman, 2013).

Quantitative research methods necessitate the researcher to select a large, random population so findings can be generalized based on predesigned response categories. Personal experiences are less likely to be taken into consideration in quantitative research because a preconstructed standardized instrument is used to calculate the responses (Yilmaz, 2013). This study required the personal, lived experiences of nontraditional students to be conveyed to the researcher. In-depth life experiences have a significant impact on the decision to work through the challenges of earning a degree as an adult learner. Such personal information cannot be quantifiably measured through statistical analysis.

According to Merriam (2001), strength of qualitative research is the opportunity for the researcher to experience flexibility in the interactive approach with the participants through utilization of inductive analysis and holistically exploring a social phenomenon. According to Klopper (2008), the researcher in a qualitative study must be willing to investigate with an open mind and be willing to improvise, revise, and adjust. For example, the researcher can ask the participants open-ended questions with the option to modify the questions to expand the data of the research topic. According to Glesne (2006), qualitative researchers provide relative insight into the participants' cultural,



social, and political perspectives so that personal experiences can be interpreted and conveyed. This study investigated the phenomenon of student retention from the insight of nontraditional college students' daily lives and their personal experiences that motivated them to remain enrolled.

A qualitative study was selected because it provided personal insight from a human perspective that is less likely to be provided from a quantitative study. The phenomenological research design is the best approach in a study that seeks to develop an increased understanding of people's perspectives, perceptions, and experiences of the phenomenon being investigated (Moustakas, 1994). This study sought to develop an understanding of the personal reasons and driving motivators that push nontraditional students to persist toward degree attainment despite facing challenges that must be overcome. Therefore, a qualitative, phenomenological study was the best research design for this study.

### **Nature of the Research Design for the Study**

The research design used in this study was the phenomenological research design. According to Moustakas (1994), a phenomenological approach to qualitative research encompasses studying a small number of participants comprehensively in search of finding underlying themes or patterns of meaning that are common to the participants of the study. According to Ringsberg and Krantz (2005), the phenomenological design is best utilized when the researcher wishes to gain a detailed description of a wide range of experiences.

While there are numerous qualitative research designs, the researcher selected the phenomenological design for this study because of the importance of documenting the

lived experiences of the participants through personal interviews. Through utilization of the qualitative phenomenological approach, the researcher attempted to understand and interpret the insight and perceptions of the participants in their daily lives. According to Moustakas (1994), a phenomenological approach to qualitative research encompasses studying a small number of participants comprehensively in search of finding underlying themes or patterns of meaning that are representative of the phenomena being studied. This study was conducted with the intention of gaining insight into the lives of adult students who are enrolled in a university through the utilization of individual, in-depth interviews. Through the qualitative interview process, the researcher integrated multiple perspectives and developed common themes (Seidman, 2013). “A phenomenological approach to interviewing focuses on the experiences of participants and the meaning they make of that experience. While focusing on human experiences and its meaning, phenomenology stresses the transitory nature of human experience” (Seidman, 2013, p. 16).

Through using the qualitative interview process in this study, the researcher sought to develop an understanding of the participants’ personal experiences to expand their knowledge about the phenomenon being studied, nontraditional student retention. The phenomenological approach provided individual insight and personal experiences of the participants that were essential for understanding the phenomenon of nontraditional student retention and potential ways it could be addressed. Other qualitative research designs would not have allowed the researcher to develop the deep understanding necessary to consider the lived experiences of the participants by them sharing thoughts at their core essence with the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). According to

Bloomberg & Volpe (2012), other qualitative research designs such as ethnography, case study, and grounded theory, study the participants in a group setting or as a social unit, lacking the personal interaction that are offered by a phenomenological study that requires personal interaction between the participant and the researcher.

Personal interviews were the source of data for this qualitative, phenomenological study. The researcher used the phenomenologically based interviewing technique that focuses on concentrated, in-depth interviewing that resulted in assumptions and interpretations gathered from phenomenology. This approach primarily uses open-ended questions, which allows the researcher to explore their participants' responses to the questions (Seidman, 2013). As defined by Holloway and Wheeler (2010), this semi-structured interview process typically begins with a broad, open question centered on the area of study, with subsequent questions varying depending on the participant's response.

The target population for this study consisted of nontraditional university students from one university in the Midwest that met the study criteria. For this study, the researcher defined a nontraditional student using the criteria of Choy (2002) and Horn (1996), who defined a nontraditional student using seven primary criteria. The seven criteria were: the student was (1) enrolled in college after a delay, (2) enrolled part-time, (3) had a full-time job, (4) financially independent (student filed their own financial aid forms), (5) had dependents other than a spouse, (6) was a single parent, and/or (7) did not earn a high school diploma (Appendix E). According to Hoyt et al. (2010) if a student met only one of the seven criteria, he or she is minimally nontraditional. If a student met two or three of the seven criteria, he or she was moderately nontraditional. If a student met four or more of the seven criteria, he or she was highly nontraditional. This study

utilized moderately or highly nontraditional students as participants, as defined by Hoyt et al. Therefore, the university students that met at least two of the seven criteria as described by Choy and Horn were utilized as participants in this study.

The research design included a field test, similar to a pilot study, and member checking. Pilot studies strengthen the data for the study by allowing the researcher to practice prior to beginning the actual study (Bloomerberg & Volpe, 2012). According to Seidman (2013), member checking ensures the transcript is an actual depiction of the interview, as well as safeguarding that the researcher did not include personal bias. The field test included two volunteer participants that meet the criteria of the actual study participants. The interviews were conducted in the same manner and all study protocol was followed, including the researcher audiotaping the interviews, in addition to recording field notes based on the observations of the researcher.

The participants in the study were nontraditional students attending one university in the Midwest. The participants met at least two of the seven criteria as established by Choy (2002) and Horn (1996). The interviews were conducted on the university campus, with the location on campus selected by the participant. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. The participants received a copy of the interview guide prior to the interviews taking place, and the interview guide was utilized by the researcher during the semi-structured interviews. The interviews were recorded on audiotape with a hand-held tape recorder, in addition to the researcher taking field notes that included observation of body language and other significant factors including emotion or facial expression when talking about a specific topic. Upon completion of the interviews, transcription of the audiotapes was completed, and transcripts were provided to the

participants for member checking. The results of the study were analyzed with the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method as recommended by Moustakas (1994).

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms are operationally defined for the specific use of this study.

***Attrition.*** Attrition describes a student's personal background and the interactions experienced in relation to the institution that determines if they will remain enrolled on campus (Willcoxson, Cotter, & Joy, 2011). The measure of the number of students who do not return to the same institution the following year that have neither graduated nor continued in an official course at the same institution (Willcoxson, Cotter, & Joy, 2011). According to Schuetz (2008), attrition is defined as leaving higher education before achieving one's educational objectives.

***Nontraditional student.*** The researcher defined a nontraditional student using the criteria of Choy (2002) and Horn (1996), who define a nontraditional student using seven primary criteria. The seven criteria are: the student is (1) enrolled in college after a delay, (2) enrolled part-time, (3) has a full-time job, (4) financially independent (student must file their own financial aid forms), (5) has dependents other than a spouse, (6) is a single parent, and/or (7) did not earn a high school diploma. According to Hoyt et al. (2010) if a student meets only one of the seven criteria he or she is minimally nontraditional. If a student meets two or three of the seven criteria, he or she is moderately nontraditional. If a student meets four or more of the seven criteria, he or she is highly nontraditional. This study utilized moderately or highly nontraditional students as participants, as defined by Hoyt et al. Therefore, the university students that met at least two of the seven criteria as described by Choy and Horn were utilized as participants in this study.

**Retention.** The students who are enrolled in one year of a course or degree and remain enrolled during the subsequent year (Willcoxson, Cotter, & Joy, 2011). Retention references the capability of a post-secondary institution to retain a student on the same campus from enrollment and attendance through degree or certificate completion (Seidman, 2006).

**Stop outs.** Stop outs include college students who withdraw for one or more semesters but re-enroll at a later time (Schatzel, Callahan, Scott & Davis, 2011).

**Traditional student.** Traditional students are students that attend college immediately after high school graduation without a gap in study. Traditional students typically do not have a full-time job, a family to support and care for, and carry less stress than nontraditional students (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2013).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations**

**Assumptions.** In the realm of research, assumptions are acknowledged to be true without evidence or support (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). According to Denzin and Lincoln, assumptions may alter the results in a study that the researcher has little or no control. The following assumptions will be present in this study:

1. It was assumed that interview participants in this study were not deceptive with their answers, and that the participants answered the interview questions honestly and to the best of their ability. The researcher was not affiliated with the university being utilized in the study. Therefore, it was assumed that the participants were open and honest with the answers provided to the researcher during the interview process since there was no connection between the researcher, the postsecondary institution, and the participants.

2. It was assumed that this study was an accurate representation of the thoughts and personal experiences of nontraditional students enrolled in coursework at a university in the Midwest.
3. It was assumed that there is the potential for the interviewer to have some conscious or unconscious biases that are a result of personal experiences during interpretation of the interview results. This can have an impact on the validity of the results of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Limitations.** The following limitations will be present in this study:

1. This study included 10 participants for the interview process, making the sample of nontraditional college students relatively small. Due to the small sample size, research was limited when addressing specific emerging themes that developed during the interview process.
2. A limitation to the validity of the study related to the fact that students from only one university campus were included.
3. Another possible limitation of the study was personal biases of the researcher may have influenced interpretation of the data and overall data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher incorporated validity strategies, which employed multiple approaches to increase the likelihood of a study that was accurate (Maxwell, 2013).
4. An additional limitation may have been accuracy in the data collection procedure. To minimize this possible limitation, the researcher conducted a field study with two nontraditional university students. The field study allowed the researcher to speak the interview questions as written, experience the body

language of the participants, practice taking field notes, and alter the questions for the actual study interviews if deemed necessary based on participant recommendation or the decision of the researcher.

**Delimitations.** The following delimitations were present in this study.

1. The researcher selected the sample of nontraditional students to interview for the study using the pre-established criteria. After participant selection took place, students completed a questionnaire to ensure they met the established criteria to participate in the study (see Appendix E). Specific demographic criteria ensuring student eligibility to participate in the study might have increased study validity and reliability in the selection of participants.
2. A delimitation of the study included reinforcing to the participants that their answers to the questions were not right or wrong, as there were no right or wrong answers for the study. The researcher emphasized this concept by allowing the participants to have access to the interview questions prior to the interview, and also by encouraging the participants to make notes and bring them to their interview. Also, the participants were invited to actively participate in the interview process more than just answering the questions. They were encouraged to engage with the researcher further by asking questions before, during, and after the interview.

### **Summary and Organization of the Remainder of the Study**

Nontraditional students entering post-secondary institutions of education continue to increase across the nation (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2010). While student retention remains a challenge in all postsecondary institutions, the dropout problem is of particular



concern and warrants additional research (Miller & Tanner, 2011). According to Michalowski (2010), qualitative studies on student retention may provide the clarification of factors that lead students to withdraw from a college prior to degree completion. This study was an investigation of reasons nontraditional students make the choice to remain enrolled at a university, despite the numerous challenges and barriers they confront on a daily basis.

This qualitative, phenomenological study explored the reasons nontraditional college students make the conscious decision to continue enrollment and work toward degree attainment. The participants shared their perceptions with the researcher through the interview process. “While focusing on human experience and its meaning, phenomenology stresses the transitory nature of human experience” (Seidman, 2013, p. 16). Bean and Metzner’s (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition was used to lay the theoretical foundation for this study. Bean and Metzner define the nontraditional student as an adult over the age of 24 with full-time employment (Meyer, Bruwelheide, & Poulin, 2009). Nontraditional students are likely to make their decision on continued enrollment based on academic and environmental factors, unlike traditional students who likely base their continued enrollment decision on social factors (Bean and Metzner, 1985).

The following chapters provide a basis and background for this study. Chapter 2 presents a review of current research on the topic of student retention of the nontraditional student. It extensively discussed the theoretical student retention models of Bean and Metzner (1985) and Tinto (1975, 1993), and the integration of these two models. Chapter 2 provides a historical analysis of higher education. It defines the

nontraditional adult learner and specifically describes how this student has a myriad of differences from the traditional college student. Chapter 3 provides a detailed explanation of the methodology utilized in this study. It includes discussion on the statement of the problem, the three research questions that were developed by the researcher, and the research design that drove the study, including the data collection and analysis procedures. Chapter 4 provides a detailed description on how the data collected in the study was analyzed. Written analysis and graphic depictions were presented to portray the collection of data to the reader. Chapter 5 is an interpretation and discussion of the results of the study, as it relates to the existing body of research on nontraditional student persistence at a university.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction to the Chapter**

This qualitative, phenomenological study was an exploration into the reasons nontraditional university students remain enrolled in courses despite facing numerous challenges that traditional students often do not experience. The phenomenon of student retention refers to the efforts of a postsecondary institution to preserve student enrollment until the student completes their degree (Seidman, 2006). With the unprecedented economic challenges occurring in the United States, now is the time to focus on institutions of higher education and avenues that can lead to a higher attrition rate (Burns, 2010).

The literature review provides a detailed depiction of current, significant scholarly research on nontraditional students and student persistence in the university setting. This chapter includes a conceptual framework based on three theories on student retention, the historical background and development of higher education, and the relevance of adult education in the current world of education. It also includes the expanded definition and characteristics of the nontraditional postsecondary student, a discussion of the multiple obstacles they face during college enrollment, and student retention and persistence including how it was measured and how it was defined, why student retention was relevant to higher education, and reasons nontraditional students should continue to seek enrollment. Sources for the literature review included scholarly online databases such as ERIC, Proquest, Academic Search Complete, and Education Search Complete. The literature review was organized in sections detailing the topics of theoretical framework

and conceptual framework, review of the literature, student retention and perseverance, and a summary of the chapter.

### **Background to the Problem**

According to Astin (1993), recruiting new students on a college campus is more expensive than retaining current students. Student retention creates financial stability in a post-secondary institution, and it is a key factor in supporting academic programs (Fike & Fike, 2008). The benefits of keeping students on campus from start to graduation include reducing financial loss, enhancing the institution's reputation, and demonstrating a positive track record of the university's effectiveness (Al Ghanboosi & Alqahtani, 2013). According to the American College Test (2013), the current 2-year public institution retention rate for students between the first and second year is 55%, and the 2-year private institution retention rate for students between the first and second year is 58%. Many predictors influence a student's decision to return for the second year of college, including budget and financial aid, parents' college background, difficulty of academic coursework, and participation in extracurricular activities (Fike & Fike, 2008).

According to Forbus et al., (2011), nontraditional students experience different challenges upon their return to college other than those described by Fike and Fike (2008), such as time management issues and a higher level of stress related to factors outside the college campus. A study completed by Braunstein and McGrath (1997) focused on the retention of all first-year college students and possible reasons suggested by administrators as to why they did not return the second year. The results of Braunstein and McGrath's study revealed that 75% of students that did not finish a degree left the college within the first 2 years, and the largest number of students left after their first

year. Furthermore, 85% of the students that left made the decision on their own accord after having satisfactory academic performance during their time on campus. To aid in traditional and nontraditional student retention, institutions must create an effective enrollment management system. However, only 20% of all institutions have a system in place to target nontraditional students with the intention of decreasing the nontraditional student dropout rate (Wyatt, 2011).

As nontraditional students embark on their college journey, many explore all postsecondary options because they are concerned with expense, they need to be within commuting distance of home and work, and they want to ensure they can earn their degree of choice (Exposito & Bernheimer, 2012). Little research exists for the commuter student or nontraditional student, especially when referencing student retention (Howley, Chavis, & Kester, 2013). Reid (2010) recently completed a case study on meeting the needs of nontraditional learners at a rural community college. The research findings indicated that adult students place high importance on student support services such as peer mentoring and academic support services such as faculty mentoring. However, more research is necessary to identify significant strategies to ensure adult students reach their educational goals.

According to Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007), between 1996 and 2006 nontraditional undergraduate student enrollment increased at a rate of 30% to 50%. With college campuses experiencing a shift in student enrollment from the traditional student to the nontraditional student, it is necessary that the administrators and stakeholders of post-secondary institutions comprehend this change in student population and make the necessary adaptations to meet the needs and expectations of the nontraditional learner so

they can persist toward degree attainment (Forbus et al., 2011). Community colleges enroll more than half of all beginning public post-secondary students, including disproportionate numbers of adult, first generation, low income, and other underrepresented populations (Schuetz, 2008, p. 1). The United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2012) reported that of the 17.6 million students who enrolled in college in the fall of 2011, only 15% were attending a four-year college and living on campus. Thirty-seven percent were enrolled part time, and 32% worked full time. Forty-three percent were attending a 2-year college. More than a third of these students were over the age of 25, and a 25% of the students were over the age of 30. By 2019, the percentage of those over 25 years old is expected to increase by more than 20% (United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

College enrollment demographics are changing. With 18 million undergraduate students enrolled in some type of postsecondary institution, retention must be a priority, not just convincing the students to enroll (United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Two million of these students were over the age of 21 in the fall of 2011, which has traditionally been the age of a first-semester senior in college (United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Nearly 1 million of these students were 25 years of age or older, and nearly half a million were older than 30 (United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). As of 2012, 1 in 5 of these students were enrolled in four-year programs and attend school part-time (United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). To increase student retention

by creating a specific action plan tailored for the unique needs of students on their campus, institutions of higher education must attain data to answer such questions as, “What student characteristics influence their academic success?” “What institutional factors shape student retention, persistence and educational attainment?” and “What does the literature say about promising interventions?” (Burns, 2010, p. 34).

### **Conceptual Framework**

Numerous models and theories on postsecondary student retention have been developed and debated throughout the past, as well as in recent years. A traditional model includes Tinto’s interactionalist theory, a student integration model (1975, 1993). Because of the dire need for institutions of higher education to increase student retention, theorists have developed models that strive to improve student attrition rates by developing models that specifically address the conditions and characteristics to meet this challenge (Hirschy, Bremer, & Castellano, 2011). Another theory is that of Bean and Metzner (1985). Their emphasis was on the learner that is 24 years of age or older and experiences influences off campus, rather than the traditional student that typically experiences influences of social integration on campus (Meyer, Bruwelheide, & Poulin, 2013).

**Tinto’s theory of institutional departure.** Tinto’s theory of institutional departure focuses on interactional theories of why students depart from a college campus, and it has a basis of behavioral tendencies (Tinto, 1987). The primary purpose of this theory is to explain how “interactions among different individuals within the academic and social systems of the institution and communities which comprise them lead individuals of different characteristics to withdraw from that institution prior to degree

completion” (p. 113). Behavioral tendencies of students refer to the idea that students are more likely to continue enrollment if they are involved in social and academic life on campus, including developing connections with other students, extracurricular participation, or engagement in academic activities (Tinto, 1987). This college integration goes hand-in-hand with remaining enrolled in courses.

Tinto’s (1987) theory has changed several times over the years. He originally examined other theories of departure and believed they did not offer adequate explanation of the actual behaviors that caused a student to leave a postsecondary institution. He also examined environmental theories, and found them equally inadequate in explaining student departure. The lack of a comprehensive theory on student departure was what led Tinto to develop his own interactional theory (Tinto, 1987). The 1975 theory evolved as an adaptation to William Spady’s 1970 theoretical model, which attempted to define the reasons students drop out of college. Tinto eventually built this theory by correlating it to the work of Durkheim (1951) and his theory on suicide. While there are several types of suicidal tendencies, Tinto related most to the *egoistic* suicide, where “the individual is unable to become integrated into society due to values which may deviate from society, or from insufficient personal affiliation between the individual and other persons in society” (Tinto, 1993, p. 102). Tinto related *egoistic* suicide to students who are attending college, as they are not assimilated into the educational environment socially and/or academically. Therefore, they disengage with campus activities, end their relationship with the institution, and drop out. In essence, Tinto used a metaphysical lens and framed his student departure theory on a theory that people commit suicide because they have an



inability to integrate in their society and an inability to create a connection with others (Tinto, 1987).

Tinto's (1993) most recent version of his theory of institutional departure expands the prior version, suggesting that a student does not continue college because they cannot handle the separation from family and friends, they are not engaged in activities with students and faculty, and they may not share the values of the people surrounding them. This version of the student theory incorporated Van Gennep's 1960 rites of passage, which included incorporation, separation, and transition. This theory also insinuated that external influences such as family, finances, and employment may be the reasons students drop out (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) theory of institutional departure is well known and widely accepted as playing a significant role in guiding college student retention. According to Meyer, Bruwelheide, and Poulin (2009) it is characterized as the original theory of student retention and commonly used as a guide for student attrition. However, researchers have indicated it needs revision. One such study, an empirical study completed by Braxton and Lieu (2000), focused on Tinto's 13 propositions by completing an assessment of peer reviewed studies of the empirical evidence of the theory. The results revealed partial support for the theory. The researchers discovered inaccuracies with "internal consistency in multi-institutional or single-institutional assessments, in both residential and commuter universities, and across female and male students" (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000, p. 127). They also wrote "Tinto's interactionist theory of college student departure needs revision" (Braxton & Lien, 2000, p. 11). Socialization remains the key factor in Tinto's theory of institutional

departure. It is a starting point for other theorists who desire to expand the student departure theory and focus on retention of students in the postsecondary environment.

**Bean and Metzner's theory of nontraditional student attrition.** Bean and Metzner (1985) developed a theory to address student retention among nontraditional students seeking an undergraduate degree. This conceptual theory specifically addresses the nontraditional undergraduate student. In developing this student retention conceptual theory, Bean and Metzner (1985) thoroughly researched the theoretical work of Spady (1970), Tinto (1975) and Pascarella (1980), all of who extensively studied student attrition.

In 1980, prior to working with Metzner, Bean developed an alternative theory for student retention that focused on factors outside of socialization that might affect student attrition. Personal and external factors were taken into consideration as potential consequences of background variables that have a likelihood of affecting the student. Examples included prior student academic performance, student GPA, socioeconomic status, distance from the parent's home, size of the hometown vs. the college town, place of residence, student perceptions of study requirements, personal development opportunities on campus, the student's major or course of study, goal commitments, quality of the institution, and housing and involvement in campus activities (Willcoxson, Cotter & Joy, 2011). This work later turned into the student retention theory created by Bean and Metzner (1985).

By identifying multiple factors that differ between traditional college students and nontraditional college students, Bean and Metzner (1985) were able to define major differences in student backgrounds, academic performance, psychological factors, and

environmental factors that may have an impact on student retention. The three major factors Bean and Metzner (1985) believed to be the most influential in a student's decision-making process on college enrollment and retention were age, enrollment status, and residence. The age factor was an imperative consideration because it correlated to the relationship of a student's environmental experience on campus, ultimately affecting the student's decision to enroll and remain enrolled. The student's background, including educational goals, ethnicity, gender, and prior academic performance, was also important, as it has a direct impact on how a student interacts with faculty and other students on campus within the institution, also a determining factor in student retention (Astin, 1977; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1975). According to Bean and Metzner (1985), academic achievement, including study habits, study skills, attendance, and academic advising, plays a major role in student persistence. Academic roles also include the interaction between the student and faculty, student support services, flexibility in coursework, and student perception of the postsecondary institution (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Environmental and psychological factors also play a significant role in student persistence (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Environmental factors that affect the student's decision may include perceived ideas, as well as documented ideas that are real. Examples might include financial hardship with lack of finances to attend college, family responsibilities, long employment hours or an inflexible work schedule, or lack of family encouragement (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Psychological factors reference how a student views their self, and how they relate their feelings and belief if they can be successful at a post-secondary institution. While they may feel committed, they may not believe they can

succeed, and stress is created as a result of the college environment (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Bean and Metzner (1985) created the definition of nontraditional student as one who is over the age of 24, commutes to campus daily (a non-campus resident), and is attending classes part-time. In their theory, they also addressed the additional challenges that students with these demographics experience, such as complex personal backgrounds with various life experience, prior knowledge and skills outside of their coursework, varied educational experiences, limited time and resources, and a higher level of maturity in comparison to the traditional college student. The findings of Bean and Metzner (1985) described students as less motivated by social integration, with a greater influence coming from academics, family encouragement, and interaction with faculty. They noted the differences may also be in correlation to referring to nontraditional students rather than traditional students (Meyer, Bruwelheide, & Poulin, 2009).

With identification of the nontraditional student, Bean and Metzner (1985) indicated that the social environment was not of great importance to them because they were not residing on campus, they had numerous responsibilities outside of their college coursework, and they kept a busy schedule in addition to attending college classes. Therefore, social integration such as participation in extracurricular activities on campus, time with peers on campus outside of class, and consistent faculty interaction were only minimally important to the nontraditional student (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

**Integration of theories.** The findings of Bean and Metzner (1985) are in contrast to Tinto's findings, and describe a student that is less influenced by social integration, places greater influence on the utility of the education being received, as well as great

influence on encouragement from friends, employers, and family (Meyer, Bruwelheide, & Poulin, 2013). According to Meyer, Bruwelheide, and Poulin (2009) students have a higher likelihood of continuing their coursework if they are involved in the social aspects of the college campus. Tinto's theory of institutional departure holds steadfast that socialization is the key factor in student retention, and Bean and Metzner (1985) decide that socialization may play a significant role in student dropout rates. However, other factors of student retention that are not related to socialization should also be considered.

