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Study of the Theory of Mattering and Marginality in Relation  
to Nontraditional College Students in a Private,  
Midwestern, Single-purpose College

by

Sonya M. Hayter

August, 2015


A Dissertation submitted to the Education Faculty of Lindenwood University in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
School of Education

Study of the Theory of Mattering and Marginality in Relation  
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This Dissertation has been approved as partial fulfillment  
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Dr. Brad Swofford, Committee Member

8/26/15  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree.

Full Legal Name: Your Full Name as it Appears in University Records

Signature: Sonja M. Hayter Date: August 26, 2015

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There are many individuals who have participated in some fashion through this process with me. Without them, completion of this dissertation would not have been possible. I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Rhonda Bishop for her unending and continual support throughout this process. Providing countless hours of encouragement, she kept me motivated and moving forward. Also, thank you to Dr. Sherry DeVore and Dr. Brad Swofford for your contribution and service on my committee. Your guidance and support has been greatly appreciated.

Since beginning my career into higher education, my passion for student success has been and will remain unending. To see lives changed through the education pathway is one of my greatest joys. For those faculty and students who gave of their time to provide valuable feedback to this study, I am forever grateful.

To my husband, Doug, who is my rock and constant source of strength along with my wonderful children, Cameron, Corbin, and Cailynn – thank you for never doubting I would finish this dream of achieving my doctorate degree. I love each of you more than words can express. To my precious granddaughter, Pierce, who is a source of light unexplainable – I love you! Finally, thank you to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who blessed me with the strength and perseverance to finish this endeavor. I am blessed beyond measure and beyond anything I deserve.

“In everyone’s life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit.” ~ Albert Schweitzer

## **Abstract**

The demand for individuals holding a college degree is expected to increase by 16% by the year 2018 with approximately 66% of all jobs requiring some form of post-high school training (Kelly & Strawn, 2011). Also increasing in numbers is the number of nontraditional college students seeking a degree. Nontraditional students returning to school often have outside barriers that can challenge degree attainment, placing them at risk for dropping out. Using Schlossberg's (1989) theories of mattering and marginality as a guide and through a qualitative approach to research, data were collected from a private, Midwestern, single-purpose college to explore what nontraditional students perceived as either mattering or marginal during their educational experience. During the open-ended interview format, nontraditional students and faculty were asked questions focusing on their perception of the educational experience inclusive of what they felt contributed or did not contribute to their experience. A total of 12 nontraditional students and three faculty members within a cohort program participated with three themes rising from the data: connectivity, tenacity, and sacrifice. The findings were consistent and validated Schlossberg's (1989) theories of mattering and marginality with students and faculty expressing an insightful and very distinct connection with each other during the program resulting in increased motivation and fortitude to stay the course.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

For several decades now, the number of nontraditional college students has been growing and currently constitutes a dominant presence across most college campuses (Ross-Gordon, 2011; von Lehman, 2011; Wyatt, 2011). Merriam and Bierema (2014) surmised this group is now the vast majority of the student body. K. Patricia Cross' 1981 book, *Adults as Learners*, concentrated on the topic of how to reach nontraditional college students and is also known by the terms *adult learners* or *lifelong learners* in higher education.

While no exact definition currently exists, certain factors are commonly used in identifying students who belong in this group (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Nontraditional college students may be single parents, have dependents, are employed part-time, or are the financially responsible adults in the nuclear family (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). However, age is most often used as the defining factor (Wyatt, 2011). The college completion rate for this group is considered low, with approximately 30% of nontraditional college students not returning after their first year in college (Kimmel, Gaylor, Grubbs, & Hayes, 2012). The question becomes: What can higher education institutions do to keep these students in school?

The nontraditional college student faces many challenges with the path to a college degree quite varied for nontraditional students based on background and extenuating barriers (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). Caught in two different worlds, the challenge to stay focused between school and other life obligations is difficult (von Lehman, 2011). Noting the percentage of nontraditional college students enrolling in college has increased over 40% between 2000 and 2011, Soares (2013) illustrated this

increase now comprises nearly 85% of all students enrolled in higher education.

According to Melkun (2012), the educational goal of completing a degree for this group of students remains a challenge due to numerous responsibilities in their world.

Many times, nontraditional college students are motivated to learn but are held back because of extenuating circumstances requiring their assistance (Day, Lovato, & Tull, 2011; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Demands, such as families, children, and job responsibilities, add to the complexity of completing a degree (Day et al., 2011). Perna (2010) relayed most college students, traditional or nontraditional, are now forced to work, which ultimately results in heightened anxiety and lower completion numbers. College administrators and professors alike recognize this once unique student is now very common (Ross-Gordan, 2011). Reaching out to students who must balance jobs and education can help foster increased degree completion among students forced to maintain jobs while striving for a degree (Soria, 2012).

This chapter is an introduction to the study. Background for this study is provided on the topic of the retention of nontraditional college students. The framework centers on Schlossberg's (1989) theory of mattering and marginality. In addition, the statement of the problem is examined, providing necessitating confirmation this research study was appropriate. The purpose of the study, as well as research questions, definition of terms, limitations and assumptions are provided to help the reader gain a greater understanding of the obstacles and support systems which directly and indirectly play a significant role in a nontraditional college student's outcomes.

## **Background of the Study**

With increasing awareness of the need for a college degree, the ongoing evaluation of how to increase retention and graduation numbers among nontraditional college students is rising (Laitinen, 2012). In President Obama's (2009) State of the Union address, he claimed, "...every American will need to get more than a high school diploma. And dropping out of high school is no longer an option" (p. 1). Not only do individuals benefit by attending and completing college, but America also benefits from the resulting overall stronger economy (Hoffman & Reindl, 2011).

As early as the 1970s, professors and scholars began acknowledging and extensively studying nontraditional college students (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). The complexity of how to reach and retain nontraditional college students cannot be defined with one theory, concept, or model of education (Knowles et al., 2011). Since that time, the continual question pervades many universities and colleges as to what strategies are needed to retain nontraditional college students (Taylor & House, 2010). Considered at-risk, Taylor and House (2010) relayed encouragement is necessary for nontraditional college students to attend college; therefore, institutions are challenged to seek ways for developing relationships to assure student success (Brown, 2012; Tinto, 2012).

Many aspects of the traditional classroom do not address or meet the needs of the high population of nontraditional college students enrolled (Scott & Lewis, 2012). Additionally, the number of professors who effectively engage nontraditional college students is limited (Goddu, 2012). There is growing concern higher education institutions have not addressed the importance of changing both the style of teaching and learning

platforms (Goddu, 2012). Further, as tuition continues to increase, and the need for further education grows (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013), seeking ways to narrow the gap for retaining students and completing a degree is imperative (Davies-Vollum & Greengrove, 2010).

The multiple roles nontraditional college students hold, along with needs that are considerably different than those of a traditional student, cannot be ignored, and institutions continue to evaluate ideas for keeping nontraditional college students in school (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Even though nontraditional college students are viewed as assets to the classroom, resulting from widely varying and vast life experiences they bring to the educational realm, they are at high risk for dropping out (Ross-Gordon, 2011). This at-risk status results, in part, to not being able to fully engage in the college experience because of the life demands (Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Consequently, with nontraditional college students considered the norm across college campuses, institutions now identify nontraditional education as a discipline, which is valuable and necessary for reaching and retaining students (Coulter & Mandell, 2012). What is not easily identified is the most effective model of delivery for connecting and engaging nontraditional college students, thereby increasing retention and graduation rates. Even though the populations of many higher education institutions have shifted to a more diverse group of learners, education models and styles of engaging and retaining students have not changed (Coulter & Mandell, 2012).

Tinto (1993) surmised in his theory of departure that retaining a student is primarily dependent on several extrinsic factors, which can be directly related to a student's involvement or engagement, either on a social level or the

institutional/academic level. Tinto's (1993) theory aligns with Schlossberg's (1989) theory of mattering and marginality, which claimed students are much more likely to withdraw if they do not feel connected in some manner. For that reason, students will often leave an institution due to the lack of connection, either through peer or faculty relationships (Lau, 2003). Schlossberg (1989) noted when faculty, peers, and staff interact with students, and nontraditional college students are led to feel they matter, a sense of confidence or individual worth develops. It is critical institutions develop ways to enhance relationships and connect with nontraditional students in order to increase success in higher education outcomes (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Using Schlossberg's (1989) theory of mattering and marginality as key factors of connection with the institution, faculty, or peers, are instrumental and believed to be directly associated with better outcomes of success related to nontraditional students. Stayhorn (2012) echoed this same thought, indicating factors for student success relies heavily on the extent nontraditional college students are engaged or connected. Nontraditional college students often identify themselves as *workers who attend school* rather than *students who work* also indicative of students who have not connected in some fashion to the institution (Munra, 2011; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Soares, 2013). The self-perception of being a learner second, and a worker first, increases the risk for dropping out before completing a degree (Soares, 2013).