The frameworks of Tinto (1993) and Bean (1980) have commonalities; however, the reasons for student departure differ. Significant commonalities in the two frameworks include the influence of external factors on student retention. The personal and institutional variables from each theorist vary greatly in indicating the reasons students drop out of college (Willcoxson, Cotter, & Joy, 2011). Bean and Metzner (1985) advocated Tinto's (1975) theory was lacking in adequate explanation for the reasons older, part-time students and commuter students did not remain enrolled in college, indicating too much focus was placed on students' external environments and their background. Their argument was that nontraditional students spend equal time in their external environment and on the college campus; therefore, environmental factors that are independent of the college campus should be a consideration when factoring student retention. According to Bean and Metzner (1985), the main differentiation in determining the path to retention or dropping out of college, was that nontraditional students have a different set of variables that impact their decision to remain enrolled than traditional students. Specifically, the external environment was a greater key factor in retention for nontraditional students than social integration on campus.

Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) model of student involvement is one of the most well-known and accepted theories when referencing student retention and attrition (Meyer, Bruwelheide, & Poulin, 2013). It has been the foundation for other post-secondary student retention and attrition theories to be developed, including Bean and Metzner's Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition (1985). While Tinto (1975) focused on the traditional student, Bean and Metzner (1985) specifically identified nontraditional students in a different category because they have varied circumstances in comparison to traditional students. These include a wide range in maturity level, varied resources, differing educational backgrounds, and a potentially limited access to the college campus due to external factors such as a family and full-time employment. The purpose of this framework was to offer an expanded understanding of the student retention process for students that do not fall into the traditional student categories. Up to this time, nontraditional students, although they have a significantly different focus for attending and continuing enrollment on the college campus, were treated with the same factors as traditional students when they dropped out. Bean and Metzner (1985) created a model that was much more useful in identifying current trends for nontraditional student attrition when completing research on why students drop out of college (Meyer, Bruwelheide, & Poulin, 2013). Bean and Metzner's theory will provide a foundation for this study on nontraditional student retention by relating the foundational reasons interpreted for the reasons students drop out with the actual perceptions of students and their lived experiences on degree persistence at a university.

## **Review of the Literature**

For the nontraditional learner, reentry into the world of education can be overwhelming as the student has to cope with institutional protocols, personal challenges created by the multiple roles they have added to their list of responsibilities with entering college, and adjusting to social connections with their new peers (Willans & Seary, 2011). The return to a formal learning environment can create feelings of excitement for some, and anxiety for others, even though they are ready for the change and know it is necessary for personal or career growth (Willans & Seary, 2011).

According to Hussar and Baily (2009), the National Center for Education Statistics projected that between 2007 and 2018 students age 25 or older that are enrolling in college will maintain or continue to increase during this time. While adult learners continue to enroll in college, research and surveys have shown they have a high risk of dropping out before they reach their educational goals (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). In examining the nontraditional student, it is evident that universities encourage their enrollment; however, they do little to address their varying circumstances and needs that differ from the traditional college student (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

The changes over the past 300 years in the higher education system have transformed the system so students of all backgrounds can enroll, not just students from elite families (Topper & Powers, 2013). With post-secondary student enrollment increasing in record numbers, the type of student population has changed alongside the systematic changes. Since the 1998-1999 school year, private and public non-profit institutions of higher education have experienced a 31% increase in student enrollment (United States Government Accountability Office, 2012).

**Historical perspective of postsecondary education.** Harvard University, founded in the early 1600's, became the first post-secondary institution in the United States. While Harvard was a private institution, many types of higher education institutions have been developed since this concept of advanced education was created. While the goal of each is consistent, which is to advance academic knowledge and ultimately allow students to work toward a certificate or college degree, they have vast differences in how they are owned and operated, how they are funded, and how they cover their costs to offer the education to students. According to Seidman (2012), in 1771 Harvard had a total of 63 college graduates, the largest class ever that preceded the American Revolution. Following this historical graduation, colonial colleges had enrolled almost 750 students by 1776, as students from wealthy families sought after the education to become lawyers and other prestigious careers (Geiger & Whiston, 1991).

With the rise of American independence in the eighteenth century, progressive citizenry became a prominent factor in society. Although many sought after educational opportunities, these opportunities were limited depending on their race, gender, social class, and religious preference (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). College attendance dropped between 1775 and 1800, with male enrollments steadily decreasing during this time (Seidman, 2012). The education movement in the United States started with the Industrial Revolution in the early 1800s (Jurgens, 2010). Enrollments started growing as the American college started to expand and new colleges emerged throughout the nation, experiencing increases over 80%, and by 1820 male enrollments were up 1% (Geiger & Whiston, 1991). The 1820's and 1830's were a time of rapid growth, creating a need for the examination of admissions criteria and thus, the birth of the Yale Report of 1828



(Seidman, 2012). However, with the stock market crash in 1837, hard economic times hit and the state of education dramatically changed in the 1840's (Seidman, 2012).

The *Morrill Land Grant Act* was signed by President Lincoln in 1862, and was “one of the most defining moments for American higher education,” (Seidman, 2012, p. 17). The *Morrill Land Grant Act*, also referred to as the *Land Grant Act*, required a minimum of one college in every state to offer programs in engineering and agriculture. The law enabled states to sell federal land and fund colleges with the proceeds from the sale to start colleges, which quickly started appearing across the United States almost exclusively as public institutions (Kaiser, 2011). Prior to this Act, the majority of post-secondary institutions were private (Levine & Levine, 2012). While this Act was responsible for changing the term ‘college’ to ‘university,’ enrollments decreased during this time because few students had an interest in these courses, which decreased the demand for a college education (Seidman, 2012). While the *Morrill Land Grant Act* allowed for educational institutions to be established across the United States through the means of endowment funding, admission was still only granted to an elite group of people. The *Second Morrill Act of 1890* allowed states to follow the process again of selling government land for college funding; however, the stipulation with this law was that if a college was established using the funds they could not limit admission to a specific race, allowing Blacks and Native Americans the opportunity to earn a college education (Billings, 2012).

The industrialization era came with the beginning of the twentieth century, creating a greater need for people with a college degree. The largest postsecondary institution enrollments recorded prior to this time were two thousand students, but by

1910 this number had doubled to 4,000 students, and by 1915 the number of students enrolled in college had expanded to 5,000 (Geiger and Whiston, 1991). Rapid growth continued as industrialization created new companies that needed trained managers, and with 1,000 institutions across the country, approximately 110,000 students were enrolled and earning a college education (Seidman, 2012).

With this rapid growth, the institutions earned leverage and they returned to being selective about the students they admitted, once again segmenting the population so that only the upper class could afford to send their children to college. The institutions that participated in this practice became the elite institutions, and began recruitment efforts to gain students from across the nation that met their admission requirements (Seidman, 2012). With an average annual tuition fee of \$80, the wealthy had no difficulty paying the bill; however, labor workers that earned \$1 a day and even skilled workers that earned \$5 a day could not afford to send their children to college (Levin & Levin, 2012). Additional post-secondary institutions were started to meet the needs of the varied population that could not get into the elite universities or afford to attend them, including Jewish and Catholic universities, African-American colleges, and women's colleges (Seidman, 2012). For the first time in the history of higher education, discussions began on student retention rather than just student recruitment and admission. "Student mortality" became a term in the 1930's, as one of the most popular studies on student attrition titled "College Student Mortality" was completed by John McNeely and published in 1938 on behalf of the United States Department of the Interior and the Office of Education. In the study, the student attrition of 60 postsecondary institutions from across the United States was studied, including the length of time it took for a student to earn a degree after

enrollment, gender, age at time of enrollment, location of personal residence and type of residence, employment specifics, and involvement in extracurricular activities on the college campus. The study also included reasons the students dropped out of college, resulting in multiple reasons such as academic dismissal, financial constraints, personal health challenges or a death in the family, and a lack of desire to continue (Seidman, 2012). McNeely's study would be used for the years to come as foundation for higher education student attrition, as it was one of the most comprehensive studies every completed (Seidman, 2012).

Higher education experienced another period of rapid growth during and immediately following the Great Depression and World War II, once again due to government intervention. The GI Bill was created to assist soldiers as they returned home from war to help them acquire the necessary job skills to return to civilian life. During this period, Harvard received more than 60,000 applications, other institutions across the nation were over their maximum enrollment capacity, and over 1.1 million ex-GI's used this means to earn a college degree (Seidman, 2012). The GI Bill created an increase in enrollment from 35% to 44% for all colleges and universities, and public institution enrollment increased from 49% to 79% (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). According to Levin and Levin (2012), approximately 75% of the soldiers that attended college under the GI Bill graduated with a degree.

The economic boom after World War II, along with the GI Bill, created yet another surge of enrollment in higher education. Occupations were being created that required specific job skills, the population was quickly growing, and community colleges were created to allow open enrollment so all students could have an equal opportunity for

a college education (Kimball, 2011). Between 1945 and 1975 college student attendance increased over 500%, from 2 million students to approximately 11 million students (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Student retention was a common discussion topic in post-secondary education by 1970 (Seidman, 2012). Higher education leadership expressed concerns about the number of students that were dropping out prior to completing their degree. Other studies had been published on the topic by this time; however, in 1971 Spady wrote an article titled, “Dropouts from Higher Education: An Interdisciplinary Review and Synthesis,” which discussed the reasons students make the choice to drop out, which included the campus culture, peers, faculty, college administrators, or a lack of interest or skills (Seidman, 2012). Although Astin and his peers at UCLA had been studying student retention since the late 1960’s, Spady’s article was a catalyst to the trend of examining student retention, which has continued to current times (Hagedorn, 2005).

The late 1970’s and early 1980’s brought numerous studies on student retention, including Tinto’s student integration theory (Tinto, 1975) and Bean and Metzner’s nontraditional student attrition theory (1985). The 1990’s brought continued research on student attrition, with a focus on expanding the research and knowledge on the topic with strategies on ways to develop methods to keep college students enrolled. Recent years have brought a trend to try and meet the varying needs of all students with new modalities of learning, such as the emergence of online degree programs, and examining the needs of the new nontraditional student population (Jesnek, 2012).

Past trends in higher education have established a foundation for student diversity, as well as laid the groundwork to continue searching for strategies to increase student attrition. While new challenges continue to arise, accountability in the postsecondary

education system continues to be a priority (Seidman, 2012). Higher education has changed the world in numerous ways. The United States educational system has decreased the illiteracy rate from 20% in 1870 to less than 1% in 1979. In addition, it has increased the population's educational status (Levine & Levine, 2012). Presently, there are still 105 land-grant universities in existence that were started with the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 (Billings, 2012). In 2004, these 105 universities enrolled approximately three million students, and awarded one-third of United States bachelor's degrees, one-third of all master's degrees, 60% of all doctorate degrees, and 70% of all engineering degrees (Billings, 2012). Educational reform has been prevalent throughout the history of the United States, with the latest reform effort sponsored by the United States Department of Education in 2010 titled "A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act" (Levine & Levine, 2012). While this reform effort focuses on elementary and secondary students, the underlying intent is that it will prepare students to enter college at a level where they can be successful educationally at an institution of higher education or be prepared to successfully enter the workforce (Levine & Levine, 2012). Enrollment in postsecondary institutions continues to rise, with an increase of 38% between 1999 and 2009, or an increase from 14.8 million students in 1999 to 20.4 million students in 2009 (Levin & Levin, 2012). The National Center of Educational Statistics (2009) projected a 10% increase in college enrollment of students under the age of 25 between 2006 and 2017, and an increase of 19% in college enrollment of students over the age of 25 during this same time frame. In a speech delivered by President Obama in 2009, he recognized that college enrollment is not the challenge, but college readiness and student persistence and

completion rates must be improved (Obama, 2009). As quoted by Wolniak, Mayhew, and Engberg (2012), “Once enrolled in college, understanding factors associated with student persistence is critical to strengthening the educational pipeline and achieving the broad economic and social goals fundamental to American society” (p.795).

**The nontraditional college student.** According to Shillingford and Karlin (2013), the face of universities is changing. The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (2012) released a report stating that as many as 73% of college students in the United States enrolled in postsecondary degree programs are considered nontraditional students. Defining the nontraditional college student is not a simple task in comparison to defining the traditional college student due to fewer studies being completed on the nontraditional student (Hoyt, et al., 2010). A survey conducted at a 4-year southwestern university was sent to the entire student population, with the intent of identifying their student population’s demographics, attitudes, behaviors and outcomes, overall grades, stress levels, and overall college expectations. The survey revealed that the nontraditional student is more likely to be married, residing off campus and commuting to class, working many hours when they were not attending class, and had different expectations for their college experience than the traditional student. The nontraditional students were also less involved in campus social activities (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2010).

**Characteristics of the nontraditional college student.** Adult students, often referred to as nontraditional students, are growing in numbers on college campuses at high rates, creating numerous indicators that these students, constitute a significant proportion of the undergraduate student population (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Nontraditional

students vary from traditional students in many ways beyond their age. Hoyt et al. (2010), described the traditional college student as being between 18 and 24 years old and pursuing an undergraduate degree. According to Milheim (2005), for nontraditional students to start or return to college after a stop out there are usually motivational factors present, such as preparing for the downsizing of a job, career change caused by burnout or to start a new business, the children have left home, or personal fulfilment to reach an educational goal.

According to the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (2012), the National Center for Education Statistics, along with Choy (2002), defined a nontraditional student as having one of the following criteria: delayed college enrollment, attends college part-time, holds full-time employment, was financially independent and does not rely on parental support, is a single parent, and did not have a high school diploma. This definition has even been expanded in many colleges to include veterans, married students, adult learners, students that start back to college after taking a break, or any student that does not meet the typical traditional student definition (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (2012). According to Astin (1984) and Tinto (1993), the traditional college student is predominantly White between the ages of 18-23 years old, enrolled full-time, resides on the college campus, and begins college immediately after high school graduation. According to Munro (2011), many nontraditional students are paying full fees for their tuition and not relying on financial assistance, attend their classes part-time, are much older and more mature, and work full-time.

In an attempt to explore the unique set of characteristics of a nontraditional student, Hoyt, et al., (2010) searched for the factors that made nontraditional students unique from traditional students. One main difference found by Bean and Metzner (1985) is that nontraditional students do not immerse themselves in the social environment on campus, but give a much stronger consideration to their academic goals. While nontraditional students have a unique set of characteristics as described by Choy (2002), these students have also been characterized by Hoyt et al. (2010) with a risk factor depending on how many of the characteristics they possess. For example, a student that displays four or more of the characteristics is considered a highly nontraditional student; a student that displays two or three of the characteristics is considered moderately nontraditional student; and a student that displays only one of the characteristics is considered a minimally nontraditional student.

While most nontraditional students view learning in a more positive way than traditional college students, they still have numerous challenges to overcome when attempting to balance work, family, commute time, and studying (Choitz & Strawn, 2011). Levin (2007) described nontraditional students by breaking them into four categories, called Adult Learner Typology. These four categories characterized the risk factor that was associated with being a nontraditional student. The four categories were minimal risk, moderate risk, high risk, and ultra-high risk. Minimal risk students had one characteristic of a nontraditional student, such as not attending college directly out of high school. Moderate risk students had two or three characteristics of a nontraditional student, such as a student that is returning to college after a break or one in need of financial assistance. A high-risk student had four or more characteristics of a



nontraditional student, such as entering college after a break, financial need, working 20 hours a week or more, or a single parent. Ultra-high risk students had many characteristics of a nontraditional student, in addition to being a student in a higher education mainstream program.

**Obstacles, barriers, and challenges.** The needs and desires of nontraditional students are different than their traditional student counterparts (Newbold et al., 2010). With these different needs, colleges must take note of how to meet these varied needs to increase their chance of retaining nontraditional students on their campuses, as they are typically left to manage their own academics once they enroll (Fragoso et al., 2013). Students who are at the highest risk of dropping out of an undergraduate degree program are often the ones who are working full-time to support a family and commuting long distances to school and to their place of employment (Pontes & Pontes, 2012). Nontraditional students are also at higher risk to dropout because their time and location constraints often conflict with their class schedule (Pontes & Pontes, 2012). According to Ross-Gordon (2011), one of the key characteristics that distinguish the adult learner from other college students is the high probability that they are juggling many other life roles in addition to attending college classes, including spouse or partner, full-time worker, caregiver, parent, and community member. While these roles are important in their lives, the multiple roles present a challenge for the nontraditional student because the necessary appropriation of time for the life roles and academics is sparse (Ross-Gordon, 2011). In a study completed by Stone (2008), the typical nontraditional student was a female from a disadvantaged background, struggling to balance the roles of wife, mother and student, and felt insecure about the probability of being academically successful. Most of the

women in the study had little support from their spouse or family, and their college courses were not taken seriously but viewed more as a 'leisure' activity that came second to their responsibilities at home.

Additional, less prevalent, barriers faced by nontraditional students are cultural barriers, health conditions, past criminal records, substance abuse, lack of family support, unstable relationships, and lack of academic preparedness (Spellman, 2007). According to Jesnek (2012), nontraditional students are also often first generation college enrollees that have a difficult time adjusting to the new digital world in education. Students that have been out of school for 10 to 20 years are enrolling in college courses for the first time. They are between 30 and 60 years old and many do not own personal computers, they do not have access to the internet in their home, nor do they even have a basic working knowledge of Microsoft Word (Jesnek, 2012). The nontraditional college student brings different life experiences to the classroom, thus different educational needs and expectations, than the traditional college student. With the consistent and continued rise in nontraditional students enrolling in college courses and degree programs, it is essential that these postsecondary institutions begin to find a means to support this type of college student (Jesnek, 2012).

**Student retention and persistence.** Student retention is a critical component in the success or failure of any post-secondary institution (Sorey and Duggan, 2008). It remains a critical factor in an institution's reputation and stability, as well as assisting students and society to elude the potential consequence of no having a college education, including poverty, unemployment, or underemployment (Marshall, 2008). According to Veenstra (2009), college retention after the first year is a key factor in student goal

attainment of a degree. A theoretical study conducted over four years by Fike and Fike (2008) included 9,200 community college students who were enrolled for the first time. The results of the study revealed that developmental education coursework, the availability of online courses, and student support programs increased student persistence and retention. When students have support for the unforeseen challenges they face their first year, they are more likely to continue to a second year of college. This concept can be applied to traditional students as well as nontraditional students. However, because of the shift in student demographics to higher percentages of nontraditional students, colleges and universities must alter their focus to meet the unique needs of the nontraditional student to increase retention (Wyatt, 2011).

According to Casstevens, Waites and Outlow (2012), nontraditional student retention has increased in concern because the student population of students over the age of 25 years old has dramatically increased in numbers. Although little research has been completed on the interaction between traditional students and nontraditional students, some research suggested that older learners have little tolerance for their younger counterparts showing up to class late, disrupting class, and not taking their grades seriously (Parks, Evans, & Getch, 2013). While this may not have a large impact on nontraditional student retention, it is a factor that postsecondary administrators must consider when working to meet the needs of the nontraditional student population. The United States Census Bureau (2009) reports that approximately eight million students between the ages of 25 and 34 years old have enrolled in college, yet dropped out before their degree was completed.

Pontes and Pontes (2012) identified seven key factors that increased the risk for a student to drop out, while making note that students that dropped out of an undergraduate degree program usually have a full time job, a family to care for and support emotionally and financially, and a long commute to their place of employment and to the college campus. The seven risk factors that Pontes and Pontes (2012) identified that are linked to undergraduate student attrition are, (1) part-time enrollment, (2) delayed enrollment after high school graduation, (3) financial independence, (4) dependents at home including a spouse, children, or elder parents, (5) full-time employment, (6) single parent, and (7) did not graduate from high school. Students that have at least one or more of these risk factors are considered nontraditional students, and they are at the greatest risk to either take much longer to complete their program or drop out altogether because of the additional pressures outside of their college classes (Pontes & Pontes, 2012).

According to Hewitt and Rose-Adams (2012), 1 in 12 students drop out after their first year of college and between 33% and 43% strongly consider dropping out after completing their first year. Nearly 50% of all students that start college do not complete the program to earn their degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Yet, retention of adult learners remains a topic that is insufficiently studied and measured (Fincher, 2010). Nontraditional student retention cannot be compared nor treated the same as traditional student retention. With adults entering the higher education sector more rapidly than traditional college students, the gap in information on adult student retention must be taken seriously (Fincher, 2010).

**Measurement and definition of retention rate.** Student attrition is often the measure that is used to identify an institution's retention rate. According to Berger and

Lyon (2005), many postsecondary institutions view student retention as the most accurate measure of the overall success of the organization. Hagedorn (2005) stated, “higher education researchers will likely never reach consensus on the ‘correct’ or ‘best’ way to measure this very important outcome (p. 81). According to Schatzel, Callahan, Scott, and Davis (2011), approximately eight million individuals, or 21% of the population, of people ages 25 to 34 in the United States have enrolled in a postsecondary institution and dropped out prior to completion of a degree. These statistics indicate that retention is a challenge that needs to be addressed in post-secondary education.

According to Marshall (2008), retention, attrition, persistence, and withdrawal are used interchangeably in college campus discussions referencing student enrollment. From the institutional perspective, retention and attrition describe student enrollment, and from the student’s perspective, persistence and withdrawal are descriptive terms for college enrollment (Marshall, 2008). According to Bean and Metzner (1985), nontraditional student retention must be correlational to an operational definition of the matter under investigation. The terms “retention” and “dropout” are two of the most widely known terms in the field of higher education, with “retention” meaning to remain in college until completion of a degree and ‘dropping out’ leaving the college prior to finishing a degree (Seidman, 2012). Astin (1971) made note that defining a college dropout is complicated because students that dropout often return to college at a later time and many times at more than one institution. “Dropout” is a label that is often misused and overused in the field of education (Tinto, 1987). According to Bean (1990), some students attend college for reasons other than obtaining a degree, and these students should not be labeled as a dropout just because they did not finish a degree if that was not their intentional goal in

the beginning. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2009) defines retention as the percentage of students that enroll in an institution and complete a program at that same institution.

According to Brock (2010), higher education has become increasingly more available to people over the last 40 years; however, student success has not increased if the measurement is through degree attainment and student persistence. The College Board (2008) reported that high school graduates peaked in 2008, and the same number of high school graduates as in 2008 will not be reached until 2018. With fewer students available to enter college, retaining those already enrolled is imperative for college sustenance. While the federal definition of student retention is a graduation rate and not a retention rate, all postsecondary institutions are mandated to submit their retention figures to federal and state entities (Seidman, 2012). A study completed by Summerskill in 1962 indicated a range of 18% to 88% for retention in postsecondary institutions, recommending a universal formula be created so an accurate student retention rate could be attained that was comparable at all institutions (Seidman, 2012). A universal formula still has not been mandated five decades later (Seidman, 2012). For Summerskill's study, retention is defined as completing at minimum the first two semesters, which is an academic year, continuously, with the intention of working toward degree attainment at the institution and demonstrated by being currently enrolled.

**Reasons to enroll.** According to Ritt (2008), adult learners have the opportunity to gain economic benefit and personal satisfaction with their academic achievement, which increases their chances of providing social, political, and economic benefits not only for themselves, but for society as a whole. With the rapidly changing economy,

students must make the decision to enroll in college courses to be prepared for the changing employment roles in the world (Mullins, 2011). According to Pusser et al., (2007), 54 million adults have not earned a college degree, and of those adults, 34 million have never attended any postsecondary institution. As the generations change, a college degree has become more important for workers to qualify for jobs that will maintain their lifestyle and even meet basic needs (Mullins, 2011).

Postsecondary institutions are more focused than ever on helping students succeed as they attempt to increase the number of students that complete their degree (Wolniak, Mayhew, & Engberg, 2012). For the nontraditional student, capitalizing on these efforts by the institutions creates a win-win situation as they work to overcome their numerous barriers that are presented during college enrollment. The decision to re-enter the world of education has a different meaning for many, although most pursue a college degree to increase their employment earnings (Griffith, 2011.) Other reasons include to fulfill a lifelong goal or for the enjoyment of learning (Griffith, 2011).

**Studies on retention of nontraditional learners.** Schreiner (2009) conducted a quantitative study aimed at linking student satisfaction with student retention. While there is little research that links the two, common belief is that the two have a direct connection (Schreiner, 2009). The sample consisted of 27,816 students at 65, 4-year institutions. Two methods of data collection were used in the study to measure the relationship between student satisfaction and student retention. The first method was a logistic regression analysis that utilized students' enrollment status (dropped out or returned) as the dependent variable. The second method utilized in the study was a" hierarchical multiple regression analysis, with students' response to the question, "All in all, if you

had it to do over again, would you enroll here?" used as the criterion variable" (Schreiner, 2009, p. 3). The results of Schreiner's study revealed student satisfaction was directly connected to student retention. The study also revealed student satisfaction occurs at various levels that can be strategically handled by understanding each level of satisfaction.

Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) conducted an explorative quantitative study with nontraditional students focused on analyzing the relationship between first year experiences and course continuation into the second year. For Gilardi and Guglielmetti's study, nontraditional student was defined as a student that is employed part-time or more, and dropout students were defined as a student that did not enroll for the second year of courses. Transfer students were excluded from the dropout student category. The sample consisted of 228 students, of which 174 were enrolled at a university and 74 were dropouts. Telephone interviews that asked specifically designed questions were used as the method of data collection. The dependent variable was the continuation of studies. The study analyzed the correlation between the quality of life on campus during the first year of courses with the continuation into the second year. The emphasis of the study was on the difference in this correlation between traditional students and nontraditional students. The results of the study revealed there is a much higher likelihood of a student dropping out at the end of the first year if they are working an outside job during enrollment. While other factors were considered in the study, such as age, gender, cultural background, and high school grades, none of these factors were as significant as being employed when correlating the dropout rate to student retention.



An exploratory study completed by Forbus et al. (2011) investigated the stress level of nontraditional students as opposed to the stress level of traditional college students. The study also focused on the coping mechanisms used by each group of students in handling their stress. The sample consisted of 471 respondents, with 97 of the students being nontraditional. For Forbus et al.'s study, nontraditional students were defined as those over 24 years of age. Data collection consisted of a survey that was self-administered, structured, and undisguised as a questionnaire. The researchers specifically selected this instrument, "recognizing the fact that the instrument was meant to measure ideas and concepts that are abstract and non-observable, extra care was taken in designing the questionnaire in terms of proper phrasing of the questions, and a neat layout of the various sections" (Forbus et al., 2011, p. 113). The results of the study revealed that statistically stress and coping mechanisms was significantly different for nontraditional and traditional students. However, when asked if they had a high level of stress in their life, the results indicated nontraditional students and traditional students experience similar stress levels. However, the study also determined the stress level for nontraditional students and traditional students was created for completely different reasons. In the study, nontraditional students indicated they experience stress because of work, school, and families. Traditional students indicated they experience stress because of academic and social concerns.

Wyatt (2011) conducted a qualitative case study focused on the reasons nontraditional students continue to pursue their education. The study explored the engagement level on campus in relation to overall motivation and satisfaction during their enrollment. The main focus of the study was revealed in the initial research question,

“How does a university successfully engage nontraditional students?” (Wyatt, 2011, p. 16). The researcher did not disclose the number of participants in this study. The data collection consisted of two focus group sessions and in-depth personal interview sessions. In these sessions, “participants discussed student engagement and the collegiate experience as well as what they expected and needed from the institution to be success in college” (Wyatt, 2011, p 15.) The results Wyatt’s study concluded that nontraditional students place heavy emphasis on student engagement when they are making the choice to continue enrollment. The study also revealed that nontraditional students lead extremely busy lives, with attending college being only one of their multiple responsibilities. Therefore, the college environment and the message that is sent to the students on the importance of the student body to the college staff is a determining factor in nontraditional student retention.

Howell and Buck (2011) conducted a study on the correlation between student satisfaction and student retention. Furthermore, the researchers contended this correlation could be a discerning factor in assessing faculty effectiveness. The sample consisted of 1,725 adult students and 214 faculty members at five institutions of higher education. The students were enrolled in courses intended for nontraditional students seeking a business degree. The faculty members were specifically instructors for a business course in an adult business degree program. The data collection consisted of two survey instruments, one for the students and another for the faculty. Eleven research questions and hypotheses were the driving force behind this study. The results of Howell and Buck’s study concluded there is a connection between student satisfaction and student retention.

According to the study, student satisfaction is directly related to classroom management and culture of the classroom.

Shelton (2012) completed a study on nontraditional student retention in a nursing program. The definition of student retention for Shelton's study was persistence in meeting the academic demands for continuation in the program. The sample included 458 nontraditional associate degree students enrolled in nine associate degree nursing programs in New York and Pennsylvania. The participants were either currently enrolled in their final semester of coursework for the program, or had dropped out of the program within the previous 9 months leading up to data collection. The data collection consisted of questionnaires that included four topics, including the student's background, academic self-efficacy, academic outcome expectations, and perceived faculty support. The study revealed that perceived faculty support was a determining factor in course continuation. In this study, perceived faculty support was directly related to student persistence and student academic performance.

McCann, Graves, and Dillon (2012) conducted a study to determine the impact of student satisfaction on retention. The sample consisted of 305 adult learners from an MBA program and adult degree completion program. The data collection consisted of the students completing a survey with questions centered on academic advising effectiveness, academic services, admissions and financial aid effectiveness, campus climate, instructional effectiveness, registration effectiveness, safety and security, and service excellence. The Adult Student Priorities Survey (ASPS) was utilized in McCann, Graves, and Dillon's study, along with demographic questions. The findings of the study revealed

that adult students were motivated by strong faculty engagement with cognitive stimulation and interest being the most dominant factor of adult learner persistence.

Schomer and Gonzales-Monteagudo (2012) conducted a study to determine the potential correlation between social challenges of nontraditional students and student retention at a university. The comprehensive sample consisted of 160 nontraditional students. They were grouped into three categories, including first-year students, last year students, and students who dropped out. Two students were selected for a case study after the 160 students completed a questionnaire and the answers reviewed by the researchers. According to the researchers, the reasoning behind selecting only two students for the study was because this enabled them to develop an in-depth narrative for each student, with the goal of “understanding students’ perspectives about their university experiences from personal, educational and institutional dimensions (Schomer and Gonzales-Monteagudo, 2012, p. 151). Biographical narrative interviews were conducted with each participant, utilizing an open approach that started with the early background of the student and continuing through their life cycle. The results of Schomer and Gonzales-Monteagudo’s study discovered there are many challenges that must be considered when referencing the correlation of nontraditional student social challenges and retention. The study also revealed the support of friends, acquaintances, and faculty is essential for nontraditional students to progress in their course of study.

**Appropriateness of instruments, designs to collect data.** According to Schoefield and Dismore (2010), more qualitative studies are needed to explore the reasons for low student retention in higher education institutions. Furthermore, quantitative studies are the common method for studying nontraditional student retention,

leaving the need for qualitative research among this population (McCann, Graves, & Dillon, 2012). McCann, Graves, and Dillon state, “Qualitative research can bring a deeper understanding of older adult participation in education and enable future inquiries into the underlying motives of adult learners” (p. 48).

While quantitative research can provide valuable information on a specific topic by offering a specific measure, qualitative research engages a different style of gathering data that allows the researcher to discover the underlying meaning behind the data (Yilmaz, 2013). The utilization of a qualitative research study is specifically important when the researcher is seeking to understand the personal perspective of an event or experience (Hale, Treharne, & Kitas, 2007). Qualitative research also encourages the researcher to explore the insights of individuals in relation to a specific topic (Glesne, 2006).

The majority of the prior studies presented utilized a quantitative research design. This is the design commonly used by researchers studying nontraditional student retention (McCann, Graves, & Dillon, 2012). This study sought to increase knowledge in the field by exploring the personal insight of nontraditional students and the reasons they continue enrollment despite numerous challenges not experienced by a traditional student. This study required the personal, lived experiences of nontraditional students to be conveyed to the researcher. In-depth life experiences have a significant impact on the decision to work through the challenges of earning a degree as an adult learner. This personal insight from a human experience cannot be quantifiably measured through statistical analysis. Therefore, the qualitative design is the best choice for this study. The phenomenological research design is the best approach in a study that seeks to develop an

increased understanding of people's perspectives, perceptions, and experiences of the phenomenon being investigated (Moustakas, 1994). This study sought to develop an understanding of the personal reasons and driving motivators that push nontraditional students to persist toward degree attainment despite facing challenges that must be overcome. Interviews allowed the participant to share their story, while allowing the researcher to make sense of it and utilize it to contribute to enhance the field of knowledge (Seidman, 2013). Interviewing the participants in this study allowed the researcher to gain the personal insight from each student on the reasons they make the choice to continue in their courses rather than dropping out.

### **Summary**

While student enrollment in postsecondary institutions was clearly on the rise, student retention continues to be a struggle, with no clear answers or specific strategies to prevent students from dropping out on the horizon. Recent statistics validate the increasing numbers of nontraditional students that are enrolling in postsecondary programs. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), not only did college enrollment increase 26% between 1997 and 2007, but students over the age of 25 increased 13% between 1997 and 2007. However, according to Hagedorn (2005), there is not a universal standard for tracking these students between when they drop out, when they transfer between institutions, or when they take a stop out or gap year. A national movement exists to "increase the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees and credentials to 60% by 2025" (Lumina Foundation for Education, 2009, p. 2). In a study completed at Columbus State University, data compiled from Institutional Research from the freshman cohort between 2003 and 2009 revealed that one out of every three students

that was enrolled in a degree program dropped out, and only one quarter of the initial 2003 cohort actually graduated (Brown, 2012). The results of this study demonstrated there is a long way to go to meet the 60% target level established by the Lumina Foundation (Lumina Foundation for Education, 2009).

The theoretical framework of Tinto (1975), Astin (1975) and Bean and Metzner (1985), was covered in Chapter 2, including details about the development of their student retention models and the reasoning and rationale that was utilized to develop these models. Chapter 2 also offered a detailed overview of the historical perspective on higher education, characteristics of the nontraditional college student and the challenges they face that make them different than the traditional college student, and measurement methods and the definition of student retention and persistence.

Chapter 3 covers the methodology of this qualitative, phenomenological study on nontraditional student retention and specifically answers the questions as to how this study was guided to develop a clearer understanding of the reasons nontraditional students persist toward degree attainment despite numerous barriers they must overcome. Chapter 3 includes the statement of the problem, the three research questions, the research methodology and design, the population and sample selection, the sources of data, validity and reliability, data collection procedures and analysis procedures, ethical considerations, and study limitations.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Introduction

The intent of this qualitative study was to understand the reasons nontraditional postsecondary education students continue their enrollment in spite of external challenges and barriers. This phenomenological study utilized the qualitative method of research. Qualitative research is appropriate when seeking a deeper understanding of a social setting or activity from the viewpoint of the study participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Through the development of general themes, the researcher understood the underlying meaning through the interpretation of the data. The use of qualitative research is particularly appropriate when the researcher has the objective of understanding the personal perspective of an event or experience (Hale, Treharne, & Kitas, 2007).

According to Klopper (2008), the researcher in a qualitative study must be willing to investigate with an open mind and be willing to improvise, revise, and adjust. For example, the researcher can ask the participants open-ended questions with the option to modify the questions to expand the data of the research topic. According to Glesne (2006) qualitative researchers provide relative insight into the participants' cultural, social, and political perspectives so that personal experiences can be interpreted and conveyed.

Chapter 1 provided an explanation for the need to focus on student retention in higher education, and the gap in literature for retention of nontraditional college students. Chapter 2 discussed the theoretical framework of Tinto (1975) and Bean and Metzner (1985), and their reasoning and rationale behind their student retention models, as well as an overview of the history of post-secondary education, details to define the



nontraditional college student, and facts about student retention and persistence. Chapter 3 includes an explanation of the research design that was implemented in this qualitative phenomenological study, the population and sample selection utilized in the study and how they were selected, the sources of data, and the data collection and analysis procedures.

### **Statement of the Problem**

It is was not known how nontraditional students perceived factors and events that motivated them to stay enrolled in postsecondary courses and persist to attaining a degree. The intent of this study was to capture the perceptions of nontraditional students and prevailing themes or events that create the desire to stay enrolled in postsecondary courses and work toward degree attainment. Institutions of higher education measure their internal efficiency through monitoring their student retention rates (Al Ghanboosi & Saleem, 2013). While there are numerous factors that affect the student's decision not to return to college after the first year of completion, influencing elements of the institution and personal challenges can equally play a role in the decision to drop out. Tinto's theoretical research, completed in 1975 and 1993, explored higher education attrition rates, and potential reasons that student withdrawal from college occurs for multiple reasons. However, without a comprehensive model to examine this student retention rate and a method to explore specific reasons for the students dropping out, the problem will remain a global challenge, costing institutions millions of dollars (Al Ghanboosi & Saleem, 2013).

According to Craig and Ward (2008), practitioners and educators must continue to take the initiative to overcome the challenge of student retention and target the factors

that are creating the high percentage of nontraditional student drop out. Through the investigation of emerging patterns with the utilization of qualitative research, methods will gain clarity so the student attrition challenge can be addressed and possible intervention strategies can be created (Schoefield & Dismore, 2010). Understanding why students make the choice to spend time and money on attending college, and then make the decision to not continue toward their original goal, was essential information for the educational administrators and stakeholders if a change is to be made. The student voices need to be heard for college leaders to be able to implement service and program changes in their institutions that will focus on keeping the students enrolled in their courses. If decisions are made without listening to the students, missed opportunities for specific insight may play a role in nothing changing (Wyatt, 2011).

### **Research Questions and Phenomena**

The research questions in this study guided an exploration of the personal experiences of nontraditional college students. The questions were designed to allow the researcher to gain knowledge of nontraditional students' perceptions of the reasons they continue coursework despite their potential challenges by being a nontraditional student by sharing their lived experiences. The research question for this study was 'how did nontraditional student perceive factors and events that motivated them to stay enrolled in postsecondary education and persist to attaining a degree at one university located in the Midwest?' The following overarching sub questions guided this study:

R<sub>1</sub>: How did a nontraditional student stay motivated to remain enrolled at a university?

R<sub>2</sub>: What were the positive and negative experiences that influenced a nontraditional student to remain enrolled at a university?

R<sub>3</sub>: What perceived obstacles or challenges did nontraditional students experience that could have resulted in the decision to withdraw from a university before goal completion?

This qualitative, phenomenological study was used to explore the challenges that have a potential impact on student retention in postsecondary education. With the rise of adult learners in the postsecondary education sector enrolling at an all-time high, factors that increase their chance of success must be a primary focus (Roman, 2007). However, few studies have been conducted on the needs of older adult learners that could increase the attrition rate of these students (Monroe, 2006).

Phenomenology was the research design for this qualitative study. According to Giorgi (2009), the phenomenological approach assists the researcher in analyzing the spontaneous processes that exist in the mind of the researcher, but do not always flow naturally due to conscious surroundings. The intent of the researcher for this study was to probe the thought process of nontraditional students' perspectives and perceptions when making a decision about a specific situation, in this case, continuing enrollment in a postsecondary institution that will guide them toward achieving an educational goal. The phenomenological approach was the best design for this study because it was based on the responses of the participants, which centered on their personal, lived experiences in reference to the reasons they continue to work toward degree attainment at a university. A phenomenological study allowed the researcher to take personal accounts of the participants in relation to a specific topic and develop common themes from their

responses that are based on personal experience. Phenomenological studies are focused on the wholeness and take all sides into consideration, looking at a situation from numerous angles and perspectives until a cohesive consensus is achieved (Moustakas, 1994). Explanations and analysis are not a part of phenomenology, but descriptions of personal experiences guide a phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Research Methodology**

In order to understand the reasons nontraditional university students continue their enrollment in spite of challenges, this study utilized the qualitative method of research. Qualitative research is a means of exploration into a social or human problem that creates general themes. This allows the researcher to interpret the underlying meaning through the interpretation of the data. According to Hale, Treharne, and Kitas, (2007), the use of qualitative research is particularly applicable when the researcher has the goal of understanding the personal perspective of an event or experience. Qualitative research engages the researcher to listen well to others' stories, which opens the door for the researcher to interpret and restate the subjects' story (Glesne, 2006). According to Merriam (2001), strength of qualitative research is the opportunity for the researcher to experience flexibility in the interactive approach with the participants through utilization of inductive analysis and holistically exploring a social phenomenon. Conducting the research in the natural environment of the participant allows natural observations to be extracted by the researcher (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). In this study, the researcher desired to gain an understanding of the participants' points of view by understanding the phenomena being studied, making a qualitative study the best approach to meet the desired outcome, meeting the goal of the qualitative research design.

According to Patton (2002), quantitative researchers use non-experimental and experimental designs to employ their study, whereas qualitative researchers detail their study through rich information from their participants through the sharing of reflections and personal events on the phenomena being studied. Quantitative research involves collecting data with an instrument that can be calculated in numerical form (Punch, 2013). This type of research does not take personal experiences of the participants into consideration; therefore, it was not selected for this study. It is also not conducted in the natural environment of the participants, another reason that quantitative research was not selected. The purpose of this study was to understand the personal challenges nontraditional students overcome to earn a postsecondary degree. Qualitative studies reflect data that is observed, but not measured, whereas, quantitative studies reflect data that is measurable and generates study results that can be converted into numerical data. The best method of research for this study to achieve the desired results is a qualitative method because this study will utilize the personal insights of the participants, which are not numerically measurable.

A mixed method research design is the integration of a qualitative and quantitative study. This research design is often a discussion for debate due to the rigorous and detailed framework required for proper interpretation of the study results (Östlund, Kidd, Wengström, Rowa-Dewar, 2011). Babour (1998) argued that combining study methods and mixing paradigms creates challenges for the researcher. This study will contribute information to the field of knowledge by conveying the lived experiences of nontraditional college students and the reasons they continue enrollment toward degree attainment despite numerous challenges. For the study to derive practical meaning, it

must be based on the reality of these students, which is not accomplished through a mixed method research design, but by means of the qualitative research design.

According to Klopper (2008), the researcher in a qualitative study must be willing to investigate with an open mind and be willing to improvise, revise, and adjust. For example, the researcher can ask the participants open-ended questions with the option to modify the questions to expand the data of the research topic. Open-ended questions also allow the participant to expand on the question, providing additional information that assists the researcher in developing common themes for the study. According to Glesne (2006), qualitative researchers provide relative insight into the participants' cultural, social, and political perspectives so that personal experiences can be interpreted and conveyed in the results of the study. This study investigated the phenomenon of student retention from the insight of nontraditional college students' daily lives and their personal experiences that motivate them to remain enrolled.

### **Research Design**

The research design used in this study was the phenomenological research design. According to Ringsberg and Krantz (2005), the phenomenological design is best utilized when the researcher wishes to gain a detailed description of a wide range of experiences. Through utilization of the qualitative phenomenological approach, the researcher attempted to understand and interpret the insight and perceptions of the participants in their daily lives. According to Moustakas (1994), a phenomenological approach to qualitative research encompasses studying a small number of participants comprehensively in search of finding underlying themes or patterns of meaning. This study was conducted with the intention of gaining insight into adult students' lives that

are currently enrolled in a university through the use of individual, in-depth interviews. Through the qualitative interview process, the researcher explored multiple perspectives and developed common themes on the phenomena being studied. “A phenomenological approach to interviewing focuses on the experiences of participants and the meaning they make of that experience.

According to Seidman (2013), the phenomenological research design focuses on the personal experiences of the study participants and the meaning they make of that experience. Through using the qualitative interview process in this study, the researcher sought to develop an understanding of the participants’ personal experiences to expand the knowledge about the phenomenon being studied, nontraditional student retention. The phenomenological approach provided individual insight and personal experiences of the participants that were essential for understanding the phenomenon of nontraditional student retention and potential ways it could be addressed. Other methods of qualitative research would not have allowed the researcher to develop the deep understanding necessary to consider the lived experiences of the participants by them sharing thoughts at their core essence with the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), other methods of qualitative research such as ethnography, case study, and grounded theory, study the participants in a group setting or as a social unit, lacking the personal interaction that are offered by a phenomenological study that requires personal interaction between the participant and the researcher.

“While focusing on human experiences and its meaning, phenomenology stresses the transitory nature of human experience” (Seidman, 2013, p. 16). Through using the qualitative interview process in this study, the researcher was able to develop an

understanding of the participants' personal experiences to expand their knowledge about the phenomenon being studied, which is nontraditional student retention. The phenomenological approach in this study provided individual insight and personal experiences of the participants that are essential for understanding the phenomenon of nontraditional student retention and potential ways it can be addressed.

Phenomenological research strives to associate an experience to an outcome by providing a description of the experience rather than through an analysis of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas also added that phenomenological research allows an individual's personal voice to be heard, captures the true feelings of the individual, as well as bringing out deep feelings that may not otherwise surface. Furthermore, a phenomenological study involves a person's individual experience with the goal of rendering a comprehensive understanding of the lived experience (Moustakas, 1994; Lichtman, 2011). Phenomenologists focus on finding a commonality with the participants in their study with the ultimate purpose of creating an understanding of the phenomena from the lived experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Van Manen (1990) contends that phenomenological research provides a way for the researcher to connect with the participant through the research activity. For example, the researcher focuses on a phenomenon, which is a lived experience of the participant, and the participant is then allowed to share personal information on this phenomenon with the researcher. Phenomenology is descriptive in nature; however, it utilizes an interpretive process by the researcher to convey the lived experience for the study (Bloomberg & Volpe).

The research questions and purpose of the study were a determining factor in selection of the research design. The research questions, "How does a nontraditional



student stay motivated to remain enrolled at a university?” “What are the positive and negative experiences that influence a nontraditional student to remain enrolled at a university?” and “What perceived obstacles or challenges do nontraditional students experience that could result in the decision to withdraw from a university before goal completion?” were exploratory in nature and seek to determine the motivating factors that keep nontraditional students enrolled in college courses despite facing numerous challenges. Answering these questions lends the study was best suited for a qualitative research design. Furthermore, if Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), Moustakas (1994), Lichtman (2011), and van Manen (1990) are accurate, this study was best suited as a phenomenological study, as it sought to gain insight into the personal, lived experiences of nontraditional college students and their reasons for desiring a college degree, even though they must overcome numerous obstacles to reach their goal.

### **Population and Sample Selection**

The target population for this study consisted of nontraditional university students from one university in the Midwest that met the study criteria. The University enrollment in the fall of 2014 was 11,132 students enrolled in courses on-campus, and approximately 2,000 students enrolled in online courses. Of these students, approximately 6,300 were enrolled full-time and approximately 3,400 were enrolled part-time. There was a total of 9,052 undergraduate students enrolled, 1,753 graduate students enrolled, and 327 non-degree students enrolled (University website, 2014). For this study, the researcher defined a nontraditional student using the criteria of Choy (2002) and Horn (1996), who defined a nontraditional student using seven primary criteria. The seven criteria are: the student was (1) enrolled in college after a delay, (2) enrolled part-time, (3) had a full-time job, (4)

financially independent (student must file their own financial aid forms), (5) had dependents other than a spouse, (6) was a single parent, and/or (7) did not earn a high school diploma (Appendix E). According to Hoyt et al. (2010) if a student meets only one of the seven criteria he or she is minimally nontraditional. If a student met two or three of the seven criteria, he or she was moderately nontraditional. If a student met four or more of the seven criteria, he or she was highly nontraditional. This study utilized moderately or highly nontraditional students as participants, as defined by Hoyt et al. Therefore, the university students that met at least two of the seven criteria as described by Choy and Horn were utilized as participants in this study.

According to Moustakas (1994), a small sample size should be used in qualitative research because of the laborious and systematic methodology. According to Klenke (2008), a small number of participants should be used in a qualitative study when personal reflections are the core of the study. Morse (2000) recommends a sample size of six for a phenomenological study. Similarly, Patton (2002) recommends that qualitative research studies should focus on small sample sizes in order for the researcher to be purposeful in understanding a phenomenon extensively with depth and detail. Therefore, the sample size for this study, selected on the basis of the research from Moustakas, Klenke, Morse, and Patton, was 10, which was the point at which saturation was reached. Saturation in qualitative research occurs when participants are no longer introducing new perceptions or insights on the phenomena being studied (Groenewald, 2014). According to Seidman (2013), a researcher must quit interviewing at the sign of saturation, or “when they have interviewed enough participants” (p. 58). The two criteria for saturation are sufficiency of information and saturation of information, which is when the interviewer

starts to hear the same answers from the participants (Seidman, 2013). A number cannot and should not be established prior to the interview process starting in a study, as “enough” is different for each study and for each researcher (Seidman, 2013, p. 58). When the researcher is not learning anything new from the participants’ answers to the interview questions, saturation has been reached and the interviewer should stop interviewing (Bertaux, 1981).

The sample for this study was composed of participants that willfully elected to participate in the study once selected by the researcher through purposive sampling, which indicates the selection of the research sample is purposeful, with participants selected based on their personal experience with the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 2001). According to King and Horrocks (2010), purposeful sampling is efficient in selecting participants who are ingrained in the study phenomena, as well as having a deep understanding of the phenomena. The sample for this study met at least two of the seven criteria (Hoyt et al. 2010), defined by Choy (2002) and Horn (1996), which were: the student was (1) enrolled in college after a delay, (2) enrolled part-time, (3) had a full-time job, (4) financially independent (student filed their own financial aid forms), (5) had dependents other than a spouse, (6) was a single parent, and/or (7) did not earn a high school diploma (see Appendix E).

Authorization was granted from a Midwest university for solicitation of student participants for this study (see Appendix F). Flyers were posted on the university campus to solicit nontraditional students to participate in the study. Referrals from students that responded to the flyers, as well as personal contact of students by the researcher, also assisted in garnering participants for the study. The flyers posted on the university

campus invited students to participate in the study, and included the specified criteria for the participants. Students choosing to respond were instructed to call or email the researcher with questions and to solicit further information on participation in the study. Students who selected the email option received a return email from the researcher, requesting telephone contact. According to Bertaux (1981), this method of selecting participants is called “snowballing.” While the number of potential participants who responded and desired to participate in the study could not be predetermined, the researcher qualified each potential participant at the initial point of contact to ensure they met a minimum of two of the seven required criteria as defined by Choy (2002) and Hoyt (1996). This was completed with a checklist of the criteria read to the participant, who provided the answer to ensure all criteria of the study were met (see Appendix E). Prior to beginning the interview process for the study, the researcher assigned a number to each potential participant, and randomly selected the 10 participants. Each randomly selected participant was invited to participate in the study. The researcher informed each of the selected participants that their participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study without penalty at any time (Bickman & Rog, 1998). The researcher also informed the participants that the data collection for the study would be kept in strict confidence and that each participant would be assigned a numeric identifier in place of names to ensure confidentiality. For example, S1, S2, S3, etc., was used. Pseudonyms were also assigned to each participant. This safeguarded the anonymity of participant responses. Furthermore, coding of the students was by gender, for example, SF1, SF2, SM1, SM2, etc. Prior to the interview, each participant completed the Demographic Criteria Checklist for Participant Selection (see Appendix E) and signed the Informed

Consent (see Appendix D) to acknowledge his or her permission to willingly participate in the study.

### **Sources of Data**

The source of data for this study was in-depth interviews, which were validated through member checking. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), interviews are a practical method to obtain concentrated, in-depth information of the phenomena. Open-ended interview questions allowed the researcher to explore their participants' responses to the questions (Seidman, 2013). Furthermore, as defined by Holloway and Wheeler (2010), an unstructured or semistructured interview process typically begins with a broad, open question centered on the area of study, with subsequent questions varying depending on the participant's response.

Patton (2002) recommended one method of obtaining research data in order to prevent errors, which more easily occurs when multiple methods of research are used. In addition, according to Remler and Van Ryzin (2011), utilizing one research approach rather than multiple approaches increases the consistency of data. Klenke (2008) presented that interviewing has been a proven method for researchers since the initial years of qualitative studies; therefore, it is an effective method to conduct a qualitative study to yield viable results for the phenomena being investigated. For this study, and as recommended by Patton and Remler and also recommended by Van Ryzin, and Klenke, the one approach utilized was interviews as the source of data.

The three research questions of the study provided the framework for the interview questions (see Appendix B). The interviews resembled conversational tone between the researcher and the participant, allowing for unprompted interaction to take

place (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 2012). Rubin and Rubin (2012) clearly explained that interview questions should be planned in advance; however, if the researcher does not understand the answer given, follow-up questions should be asked for clarification and to develop a better understanding of the answer. Clarification for the researcher can be gained by asking the participant to expand on their answer, provide further details, explain their personal feelings further, or add to their ideas already shared (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The interview questions were written following the recommendation of Seidman (2013), which guided the researcher by asking, ‘What am I trying to learn about and understand?’ ‘Why is this topic important?’ and ‘How can I probe the participant for in-depth information?’ Following the recommendation of Patton (2002), an interview guide was designed that included meaningful and probing questions and based on the foundation of each research question. Four open-ended questions were included in the interview guide, which elicited responses of the personal experiences of the participants (see Appendix B). Four general interview questions were developed. The first question asked participants to describe the reasons they continue enrollment in courses at the university. Interview questions 2 and 3 asked participants to describe any positive and negative experiences that have contributed to their continued enrollment at the university, respectively. The last question queried participants on any personal obstacles or challenges they may have encountered during enrollment at the university that they have chosen to overcome in order to stay enrolled in courses. Probes were developed for each of these four questions. A complete copy of the interview guide can be located in Appendix B of this document.

Upon completion of the interviews and transcribing of the data, the researcher utilized member checking, which is a process of having participants read their interview transcript and check responses for accuracy. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking is a means of adding trustworthiness and credibility to the study. The process of member checking refers to sharing the transcribed data with the participant to ensure accuracy and authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Validity**

It has been argued that validity is not relevant in qualitative research, although there is a necessity for all research to have a qualifying check of the results of a study (Golafshani, 2003). Validity in qualitative research is a measure of checks and balances to ensure study legitimacy (Golafshani, 2003). In qualitative research, Seidman (2013) and Yin (2011) define validity as the extent and accuracy the phenomena relates to the findings of the study. “The criterion of validity suggests whether the findings are accurate and credible from the standpoint of the researcher, the participants, and the reader” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 125).

Credibility and dependability was established by the researcher in this study with the utilization of open-ended interview questions, which, according to Patton (2002), is a means of removing the researcher’s personal feelings from the study to gain a neutral and objective stance. Through the utilization of audiotaping the interviews as well as taking field notes, the researcher increased accuracy and validity by having exact transcriptions of the answers to the questions as well as documented body language and researcher observances of the participant. According to Patton, the researcher is the instrument in a qualitative study that guides the validity of the study. As stated by Seidman (2013), “One

major difference, however, between qualitative and quantitative approaches is that in in-depth interviewing we recognize and affirm the role of the instrument, the human interviewer” (p. 26).

Validity in this study was also established by thoroughly reviewing the audiotape and notes from the interview immediately after each interview. According to Patton (2002), reviewing the participant answers immediately after an interview is a means of adding validity to a qualitative study. As quoted by Patton, “This period after an interview or observation is a critical time of reflection and elaboration. It is a time of quality control to guarantee that the data will be useful, reliable, and authentic” (p. 348).

A field study, similar to a pilot study, was employed to increase validity of the study. Pilot studies strengthen the data for the study by allowing the researcher to practice prior to beginning the actual study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The field study included two volunteer participants that met the criteria of the actual study participants. The field study interviews were conducted in the same manner and all study protocol was followed, including the researcher audiotaping the interviews, in addition to recording field notes based on the observations of the researcher. Member checking was also utilized to increase the validity of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stress the importance of member checking, which adds value and significance to the credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

### **Reliability**

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), qualitative research must portray an honest result that is based on how well the researcher has provided evidence that analyzes and portrays the reality of the situations and participants included in the study. Findings



are reliable when they are consistent and dependable in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009; Neuman, 2006).

The guide for participant interviews was used as a semi-structured guide to collect information of the lived experiences of the study participants (see Appendix B). The interview guide was a basis for qualitative studies, and it provided the participant the option to elaborate on the posed questions. According to Seidman (2013), it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure a safe, unrestrictive environment for the study participants and quietly encourage them to openly share their experiences, while being fully aware of body language and other cues that disclose meaning to the participant and to understand their lived experiences.

To promote a reliable and credible research study, a field test of the interview questions was conducted with two participants that met the specified criteria of a nontraditional student. The exact procedures and interview questions were used to ensure similar conditions were present. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility of a study is the primary standard for the study to be considered trustworthy.

With the use of the interview guide for the participant interviews, administering a field test, and employing member checking, all participants were treated similarly and the same protocol was followed with each participant. According to Patton (2002), reliability and validity in qualitative research has less opportunity to be compromised when all research concepts are applied consistently with each participant.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

For this study, the researcher defined a nontraditional student using the criteria of Choy (2002) and Horn (1996), who defined a nontraditional student using seven primary

criteria. The seven criteria were: the student was (1) enrolled in college after a delay, (2) enrolled part-time, (3) had a full-time job, (4) financially independent (student filed their own financial aid forms), (5) had dependents other than a spouse, (6) was a single parent, and/or (7) did not earn a high school diploma (Appendix E). According to Hoyt et al. (2010) if a student met only one of the seven criteria he or she was minimally nontraditional. If a student met two or three of the seven criteria, he or she was moderately nontraditional. If a student met four or more of the seven criteria, he or she was highly nontraditional. This study utilized moderately or highly nontraditional students as participants, as defined by Hoyt et al. (2010). Therefore, the university students that met at least two of the seven criteria as described by Choy and Horn were utilized as participants in this study.

Prior to conducting the first interview for the study, the researcher employed a field test using the Guide for Participant Interviews (see Appendix B). Two volunteers who met the same criteria as required for the study participants was selected, utilizing the same process as used in obtaining participants for the study. The pilot study allowed the researcher to follow the prescribed process of the study, with the opportunity to make any necessary changes prior to the study starting. This ensured data collection procedures were workable, in place, and ready for the interviews to begin. Implementation of the pilot study allowed the researcher to practice notification of the volunteers, practice the interview questions and develop a conversational tone during the interviews, as well as practice in transcribing and coding the data after the practice interviews take place, and prior to the official start of the actual study.

The Authorization to Conduct Research form was obtained from the university (see Appendix G.) Upon final approval of the proposal, the researcher scheduled the defense, and the Institutional Review Board documents were submitted by the researcher and the researcher's chair. Upon the Grand Canyon University Institutional Review Board approval, purposeful sampling began. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), purposeful sampling is recommended in qualitative research because it provides an increased understanding of the phenomena being studied. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to describe a specific perspective in depth, rather than generalizing it to a population (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Flyers were posted on campus inviting students to participate in the study, with instructions to telephone or email the researcher. Once an interest to participate in the study had been established by the potential participants contacting the researcher, participants were screened prior to final selection using the Demographic Criteria Checklist for Participant Selection to ensure they met the criteria of the defined nontraditional student by Choy (2002) and Horn (1996) (see Appendix E). When the researcher confirmed the study criteria had been met, an invitation to participate in the study and an informed consent letter was emailed, mailed, or hand delivered to the participant. Following, the participants were again contacted personally by the researcher to schedule the interview time, location, and arrangement of the best method to receive the interview guide. The interviews were conducted on the university campus and lasted approximately sixty minutes. However, the researcher allowed the participant to select the campus location to allow for a place the participant feels safe to share their personal perceptions of the phenomena being studied.

Each interview began the same, with the reminder to the participant that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Each interview was audiotaped, as recommended by Yin (2011). The researcher also recorded hand notes of the observations made during the interviews, in addition to body language and other notes relevant to the data collection such as date, time, location, and setting (Yin, 2011).

For member checking to ensure accuracy, all data collection from the interviews was transcribed and returned to each participant for review and revision, if necessary, as part of the study. Upon approval from each participant, the researcher started analyzing the data following the data analysis procedures. Upon completion of the member checking, a thank you letter was sent to the participant to express the appreciation for the participant's time to share their lived experiences and participate in the research study (see Appendix F).

The data are stored in the researcher's home office in a secured and locked file cabinet to which no one but the researcher has access. All data, throughout the study and at the completion of the study, will be kept for a minimum of 7 years. It will be destroyed after this time has passed.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Each interview was recorded on audiotape and transcribed for preparation of the data analysis for this study, as recommended by Seidman (2013) "I believe that to work most reliably with the words of participants, the researcher has to transform those spoken words into a written text to study" (p. 117). Three research questions guided the study: (1) How does a nontraditional student stay motivated to remain enrolled at a university?

(2) What are the positive and negative experiences that influence a nontraditional student to remain enrolled at a university? (3) What perceived obstacles or challenges do nontraditional students experience that could result in the decision to withdraw from a university before goal completion? According to Maxwell (2013), interview questions are a method of collecting data in a study; however, the research questions and the interview questions are separate parts of the design and each should stand independently. This can easily be confusing to qualitative researchers, because “researchers often talk about ‘operationalizing’ their research questions, or of ‘translating the research questions into interview questions” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 100). Maxwell stated, “There is no way to mechanically convert research questions into methods; not a logical transformation of the latter” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 100).

Upon completion of the interviews, the interview transcriptions, and completion of member checking, analysis of data began. The most important part of sorting through raw data is the ability to identify key themes that are representative of the sample (Patton, 2002). “The researcher must come to the transcripts with an open attitude, seeking what emerges as important and of interest from the text” (Seidman, 2013, p. 119). A thematic analysis is highly common in a qualitative study, and it occurs when data begins to develop answers for the phenomenon being studied (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Making note of what is interesting, labeling it, and filing it in the appropriate file is ‘coding’ the data in qualitative research (Seidman, 2013). The researcher read through the transcripts several times, analyzing the raw data by marking the interesting passages as recommended by Seidman (2013). Words that expressed feelings and ideas were marked, as well as words that were repeated or that were in phrases and expressed particular

meaning (Patton, 2002; Hatch, 2002). Organizing the interview responses into categories, then analyzing the data from this manner to connect threads and patterns that turn into themes, is the most conventional way to analyze qualitative research (Seidman, 2013).

Once the researcher completed analysis of each transcript, data analysis began using the Stevick (1971), Colaizzi (1973), and Keen (1975) methods supported by Moustakas (1994). This method of data analysis first describes the researcher's personal experiences with the phenomena being studied in order to push these experiences aside and allow the researcher to focus on the study. The following steps in the data analysis included developing a list of commonly used statements from the transcripts to develop a list of statements that do not overlap, followed by developing a list of significant statements that do overlap. The overlapping statements were then grouped into larger units of information, called themes or 'meaning units' (Moustakas, 1994). Once the themes were developed by the researcher, a textural description of 'what' the participants in the study experienced, with examples, was written verbatim of the participant. After the textural description was written, a structural description was written which explained the 'how' the experience happened in reference to the setting and context of the phenomena. Finally, a composite description was written by the researcher that summarized both the 'what' and the 'how' in relation to the phenomenon being studied.

Qualitative research begins with questions, data is gathered around these questions, then the researcher has the responsibility to identify the significance of the data and construct the method for how to relay the findings of the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). According to Moustakas (1994), descriptive expression by the participants is the means of developing an understanding of the phenomenon. In this study, qualitative data

analysis, using the method of Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen and recommended by Moustakas, allowed the researcher to develop any common themes on the reasons nontraditional students remain enrolled at a university despite challenges they may encounter.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Phenomenology does not describe an experience, but rather reiterates a lived experience of the phenomenon being studied (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012). In this study, epoche was practiced by the researcher. Epoche is the process of bracketing one's own personal experiences, which enables the researcher the ability to analyze another's lived experiences without imposing personal beliefs (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche in phenomenological research can be avoided with the systematic process of bracketing (Moustakas, 1994). While epoche is an analytic process that will continue throughout the study, the researcher must be aware of it from the beginning of the study (Patton, 2002). Epoche allows the researcher to be sensitive and understanding to the participants, while ensuring personal viewpoints are not cast upon the participant.

In qualitative research, bracketing is important because it encourages the researcher to push personal thoughts, knowledge, attitudes, and assumptions aside and focus on the participants' lived experiences for the study (Fischer, 2009). Bracketing is a method used to prevent the researcher from imposing preconceived thoughts into the research process (Tufford & Newman, 2010). It is imperative the researcher does not impose personal beliefs or perceptions onto the study participants. While lived experiences of the participants are a key factor in a phenomenological qualitative study, it is the first thoughts that enter the participant's mind that should be recorded as the most prominent to ensure a quality study (Moustakas, 1994). The member check follow-up

interviews will not replace the original thoughts, but expand on any thoughts the participant would like to add that may have been forgotten at the initial interview.

A dissertation study should not exercise discrimination of any social group, class, age group, or disability, with all research participants being treated fairly and without impartiality (Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005). Institutional Review Board approval is required to conduct research with human participants. This approval was approved at the study university, with approval also from Grand Canyon University.

All participant identifiers were removed to ensure confidentiality through the assignment of a numeric identifier to each student, for example, Student 1, Student 2, Student 3, etc., in place of names. Pseudonyms were also assigned to each participant. The participants were then broken down one step further for the coding process, to identify males and females, for example, SF1, SF2, SM1, SM2, etc. This safeguarded the anonymity of participant responses. Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher obtained an Informed Consent Form from each participant (see Appendix D). The researcher answered any questions pertaining to the study at that time. Participants were reminded their participation in the study was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

### **Limitations**

The sample size of this study was 10 students. Therefore, this number is representative of only a small number of nontraditional students' experiences of the reasons they remain enrolled despite numerous external challenges. The participants in the study did not include nontraditional students that dropped out of college. Therefore, student retention of nontraditional students was viewed only from the experiences and



perceptions of nontraditional students that continue to work toward their educational goal of degree attainment.

Research was only completed with participants from one college campus, creating a limitation in the validity of the study, rather than if the study were completed on multiple college campuses. To lessen the limitation of accuracy in data collection, a pilot study was completed with two students following the same protocol as the actual study interviews. This allowed the researcher to practice asking the questions, taking handwritten field notes, reading participant body language, and engage feedback from the pilot study participants prior to the study interviews taking place.

Another possible limitation of the study was personal biases of the researcher that may influence interpretation of the data and overall data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), the interview process in a qualitative study can be influenced by personal bias during the data collection process of the researcher. The researcher incorporated validity strategies that employed multiple approaches to increase the likelihood of a study that is accurate (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

An additional limitation may be accuracy in the data collection procedure. To minimize this possible limitation, the researcher conducted a pilot study with two nontraditional university students. Again, this pilot study allowed the researcher to speak the interview questions as written, experience the body language of the pilot participants, practice taking field notes, and alter the questions for the actual study interviews if deemed necessary based on participant recommendation or the decision of the researcher.

## Summary

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of nontraditional college students and the reasons they remained reenrolled despite having numerous challenges to overcome throughout the enrollment process. In order to understand the reasons nontraditional university students continued their enrollment in spite of challenges, this study utilized the qualitative methodology..

Qualitative research is a means of exploration into a social or human problem that creates general themes. This allows the researcher to interpret the underlying meaning through the interpretation of the data. According to Hale, Treharne, and Kitas, (2007), the use of qualitative research is particularly applicable when the researcher has the goal of understanding the personal perspective of an event or experience. Qualitative research engages the researcher to listen well to others' stories, which opens the door for the researcher to interpret and restate the subject's story (Glesne, 2006). Qualitative research promotes a deeper understanding of the personal experiences of an individual, typically conducted in the natural environment of the participant (Bloombert & Volpe, 2012).

According to Merriam (2001), strength of qualitative research is the opportunity for the researcher to experience flexibility in the interactive approach with the participants through utilization of inductive analysis and holistically exploring a social phenomenon. According to Klopper (2008), the researcher in a qualitative study must be willing to investigate with an open mind and be willing to improvise, revise, and adjust. For example, the researcher can ask the participants open-ended questions with the option to modify the questions to expand the data of the research topic. According to Glesne (2006), qualitative researchers provide relative insight into the participants' cultural,

social, and political perspectives so that personal experiences can be interpreted and conveyed. This study investigated the phenomenon of student retention from the insight of nontraditional college students' daily lives and their personal experiences that motivate them to remain enrolled.

Chapter 3 reviewed the reasoning for a qualitative, phenomenological research method and provided specific details why this is the best method for this research study. Chapter 3 also provided detailed information of the statement of the problem, the research questions, the research design, how the participants were selected, and the sources of data. In addition, Chapter 3 provided specific information on validity and reliability of the study, the data collection procedures, the data analysis procedures, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study. Chapter 4 provides the results of the research study. A summary of the nontraditional college student interview results will be provided and discussed, as well as the data analysis of the study.

## Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the insights of nontraditional students and the reasons they continued course enrollment regardless of the challenges nontraditional students experience. The intent of this study was to gain a greater understanding of such challenges in the effort to improve nontraditional student retention rates. The importance and impact of student retention on higher education campuses is not a new phenomenon. Adult learners are a growing population of students across the country (Forbus et al, 2011). They experience varied educational, personal, financial, and social needs from the traditional college student. This study addressed the gap in literature between traditional college student retention and nontraditional college student retention. While numerous studies have been completed on student retention in postsecondary education, the majority of these studies focused on the traditional student rather than the nontraditional student (Jinkens, 2009). It is imperative that institutions of higher education focus on these varied needs to increase the retention of nontraditional students on their respective campuses.

This study was guided by the problem statement, “It is not known how nontraditional students perceived factors and events that motivated them to stay enrolled in postsecondary courses and persist to attaining a degree” to answer the research questions, (1) How does a nontraditional student stay motivated to remain enrolled at a university? (2) What are the positive and negative experiences that influence a nontraditional student to remain enrolled at a university? and (3) What perceived obstacles or challenges do nontraditional students experience that could result in the

decision to withdraw from a university before goal completion? The findings of the study completed for this research project will be reported in Chapter 4, which will include discussion of the data that were collected for the study. A chapter summary will conclude chapter 4.

### **Descriptive Data**

The research design utilized in this qualitative research study was phenomenology, which allowed the participants to provide the researcher with a personal account of the reasons they stay enrolled despite experiencing challenges as a nontraditional college student. Qualitative research is a means of exploration into a social or human problem that creates one or more general themes of the phenomenon being studied. According to Moustakas (1994), the phenomenological study focuses on the wholeness of the participant and takes all parts of the individual into consideration, which provides a broad perspective that creates cohesiveness in a study.

Individual, in-depth interviews were conducted as the means of data collection for this study. Ten independent, personal interviews were conducted with the 10 nontraditional student participants. This method allowed the researcher to probe deep into the lived experiences of the participants and extract their perceptions on the reasons they continue to strive for degree attainment in spite of obstacles they encounter along the way. The three research questions shaped the design of this study. The interviews ranged in time from 28 minutes to 64 minutes to complete. The length of time taken for each interview was directly dependent upon the amount of time each interviewer spent answering the interview questions, which was directly related to the total length of each interview transcript once it was transcribed by the researcher. The length in pages, in

Times New Roman font size 12, of the transcribed interviews, ranged from four pages to 20 pages per interview.

Upon approval of the Grand Canyon University Internal Review Board and the Midwest University's Office of Institutional Research that was utilized in the research study to select for the nontraditional student participant interviews, the researcher posted signs on campus inviting students to participate in the study (see Appendix I). As students contacted the researcher, clarification was provided to ensure each student met a minimum of two of the seven guidelines established in identifying a nontraditional student per the guidelines of Choy (2002) and Horn (1996). The seven criteria used in identifying a nontraditional student were: (1) enrolled in college after a delay, (2) enrolled at least part-time in courses, (3) had a full-time job, (4) financially independent (student filed their own financial aid forms, (5) had dependents other than a spouse, (6) was a single parent, and/or (7) did not earn a high school diploma (see Appendix E). According to Hoyt et al. (2010) and Levin (2007) if a student met only one of the seven criteria, he or she was minimally nontraditional with minimal risk of dropping out. If a student met two or three of the seven criteria, he or she met two or three of the seven criteria, he or she was moderately nontraditional with moderate risk of dropping out. If a student met four or more of the seven criteria, he or she was highly nontraditional and at high risk of dropping out of college.

Prior to the actual study beginning, two students were selected who met the study criteria, and a field test was conducted for the purpose of increasing validity and reliability in the study. These two student participants for the field test were not part of the actual study. The purpose of the field test was to check the research procedures, as

well as allow the researcher the opportunity to alter the research questions if necessary. Pilot studies, similar to a field test, strengthen the data for the study by allowing the researcher to practice prior to the study actually beginning (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). All study guidelines were followed for the field test, including the forms sent to the field test participants, audiotaping and hand-written notes of the interview, and transcription of the interviews. At the conclusion of the field test, the researcher determined no changes were needed for the study interview questions and proceeded to participant selection. The information obtained from the field test was not included in the final research analysis of this study.

The study included 10 student participants. Of the 10 study participants, four were male and six were female. To ensure confidentiality of each study participant, pseudonyms were assigned that gave each participant an assigned name, indicated by the number of the participant, and if the student were male or female. This ensured each response was anonymous and the actual names of the participants remained private. The demographic information of each participant is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1.

*Demographics of Study Participants*

Participant	Study Identifier	Pseudonym	Gender
Participant 1	SM1	Charles	Male
Participant 2	SM2	Joseph	Male
Participant 3	SF1	Gina	Female
Participant 4	SF2	Ella	Female
Participant 5	SF3	Daisy	Female
Participant 6	SF4	Lucy	Female
Participant 7	SF5	Brenda	Female
Participant 8	SM3	Peter	Male
Participant 9	SM4	Lucas	Male
Participant 10	SF6	Haley	Female

Five of the participants were considered to be at moderate risk of dropping out of college as a nontraditional student, and five of the participants were considered to be at high risk of dropping out of college as a nontraditional student, according to the guidelines of Hoyt et al. (2010) and Levin (2007). None of the participants were in the minimal risk category. The following table displays the characteristics of each participant that determined their level of risk for dropping out of college.



Table 2.