Getting nontraditional college students connected is a challenge, but imperative, and must be more than just opening the doors of an institution (Drake, 2011). Often considered a student affairs matter, connecting with the nontraditional student must be a



concentrated goal of the institution if the outcome is to be achieved (Wyatt, 2011). Many times relationship building by student-faculty interaction, peer relationships, mentoring, and advising can greatly affect retention outcomes (Drake, 2011).

Schlossberg's (1989) thought in relation to the theory of marginality indicated a student's feeling of being marginal could potentially affect outcomes with relation to completing a degree completion. Tinto (1993) echoed the fact that many times students struggle to fit into and become a part of the extraordinary college world. The adjustment can be difficult socially and academically (Tinto, 1993). Schlossberg (1989) affirmed that at some point in the educational process, all students feel marginal when trying to adjust to new surroundings.

Mezirow (2000) supported Schlossberg's theories by stating students coming into higher education may experience a transformational learning period. Transformative learning, as noted by Mezirow (2000), is hugely affected by both a student's surroundings and relationships the student builds within or during the educational process. Mezirow (2000) described these varying differences as related to age, social class, and background, as well as numerous other differences, which may provide students an opportunity to learn from each other through a cooperative learning atmosphere (Lau, 2003). Finding common ground through cooperative learning (Lau, 2003), much like Schlossberg's (1989) theory of mattering, allows students to develop connections. These connections then create important bonds inclusive of increased social support, relationships, and acceptance (Mezirow, 2000). Feeling as though one does not fit in, or the idea of living in two different worlds, may contribute to one feeling marginalized (Schlossberg, 1989).

A transitional life experience, such as school or change in job, is felt to significantly increase the nontraditional college student's feelings of marginality (Schlossberg, 1989). To combat this sentiment, Tinto (2012) assessed that by improving a student's sense of belonging and improving thoughts of self-efficacy, increased retention rates are realized. However, while retention in higher education is extremely important and necessary, it should not be the sole focus of an institution (Tinto, 1993). Rather, ensuring students experience growth in the areas of engagement, socialization, and intellect should be the foundational principle upon which to build cultural collateral for completing a degree (Strayhorn, 2012).

When the nontraditional college student's experiences grow in relation to concentrated engagement or connection during the education process, improved outcomes, such as higher retention rates, typically follow (Tinto, 1993). Additionally, this sense of belonging may also contribute to the nontraditional college student's increased motivation to do well and feelings of individual self-worth (Schlossberg, 1989; Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 2012)

When viewing nontraditional college student success through the lens of engagement, Schlossberg (1989) outlined key factors that either contribute or increase challenges for nontraditional college students. Many nontraditional college students experience stress over fitting in or having a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Acceptance and/or failure to integrate often results in the nontraditional college student feeling left out and lacking social collateral (Tinto, 1993). This can intensify by the fact that many institutions are not trained or positioned to help all students succeed (Kuh et al., 2010).

It is a fundamental premise and basic human need to feel connected, to matter, or to feel a sense of belonging; moreover, this need to belong crosses many arenas of life from college, workplace, families, and relationships (Strayhorn, 2012). Creating this type of connectedness, or learning environment can often be accomplished through the development of varying levels of institutional relationships or community/cohort learning environments (Rausch & Crawford, 2012). Transitioning between attending college and the numerous roles nontraditional college students hold outside of college often contributes to nontraditional college students not feeling connected (Kuh et al., 2010) and no sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Social interaction and orientation may alleviate the feeling of marginality, or the sense one is not important to others (Schlossberg, 1989).

Institutions promoting a high degree of educationally effective engagement with their students often see greater-than-average performance and outcomes (Kuh et al., 2010). Schlossberg (1989) and Tinto (1993) concluded students participating in a nontraditional education option, such as a community-type learning atmosphere, were less likely to withdraw or leave the institution. Mattering then becomes viewed as more of a motive for increasing a nontraditional college student's self-esteem, with the idea that greater outcomes would be achieved as well (Schlossberg, 1989).

Beginning in the late 1990s, cohort or community models of learning began to grow in popularity in higher education institutions in the United States (Rausch & Crawford, 2012). No longer are traditional learning environments, which many times appear rigid and boring, the standard, but students now work through and apply concepts in a community-type atmosphere of engaged professors and classmates (Kabes & Engstrom, 2010). Through this collaborative learning environment, students are more

likely to engage in questions and contribute actively in subject matter, thereby breaking down insecurities and increasing learning (Bruffee, 1999).

Nontraditional college students are classified many times as culturally unprepared for the rigor of higher education (Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011). Institutions then, as Mehta et al. (2011) described, become hugely at risk for not being able to retain nontraditional students. The need for engaging nontraditional college students in the college atmosphere through multiple avenues inclusive of peer relationships, faculty-to-student relationships, as well as formal and informal interactions can greatly increase retention rates and provide the cultural capital many are lacking upon entering or returning to college (Mehta et al., 2011). Tinto (1993) echoed these same thoughts and surmised more students leave college than remain, raising the stakes for institutions to constantly seek best practices for engagement and retention.

### **Statement of the Problem**

As early as 1970, Knowles et al. (2011) proposed adult learners, or nontraditional college students, learn much differently than traditional students, initiating much discussion and debate. Almost 45 years later, the demographics of higher education have changed drastically with many nontraditional college students returning to finish, or even begin degrees in higher education (Ross-Gordon, 2011), placing the work of Knowles et al. (2011) in the forefront.

With continuous rising costs in tuition and colleges attempting to educate a wide range of increasingly diverse learners in the classroom, it is critical for institutions to be consistently evaluating their educational processes and effectiveness (Davis, 2011).

Because nontraditional college students are at risk for not completing a degree, educators must be cognizant of situational, dispositional, and instructional barriers, and ask, "What

do they think? What do they see?” (Davis, 2011, p. 3). Increased challenges in funding have warranted institutions raise the standards for meeting the educational needs of students and retaining them (Hixenbaugh, Dewart, & Towell, 2012). A definite challenge, according to Fincher (2010), relay how to effectively retain the large numbers of nontraditional college students now comprising the majority of college campuses today. Fincher (2010) stated, “Adult student retention is neither insignificant, nor identical, to retention for traditional students” (p. 12).

Tinto (2012) noted student retention is a challenge with no promises or guarantees to the ability of retaining all students. However, what is absolutely certain is the value added to the educational experience when total commitment of an institution occurs (Tinto, 2012). With a greater understanding of Schlossberg’s (1989) theory of mattering, as a foundational principle for institutions, educational experiences for all students would be greatly enhanced (Strayhorn, 2012). The intentional act of connecting to students could be instrumental in creating an increased self-confidence and self-efficacy in many nontraditional college students, having a profound effect on greater outcomes (Schlossberg, 1989).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Evaluating the outcomes associated with community or collaborative learning atmospheres, often referred to as cohorts, and was the focus of this research. Examining the perceptions of nontraditional college students using Schlossberg’s (1989) theories of mattering and marginality as a compass, the hope is to gain valuable insight as to what nontraditional college students derive as significant factors related to their college success. Additionally, examining the effects of a cohort style of learning and any

significant contributions nontraditional college students attending a private, Midwestern, single-purpose college feel contributes to their success will be examined.

**Research questions.** The following research questions guided the study:

1. What factors do nontraditional college students who attend a private, Midwestern, single-purpose college perceive as contributing to their success?
2. What factors do nontraditional college students perceive as mattering in their educational experience at a private, Midwestern, single-purpose college?
3. What factors do nontraditional college students perceive as marginal in their educational experience at a private, Midwestern, single-purpose college?
4. What factors do college educators who teach in a private, Midwestern, single-purpose college perceive as their roles in keeping nontraditional college students engaged?

### **Definition of Key Terms**

For the purposes of this study, the following terms were defined:

**Matriculating.** Enrollment of a student into a higher education institution (Webster's New World College Dictionary, 2014)

**Non-traditional college students (nontraditional college student).** May include characteristics of one or more of the following characteristics: delayed entry to college, having dependents, single parent, part-time or full-time employed, financially independent, or not having a high school diploma (Ross-Gordon, 2011).

**Retention.** A measurement of the rate in which students progress in their education through an institution of higher education, either as a beginning student starting

the process to attain a degree, or a returning student from the previous semester or re-enrollment. (National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d.)

**Single-purpose college.** A college solely focused on supplying education for one specific area of interest such as health professions (Higher Learning Commission Report, 2015).

**Theory of mattering.** Schlossberg (1989) referred to the term *mattering* as a feeling that one matters to another individual, or that one is concerned with another individual's wellbeing.

**Theory of marginality.** Schlossberg (1989) described the feeling of *marginality* as disconnectedness from others, or from situations. A feeling of self-consciousness or lack of confidence can result with individuals becoming extremely sensitive.

**Traditional college student.** A student, typically between the ages of 18 and 22, who “attends a four-year higher education institution and oftentimes lives on campus” (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 16).

### **Limitations and Assumptions**

The following limitations are identified in this study:

**Sample demographics.** This study was limited to a small sample of nontraditional college students from a private Midwestern, single-purpose college, inclusive of those receiving an education in both a cohort and traditional model. This specific sample was unique, in that the student population is mostly nontraditional college students, and retention rates of this college are extremely high. The results or experiences expressed by students interviewed may not be reflective of students in similar institutions and cannot be generalized beyond the parameters of this study.