*Dropout Risk Level of Participants*

Criteria	Charles	Joseph	Gina	Ella	Daisy	Lucy	Brenda	Peter	Lucas	Haley
Enrolled in college after delay						x				
Enrolled at least part-time	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Full-time job	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x
Financially independent	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Dependents other than spouse							x	x	x	x
Single parent							x	x		x
Did not earn a high school diploma										
Risk Level of Dropping Out	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3

Note. 1 – Minimal Risk    2 – Moderate Risk    3 – High Risk

Upon each student being screened to ensure he or she met the study criteria, the student was given the Invitation to Participate in a Research Study form (see Appendix C), the Informed Consent form (see Appendix D), and the Guide for Participant Interviews (see Appendix B). Data collection began with the researcher interviewing 10 nontraditional university students as defined by Choy (2002) and Horn (1996). The interview questions sought to create a greater understanding by the researcher as to specific challenges the student has experienced during enrollment at the university. Data were collected and analyzed for the purpose of seeking answers to the research questions of the study.

For this study, 10 participants agreed to complete the interview process and all 10 interviews were completed by the researcher. While the estimated time it would take to complete each interview was 60 minutes, it was made clear to each participant that this

was an approximate time. The actual total time to complete the interview depended upon their interview answers. The interviews ranged from 28 minutes to complete at the minimum, and 64 minutes to complete at the maximum. Once transcribed, the interview transcripts were a total of 85 pages, single-spaced in Times New Roman font size 12, with the shortest interview transcription four pages in length and the longest interview transcription 20 pages in length. Once the interview transcriptions were completed, the researcher expanded the single spaced transcripts to double space and font size 14 to allow adequate space to analyze each transcript.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

**Collection and preparation of data.** The researcher utilized only one method of obtaining research data as supported by Patton (2002), and Remler and Van Ryzin (2011), which was a personal interview with each participant. Furthermore, the use of open-ended interview questions was utilized by the researcher. This method of research allowed the participants to expand their answers to include personal situations beyond the actual interview question (Patton, 2002).

Phenomenology does not describe an experience, but rather reiterates a lived experience of the phenomenon being studied (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012). In this study, epoche was practiced by the researcher. Epoche is the process of bracketing one's own personal experiences, which enables the researcher the ability to analyze another's lived experiences without imposing personal beliefs (Moustakas, 1994).

During each interview, the researcher took hand-written notes as well as audiotaped the private session, as recommended by Yin (2011). The researcher's hand-written notes consisted of key points made by the participant, as well as observing

emotions that were displayed while the participant talked about a specific moment or event in his or her life, including making note of body language that was used to express further emotion on a specific topic or point of view. For this study, the researcher took minimal to moderate notes to allow the researcher to maintain full attention on the participant without distraction. The researcher observed and recorded prominent gestures, emotions, and statements. The researcher reviewed the hand-written notes immediately following each interview as a means to increase validity in the study (Patton, 2002). Through the immediate reviewing of the notes taken by the researcher during the interview, the researcher obtained a strong sense of the commitment and personal emotion that the participant felt during talking about a life event. After several interviews had been completed, this allowed the researcher to note patterns in the lives of the participants' that showed similarity and had the potential to impact their overall sense of what it meant to earn a college degree, no matter what obstacles they encountered. As patterns were developed with each subsequent interview and finally, revealed in the data coding, validity of the study increased.

The participants were allowed to bring notes with them to the interview. Participant five and participant ten elected to take advantage of this opportunity and brought notes they had made from the Guide for Participant Interviews. Each participant was attentive and answered each question, often pausing to take time for reflection before providing an answer to the researcher. Probing questions, as identified in the Guide for Participant Interviews, were used by the researcher if the participant needed a prompt to expand into more detailed information.

At the end of each interview, the researcher created a new document that contained the hand-written notes from the session to ensure all information was clear and concise as perceived by the researcher (Seidman, 2013). Interviews were then transcribed and data analysis was completed utilizing Moustakas' (1994) variation on Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen's model. Key points and observations from the interview notes were added to the bottom of each participant's transcription.

**Analysis of data.** This method of data analysis first describes the researcher's personal experiences with the phenomena being studied in order to push these experiences aside and allow the researcher to focus on the study. The following steps in the data analysis included: developing a list of commonly used statements from the interview transcripts to develop a list of statements that did not overlap, followed by developing a list of significant statements that overlapped (see Appendix J).

As the researcher completed each interview, she noticed a pattern of she noticed a pattern of the same or similar statements that emerged in subsequent interviews. If the statements that were made by the participants were not exactly the same, the underlying meaning of the participant responses was similar in nature. These statements were based on the personal, lived experiences that were described by each participant. At the conclusion of the 10 interviews, the researcher had a general idea of similarities that would arise in the data analysis. The interviews were transcribed, and the researcher reviewed and coded reviewed and coded patterns of repeated phrases, patterns of repeated words, and patterns of thoughts that referenced specific situations that each participant had experienced. The researcher then developed a list of significant statements that emerged from the participant interviews, which were themselves coded.

Once the significant statements were identified from the transcripts, the researcher developed a codebook that organized the data into specific meanings shared by the participants from the interviews. The significant statements were interpreted by the researcher based on the actual statement to create the codebook, taking into account the context of the conversation that was taking place during the interview at the time the statement was made (see Appendix K). At the completion of the codes being assigned to the statements, the researcher analyzed and calculated the number of participants that referred to the specified code (see Appendix L). If a significant point was mentioned by two or more of the participants at least one or more times, these overlapping statements were then grouped into larger units of information, called themes or ‘meaning units’ (Moustakas, 1994). The results were interpreted through the theoretical lens of Bean and Metzner’s (1985) theory of nontraditional student attrition.

Member checking was utilized by the researcher as a means of ensuring transcription accuracy for each interview. The process of member checking provided authenticity to the transcribed data by ensuring the researcher was accurate in transcribing the audiotaped interviews to transcription format (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Upon approval from each participant, ensuring accuracy of the transcribed interview, a thank you letter (see Appendix F) was sent to the participant to express appreciation for his or her time and for his or her willingness to share personal experiences during the interview.

According to Patton (2002), the most important part of sifting through raw data is the ability to identify specific themes that emerged during the interview process. A thematic analysis is highly common in a qualitative study, and it occurs when patterns in

the data begin to reveal answers for the phenomenon being studied (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Once the researcher completed the transcript analysis, data analysis began using the Stevick (1971), Colaizzi (1973), and Keen (1975) method of analyzing qualitative data, which is also supported by Moustakas (1994). The researcher then ‘coded’ each transcript following the recommendations of Seidman (2013). Each transcript was read through several times, and each time the transcript was marked if a specific topic was found to be repeated, showed expression, or indicated a particular meaning on the specific topic. The researcher developed a list of statements that were common among the study participants, followed by a list of statements that were only shared by one or two of the participants. The overlapping statements were grouped into larger units of information, called themes (Moustakas, 1994). Notes were also made on each transcript by the researcher, combining transcript passages with the hand-written notes taken during the actual interview. The interview responses were organized into categories, which were then analyzed and turned into patterns. The patterns were turned into themes, as recommended by Seidman (2013) through the grouping of overlapping information (Moustakas, 1994). Once the themes were developed by the researcher, a textural description of ‘what’ the participants in the study experienced was written, followed by the researcher writing a structural description which explained the ‘how’ the experience happened. Finally, the researcher summarized both the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ in relation to each nontraditional student and his or her personal experiences on why he or she continued to take courses despite facing challenges not typically faced by a traditional college student. The textural description was an integration of the overall thoughts of the participant as they were relayed by the answers to the questions

throughout the interview. The textural descriptions described the overall theme of the interview as portrayed by the answers the participant gave to each interview question. The structural description was completed by the researcher through the integration of the thoughts of each individual and the way in which they integrated with the answers from the other participants' answers to the interview questions.

## **Results**

Four themes were developed from Research Question 1, three themes were developed from Research Question 2, and three themes were developed from Research Question 3. In addition to the 10 themes that were developed in reference to the research questions, three themes came out of the participant interviews that are included as additional findings of the research (see Appendix M).

**Research Question 1.** How did a nontraditional student stay motivated to remain enrolled at a university? Four themes emerged from the participants' responses:

1. Self-motivation
2. Role model for children and family
3. Increased career options
4. Goal of financial independence

**Theme 1: Self-motivation.** When participants described the reasons about why they had endured college through difficult challenges, they consistently made note that quitting was not an option in their minds. In the interview, Daisy shared, "I think that, if I can use the word desperation, it's my only course of action to get where I want to be. So there is no option for me to waver or get off this path in any way." At the beginning of the interview, with the very first question when Lucas was asked to describe the reasons

that you continue enrollment in courses at the university, the very first words spoken, without hesitation, were “Because I refuse to quit.”

Ninety percent (90%) of the study participants contributed at least one significant statement during their interview that referenced their determination to complete their college degree. These were Charles, Joseph, Gina, Ella, Daisy, Lucy, Brenda, Lucas, and Haley. Multiple statements were also included in the interviews that while determination is strong, it does not come without the thought of dropping out when times get tough. In the interview, Charles shared, “It’s just that it’s hard. It’s hard to stay in school and just keep going. Every student hits a wall where they’re just frustrated, and to where it’s overwhelming.” Furthermore, all nine of these participants described the biggest reason they continued enrollment was because of self-motivation, which is gained through the excitement of earning a college degree, each with personal reasons on why this is an important goal for them. Each of the nine participants had different reasons for their self-motivation, but comments surfaced throughout the interviews indicated it was up to them to motivate themselves, as well as their responsibility to show up to class. These participants reiterated that it was not someone else’s obligation to keep them motivated. Lucas shared:

I remember weeks where I slept, if I slept a few hours, that it was a good night. And weeks where between working two jobs and being full-time at 18 credit hours, plus all my other obligations because I was leading a young life and I was doing all this stuff, I was just spread so thin. There were times when it got so tough that I was just like ‘I can’t do this anymore, I can’t do it.’ And you find a way to, you find a way to.



Charles shared that he will be the first person in his family to graduate with a college degree, and that is his self-motivation, which is to make his family proud of him. Ella shared that she has numerous cynics in her family in reference to her college enrollment, and that is her continued motivation, which is to prove them wrong and earn her degree. Brenda shared that since she was a child her parents never let her quit anything, and she has carried that concept into her adult life. Lucas stated simply and in a matter-of-fact tone that he refused to quit and that is why he is still enrolled at the university.

***Theme 2: Role model for children and family.*** Every participant whom is a parent, and one that lost a child after starting college, shared the importance of being a positive role model for their children and the impact this has on their continued college enrollment. Also, one participant that is not a parent shared a statement that indicated the importance of being a role model for family members outside of being a parent. This accounted for 6 of the 10 participants (60%). At least one significant statement was mentioned during the interview that referenced the importance of being a role model from Charles, Ella, Daisy, Lucy, Brenda, and Haley. Charles, who does not have any children, shared, “I’m making people proud around me who have come into my life, and I don’t want to let them down, in a sense. Because they’ve watched me, and not here I am in my own life, and I’m actually succeeding, and they’re proud of me.” Other participants shared that if they quit, they fear it will show their children it is acceptable to quit. Daisy shared that she believes her time in college has made both of her children better students, especially her daughter who was considering dropping out of high school prior to her starting college. In her interview, she said, “The other thing that has become beneficial

and maybe I didn't think of it as a motivating factor originally, but now it really keeps me going strong is that my kids are watching. My son's grades have risen since I started college." She went on to share, "My daughter was going to drop out of high school, but has decided to stay in high school." The participant that lost her child after starting college shared that being a mother was the reason she started college, and even though her daughter is not with her now, she is still living her life for her daughter and has the desire to be successful for her child. In her interview, she shared,

I went back to school because I got pregnant, and then when my daughter went to heaven instead of staying here, it was just ... there wasn't a second thought as to what my purpose is and continuing to live not only for myself, but for her as well.

Lucy shared that she remained enrolled in courses because it was one way she could teach her daughter to continue pursuing your dreams no matter what obstacles may get in the way.

***Theme 3: Increased career options.*** All 10 study participants (100%) shared statements and experiences indicating the desire to go to a job they love, with this being at least one of their reasons for continuing courses at the university in spite of challenges they have encountered. Every participant shared their belief that a college education provides employment options that one does not have without a college degree.

Charles shared that he believes a college degree will give him a better life than what he had growing up because he has been on his own since he was a teenager. He stated, "Growing up, I always pictured myself going to college and getting a career for myself. So when the actual time finally came, I was ready for it. And college is something I want to do, and career-wise, it'll benefit me in the long run." Participant 2

shared that being in a dead end job that he hated one summer was the reality check he needed to return to college that fall semester and keep looking forward to graduation. He stated during his interview:

The main reason for continuing my education, higher education outside of high school is just to better my opportunities throughout my career. Just having that backbone of having a bachelor's degree in the future will help me out with promotions, more opportunities, that sort of thing. So just basically making sure that I have every single opportunity that I can when I get further into my career.

Gina shared a similar story to Joseph, sharing that she does not want to work in retail for the rest of her life, and without a college degree she likely would not have many choices about what type of job she would have to accept. Haley shared she does not feel she is being paid what she is worth in her current job, and earning a college degree will help to level the playing field financially in her job or in other jobs she pursues.

***Theme 4: Goal of financial independence.*** The participants that discussed financial independence as a reason for earning a college degree spoke of it passionately. At least one significant statement was mentioned during the interview that referenced financial independence from Charles, Joseph, Gina, Daisy, Lucy, Lucas, and Haley. During the interviews, 70% of the participants alluded to the goal of financial independence at least one time. In his interview, Joseph shared, "When I first moved here I was working full time making minimum wage and I kind of just had an epiphany where I realized if I didn't get my education, this is where I'll be staying." When Daisy was asked what her main motivator for continuing her coursework was, she provided a matter-of-fact answer, "I would say number one is financial." Other significant phrases

shared by the participants indicating the importance of financial independence was “the hope of I’m going to make it through and have a better life,” and “to be self-reliant and independent financially is a huge goal.”

**Research Question 2.** What are the positive and negative experiences that influence a nontraditional student to remain enrolled at a university? Three themes emerged from the participants’ responses:

1. Professors
2. Impact of academic advisors
3. Course offerings

**Theme 1: Professors.** The topic of college professors was prominent in both a positive and negative voice of the participants. The overall impact of the college professor on the college experience was shared by all ten of the study participants (100%), contributing at least one statement that was in relation to a professor. Furthermore, all of the study participants had at least one or more positive experience to share about professors they have had over the years, and 8 out of the 10 participants (80%) had at least one or more negative experience to share. While it was apparent during the interviews that these experiences played a significant role in their overall college experience during the course, it was obvious that they would not have allowed the conflicts to be a reason they would dropout. However, Brenda shared that an extremely negative experience with a professor almost made her transfer to another college to finish her degree. In her interview, she shared,

I had a professor who thought it was appropriate to hit on me and consistently invite me back to his office with him and I was very uncomfortable and distraught in his class and I literally surrounded myself with people constantly.

Brenda also shared another story about a professor, “There have been a few that have been language barriers where I have professors or peers that I’m grouped with that can barely speak English and just not being fluent in their language. It makes it very difficult.” Lucas shared a similar story, “. . .And those two of the worst ones, but there are even others like having a teacher who there was a large language barrier at the college that just made it a nightmare.”

On the positive side, Charles shared that he particularly has been impressed with his math professors because of the extra amount of time they spend with the students outside of class. He shared in his interview, “The math teacher I’ve had this year has made a wonder for me.” Joseph shared a similar experience, revealing that his smaller classes have played a major role in his quality of education and this also enabling the professors to spend one-on-one time with him (and other students). Lucas shared, “There have been four, probably four or five good ones. . .probably my favorite class ever was with him. And it wasn’t because necessarily this great life lesson that I learned in the class or anything, but he was so passionate about teaching us.”

On the negative side, Ella shared that it has been difficult because the professors do not share values and standards in each course. One professor may tell her she is an awesome student, and another may tell her she is very low academically. In her interview, Ella stated:

It's just frustrating that they don't have the same expectation and I'm really hurting with that because you're going along, you're doing really good and then all of a sudden, you hit a teacher who's telling you you suck and you go 'wait a minute, I've been doing it like this this whole time and now I suck.

This participant believes this is very unfair and the university needs to provide a more standard rule to bring the professors closer together on classroom guidelines. Lucas shared three separate instances where the professors created an uncomfortable environment for him and other students, making it very difficult to go to class. Lucas also shared that he had multiple professors that would only hold class for a very short time frame, and then have the students do all the work outside of class. He shared if he is paying for an education, and the professors are getting paid, then the majority of class time should be utilized learning. He should not have to learn on his own at home. Haley stated, "The worst thing I had was a professor who just didn't seem like a happy person to begin with. She was somebody you can't even contact or ask a question."

***Theme 2: Impact of academic advisors.*** This theme was developed from statements or stories that came from 4 of the 10 participants (40%), including Charles, Lucy, Brenda, and Peter. Much like the role of the professor, the four participants that shared information about academic advising experiences had both positive and negative to share. The overall perception that was developed with this theme is that advisors have a profound impact on the college experience, even though they may not be the actual reason a student drops out.

Brenda has had both positive and negative experiences with college advisors. She shared the following about her first advisor, "I mean she was absolutely wonderful. She

made me want to stay. She made me want to learn.” On the other hand, Brenda also shared this story, “...they have one advisor for the education program and that one advisor takes on like 300 students each semester and I never heard from him. He never got back to me. I almost could not even see my own advisor and the financial end of it, they were terrible with that as well.”

**Theme 3: Course offerings.** Charles, Joseph, Gina, Daisy, Brenda, and Lucas shared at least one significant statement that was in relation to the availability of courses. While some comments were positive, and some negative, it was apparent that this can create anxiety for a nontraditional student with 60% of the participants alluding to the theme. When asked if anything could be changed on campus to assist nontraditional students, Joseph stated, “I think definitely offering more nighttime classes because if you do work full time it’s more likely it’s a full time day job so it’s nine to five.” Charles shared a similar point of view, saying, “People have kids. People work. So if they could have either more classes open or different times.” Gina shared this is also a huge challenge for her, because her work schedule only comes out one day in advance. While she can make her university courses work for that one semester, it has been a challenge because some courses are only offered once per year, and sometimes only once per every three semesters. Lucas works two jobs, and he has had the same challenges with the lack of flexibility in courses as Joseph and Gina. Lucas shared in the interview, “I can’t tell you how many classes I wanted to take that I couldn’t take because of when they were offered.”

**Research Question 3.** What perceived obstacles or challenges do nontraditional students experience that could result in the decision to withdraw from a university before goal completion? Three themes emerged from the participants' responses:

1. Support network of family and friends
2. How to pay for college
3. Time management and balance

*Theme 1: Support network of family and friends.* The impact of the personal support network of family and friends was alluded to at least one time during the interviews of Charles, Ella, Daisy, Lucy, Brenda, Peter, Lucas, and Haley. With 80% of the participants sharing the effect family or friends can have on how one feels during college, many of them also shared that when they were supported it was helpful and uplifting to trudge through difficult times. Ella shared experiences that included family that was supportive and family that was not supportive, and the impact it had on her. In referring to her mother, she stated, "I don't think she thought I would finish." She said,

Why now, of all times? . . . All the way through a lack of support from her. So, and I have an adoptive mother in my life. She was my special education teacher from third through sixth grade and if it wasn't for her during that time, it would have been really bad because she's very supportive. She didn't believe what my mom believed.

Daisy took the opportunity to share about her personal challenges she has had with her network of friends. She shared:

So friendships, by the time you're my age, your friends are your sisters. They're part of you. They're your family, but they're not always understanding. So I have



a couple of friends and we have, really, one, two, maybe three very close girlfriends in life at any one time. So a couple of them are a little ticked at me because I spend zero, exactly zero, amount of time with them right now.

Lucy shared several major medical challenges that she experienced early in her college attendance. She shared that without the support of her family, she does not know how she would have made it through this tough time. She also experienced a pregnancy during her enrollment, and again turned to family and friends to help her out so that she could continue her courses. When asked about any other positive experiences that contributed to her enrollment, she stated:

I have had a support system. Outside and even other students that I did school with. Even from my first degree being in the nursing program. I had those individuals who still have supported me. A lot of friends have been supporting me. My former high school teachers have supported me through it all. My parents are like my biggest motivators.

Brenda described several challenging times where the support of her friends and family carried her through to allow her to continue studying so she did not get behind. Her challenges ranged from several life-altering medical diagnoses' in her family, as well as one herself, and a very difficult time with another family member. When speaking of her family, she shared, "They've all been wonderful about helping out where they can when they can and helping to take my son so that we barely have to pay for childcare ever. They've all been wonderfully supportive." Haley shared a time that a very close family member passed away. During this difficult time her family and friends carried the weight

of her home responsibilities and helping out with her children so she could mourn the loss and continue to focus on her coursework.

Of all the questions asked during the interview, the participants that shared a difficult time during their college enrollment expressed the importance of how their support system made all the difference in their continued enrollment. Three of the participants became emotional when sharing their personal experiences of how their family and friends carried them through the very difficult time so that they could remain enrolled in their courses without dropping out or taking a break.

***Theme 2: How to pay for college.*** The expense of college was mentioned at least one time during the interviews by Charles, Gina, Ella, Daisy, Brenda, and Haley. While it was not mentioned multiple times by all participants, it was a topic of interest to the participants that contributed the significant statements centered on college expense. Sixty percent (60%) of the participants were in the group that was responsible for the development of this theme. Daisy was very passionate about this topic, stating early in the interview, “A huge positive experience is the FAFSA thing. Without the loans, I’m not sure that I would have been accepted. So I have to be very grateful for that.” However, later in the interview, Daisy continued the conversation stating,

So a big obstacle, I think I keep bringing this topic up, but I guess it’s a big deal, is money. It feels incredibly scary and daunting to be in debt to this level. It’s overwhelming. I wake up with a heart pounding, panicked feeling, sometimes, about money.

Gina shared an experience that the first major she chose was taken away during her second year. The university administrators made the choice to drop this major from

their campus offerings; therefore, the students that began with the major had to change to a different major. This created some of her classes not fitting into the second major she was forced to choose. She believed the financial burden this created for her is unfair, because now it will take her longer to earn her degree because of changes the university made that were out of her control. In sharing this story, Gina stated, “Money is definitely an issue just trying to pay for classes and work to pay for classes. It’s a lot of money.” Brenda stated it simply, “It’s been a lot financially and time-wise and planning.” Haley shared that she was able to push aside the financial debt she is creating over the years of her enrollment by focusing on her goal of earning a college degree. She stated, “The only negative is we’re racking up this bill. Are you going to have a job? ... Are you going to be able to pay off your student loans? Because it is a lot.”

***Theme 3: Time management and balance.*** Finding a balance between attending classes, studying, finding time to spend with friends and family, and work, is a hard endeavor for ninety percent (90%) of the study participants. Charles, Joseph, Gina, Ella, Daisy, Lucy, Brenda, Lucas, and Haley contributed at least one significant statement on the topic of time management or a lack of balance in their life while being in college. Charles shared that he works two jobs and goes to school full-time so it is extremely difficult to stay caught up with his course requirements, especially when there is a paper to write or to study for an exam. Managing his time has been the most difficult part of finding balance for this participant. To reiterate this, Charles shared:

I definitely feel like I fall behind most of the time, because I have to go to work, and sometimes I want to sleep...so I’ll go to sleep instead of studying for my test

the next day, or doing my math assignment that's due the next day...budgeting that or managing that is definitely hard between doing all this.

Later in the interview, Charles returned to the topic of time management by stating, "Managing my time is always a struggle. With everything. That just doesn't include school, that includes my social life, my study time, work life, personal time, everything." Joseph shared, "It's going to be a struggle working full time and completing courses. It's going to be a struggle."

Gina shared similar circumstances, mostly because she does not get her work schedule for the following week but one day in advance. Therefore, she cannot plan study time ahead, making it extremely difficult when there is an exam, a lab, or a big assignment due during the week. This is also a challenge to try and create any social events into this participant's schedule, which she does not like. In her interview, Gina stated:

I always work weekends for sure but I hardly ever get my schedule more than a day in advance before my Saturday work schedule so that can be tough just to plan any kind of social life, when you may be able to fit it in with school or not, usually not. It's usually school, work, home, repeat.

Daisy shared that she only has a few close friends and they are like sisters. However, she is not able to spend any time with them, outside of a holiday break, and they are getting angry with her. She understands that she has to continue to make the choice to study and put her family first on the rare occasion she does have open time. However, this is a difficult concept to grasp because she cares deeply about these friends. She is having a difficult time finding the balance between attending class, studying,

prioritizing family, and spending time with friends. Talking about getting taxes done and her car worked on during a school break, she shared,

I just don't have the emotional or mental capacity to do it while I'm in school or in my coursework. I potentially could lose friends, but what is my choice? Like this is survival. So I don't have a choice.

Lucas contributed to the development of this theme by stating,

Just going to school by itself is a full-time job, or more. And then couple that with working and working two jobs and then volunteering and having a family and anything else, it's a recipe for disaster. And the ones who make it through, you commend them.