**Researcher bias.** The primary researcher in this study was a nontraditional adult student who carried a certain bias to the topic studied. This relationship cannot be completely free of this bias, but intentional dialogue and discussion was held with the dissertation committee members. During data collection and analysis the dissertation chair provided oversight of the process to avoid any possible bias.

**Instrument.** This qualitative study included individual interviews with open-ended questions. The questions were created by the researcher, thus the instrument was a limitation. As noted, research bias was a possibility. Certain processes such as using a proctor for interviews and member-checking for accuracy, were established in order to minimize the effect of bias on this study.

The following assumptions were accepted:

1. Those who participated in this research answered questions without bias.
2. Those who participated in this research offered an honest reflection of their feelings.

## **Summary**

The college campuses of today look very different from several decades ago, with high populations of nontraditional college students no longer considered the exception, but rather the norm (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Because of the demands on nontraditional college students, such as families, children, and job responsibilities, they are very quickly identified as at risk for not completing a degree (Day et al., 2011). Many scholars identify the importance of engaging nontraditional college students and making connections formally and informally with peers, faculty, or administration as a foundational principle for enhanced student outcomes (Tinto, 1993).



With the influx of nontraditional college students, traditional models of classroom instruction have become obsolete necessitating a reevaluation of their effectiveness (Hermida, 2010). Institutions must actively seek best practices for quality involvement of nontraditional college students (Price & Baker, 2012). Rausch and Crawford (2012) determined the intentional engagement of nontraditional college students and community learning environments have significant potential for raising graduation outcomes. Students who participate in community and/or collaborative learning feel as though they matter to peers and faculty members (Bruffee, 1999).

Traditional learning environments are no longer the standard and often viewed as boring; however, through collaborative learning, students are encouraged to work through and apply concepts with equally-engaged professors and classmates, enhancing outcomes (Kabas & Engstrom, 2010). Nontraditional college students involved in this type of setting often feel more comfortable in contributing actively thereby breaking down insecurities and raising learning outcomes (Bruffee, 1999).

Chapter Two includes a review of the literature addressing nontraditional college students, their needs, and how they learn. Additionally, research surrounding engagement and collaboration involvement is addressed along with the retention of students when connectedness occurs either with peers, faculty, or administration. The challenges nontraditional college students face in a world they are not typically familiar with, but desire to be successful in, are explored along with various outcomes of how those challenges are faced or managed.

## Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Between the years 2008 and 2018, the demand for individuals holding a college degree was expected to increase by 16%, with approximately 66% of all jobs requiring some form of post-high school training (Kelly & Strawn, 2011). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2011) estimated a 20% increase in students aged 25 and over on college campuses by the year 2020. It is anticipated nontraditional college student population is expected to double that of traditional students by the year 2019 (Kelly & Strawn, 2011). Consequently, the focus must be on nontraditional college students (Hoffman & Reindl, 2011). Staying the course and earning a degree will prove beneficial for those pursuing the attainment of a degree (Carnevale, Cheah, & Strohl, 2012).

However, with powerful statistics comes the challenge of how higher education institutions plan to tackle the responsibility for educating the growing population of nontraditional college students (Wyatt, 2011). It is no longer acceptable to ignore the opportunity that exists for the vast majority of nontraditional college students seeking degree completion (Casazza & Silverman, 2013). Ongoing research and determining what can be done to keep nontraditional college students in the classroom are a continual challenges with a variety of answers (Day et al., 2011). Identified as high risk for completing a degree, nontraditional college students are identified by Soares (2013) as “moving targets” (p. 14) necessitating the need for expanding flexibility and untraditional models to educate them.

With four-year institutions experiencing graduation rates at 60%, and completion rates of bachelor’s degrees taking upwards of six years to complete, analyzing how to address deficit outcomes is a must (Bettinger, Boatman, & Long, 2013). Placing

nontraditional college students on traditional college campuses not only increases stress and constraints on an already full schedule, but raises the stakes for student dropout.

Nontraditional college students are a population with many life events restricting their time and resources (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Pontes & Pontes, 2012).

When a student makes the decision to identify as an employee taking classes, he/she is, in essence, framing or limiting expectations related to personal success (Choy, 2002; Munro, 2011; Perna, 2010; Soares, 2013). This is indicative of the nontraditional college students' sense of belonging to the institution, being involved, and experiencing growth in their educational endeavors (Price & Baker, 2012). It is estimated traditional college students comprise a mere 16% of all college student bodies (Merriam & Bierema, 2014), leaving a large number of nontraditional college students to educate and graduate.