**Additional findings.** Three themes surfaced from the interviews that did not fit into any the three research questions. These themes were developed because they were brought up by two or more of the participants at least one time.

1. Campus daycare is needed
2. Campus resources for social enhancement
3. Lack of campus parking

Joseph, Gina, and Brenda alluded to the benefit of a campus daycare for students. They shared it would make a difference to nontraditional students, even though Joseph and Gina do not have children of their own. When asked if anything could be changed on campus to assist nontraditional students, Joseph shared, "Offering more nighttime classes and also if you have kids or if you're watching out after kids you definitely have an opportunity to be able to have a daycare on campus ... be a good thing." In similarity, Gina shared, "One thing that I could really see would be an issue for some people, not

really me I guess, but really if you have kids somewhere to put in like a daycare or something.” Brenda shared that a facility like this on-campus would have greatly simplified their life and schedule when they had a newborn baby and had to leave them in daycare to attend class. When the question was asked to Brenda, “Is there anything on the campus that you would change or that students need, that would assist the nontraditional student?” she answered:

I know there aren't a lot of schools that have daycares and such, and I personally have a lot of friends that had dropped out or put back and were going to take a lot longer doing their coursework because they had a child but had no childcare, or childcare cost a fortune, and they're trying to work and they're trying to put their kid in childcare and they're trying to do a degree and it's just, they can't. So I think a big thing that would help on a campus would be some sort of minimal daycare or even free for the nontraditional student.

An additional theme that surfaced from the interviews that did not fit into any of the three research questions referenced the need for more social venues on campus, and in general, from participants that contributed a significant statement with campus venues in relation to the social aspect of college. Joseph and Peter contributed such statements or thoughts during their interview. Joseph shared this is not a deal-breaker for him in attending the university. However, it is a definite downfall and frustration. He stated:

It's a commuter school so there's no outlets as much as I'd like to see with transportation, getting to and from campus, amenities, just little things. I mean not necessarily it's a deal breaker but there's not too many food outlets on campus that usually when people come visit school, our school, they say, “Oh, where's

some place to eat? And, [you respond] Oh, I'm sorry. You have to go all the way down the street off campus to eat.

In a similar topic of socializing for nontraditional students, but from a whole different perspective, Peter suggested that it would be helpful to establish a mentoring program for nontraditional students. He said as a nontraditional student, it is very hard to get involved in the on-campus activities because he does not live on campus and has many outside responsibilities besides his coursework. He stated,

Being a nontraditional student, it's really hard to meet new people on campus... I was really involved in intramural sports because I'm competitive. So that is how I met a few friends. But other than that, I was always just in the library, so it was hard to meet new people and fit in sometimes.

Peter went on to share, "I think it'd be great to pair people, maybe like study groups and stuff like that. That's a great way to meet new people."

The third theme that developed during the interviews that did not fit in one of the research question categories is the frustration that students have with the lack of parking on the university campus. Joseph, Gina, Peter, and Lucas shared passionate statements that referenced the parking situation. Peter shared, "Parking at [university] is awful. And I lived, it was still a half hour walk from where I lived to class, so I still had to drive."

Gina stated,

Parking is pretty bad on campus especially with the amount you have to pay for it, so we tend to park really far away and walk like a mile to class every day... the prices are so bad and even with the shuttle system they set up. There's way too many people and not that many buses and I stopped doing that because even when

I arrived like over an hour early I still tended to be late to class anyway because there is so many people and I had to wait like three buses to go by to even get one and thirty minutes to park before that. It's an issue.

Lucas even shared that he considered transferring because it makes him so angry. He explained that a parking pass costs \$400, yet there are three times as many students as there are parking places on campus. He only lives 7 minutes away from campus, yet he has to leave 40 minutes before his class starts to be able to find a place to park and be in class on time. He shared that this is also the best-case scenario with a class that is first thing in the morning. If he has a class later in the day, it is faster to walk a mile to campus than find a place to park. Lucas concluded this part of his interview on the topic of parking by stating, "I got so sick of it, so fed up. That's a nightmare, that and all the construction they always have going on on campus."

### **Summary**

The first research question of this study was: How does a nontraditional student stay motivated to remain enrolled at a university? The results of this study indicated that self-motivation of the student is the key factor for nontraditional students to continue enrollment in spite of experiencing numerous challenges during their time of enrollment. Each participant indicated a personal reason that they continue coursework and keep their eye on the end result, which is earning a college degree. While the reasons for each participant were varied, the commonality among the participants was that self-motivation was the key factor in staying motivated, with the additional thought that quitting is not an option at any time no matter what negative circumstances they may be experiencing. The participants that are parents, and one that lost a child, shared their children are the key



factor in keeping their motivation. The study results also indicated that nontraditional students stay motivated to remain enrolled because they believe a college degree will provide more employment options and create financial independence for them and their family.

The second research question of this study was: What are the positive and negative experiences that influence a nontraditional student to remain enrolled at a university? The results indicated that professors have a large influence, either positive or negative, over the student's experience in each course, ultimately making up the overall big picture of the college experience. Other negative experiences that influence student enrollment is the lack of support on campus from their academic advisor and poor course offerings, especially in higher level courses.

The third research question of this study was: What perceived obstacles or challenges do nontraditional students experience that could result in the decision to withdraw from a university before goal completion? The results of the study indicated that a support system of family and friends is invaluable when it comes to staying enrolled in courses. Two of the 10 participants did not have the support of family and friends and they shared the challenges this has created for them, even though one participant used it as a motivator to prove them wrong and continue to strive for her degree. Another challenge that was shared by many of the participants is the cost of college tuition and attendance. While each participant handles it differently, the commonality of the financial burden was steady. Lastly, the results of the study indicated that it is difficult for nontraditional students to find balance between work, family, friends, and studying. While some participants have struggled, but finally found the

balance, others are still struggling to find the balance and doubt if they will ever feel balanced while they are enrolled in courses.

Additional findings of the study indicated that nontraditional students are concerned with the lack of daycare, and recommend the necessity of a college campus having a low cost, on-campus, and daycare facility. Two of the participants also indicated the lack of social venues or resources that are available on campus, suggesting the need for getting this information to nontraditional students since they do not live on campus and often do not have a means to learn about the opportunities available on the campus. Finally, 40% of the participants expressed a resounding frustration with the lack of parking on campus, and the inefficiency of the options to overcome the parking challenges.

The research presented in this study represents nontraditional students, which are a diverse group of people that are growing faster than any other population in postsecondary education (Wyatt, 2011). The results of this study were collected without bias from the researcher, with the shared events from the participants unfolding to Bean and Metzner's theory of nontraditional student attrition (1985). The researcher had no expectations as to the results of this study prior to it being conducted. The data were analyzed utilizing the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen model as adapted by Moustakas (1994). Only after the interviews were completed, transcribed, the transcripts analyzed and the themes developed, did a reflection of Bean and Metzner's theory of nontraditional student attrition become apparent to the researcher. The findings of Bean and Metzner (1985) described students as less motivated by social integration, with a greater influence coming from academics, family encouragement, and interaction with faculty.

Ten nontraditional college students, as identified by Choy (2002) and Horn (1996) were selected as participants for this study. Each student completed a one-on-one interview with the researcher. The participants were enthusiastic in sharing their personal experiences during college enrollment, in addition to voicing their perceptions on personal motivation and campus recommendations. Thirteen themes emerged from the 10 interviews conducted by the researcher.

The results of this study indicated that nontraditional students must find personal motivation and purpose in the decision to attend college and remain enrolled in college courses. There are numerous reasons that create underlying motivation for a nontraditional student according to this study; however, more importantly is the fact that it is evident that motivational forces play an intricate role in nontraditional student retention.

Chapter 5 will provide a comprehensive summary the entire study. It will recap the study topic, provide an explanation how the study results contribute to the body of knowledge on the topic, outline a summary of findings relative to the theoretical foundations for the study and the conclusion, and inform the reader of implications that may be present within the study. Chapter 5 will also supply recommendations for further research on the topic.

## **Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

Adult students have continued increase at a steady pace in the higher education sector in recent years, with the enrollment of students 25 years of age and older increasing over 42% between 2000 and 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). In 2011, the Current Population Survey found there were a total of 20.4 million people enrolled in college, an increase of 4.5 million from a decade earlier (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). According to the United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2012), 18 million undergraduate students were enrolled in an institution of higher education in 2011. Two million of these students were over the age of 21, 1 million of these students were 25 years of age or older, and nearly half a million of these students were 30 years of age or older. Furthermore, the nontraditional student population is the fastest growing student population in higher education (Wyatt, 2011). In 2011, the National Center for Education Statistics projected education statistics for upcoming years. These projections were for the year 2020, and stated that between 2013 and 2020 total college enrollment is projected to increase 5% for 18 to 24 year old students, 16% for 25 to 34 year old students, and 17% for students that are 35 years old or older.

While there are several methods to define a nontraditional college student, variables outside of age have been used in recent years (Jenkins, 2009). There are several definitions found in international literature for defining a nontraditional college student (Kim, 2007). The U.S. Department of Education (2012) identified nontraditional students as those who have the following characteristics: delayed enrollment between high school

graduation and college enrollment and attendance, full time employment, enrolled part-time in college, financially independent, a single parent, has not earned a high school diploma, or has the responsibility of caring for children. One main difference between traditional and nontraditional college students, as identified by Bean and Metzner (1985), is that nontraditional students do not engage in the social environment on campus, but give a much stronger consideration to their academic goals. A southwestern, 4-year university sent a survey to its entire student body, seeking to identify its student population's demographics, attitudes, behaviors and outcomes, overall grades, stress levels, and overall college expectations. The survey revealed the characteristics of a nontraditional student were more likely to be one who is married, resides off campus and commutes to the campus for class, is employed at a job for numerous hours each week, and holds different expectations as an outcome than the traditional college student. Furthermore, the nontraditional college student was less involved in campus activities (Newbold et al., 2010).

The importance of college retention remains a high priority on college campuses because when students leave a higher education institution prior to graduation, it creates a significant loss in revenue for the institution through lost tuition and fees, as well as the potential loss of future support contributions (Peterson-Graziose, Bryer, & Nikolaidou, 2013). Therefore, as the number of adult learners increase on college campuses, factors that increase their chance of success are at the forefront (Roman, 2007). According to Monroe (2006), few studies have been conducted on meeting the needs of these students, which could ultimately increase their chance for success, and would increase overall college retention rates. The American College Test Institutional Data Files (2013)

reported the national average of students that complete their first year of college, and do not return their second year in 2013 was 28.1%, identifying student retention as an obstacle on college campuses that must be addressed. With the increase in nontraditional student enrollment rising at a steady pace, researching the gap presented by the American College Test Institutional Data Files (2013) is not only warranted, but a necessity to creating a better understanding of the reasons students are dropping out of college.

The nontraditional student faces multiple barriers that traditional students may not experience because nontraditional students are older and have different challenges and responsibilities (Jinkens, 2009). As the nontraditional student population continues to grow, it is important to identify the factors that define nontraditional student persistence and the determination these students have to succeed. This study addresses this gap in literature by contributing the lived experiences of nontraditional students and their personal challenges of remaining enrolled in a post-secondary institution to the body of knowledge.

The challenge of student retention must continue to be a focus for practitioners and educators to identify the reasons nontraditional students are dropping out of college so strategic targeting can take place with the intention of decreasing the dropout rate (Craig & Ward, 2008). Developing an understanding of why students spend money on college courses, then make the choice to dropout and essentially lose the money they have spent because they did not earn a college degree, is critical information for stakeholders and educational administrators if they are to make a change in the nontraditional student retention rate. Furthermore, students must be heard so that the

changes are directly relational to meeting their needs, otherwise nothing may change without this student insight (Wyatt, 2011).

### **Summary of the Study**

The intention of this study was to gain purposeful insight into the daily lives of nontraditional college students through the utilization of one-on-one, in-depth interviews. The qualitative interview process allowed the researcher to explore multiple perspectives from each participant and develop common themes from the interview question responses from all the participants (Seidman, 2013). Phenomenological research strives to relate an experience to an outcome by providing a description of the experience rather than through an analysis of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The intent of the researcher was to develop a greater understanding of the lived experiences of each participant to provide insight into the phenomenon that was studied, which was nontraditional student retention.

The target population for this study was nontraditional students from one Midwest university. For this study, the researcher utilized the seven criteria of a nontraditional student of Choy (2002) and Horn (1996). Choy and Horn define a nontraditional student as one who is enrolled in college after a delay, is enrolled at least part-time, has a full-time job, is financially independent with a definition that the student files their own financial aid forms, has dependents other than a spouse, is a single parent, and did not earn a high school diploma. According to Hoyt et al. (2010) and Levin (2007) if a student meets only one of the seven criteria he or she is minimally nontraditional and minimally at risk of dropping out. If a student meets two or three of the criteria, he or she is moderately nontraditional and at moderate risk of dropping out. If a student meets four or more of the seven criteria, he or she is highly nontraditional and is at high risk of

dropping out. This study utilized moderately nontraditional and highly nontraditional students as participants.

Purposive sampling, which indicates the study participants were selected based on their personal experience of the phenomenon, was used to select the participants for this study (Merriam, 2001). Purposive sampling is an effective method of selecting participants for a study because they are ingrained in the study phenomena and have a broad understanding of the phenomena (King & Horrocks, 2010). Flyers were posted at the university inviting students who met at least two of the seven specified criteria to participate in the study. Initial students in the study also offered referrals for further participants. Students were given the option to contact the researcher via text messaging, calling, or email. At the point of initial contact, the researcher qualified the participant. Upon qualification, the participant received the Invitation to Participate (see Appendix C), the Guide for Participant Interviews (see Appendix B), and the Informed Consent (see Appendix D). As the participants were selected, they were assigned a numeric identifier in place of their name to warrant confidentiality and to ensure each participant would remain completely anonymous throughout the duration of the study. Participant identifiers were given based on the number of the interview as they took place, in addition to the gender of the student. They were also assigned a pseudonym. For example, the first participant was a male. He was given the participant identifier of SM1 for Student Male 1. This participant was referred to throughout the study using his assigned pseudonym. The second participant was a female. She was given the student identifier of SF1 for Student Female 1 because she was the first female to participate in



the study. This participant was also referred to throughout the study using her pseudonym, and so forth.

Prior to the actual study beginning, the researcher completed a field test that emulated the actual study. The pilot study was employed to increase validity of the study. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), pilot studies strengthen the data for the study by allowing the researcher to practice the study process prior to actually beginning the study. Two participants were selected for the pilot study that met a minimum of two of the seven required criteria, and the study guidelines were followed exactly as if the actual study was taking place. At the completion of the pilot study, the researcher determined that no changes were necessary to the interview process or for the interview questions.

To begin data collection, the study interviews were scheduled and held in a library study room. The informed consent was collected and the interviews began. The researcher read the introduction to the study guide, ensuring each participant was informed they were participating voluntarily and that the interview could be stopped without penalty at any point. Each one-on-one interview was audiotaped, and minimal to moderate hand-written field notes were also taken by the researcher. The participants were allowed to bring their own notes referencing the interview questions that were provided to them prior to the actual interview. Two of the participants exercised this option. The researcher utilized the Guide for Participant Interviews as a semi-structured guide to collect information from each of the participants.

At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher reviewed the hand-written notes and rewrote them for clarity as necessary, as recommended by Patton (2002). The interviews were then transcribed and data analysis was completed using Moustakas'

(1994) variation on Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen's model. Prior to coding of the transcripts, member checking was utilized to increase validity of the study, as recommended by Lincoln & Guba (1985). At the completion of the interviews, transcribing the interviews, and the member checking, the transcripts were 'coded' by the researcher using the Stevick (1971), Colaizzi (1973), and Keen (1975) method, as supported by Moustakas. The researcher utilized Seidman's (2013) recommendations for completing the actual coding. Each transcript was read through several times, with the researcher marking if a specific topic was found to be repeated, showed expression, or indicated a particular meaning on the specific topic. The researcher developed a list of statements that were common among the study participants. The overlapping statements were grouped into larger units of information, called themes (Moustakas, 1994). Notes were also made on each transcript by the researcher, combining transcript passages with the hand-written notes taken during the actual interview. The interview responses were organized into categories, which were then analyzed and turned into patterns. The patterns were turned into themes, as recommended by Seidman (2013).

Epoche is an analytic process that was practiced by the researcher for the duration of the study. Epoche is the process of bracketing one's own personal experiences, which enables the researcher the ability to analyze another person's lived experiences, without imposing personal beliefs on them (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, epoche enabled the researcher to show sensitivity to the participants without casting personal opinions or viewpoints on the participants.

The remainder of Chapter 5 will include a summary of the findings of the study on nontraditional student retention, as well as a conclusion to the study. Discussion will

also be shared on the theoretical, practical, and future implications of the study. Chapter 5 will conclude with recommendations for future research and practice.

### **Summary of Findings and Conclusions**

Nontraditional student retention strategies must continue to be explored if answers are to be found on the reasons students drop out of college. Furthermore, postsecondary institutions must pursue the factors that keep students enrolled, which will ultimately decrease the dropout rate (Craig & Ward, 2008). According to Roman (2007), nontraditional student retention is a challenge across the nation, which is decreasing institution revenue and creating questions centered on academic achievement. Research in this qualitative, phenomenological study answered the three research questions:

R<sub>1</sub>: How does a nontraditional student stay motivated to remain enrolled at a university?

R<sub>2</sub>: What are the positive and negative experiences that influence a nontraditional student to remain enrolled at a university?

R<sub>3</sub>: What perceived obstacles or challenges do nontraditional students experience that could result in the decision to withdraw from a university before goal completion?

Ten nontraditional students, as defined by Choy (2002) and Horn (1996), were selected as participants for this study and completed a one-on-one interview with the researcher to create themes to answer each research question. The participants were eager to share the personal experiences they have encountered during college enrollment, in addition to voicing their perceptions on personal motivation and campus recommendations. Thirteen themes emerged from the 10 interviews conducted by the researcher.

**Research Question 1.** How does a nontraditional student stay motivated to remain enrolled at a university? Four themes emerged from the participants' responses:

1. Self-motivation
2. Role model for children and family
3. Increased career options
4. Goal of financial independence

Creating one's own motivation was a prominent factor that was continually expressed during the participant interviews. Nine of the 10 participants (90%) shared specific aspects that are the reason for their self-motivation. Each of these participants provided a specific example as to why they enrolled in college, why they remain enrolled in courses, and their plans after they graduate from college. Each of the participants provided a specific reason they are motivated to earn a college degree. According to Milheim (2005), for nontraditional students to start or return to college after a break there are typically specific factors that are motivating the student to enroll.

All four of the participants that have children, and one that lost a child, and one without children, expressed the importance of being a role model to their children. Six out of the 10 participants (60%) contributed answers that created this theme under Research Question 1. It was the consensus of these students that their children are watching them and their actions, and if they quit it will send the message to their child or children that quitting is acceptable. It was also important to the participants in the study not only that they continue in their coursework to degree completion, but that they do well in their coursework, again, as a positive role model for their children. One of the main differences between traditional and nontraditional students is that nontraditional

students do not immerse themselves in campus activities, but are more focused on academic achievement and reaching their goals (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Centered on this theme was also the discussion of the strong desire to have options for the type of employment the student will be doing for the rest of their life. It was a consensus that they want to be able to choose their line of work, and that is how they selected the degree they will earn. It was the belief of 100% of the participants that contributed to this theme that they will be happier in their life if they enjoy the job they go to daily.

The strong desire for financial independence emerged as a theme to this research question. The participants that contributed significant statements referencing financial independence was 70%, and they believe this is more likely attained with a college degree. Schneider and Yiin (2011) emphasized the significance of earning a college degree in relation to a lifetime of earning potential, which has a significant, positive impact on earnings.

**Research Question 2.** What are the positive and negative experiences that influence a nontraditional student to remain enrolled at a university? Three themes emerged from the participants' responses:

1. Professors
2. Impact of academic advisors
3. Course offerings

The topic of college professors was prominent in both a positive and negative voice of the participants. The impact of a college professor, both in a positive light and a negative light, was shared by all 10 of the participants (100%). Furthermore, all of the

study participants had at least one or more positive experience to share about professors they have had over the years, and 8 out of the 10 participants (80%) had at least one or more negative experience to share. In the instances of the negative comments made about college professors, each participant also shared that they had experienced a positive outcome with different professors. Thoughts that were shared by the participants included that the professors were not willing to help them, they were seldom in their office, they graded unfairly, or they had a personal agenda for the class that did not share they cared about the students. Thoughts that were shared by the participants on the positive side were that the professors created great class discussion, engaged actively with the students, and had an open-door policy to discuss assignments, exams, or grading policies. According to Tinto (1995), the frequency and quality of student engagement with college professors is a key factor in the prediction of student success and retention.

Lack of support from academic advisors was the second theme that emerged from Research Question 2. Of the participants, 4 of the 10 students (40%) have had challenges with getting an appointment with their college advisor to help with scheduling, ask questions about coursework or selecting their college major, or to get help on making the decision to remain enrolled or transfer to another postsecondary institution.

The last theme that emerged from research question two was the frustration experienced by the participants to try to make their schedule workable because of the lack of course options. It was explained that many courses, especially the higher level courses, are often offered only one time during the semester. If this is the only option and the student has to be at work at this time, or is in another course at the same time, they are pushed out of taking that class completely for the semester.

**Research Question 3.** What perceived obstacles or challenges do nontraditional students experience that could result in the decision to withdraw from a university before goal completion? Three themes emerged from the participants' responses:

1. Support network of family and friends
2. How to pay for college
3. Time management and balance

The importance of having a support system of family and friends in place was shared by eight of the participants (80%). Two of the 10 participants (20%) shared they have had to overcome obstacles with family and friends not supporting them. These participants expressed the importance of having a support system outside of the campus, and shared if they did not have this support system in place it would be a huge challenge to overcome in earning a college degree. In both instances, this theme emerged because it was apparent that a support system can have an overpowering impact on continued college enrollment, whether it be present or nonexistent. Spellman (2007) acknowledged that additional barriers face nontraditional students not encountered by traditional students, with one of these barriers being the lack of family support. Participants stressed the importance of this support from family and friends as a motivating factor as well, and an influential piece of their continued enrollment.

The challenge of paying for college was a topic of concern that was shared by six participants in the study (60%). The most prevalent statements contributed on this topic referenced the stress of knowing that the expenses continue to build to high levels. These students indicated that the expense is worth earning the degree.

Finding a balance to get all the studying completed, as well as try to find time for family and friends, is a challenge for 9 of the 10 study participants (90%). The most problematic lifestyle challenges of nontraditional students can be measured using five variables: marriage and family, employment, lifestyle stressors, academic funding, and family support (Onolemhemen, Rea, & Bowers, 2008). When outside responsibilities compete for a student's time, such as work, family and civic duties, nontraditional student retention can be affected (Kasworm, 1990). Furthermore, Choitz and Strawn (2007) share that while most nontraditional students view learning in a more positive way than the traditional college student, they have numerous responsibilities that get in the way of earning a degree, such as attempting to balance work, family, commute time, and studying.

**Additional findings.** Three themes surfaced from the interviews that did not fit into any of the three research questions.

1. Campus daycare is needed
2. Campus resources for social enhancement
3. Lack of campus parking

Three of the 10 participants (30%) campus daycare would be a helpful amenity for nontraditional students. An additional theme that surfaced from the interviews that did not fit into any of the three research questions was the suggestion of additional campus venues and programs to bring nontraditional students together. Two of the participants shared details of how this would provide a better campus environment. The third theme that developed during the interviews that did not fit in one of the research question categories is the frustration that students have with the lack of parking on this university



campus. Four of the 10 participants (40%) shared that parking is a problem that is beyond frustration, and one participant even shared that he considered transferring because it makes him so angry.

Postsecondary institution administrators are focused on assisting students in earning their college degree (Wolniak, Mayhew, & Engberg, 2012). However, little research has been completed on the interaction between traditional students and nontraditional students, and the differences in goal setting to reach degree completion (Parks, Evans, & Getch, 2013). Some studies have been completed that have a significant relation to the results of this study.

Schreiner (2009) conducted a quantitative study aimed at linking student satisfaction with student retention. While there is little research that links the two, common belief is that the two have a direct connection (Schreiner, 2009). The sample consisted of 27,816 students at 65 four-year institutions. Two methods of data collection were used in the study to measure the relationship between student satisfaction and student retention. The first method was a logistic regression analysis that utilized students' enrollment status (dropped out or returned) as the dependent variable. The second method utilized in the study was a "hierarchical multiple regression analysis, with students' response to the question, "All in all, if you had it to do over again, would you enroll here?" was used as the criterion variable" (Schreiner, 2009, p. 3). The results of this study revealed student satisfaction is directly connected to student retention. This study also revealed student satisfaction occurs at various levels that can be strategically handled by understanding each level of satisfaction. The results of the current study are in agreement with this study in the aspect that student satisfaction is of great importance to

the participants. One participant in the study at hand considered transferring to another university because of her dissatisfaction on campus with a professor and the lack of guidance from her college advisor. However, the differences in the results of the study conducted by Schreiner and the study at hand are that self-motivating factors allowed the participants in the current study to look past the negatives and keep focused on the ultimate outcome of the benefits of earning a college degree. Furthermore, the study by Schreiner was a quantitative study so personal experiences were not taken into consideration when analyzing the study outcomes.

Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) conducted an explorative quantitative study with nontraditional students focused on analyzing the relationship between first year experiences and course continuation into the second year. For this study, nontraditional student was defined as a student that is employed part-time or more, and dropout students were defined as a student that did not enroll for the second year of courses. Transfer students were excluded from the dropout student category. The sample consisted of 228 students, of which 174 were enrolled at a university and 74 were dropouts. Telephone interviews that asked specifically designed questions were used as the method of data collection. The dependent variable was the continuation of studies. The study analyzed the correlation between the quality of life on campus during the first year of courses with the continuation into the second year. The emphasis of the study was on the difference in this correlation between traditional students and nontraditional students. The results of the study revealed there is a much higher likelihood of a student dropping out at the end of the first year if they are working an outside job during enrollment. While other factors were considered in the study, such as age, gender, cultural background, and high school

grades, none of these factors were as significant as being employed when correlating the dropout rate to student retention. This study is similar to the current study in the aspect that nontraditional student is defined as a student that is employed part-time or greater. However, in the current study, nontraditional student had a far more specified criteria to meet the definition of being a nontraditional student. The participants in the current study experienced far more challenges because of the more stringent criteria that was taken into consideration, such as being financially responsible for oneself, having children, full-time employment, etc. Also, this was a quantitative study; therefore, personal experiences of why the students continued or dropped out were not taken into consideration. The results of the study by Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) align with the current study in the aspect that employment in addition to college attendance is extremely difficult for a student. However, the students in the current study did not let that hinder them and made the choice to sacrifice in order to remain enrolled. Because of the personal interviews that were completed in the current study, the researcher was able to listen to the participants explain the difficulty in working full-time while in school, but also the reasons they chose to not let this be a reason for them to dropout.

An exploratory study completed by Forbus, Newbold, and Mehta (2011) investigated the stress level of nontraditional students as opposed to the stress level of traditional college students. The study also focused on the coping mechanisms used by each group of students in handling their stress. The sample consisted of 471 respondents, with 97 of the students being nontraditional. For this study, nontraditional students were defined as those over 24 years of age. Data collection consisted of a survey that was self-administered, structured, and undisguised as a questionnaire. The researchers specifically

selected this instrument, “recognizing the fact that the instrument was meant to measure ideas and concepts that are abstract and non-observable, extra care was taken in designing the questionnaire in terms of proper phrasing of the questions, and a neat layout of the various sections” (Forbus et al, 2011, p. 113). The results of the study revealed that statistically stress and coping mechanisms was significantly different for nontraditional and traditional students. However, when asked if they had a high level of stress in their life, the results indicated nontraditional students and traditional students experience similar stress levels. However, the study also determined the stress level for nontraditional students and traditional students was created for completely different reasons. In the study, nontraditional students indicated they experience stress because of work, school, and families. Traditional students indicated they experience stress because of academic and social concerns. This study varied from the current study in that it is quantitative in design and it also identified nontraditional students by age rather than personal challenges outside of the college coursework. The results of the study by Forbus, Newbold, and Mehta align with the current study in that nontraditional students in both studies expressed a high level of stress. Furthermore, the study by Forbus, Newbold, and Mehta had results of nontraditional students and traditional students experiencing stress for different reasons. This study further aligned with the current study in that the reasons the students experienced stress is because of the myriad of responsibilities such as work, school, and family.

Wyatt (2011) conducted a qualitative case study focused on the reasons nontraditional students continue to pursue their education. The study explored the engagement level on campus in relation to overall motivation and satisfaction during their

enrollment. The main focus of the study was revealed in the initial research question, “How does a university successfully engage nontraditional students?” (Wyatt, 2011, p. 16). The researcher did not disclose the number of participants in this study. The data collection consisted of two focus group sessions and in-depth personal interview sessions. In these sessions, “participants discussed student engagement and the collegiate experience as well as what they expected and needed from the institution to be success in college” (Wyatt, 2011, p 15.) The results of the study concluded that nontraditional students place heavy emphasis on student engagement when they are making the choice to continue enrollment. The study also revealed that nontraditional students lead extremely busy lives, with attending college being only one of their multiple responsibilities. Therefore, the college environment and the message that is sent to the students on the importance of the student body to the college staff is a determining factor in nontraditional student retention. This study was a qualitative study and had a similar focus to the current study. Both studies were conducted to search for the reasons students remain enrolled rather than the reasons they actually decided to drop out. The study by Wyatt was similar to the current study in the aspect that it was revealed that nontraditional students are extremely busy and this has a negative impact on their college experience. However, the results of the study by Wyatt were dissimilar from the current study in the importance of on-campus engagement by nontraditional students. While the participants in the current study shared they would like to be involved more on-campus, and they also would like to have more information about the resources on campus, they also shared that this aspect was not a deciding factor in their remaining enrolled.

Howell and Buck (2011) conducted a study on the correlation between student satisfaction and student retention. Furthermore, the researchers contended this correlation could be a discerning factor in assessing faculty effectiveness. The sample consisted of 1,725 adult students and 214 faculty members at five institutions of higher education. The students were enrolled in courses intended for nontraditional students seeking a business degree. The faculty members were specifically instructors for a business course in an adult business degree program. The data collection consisted of two survey instruments, one for the students and another for the faculty. Eleven research questions and hypotheses were the driving force behind this study. The results of the study concluded there is a connection between student satisfaction and student retention. According to the study, student satisfaction is directly related to classroom management and culture of the classroom. This study, a quantitative study, is in agreement with the study at hand in the aspect that student satisfaction is extremely important to nontraditional students. However, the differences in the two studies indicate that if a nontraditional student is not happy, it may not necessarily lead to dropping their courses.

Shelton (2012) completed a study on nontraditional student retention in a nursing program. The definition of student retention for this study was persistence in meeting the academic demands for continuation in the program. The sample included 458 nontraditional associate degree students enrolled in nine associate degree nursing programs in New York and Pennsylvania. The participants were either currently enrolled in their final semester of coursework for the program, or had dropped out of the program within the previous 9 months leading up to data collection. The data collection consisted of questionnaires that included four topics, including the student's background, academic

self-efficacy, academic outcome expectations, and perceived faculty support. The study revealed that perceived faculty support was a determining factor in course continuation. In this study, perceived faculty support was directly related to student persistence and student academic performance. The quantitative study by Shelton did not provide a definition of the nontraditional student. However, the focus of the study was on academic rigor in various aspects, the student's background, and faculty support. The current study is in agreement with the study by Shelton in the aspect that faculty play a strong role in student continuation and student satisfaction on campus.

McCann, Graves, and Dillon (2012) conducted a study to determine the impact of student satisfaction on retention. The sample consisted of 305 adult learners from an MBA program and adult degree completion program. The data collection consisted of the students completing a survey with questions centered on academic advising effectiveness, academic services, admissions and financial aid effectiveness, campus climate, instructional effectiveness, registration effectiveness, safety and security, and service excellence. The Adult Student Priorities Survey (ASPS) was utilized in this study, along with demographic questions. The findings of this study revealed that adult students were motivated by strong faculty engagement with cognitive stimulation and interest being the most dominant factor of adult learner persistence. In agreement with the study by McCann, Graves, and Dillon, the current study results indicated that nontraditional students are highly motivated by faculty support and engagement and the participants that commented on this aspect shared a strong voice that faculty has a large impact on their coursework and enrollment.

Schomer and Gonzales-Monteagudo (2012) conducted a study to determine the potential correlation between social challenges of nontraditional students and student retention at a university. The comprehensive sample consisted of 160 nontraditional students. They were grouped into three categories, including first year students, last year students, and students who dropped out. Two students were selected for a case study after the 160 students completed a questionnaire and the answers reviewed by the researchers. According to the researchers, the reasoning behind selecting only two students for the study was because this enabled them to develop an in-depth narrative for each student, with the goal of “understanding students’ perspectives about their university experiences from personal, educational and institutional dimensions (Schomer & Gonzales-Monteagudo, 2012, p. 151). Biographical narrative interviews were conducted with each participant, utilizing an open approach that started with the early background of the student and continuing through their life cycle. The results of the study discovered there are many challenges that must be considered when referencing the correlation of nontraditional student social challenges and retention. The study also revealed the support of friends, acquaintances, and faculty is essential for nontraditional students to progress in their course of study. In agreement with this study, the current study revealed similar results in the aspect that the decision to enroll in college and remain enrolled as a nontraditional student is a decision that is not taken lightly. The challenges of nontraditional students discussed in the study by Schomer et al. are many, and these obstacles are different for each student depending upon the season in their life they return to college and their respective responsibilities. This study was also in agreement with the current study in the aspect that having a support system is vital to success, as well as



faculty support being extremely imperative. This study was extensive, as it took place over the course of a large length of time. Therefore, the two participants were able to share personal, specific circumstances with the researcher, similar to the study at hand where the students' personal voices were also heard through the interview process.

Research on nontraditional student retention was found to be scarce in studies that were qualitative phenomenological studies. The majority of the studies found on the topic of nontraditional student retention are quantitative studies, as this is the design most frequently utilized in studying nontraditional students (McCann, Graves, & Dillon, 2012.) Reinforced by Donaldson and Townsend (2007), who share that extensive research on nontraditional student retention needs more studies since they are few, with more extensive research a necessity if the educational community is to develop a greater understanding of the reasons these students do not remain enrolled. More qualitative studies are needed to examine the reasons students make the choice to drop out of college rather than persist toward degree completion (Schoefield & Dismore, 2010). Quantitative studies are the common method for studying nontraditional student persistence, leaving an open door for researchers to utilize the qualitative method to fill the gap (McCann, Graves, & Dillon). While quantitative research can provide valuable information on a specific topic by offering a specific measure, qualitative research engages a different style of gathering data that allows the researcher to discover the underlying meaning behind the data (Yilmaz, 2013). The study at hand utilized the method described by Yilmaz, allowing the participants to share their personal, lived experiences on the reasons they remain enrolled at the university despite numerous obstacles they must overcome and have already overcome.

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand how nontraditional students perceive the factors and events that motivate them to stay enrolled in postsecondary education and persist to degree completion. The three research questions were developed into 10 open-ended interview questions that encouraged the participants to share personal experiences that have had an effect on their college enrollment. The answers to the interview questions resulted in the development of 13 themes, of which 3 resulted outside the research questions from the openness and honesty of the participants sharing their lived experiences. The participants in this study spent a large amount of time sharing their experiences and providing specific details about each experience. Each participant shared the reasons they continue to overcome their obstacles, and the approaches they utilize to stay motivated through the tough times.

Adult learners are entering institutions of higher education more than ever before, creating the need to complete further research on how to increase their likelihood for success (Roman, 2007). The significance of this study has contributed to the body of knowledge on the reasons nontraditional students remain enrolled in college despite numerous challenges they must overcome. Findings from this study revealed how nontraditional students stay motivated. It also revealed the challenges they experience that they have little control over. Lastly, it revealed the challenges that are created by the university that could be simplified if the university would address the challenges. Each participant in this study expressed they believe there is tremendous value in completing a college degree. Each participant was also highly motivated to remain enrolled despite the obstacles, admitting that additional obstacles are inevitable but not a reason to drop out. The additional findings revealed there are aspects that could simplify these obstacles that

are specific to nontraditional students on this campus, which may or may not be the case on other college campuses. For example, offering a low-cost, on-campus daycare facility, providing enhanced information specific to this student population so they can readily utilize campus resources, and restructuring the parking so students who commute to campus do not have to add this kind of stress to an already stressful, over-packed day. While student retention is a topic that has been an identified challenge for numerous decades, it impacts not only the student but society as a whole through the loss of institutional revenue when students drop out (Monroe, 2006). Therefore, continued research on the topic of nontraditional student retention is imperative until a strategic plan can be implemented and dropout rates decrease with these students.

### **Implications**

The intention of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to assist in filling the gap in the existing literature through the identification of lived experiences of nontraditional students and the reasons they persist through difficult life challenges and remain enrolled in a university. To better serve the growing population of nontraditional students in institutions of higher education, additional research must be conducted that specifically addresses strategic methods on aspects that increase nontraditional student retention. The implications of the findings are organized into theoretical implications, practical implications, and future implications.

**Theoretical implications.** The foundation of this study was built on Bean and Metzner's (1985) theory of nontraditional student attrition. The study fulfilled the original purpose, which was to understand how nontraditional students perceived the factors and events that motivated them to stay enrolled in postsecondary education and

persist to degree attainment. The research questions that guided this study were based on the characteristics described by Bean and Metzner, with the interview questions focused toward the research questions.

The theoretical implication of this study is that there are compelling reasons nontraditional students have to remain enrolled in college, despite the presence of obstacles that often lead to attrition rather than persistence. According to Bean and Metzner (1985), study habits, study skills, academic advising, academic achievement, and attendance all play a significant role in student persistence. Nontraditional students are likely to encounter greater obstacles during the college enrollment than traditional students, creating an increased chance of dropping out (Pontes & Pontes, 2012). Bean and Metzner (1985) attributed these obstacles for nontraditional students in that these students may be less motivated by social integration on campus, with a greater influence being created from academics, family encouragement, and faculty interaction. Furthermore, Bean and Metzner's (1985) theory addressed the wide range of demographics of the nontraditional student, such as complex personal backgrounds with various life experience, a higher level of maturity than that of the traditional college student, and limited time and resources. However, the focus of the majority of studies per the research completed for the literature review focused on the reasons students did not continue enrollment. The researcher in this study focused on the positive aspect of the reasons nontraditional students remain enrolled, rather than the negative aspect of the reasons nontraditional students do not remain enrolled, although both aspects carry equal importance in the necessity to increase student retention.

**Practical implications.** Despite the fact that college graduation rates remain steady at 50%, even though post-secondary institution enrollment continue to increase (Center for the Study of College Student Retention, 2013), the practical implications of this study determined that nontraditional students have a specific purpose when they remain enrolled in courses. Furthermore, the results of this study revealed when students find their purpose, they keep their eye on the end result of their original goal, which is degree attainment.

Several of the participants expressed concern and offered recommendations on ways to increase social integration into the nontraditional student's life. Physical changes to the campus were also recommended by several of the study participants, such as adding a daycare facility and adding more parking. One participant also recommended the university should add one or two restaurants to the campus. However, it was a consensus of all participants, that as a nontraditional student these recommendations were simply ideas that would create a better campus in their opinion, but they were not a deciding factor in whether they would stay enrolled in courses at the university. According to the participants, they would also never drop out of college based on the physical deficiencies of the campus. However, as the research solidified in the literature review, nontraditional students are in college for a specific purpose and the social aspect is of low priority. These students are also motivated by family support, faculty engagement, and personal goals, rather than what is offered on campus in the way of social hangouts.

**Future implications.** Future implications are based on the findings of the study, as well as what the study did not find. This study establishes the need for further research

on nontraditional student retention. However, the results of this study shed additional light on the reasons nontraditional students continue enrollment in college coursework. Prominent factors that emerged from the study include the importance of self-motivation, not wanting to view oneself as a quitter or have others view the participants as a quitter, creating more employment opportunities, and creating greater financial independence.

Probing more deeply into the backgrounds of participants to determine the level of self-motivation and its underlying importance was not reflected in this study. While the importance of self-motivation was clearly a significant factor in nontraditional students' continued enrollment, developing an understanding of where this motivation is created is a factor to be explored. Furthermore, answering the research question, "Can this motivation be created, and if so, how can it be created?"

### **Recommendations**

This study has provided a snapshot of the reasons nontraditional students remain enrolled in college despite numerous challenges they must overcome. It has captured the personal, lived experiences of 10 nontraditional students that have experienced personal challenges, yet decide to move forward toward degree attainment. However, there is still a massive amount of work to be done in the research arena of nontraditional student retention if positive gains are to be made on these students finishing college and earning their degree.

**Recommendations for future research.** The results of this study have contributed to the overall body of knowledge in reference to the motivating factors of nontraditional students to continue college enrollment. However, open areas of research still exist, as found in completing the literature review. The limitations or gaps in

knowledge that warrant further exploration beyond this study include research that sheds light on the personal aspirations of nontraditional students and the importance of these personal goals for degree attainment versus earning a degree for the betterment of someone else, such as to support a family or to make a family proud. This study would lend knowledge to in-depth self-motivation that extends past the motivation of self-satisfaction.

1. **Examine college readiness.** This study did not take the college readiness of nontraditional students into consideration. This would be a recommendation for future research. If students are not educationally prepared to meet the rigor of the course demands, it is possible this could contribute to the retention of the student and the decision not to continue his or her coursework.
2. **Conduct a study across several universities.** This study was limited to one university. While the study design supported a full investigation of the reasons nontraditional students remain enrolled in a university despite numerous challenges, broadening the study participants to multiple institutions of higher education would allow for a broader base of knowledge. Given the complexity of life challenges, each student has personal goals that provide self-motivation, as well as varied circumstances that present as obstacles. Expanding the study location to multiple institutions of higher education could likely provide further information detailing the motivation behind college enrollment for nontraditional students.

3. **Examine the changing nature of obstacles.** This study focused on multiple obstacles that are experienced by nontraditional students. With technology advancing and the online education market quickly expanding, the challenges faced by nontraditional students are likely to shift, creating new obstacles that do not currently exist for these students. Such obstacles could include a lack of technological skills, which could include additional training creating the possibility of a larger financial commitment.
4. **Conduct an in-depth qualitative study.** The necessity for additional qualitative research to be conducted emerged from this study. Qualitative research can bridge the distance between student retention and nontraditional students through the exploration of lived experiences. The motives of adult learners is varied depending on life circumstances. Therefore, probing further into their deep thought process on self-motivation and overcoming the challenges of a nontraditional student can provide great insight into methods to increase nontraditional student retention rates.

**Recommendations for practice.** Two key recommendations for future practice have emerged from this study. Two key recommendations for future practice have emerged from this study.

1. **Expand the definition of “nontraditional student.”** Nontraditional students can be defined by using various criteria, thus the reason for this recommendation. There are several definitions found in international literature (Kim, 2007). Bean and Metzner (1985) defined a nontraditional college student as 25 years of age or older with life circumstances that may interfere



with educational goals and degree attainment. Spanier (2011) defined a nontraditional college student as 25 years of age or older. The U.S. Department of Education (2012) identified nontraditional students as those who have one of the following traits: delayed enrollment (a postsecondary institution is not attended during the same calendar year the student graduates from high school); full time employment; enrolled part-time in college; financially independent; a single parent; has not completed their high school diploma; or cares for dependents other than a spouse. While the researcher utilized the definition of a nontraditional college student as defined by Choy (2002) and Horn (1996), for research to be consistent and strategy developed of how to successfully help nontraditional students, the definition of a nontraditional student must be consistent for researchers and in the educational community.

2. **Develop an assessment tool.** Another recommendation for practice emerged from the research completed in this study. While some universities are in the development stage of creating an assessment tool that will evaluate their effectiveness with nontraditional students (Forbus et al, 2011), this is not widespread throughout institutions of higher education based on the research completed in this study. Through qualitative research, such a tool could serve the nontraditional student population in a positive manner, while assisting the postsecondary institutions with increased student retention resulting in increased revenue. With the continued rise in the adult learner population on college campuses, catering to the needs and desires of this student could

provide benefit to the student, student's family, faculty, administrators, and stakeholders.

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## Appendix A

## Enrollment in Undergraduate and Graduate College

**Enrollment in Undergraduate and Graduate College by Selected Characteristics: 2011**

(Numbers in thousands and percents)

Selected characteristics	College enrollment						
	Total	Two-year institution			Four-year institution		
		Total	Full time	Part time	Total	Full time	Part time
<b>Total</b> .....	<b>20,379</b>	<b>6,135</b>	<b>19.1</b>	<b>11.0</b>	<b>14,244</b>	<b>53.9</b>	<b>16.0</b>
<b>Sex</b>							
Male .....	9,123	2,582	18.7	9.6	6,541	55.0	16.7
Female .....	11,256	3,554	19.4	12.2	7,703	53.1	15.4
<b>Age</b>							
16-18 .....	1,972	705	30.9	4.9	1,267	62.0	2.3
19-20 .....	4,776	1,552	26.2	6.3	3,225	63.9	3.6
21-22 .....	3,783	874	14.5	8.6	2,909	68.8	8.1
23-24 .....	2,223	556	13.9	11.1	1,667	58.6	16.4
25-29 .....	3,066	914	16.3	13.5	2,152	44.9	25.3
30-34 .....	1,551	487	16.8	14.6	1,064	37.1	31.5
35 and over .....	3,007	1,047	13.8	21.0	1,959	28.6	36.5
<b>Race and Hispanic origin</b>							
White alone .....	15,400	4,560	18.6	11.0	10,841	54.1	16.3
White alone, non-Hispanic .....	12,696	3,327	16.7	9.5	9,370	56.8	17.1
Black alone .....	3,143	1,084	22.9	11.6	2,059	49.5	16.0
Asian alone .....	1,201	271	14.4	8.2	930	65.5	11.9
Hispanic (any race) .....	2,948	1,316	27.1	17.5	1,631	41.9	13.4
<b>Employment</b>							
Full time .....	5,238	1,585	10.0	20.3	3,653	29.3	40.5
Part time .....	5,612	1,768	21.2	10.4	3,843	57.8	10.6
Not employed .....	9,528	2,781	22.9	6.3	6,747	65.2	5.6

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October 2011.

## **Appendix B**

### **Guide for Participant Interviews**

Thank you for your participation for this study and for your willingness to complete the interview process. Each response will be kept confidential, and responses will not be published in the dissertation manuscript or other dissertation publications. Participants will be referred to as Student 1, Student 2, Student 3, Student 4, etc. in the study transcript, to ensure each participant remains completely anonymous and confidentiality guidelines are reinforced.

The purpose of this interview is to recognize the phenomenon of student retention through the exploration of lived experiences of nontraditional students experiencing challenges typical of a nontraditional student. These students are often at risk of not returning for degree completion because of additional responsibilities in their life outside the college environment. Answers to the interview questions can be as short or as long as desired. If at any time, you would like to stop the interview and terminate your participation in the study, please let me know and the interview will be stopped immediately. The interview will be audiotaped, as well as field notes being taken to warrant completeness and accuracy of your answers. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes for completion, depending upon your response time for each question. We are ready to begin.

**Interview Question 1.** Please describe the reasons that you continue enrollment in courses at the university. Probing questions may include:

- A. What is one specific factor that has influenced your decision to continue enrollment? Are there additional factors that have



influenced your decision to continue enrollment and if so, what are they?

- B. What do you see as the reason or reasons you have continued enrollment when other nontraditional students have dropped their courses and dis-enrolled?
- C. Describe a time, if any, that you wanted to drop out but decided to continue instead?
- D. If there was a time that you wanted to drop out, what was the deciding factor that kept you enrolled?
- E. What do you see as your main motivating factor that you continue coursework at the university?
- F. What, if anything, could be changed on campus to assist nontraditional students in continuing enrollment to degree completion?
- G. Is there anything off campus that a student needs that would assist in continued enrollment?
- H. Is there any information that I did not ask that you would like to share in reference to your continued enrollment despite the challenges of a nontraditional student?

**Interview Question 2.** Please describe any positive experiences that have contributed to your continued enrollment at the university. Probing questions may include:

- A. What was the contributing factor that made this a positive experience?
- B. Were there multiple positive experiences that contributed to your decision to remain enrolled? Would you like to elaborate on others?
- C. What positive experiences do you anticipate happening that will be a factor in your decision to remain enrolled?
- D. Is there any information that I did not ask that you would like to share in reference to your positive experiences that have contributed to your continued enrollment?

**Interview Question 3.** Please describe any negative experiences that you have overcome to continue enrollment in courses at the university. Probing questions may include:

- A. What was the contributing factor that made this a negative experience?
- B. Were there multiple negative experiences that contributed to your decision to remain enrolled? Would you like to elaborate on others?
- C. What negative experiences do you anticipate happening that will be a factor in your decision to remain enrolled?
- D. Is there any information that I did not ask that you would like to share in reference to your negative experiences that have contributed to your continued enrollment?

**Interview Question 4.** Please describe any personal obstacles or challenges you may have encountered during your enrollment at the university that you have chosen to overcome in order to stay enrolled in courses. Probing questions may include:

- A. What personal obstacles or challenges were more difficult to overcome than others?
- B. What personal obstacles or challenges were easier to overcome than others?
- C. Describe any obstacles or challenges that were a result of personal decisions that you made.
- D. Describe any obstacles or challenges that were created by someone else's decision that was out of your control.
- E. What obstacles and challenges, if any, have improved during the time that you have been enrolled?
- F. What obstacles and challenges, if any, have gotten worse during the time that you have been enrolled?
- G. Is there any information that I did not ask that you would like to share in reference to the obstacles and challenges you have encountered during your continued enrollment?