Educators such as Tinto (1993, 2012), Bruffee (1999), and Knowles et al. (2011) have studied the education process and engagement strategies for this ever-growing and complex group of students. Still the problem remains two-fold; enrolling students into higher education pathways or programs and seeing those students through to graduation (McCann, Graves, & Dillon, 2012). While nontraditional college students hold the tenacity to complete a degree, it is a challenge (Tinto, 1993). Experiencing optimal student outcomes among nontraditional college students must be viewed as an institutional concern and not just a student affairs problem (Lau, 2003). In order to fully engage nontraditional college students, institutions must intentionally evaluate processes collectively on all levels (faculty, staff, and administration). Crossing boundaries of learning in the area of social connectedness and networking, as well as developing a

culture that is routinely participatory is a must if optimal student learning and outcomes are the goal (Bass, 2012).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Schlossberg (1989) extensively studied student perceptions and the correlation of those perceptions with student outcomes. From as early as 1989, Schlossberg's studies (1989) on nontraditional college students described the complexity, yet almost elementary nature of two theories referred to as the theories of mattering and marginality. Schlossberg (1989) stated, "Involvement creates connections between students, faculty, and staff that allow individuals to believe in their own personal worth" (p. 1).

While mattering and marginality are completely opposite themes, Schlossberg (1989) determined these two theories connect directly to student outcomes and feelings of fitting in. Schlossberg (1989) proposed these two theories crossed multiple boundaries and were not just relative to higher education. Strayhorn (2012) echoed this same thought tying a sense of belonging to that of mattering with evidence that supports a heightened positive experience and increased self-worth. The conceptualization of how most individuals function, or relate, in the world and to others around them in families, communities, and work environments are affected by either feelings of mattering or feelings of being marginal (Schlossberg, 1989). Social ties are extremely important in the quest for achieving positive outcomes (Walton & Cohen, 2007). The feeling of mattering can make a significant difference in either realizing the achievement of success or experiencing the agony of failure in many life events (Schlossberg, 1989).

Schlossberg's (1989) extensive work on transitional life events and the effect of not feeling connected, or marginal, can result in a negative, profound effect on outcomes

as described in the theory of marginality. When considering whether to continue or to quit a pursuit, the question often becomes a self-evaluation of whether one feels as though he or she belongs (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Schlossberg (1989) noted feeling marginal happens to many individuals at some point in life and generally occurs during monumental or significant life events. Walton and Cohen (2007) described, “belonging uncertainty” (p. 83) is often felt and can have a profound effect on motivation to continue. Feeling marginal or a lack of connection can have altering effects on individuals, which can result in nontraditional college students not staying in school (Price & Baker, 2012; Schlossberg, 1989; Tinto, 1993). The self-identity of placing learning secondary further increases the risk of these students for not completing a college degree (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012).

Changing the focus from strictly a student affairs issue to an overall institutional issue is crucial (Wyatt, 2011). Drake (2011) relayed the importance of institutions incorporating engagement processes that go beyond just opening doors of the institution to recognizing the importance of relationship building through peer relationships. Identifying significant ways to improve student outcomes, Drake (2011) identified such things as strong peer engagement, student-faculty interactions, advising, and mentoring programs as a means to keep students engaged and connected.

Tinto (1993) noted that while retention in higher education is extremely important and necessary, it should not be the sole focus for an institution. Rather, ensuring students experience growth in the areas of socialization and intellect should be the main foundational principle upon which institutions are built (Tinto, 1993). Additionally, as a nontraditional college student’s experience in higher education grows, greater outcomes

may also be experienced, such as higher retention rates (Tinto, 2012). Developing an increased feeling of self-worth through engagement with other students, faculty, or administrative staff often results in students choosing to stay the course, gaining confidence, and thereby achieving greater outcomes (Schlossberg, 1989).

It is through students' increased confidence that Mezirow (2000) described the importance of transformative learning. Like Tinto, (1993), Mezirow believed as individuals transform, those experiences result in maturation, greater education outcomes, and increased emotional intelligence. This emotional intelligence described by Mezirow (2000) evolves as students' experience grows with the formulation and expansion of their social awareness. Getting along with others, relationship building, and understanding of each other happens in the social realm and translates into the feeling Schlossberg (1989) described as a feeling of being connected. The theory of mattering or sense of belonging, then becomes an interwoven concept threaded into the education process through a student's self-image or self-efficacy, which can have positive effects on student retention (Strayhorn, 2012).

Schlossberg's (1989) theories of mattering and marginality outlines key contributing factors that increase the challenge for nontraditional college students. Strayhorn (2012) identified the feeling of belonging, or the lack thereof, as a crucial factor that can greatly affect a student's college experience. Age, class, ethnicity, religion, and political identifiers can play substantial roles in helping students either adapt to college or struggle to succeed (Strayhorn, 2012). Deutch and Schmertz (2011) relayed older adults returning to college have different needs and challenges than traditional students, which may be viewed as constraints. Low socioeconomic status or class affects

completion rates, as many nontraditional college students must work in order to sustain themselves and lack the social collateral for having the fortitude to complete college (Tinto, 2012). Challenges outside of education, such as jobs and families, often make it difficult for nontraditional college students to stay focused (Wyatt, 2011). Strayhorn (2012) described nontraditional college students' desire to "fit in" (p. 38) as necessary in order to be motivated to succeed. Walton, Cohen, Cwir, and Spencer (2012) illustrated the importance of developing social connections, which can increase motivation and the ability to self-regulate, resulting in an overall well-being.

Many nontraditional college students experience raised anxiety due to feeling outside of what they perceive as the norm or standard in higher education, which then affects student outcomes (Taylor & House, 2010). The innate desire that all humans have to feel they fit somewhere within the scope of society is a foundational premise (Schlossberg, 1989) and can often be accomplished in higher education institutions through varying levels of engagement or community learning (Rausch & Crawford, 2012). Transitioning between the role of college student and the numerous roles nontraditional college students hold outside of college can cause a marginal feeling (Schlossberg, 1989).

Varying elements of involvement, or sense of community, with nontraditional college students in their educational quest may provide more optimal outcomes (Tinto, 2012). Schlossberg (1989) found students who participated in a nontraditional option of learning, such as in a community or cohort learning model, felt a much greater sense of belonging whether to an advisor, faculty member, peer, or the institution. The idea or perception of mattering then becomes the motive which ultimately increases outcomes

(Schlossberg, 1989). Learning and growing together in a community model format is becoming increasingly popular (Rausch & Crawford, 2012). Kabes and Engstrom (2010) proposed that by incorporating engaged professors in a collaborative community learning atmosphere, enhanced learning is experienced. Through this collaborative learning environment, students are more likely to actively participate and contribute in various classroom projects where insecurities are decreased and learning is increased (Bruffee, 1999).

### **Nontraditional College Students**

As a fast growing population and considered more traditional than ever before, nontraditional college students are a very diverse group (Kinghorn & Smith, 2013) with several barriers identified as huge obstacles (Cross, 1981; Kinghorn & Smith, 2013; Merriam et al., 2007; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Stebleton and Soria (2012) identified various obstacles which can often compromise academic success. Multiple barriers are frequently the result of nontraditional college students trying to bridge two vastly different cultures together and not feeling as though belonging to either (Jahangir, 2010; Kinghorn & Smith, 2013; Schlossberg, 1989; Tinto, 2012).

The psychological (Kinghorn & Smith, 2013) or dispositional barrier (Cross, 1981) that exists is significant, often resulting in poor attitudes and even poorer self-image related to one's role as a student. Unsuccessful past attempts of attaining an education may contribute to the nontraditional college student's self-image, thereby increasing the barrier for achieving a successful outcome upon returning to school (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Nontraditional college students often struggle with being less prepared and having much less cultural capital for normal expectations within higher academia than their traditional college student counterpart and may perform poorly



(Petty, 2014; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). This lack of social capital needed for success in the college environment often causes stress resulting in nontraditional colleges students who have decreased coping mechanisms to deal with that stress (Mehta et al., 2011).

Additionally, what motivates a nontraditional college student to push through the stress and be successful is different for every individual, and Petty (2014) recognized a one-way-fits-all idea for motivation does not exist. Also essential is the fact nontraditional college students struggle with having the cultural capital to deal with the academic rigor, time management, and traditional college students who come well prepared to succeed in higher education (Strayhorn, 2012). Horton (2010) cautioned as institutions and educators, it is important to understand both the complexity and individuality of each nontraditional college student in an attempt to be able to engage and motivate them. Maslow (2013) posed that if the basic needs of an individual were met, it was then the emergence of needing or desiring to belong would then surface. Noting that all individuals have an inherent need to fit in, belong, or be part of something, Maslow's (2013) hierarchy of needs outlines the basic needs of all human behavior into five categories. Beginning with the most basic need as physiological, to safety and security, belongingness, esteem, and the highest being self-actualization (Maslow, 1954). These needs are sequentially layered from the lowest, or the most significant and basic of needs, to the highest realm, which is the mental or psychological well-being of an individual (Lester, 2013). Lester (2013) and Stayhorn (2012) postulated if the basic needs were satisfied, psychological health, or esteem, would be improved. The lack of self-esteem and confidence nontraditional college students experience in their quest to attain a degree becomes an ongoing internal conflict (Kinghorn & Smith, 2013).