Thank you for your participation in this study, and for taking personal time to share your on-campus and off-campus experiences with me in reference to the obstacles and challenges of a nontraditional student. I appreciate the openness and honesty in each of your responses. Please remember that if clarification is necessary on any of your

questions, I will need to contact you for a second interview. Once this study is completed, you will receive a summary of the results.

## Appendix C

### Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

Date:

Name:

Address:

Dear (Insert Name of Participant):

The purpose of this letter is to invite you to participate in a research study on nontraditional student retention for my doctoral degree dissertation. As a Grand Canyon University doctorate student, this is a requirement to complete my degree. The research study is titled *A Phenomenological Examination of Nontraditional Student Insight on Retention at a University*. The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine various challenges nontraditional students encounter during their college enrollment at a university and the reasons they continue enrollment despite these challenges. Your personal experiences are valuable to my study because the results will be shared with college administrators nation-wide to assist them in nontraditional student retention strategies.

If you are willing to participate in the study, you will be asked to complete an interview with me that will last approximately 60 minutes. The interview questions will be open-ended, and you will be able to choose the location for the interview to take place, preferably on the college campus. During the interview, I will take handwritten notes that will be used to compile the results of the study. The interview will also be audiotaped. However, please understand that as a doctoral student at Grand Canyon University, I will

uphold only the highest ethical standards during this entire process. Your name will never be used, as you will be assigned a numeric number, when the data is analyzed for the final results. Your answers to the interview questions will be completely confidential. After completion of the first interview, there will be a short follow-up interview by telephone to review your answers and to ask if there is anything you would like to add to any of the questions.

Approximately one week prior to the interview, you will receive the following:

- ✓ The interview questions to preview (you can jot down answers and bring along to the interview.)
- ✓ A consent form that states your participation is voluntary and that you may withdraw without penalty at any time during the process, as well as other specific details about the study.
- ✓ A form that requests you answer questions about your personal situation titled “Demographic Criteria Checklist for Participant Selection.”
- ✓ Confirmation of the day, time, and location of our interview.

Again, please feel free to write down any responses to the interview questions and bring them with you. You must also bring the Demographic Criteria Checklist and the signed Informed Consent form with you to the interview, as we cannot proceed without them being completed.

If you have any questions about this qualitative study, the interview questions, or the interview process, please do not hesitate to contact me by phone or email (both are below my name on the signature line for your convenience.) Dr. Carla Homburg is my dissertation chair and she will be supervising the study process. She is also available to

answer any of your questions. She can be reached by telephone at xxx-xxx-xxxx or by email at chomburg@xxxxx

Sincerely,

Tawna L. Schmidt  
Grand Canyon University Doctoral Candidate  
Email: tawna@xxxxx

Telephone: xxx-xxx-xxxx

## Appendix D

### Informed Consent Form

*Study Title: A Phenomenological Examination of Nontraditional Student Insight on Retention at a University*

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the lived experiences of nontraditional students that have chosen to continue courses at a university despite many challenges. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes and will be in person on the university campus, with a short follow-up interview by telephone within the week following the initial interview. You will be provided with the interview questions approximately 7 days prior to the interview, and you may bring notes along to answer the interview questions.

The interviewer is a student at Grand Canyon University. The interview will be conducted as part of the interviewer's dissertation process to complete a doctorate degree.

There are no known risks involved with this interview, although some information may be of personal content. The interview questions explore challenges that have been encountered during college enrollment and may include perceptions that are difficult to share. There is no right or wrong answer. However, while you do not have to answer all the interview questions, it is imperative that each question that is answered is done so thoroughly and honestly so that valid results can be achieved in the study. You may voluntarily withdraw without penalty at any time and your participation, or withdrawal, will in no way affect your enrollment at the college.

The results of the study will be used to benefit administrators across the nation to assist nontraditional students with continuing their college enrollment. No compensation or compensations are offered for participation in the study.

Each participant will be assigned a numeric number (Student 1, Student 2, Student 3, etc.) so that all answers will be kept confidential. The interviewer will write down the answers to each question as they are answered during the interview. Upon completion of the interview, the interviewer will transcribe the field notes by using the assigned student numeric code.

Please submit any questions or concerns to Tawna Schmidt at [tawnas@aol.com](mailto:tawnas@aol.com) or by telephone at 719-337-9875. If further contact is needed with my dissertation chair, Dr. Carla Homburg, she can be reached via email at [chomburg@my.gcu.edu](mailto:chomburg@my.gcu.edu) or by telephone at 910-253-8783.

I have read the details, as explained in this document, pertaining to this qualitative study. I acknowledge that I am participating through voluntary action, and that I may withdraw without penalty at any time during the process. My original signature indicates that I agree to serve as a participant in this qualitative study.



Printed name of participant \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
*(Please sign only in black ink. E-signatures may not be used for this form.)*

**Appendix E****Demographic Criteria Checklist for Participant Selection**

Participant ID # \_\_\_\_\_ (*To be completed by researcher.*)

Gender:        \_\_\_\_\_ Male    \_\_\_\_\_ Female

Please place a checkmark beside any of the following criteria that meet your personal situation:

\_\_\_\_\_ I did NOT attend college the Fall semester following my high school graduation.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am currently enrolled in college at least part-time, or 6 credit hours of courses.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am currently employed full-time (35 hours per week or more.)

\_\_\_\_\_ I am eligible to apply for my own financial aid because I am financially independent.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have dependents that I am responsible to support other than my spouse (children or others in the household that I legally must financially support.)

\_\_\_\_\_ I am a single parent (married or separated from spouse.)

\_\_\_\_\_ I did not complete high school and I do NOT have a high school diploma. (If you received a GED or any form of high school completion certificate but did not graduate from a high school please select this criteria.)

## Appendix F

### Participant Thank You Letter

Date:

Name:

Address:

Dear (Insert Participant Name):

Thank you for taking the time to be a participant in my study on nontraditional student retention. Your exceptional characteristics were the reason you were selected. Your contribution to this study will help post-secondary institutions across the nation develop a clearer understanding of the barriers nontraditional students are up against, and ways they overcome such challenges. Your contribution will also assist in creating an understanding of the reasons it is worth it for nontraditional students to move forward toward degree attainment.

On a personal note, I am inspired by all you have done to make your education a priority in your life, despite the challenges you have had to overcome. The challenge of earning a post-secondary degree is not an easy one, and you are making it happen! Through your time management efforts, placing education high on your priority list, and making the choice not to give up, you have shown me that you have the skill and desire to finish your degree strong, no matter what obstacles may get in your way.

In closing, once again I thank you for taking time from your family and your busy schedule to support my dissertation study. I also thank you for your willingness to help other nontraditional students that may read the study know that there is hope, and they, too, can overcome any obstacle to earn a college degree. I wish you the best in all your personal and professional endeavors!

Sincerely,

Tawna L. Schmidt  
Grand Canyon University Doctoral Candidate

## Appendix G

### IRB Permission to Collect Data



**GRAND CANYON**  
UNIVERSITY™

3300 West Camelback Road, Phoenix Arizona 85017 602.639.7500 Toll Free 800.800.9776 [www.gcu.edu](http://www.gcu.edu)

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DATE: November 25, 2014

TO: Tawna Schmidt

FROM: Grand Canyon University Institutional Review Board

STUDY TITLE: [646843-1] A Phenomenological Examination of Nontraditional  
Student Insight  
on Retention at a University

IRB REFERENCE #:

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: November 25, 2014

EXPIRATION DATE: November 25, 2015

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7.7

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research study. Grand Canyon University Institutional Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported to this office. Please use the appropriate adverse event forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

Please report all NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this study to this office. Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years.

Based on the risks, this project requires Continuing Review by this office on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate renewal forms for this procedure.

If you have any questions, please contact Stephanie Henkel at 602-639-8010 or [stephanie.henkel@gcu.edu](mailto:stephanie.henkel@gcu.edu). Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

## Appendix H

### Site Permission



University of Colorado  
Colorado Springs

#### Authorization to Conduct Research

Date: 9-15-2014

To: Tawna Schmidt, Ph.D. Student, Grand Canyon University  
Title: **A Phenomenological Examination of Nontraditional Student Insight on Retention at a University**

I have received your request to recruit students from the University of Colorado Colorado Springs (UCCS).

Based on the approval from the IRB at Grand Canyon University, I am extending you permission to post flyers on campus according to campus policy. Please note departments may decide not to participate in your request.

This authorization is valid starting September 15, 2014 and ends **May 31, 2015**. Upon the expiration of this authorization, you may no longer collect data, or contact research participants who agreed to be in your study. If you require an extension of this authorization, please submit a request.

It is understood that UCCS is not engaged in this research and therefore all activities related to your research must be:

- performed as a graduate student at Grand Canyon University
- in compliance with your Grand Canyon University IRB approval

UCCS reserves the right to revoke this authorization at any time.

Thank you for your concern about human subject protection issues, and good luck with your research.

If you have questions or concerns, please contact Mike Sanderson in the Office of Sponsored Programs at 719-255-3903 or via email at [msander3@uccs.edu](mailto:msander3@uccs.edu).

Sincerely yours,

Kelli Klebe  
Associate Vice Chancellor For Research and Faculty Development

## Appendix I

### Request for Study Participants

# ***PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR DISSERTATION STUDY***

## **Doctoral student needs your help!**

If two or more of the following aspects define you, you are invited to participate in a 60 minute interview centered on overcoming the challenges of college enrollment:

- I did NOT attend college the Fall semester following my high school graduation.
- I am currently enrolled in college at least part-time, or 6 credit hours of courses.
- I am currently employed full-time (35 hours per week or more.)
- I am eligible to apply for my own financial aid because I am financially independent.
- I have dependents that I am responsible to support other than my spouse (children or others in the household that I legally must financially support.)
- I am a single parent (married or separated from spouse.)
- I did not complete high school and I do NOT have a high school diploma. (If you have a GED this qualifies you.)

For specific details (with no obligation) about the study, please contact Tawna Schmidt at 719-xxx-xxxx (text or call) or by email at [tawnas@xxxxxx](mailto:tawnas@xxxxxx) with Study Participant in the subject line. ***THANK YOU!***



## Appendix J

### Phrases of Significance from Interview Transcripts

- Growing up, I always pictured myself going to college and getting a career for myself
- College is something I want to do
- Career-wise, it'll [college] benefit me in the long run
- They're [family] all good, but ... none of them wanted to attempt to go to college
- I will be the one to go through it [college]
- I don't want to let myself down and not try, at least, and giving it my all
- It's hard to stay in school and just keep going
- Every student hits a wall to where they're just frustrated, and to where it's overwhelming
- Dropping out is not an option
- Hope of I'm going to make it through and have a better life
- I don't want to let them down [family]
- People have kids. People have work. So ... more classes open or different times
- You have to go through it by yourself ... probably one of the hardest things that I've had to overcome [friends away]
- I want to go into the medical field so financial strain when I get up there ... hardest thing
- I babysit 16 hours a week ... I work 21 hours a week ... then I go to school 13 hours
- Budgeting 'that' or managing 'that' [studying] is definitely hard
- Managing my time is always a struggle
- Time management is one of the big things ... struggle with
- I'm coming here so I can do better with my life
- The individual self is the one who ultimately decides whether they're going to ... dropout
- Higher education is just to better my opportunities throughout my career
- Having that backbone of having a bachelor's degree ... will help me out with promotions, more opportunities
- Making sure I have every single opportunity I can when I get further into my career
- When I set a personal goal for myself, I like to follow through with it
- I like the challenge
- When I set a goal I like to complete it
- More nighttime classes because if you work full time it's more likely a full-time day job so it's 9 to 5
- Having the professors being able to do one-on-one with me personally ... positive thing
- Not too many food outlets on campus

- I work two jobs and I'm able to juggle those and still succeed at schooling
- I never really quit anything in my life so I feel the need to finish my degree no matter what
- I know that I cannot get more than ... minimum wage job without finishing at least my bachelor's
- I have had a lot of really good teachers even when I was struggling
- Along with good teachers there are ... not good teacher that don't offer help
- Working out a balance between work and school
- Tough to plan any kind of social life
- It's been a very freeing experience [college]
- The school side of it has never been as stressful as personal
- I've never been one to give up
- I'm already tired of certain things
- I've always been motivated
- Biggest, hugest challenge that I've dealt with is balancing it all
- Financial and job satisfaction [reasons continue enrollment]
- To be self-reliant and independent financially is a huge goal
- There is no option for me to waver or get off this path in any way
- The coursework gets a little overwhelming
- My kids are watching
- My daughter was going to drop out of high school but has decided to stay [watching me]
- Stay the course because my kids are watching
- Getting grades is important to me and keeps me motivated
- Academically, I look forward to every term
- Even a professor was sexually inappropriate in front of the class
- A big obstacle ... is money
- It feels incredibly scary and daunting to be in debt to this level
- I wake up with a heart pounding, panicked feeling ... about money
- I have a purpose
- It is exhilarating to be a student again
- Hope of the future
- Hope is what keeps us going
- Spur of the moment, they need things or there's some sort of emotional crisis [children]
- I'm up until 2 or 3 in the morning finishing something because it's due
- I spend zero amount of time with them right now [friends]
- It eats up my every last bit of time [studying]
- I hold myself accountable for what I really want
- My dream ... first one in my family from going right out of high school and finishing [college]
- Mention you are struggling ... they throw out resources for you to get involved [advisor]
- When I was struggling ... they listened to me and ... laid it out [professors]

- Negative ... not having people believe in you [friends, family]
- It's something I want and I'm going to get it
- I wanted to prove them wrong [family, friends]
- No other option
- I was going to finish that first year ... even though I didn't want to continue
- One advisor takes on ... 300 students each semester and I never heard from him
- My passion for it and my own drive
- Knowing that my son is watching
- I don't want him to think 'Mommy is a quitter' [child]
- Help on campus ... minimal pay daycare or even free
- On top of it telling me exactly what I needed [advisors]
- Lack of help in advising departments
- I want to make myself better for myself and for my son
- There was no point where it was even an option or a thought [dropping out]
- Few have language barriers ... barely speak English ... make it difficult [professors]
- I wound up having to go take a waitress job
- Lot of financially and time-wise and planning but I think I am getting the hang of it
- Pressures from myself and my family to finish my degree
- Obvious benefits of finishing a college degree
- Communication from the professors to the nontraditional student needs to be a little better
- Parking at [university] is awful
- I refuse to quit
- Stay the course
- I had to think for somebody other than myself, and so having options was really really important
- Degree gives me a few options
- When the going gets tough, you've got to see it through
- School ... teaches you that sometimes you just have to do things you don't want to do
- People quit, I don't
- I'm so thankful I didn't drop out, it would have been such a mistake
- It is a nightmare ... going to school by itself is a full-time job or more ... add working two jobs and then volunteering and having a family and everything else
- College professors I've appreciated most ... teaching life lessons
- Department ... gotten so many complaints about him [professor]
- Large language barrier...just made it a nightmare [professor]
- It's so hard because I'm so busy all the time ... ever get to see family
- I never committed to school until I knew I was ready to do it
- Motivated to improve myself
- Racking up a bill
- Life is challenging

## Appendix K

### Code Book

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Key to Codes for Phrases of Significance	
P	Professors
A	Advisors
C	Course Offerings
SM	Self-Motivation
RM	Role Model
CO	Career Options
FI	Financial Independence
SN	Support Network
TM	Time Management and Balance
CE	College Expense

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Phrases of Significance Coded	
Professors (P)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having the professors being able to do one-on-one with me personally ... positive thing</li> <li>• Having the professors being able to do one-on-one with me personally ... positive thing</li> <li>• I have had a lot of really good teachers even when I was struggling</li> <li>• Along with good teachers there are ... not good teacher that don't offer help</li> <li>• Even a professor was sexually inappropriate in front of the class</li> <li>• When I was struggling ... they listened to me and ...laid it out [professors]</li> <li>• There was no point where it was even an option or a thought [dropping out]</li> <li>• Communication from the professors to the nontraditional student needs to be a little better</li> <li>• College professors I've appreciated most ... teaching life lessons</li> <li>• Department ... gotten so many complaints about him [professor]</li> <li>• Large language barrier...just made it a nightmare [professor]</li> </ul>
Advisors (A)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mention you are struggling ... they throw out resources for you to get involved [advisor]</li> <li>• One advisor takes on ... 300 students each semester and I never heard from him</li> <li>• On top of it telling me exactly what I needed [advisors]</li> <li>• Lack of help in advising departments</li> </ul>
Course Offerings (C)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People have kids. People have work. So ... more classes open or different times</li> <li>• More nighttime classes because if you work full time it's more likely a full-time day job so it's 9 to 5</li> </ul>
Self-Motivation (SM)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Growing up, I always pictured myself going to college and getting a career for myself</li> <li>• College is something I want to do</li> </ul>

---

**Phrases of Significance Coded**


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- They're [family] all good, but ... none of them wanted to attempt to go to college
- I will be the one to go through it [college]
- I don't want to let myself down and not try, at least, and giving it my all
- It's hard to stay in school and just keep going
- Every student hits a wall to where they're just frustrated, and to where it's overwhelming
- Dropping out is not an option
- You have to go through it by yourself ... probably one of the hardest things that I've had to overcome [friends away]
- I babysit 16 hours a week ... I work 21 hours a week ... then I go to school 13 hours
- The individual self is the one who ultimately decides whether they're going to ... dropout
- When I set a personal goal for myself, I like to follow through with it
- I like the challenge
- When I set a goal I like to complete it
- I work two jobs and I'm able to juggle those and still succeed at schooling
- I never really quit anything in my life so I feel the need to finish my degree no matter what
- It's been a very freeing experience [college]
- I've never been one to give up
- I'm already tired of certain things
- I've always been motivated
- There is no option for me to waver or get off this path in any way
- The coursework gets a little overwhelming
- Getting grades is important to me and keeps me motivated
- Academically, I look forward to every term
- I'm up until 2 or 3 in the morning finishing something because it's due
- I spend zero amount of time with them right now [friends]
- It eats up my every last bit of time [studying]
- I hold myself accountable for what I really want
- My dream ... first one in my family from going right out of high school and finishing [college]
- It's something I want and I'm going to get it No other option
- I was going to finish that first year ... even though I didn't want to continue
- My passion for it and my own drive I want to make myself better for myself and for my son
- There was no point where it was even an option or a thought [dropping out]
- Lot of financially and time-wise and planning but I think I am getting the hang of it
- I refuse to quit
- Stay the course
- When the going gets tough, you've got to see it through
- School ... teaches you that sometimes you just have to do things you don't want to do
- People quit, I don't

---

**Phrases of Significance Coded**


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- I'm so thankful I didn't drop out, it would have been such a mistake
  - It's so hard because I'm so busy all the time ... ever get to see family
  - I never committed to school until I knew I was ready to do it
  - Motivated to improve myself
- Role Model (RM)
- I don't want to let them down [family]
  - My kids are watching
  - My daughter was going to drop out of high school but has decided to stay [watching me]
  - Stay the course because my kids are watching
  - Spur of the moment, they need things or there's some sort of emotional crisis [children]
  - Knowing that my son is watching
  - I don't want him to think 'Mommy is a quitter' [child]
  - I want to make myself better for myself and for my son
- Career Options (CO)
- Growing up, I always pictured myself going to college and getting a career for myself
  - Career-wise, it'll [college] benefit me in the long run
  - Hope of I'm going to make it through and have a better life
  - I'm coming here so I can do better with my life
  - Higher education is just to better my opportunities throughout my career
  - Having that backbone of having a bachelor's degree ... will help me out with promotions, more opportunities
  - Making sure I have every single opportunity I can when I get further into my career
  - Financial and job satisfaction [reasons continue enrollment]
  - I have a purpose
  - It is exhilarating to be a student again
  - Hope of the future
  - Obvious benefits of finishing a college degree
  - Degree gives me a few options
- Financial Independence (FI)
- Hope of I'm going to make it through and have a better life
  - I know that I cannot get more than ... minimum wage job without finishing at least my bachelor's
  - Financial and job satisfaction [reasons continue enrollment]
  - To be self-reliant and independent financially is a huge goal
  - Hope of the future
  - Obvious benefits of finishing a college degree
  - I had to think for somebody other than myself, and so having options was really really important
  - Degree gives me a few options
- Support Network (SN)
- They're [family] all good, but ... none of them wanted to attempt to go to college
  - Negative ... not having people believe in you [friends, family]
  - I wanted to prove them wrong [family, friends]
    - Pressures from myself and my family to finish my degree

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**Phrases of Significance Coded**


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**Time Management and  
Balance (TM)**

- I babysit 16 hours a week ... I work 21 hours a week ... then I go to school 13 hours
- Budgeting 'that' or managing 'that' [studying] is definitely hard
- Managing my time is always a struggle
- Time management is one of the big things ... struggle with
- I work two jobs and I'm able to juggle those and still succeed at schooling
- Working out a balance between work and school
- Tough to plan any kind of social life
- The school side of it has never been as stressful as personal
- Biggest, hugest challenge that I've dealt with is balancing it all
- Spur of the moment, they need things or there's some sort of emotional crisis [children]
- I spend zero amount of time with them right now [friends]
- It eats up my every last bit of time [studying]
- Lot of financially and time-wise and planning but I think I am getting the hang of it
- It is a nightmare ... going to school by itself is a full-time job or more ... add working two jobs and then volunteering and having a family and everything else
- It's so hard because I'm so busy all the time ... ever get to see family
- Life is challenging

**College Expense (CE)**

- I want to go into the medical field so financial strain when I get up there ... hardest thing
  - A big obstacle ... is money
  - It feels incredibly scary and daunting to be in debt to this level
  - I wake up with a heart pounding, panicked feeling . . . about money
  - I wound up having to go take a waitress job
  - Lot of financially and time-wise and planning but I think I am getting the hang of it
  - Racking up a bill
-

## Appendix L

### Recurring Phrases at Least One Time in Participant Interviews

Code	Participant #	Percentage
Professors (P)	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10	100%
Advisors (A)	1, 6, 7, 8	40%
Course Offerings (C)	1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9	60%
Self-Motivation (SM)	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10	90%
Role Model (RM)	1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10	60%
Career Options (CO)	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10	100%
Financial Independence (FI)	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 10	70%
Support Network (SN)	1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10	80%
Time Management and Balance (TM)	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10	90%
College Expense (CE)	1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 10	60%



## Appendix M

### Themes that Emerged from Participant Interviews

Research Questions	Themes
R <sub>1</sub> How does a nontraditional student stay motivated to remain enrolled at a university?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Self-motivation</li> <li>2. Role model for children/family</li> <li>3. Increased career options</li> <li>4. Goal of financial independence</li> </ol>
R <sub>2</sub> What are the positive and negative experiences that influence a nontraditional student to remain enrolled at a university?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Professors</li> <li>2. Impact of academic advisors</li> <li>3. Course offerings</li> </ol>
R <sub>3</sub> What perceived obstacles or challenges do nontraditional students experience that could result in the decision to withdraw from a university before goal completion?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Support network of family and friends</li> <li>2. How to pay for college</li> <li>3. Time management and balance</li> </ol>
<p>Additional Findings</p> <p>These themes were developed because they were brought up by 2 or more of the participants at least one time</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Campus daycare is needed</li> <li>2. Campus resources for social enhancement</li> <li>3. Lack of campus parking</li> </ol>

## Appendix N

### Permission to Reprint Figure 1

ACT Permission Request #469

<https://mail.aol.com/webmail-std/en-us/PrintMessage>

**From:** ACT Publications <publications@act.org>  
**To:** tawnas [redacted]  
**Subject:** ACT Permission Request #469  
**Date:** Thu, Apr 30, 2015 2:02 pm

Tawna Schmidt,

In follow-up to your request below, ACT grants you permission to use ACT 2010 Retention Summary Table: Historical Data on First Year Student Retention in your dissertation manuscript providing you agree to the following:

- o Each and every ACT material must remain intact; neither you nor your organization may make any modifications to any ACT material in any way.

Neither you nor your organization may sell or cause others to sell any part of the ACT material.

You and your institution acknowledge ACT's ownership of the material by including the following notice wherever the ACT material appears, "Copyright ACT, Inc. [insert copyright date, found on first page of ACT material]. Used with permission of ACT, Inc."

Thank you!  
**Kathy Peters**  
 Coordinator, Copyright



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**From:** Tawna Schmidt [[mailto:\[redacted\]](mailto:[redacted])]  
**Sent:** Sunday, April 05, 2015 8:31 AM  
**To:** [patricia.farrem@act.org](mailto:patricia.farrem@act.org); Public Relations Department  
**Subject:** permission to reprint request

To Whom It May Concern:

I am seeking permission to reproduce the ACT 2010 Retention Summary Table: Historical Data on First Year Student Retention in my dissertation manuscript. I would include the standard source citation.

I can provide further information as needed, including the title of my study, etc., as requested and if needed.