Petty (2014) acknowledged this social element as critical to retention whereas nontraditional students feel the connection and a sense of belonging and in turn becomes a self-efficacy process resulting in college success. As self-confidence begins to climb, Schlossberg (1989) and Tinto (1993) contended, so does retention. Micari and Pazos (2012) argued that a positive relationship between the student and professor can often result in an increase in student confidence, thereby affecting the student's outcome or success in the course, and ultimately breaking down the psychological limiting barrier related to self-image. The stronger the relationship between the two, a greater increase in confidence is realized (Micari & Pazos, 2012). Schlossberg (1989) also described the opposite of mattering, or feeling disconnected, can have detrimental effects, as validated by Maslow (2013) and Biglione (2012), resulting in low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, and feeling inferior. The importance of this connection between students and faculty is vitally important and if not cultivated may contribute to unsatisfactory outcomes, such as a student dropping out or not completing college at all (Micari & Pazos, 2012; Tinto, 1993). Dispositional barriers often magnify the multiple stressors a nontraditional student faces or clouds the student's goal of completing college (Tinto, 2012).

Another barrier contributing to a nontraditional college student's failure to succeed is sometimes categorized as personal (Kinghorn & Smith, 2013) or situational barriers (Cross, 1981). While the need for achieving a degree continues to climb, so does a tight financial market inclusive of elevated tuition prices making a degree desirable but less affordable (Kimmel et al., 2012). With motivation as a necessary component for nontraditional students to complete a degree, the financial statistics of a weakened

economy with less financial aid to distribute can often contribute to the situational barrier that often exists (Kimmel et al., 2012).

Oreopoulos and Petronijevic (2013) described the constraints of finances coupled with the downturned economy together as “dauntingly complex” (p. 41). With financial constraints as one of the main concerns for nontraditional students, the staggering debt that often accompanies an education can create added stress (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). Consequently, nontraditional college students struggle in deciding to attend college and often evaluate whether taking on escalating educational debt can be managed at all (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013). Many times shifts in the economy are the reason nontraditional students elect to consider college; unfortunately, it is often the same reason nontraditional students entertain the idea of not attending college (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011).

Lack of time and time management, long considered a massive situational barrier for the nontraditional college student trying to attain an education with outside demands, can be overwhelming and grueling (Kinghorn & Smith, 2013). This challenge of *time*, or the lack thereof, often discourages many nontraditional college students from even beginning a degree program (Cross, 1981). Juggling multiple roles consisting of jobs and families often add to the dispositional barrier and stress associated with the multi-roles (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Stone & O’Shea, 2013). The multiple demands placed on nontraditional students returning to college coupled with a deficit of time often result in disconnect or lack of engagement, which also places students at risk for dropping out (Estes, 2011; Wyatt, 2011).

A third identified barrier to a nontraditional college student's success is sometimes referred to as an institutional barrier (Cross, 1981; Kinghorn & Smith, 2013; Lau, 2003). While it is a known fact that nontraditional students have different needs than traditional students, how to meet those needs can be quite challenging (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). Oftentimes the needs of the nontraditional student can often go unmet by the institution (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). This barrier can be inclusive of all factors related to an institution and may result in exclusion or discouraging nontraditional college students from attending. Cross (1981) named such things as scheduling, location, and unnecessary course requirements as obstacles for nontraditional college students and their continuation, or even beginning, an educational pathway. While improved, some institutional issues still remain problematic (Kinghorn & Smith, 2013). Convenience, financial aid, and tuition costs are all barriers to either returning or beginning college (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013).

**Collaboration, relationship, and community learning model.** The discussion of how to effectively meet the needs of nontraditional college students in higher education remains a focus, with investments in resources for student involvement growing (Webber, Krylow, & Zhang, 2013). Keeping nontraditional college students connected, in an effort to retain and raise graduation rates, is a continual focus (Tinto, 2012). Attrition of nontraditional college students who choose to forgo the pursuit of a degree perplexes many administrators, faculty, and staff (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). Classified as both convoluted and multifaceted (Christe, 2013), student engagement in higher education with nontraditional college students is most challenging. Wyatt (2011) stressed the importance of connecting nontraditional college student either through another peer,

faculty or staff relationship, or through a community learning environment initiated by the institution.

It is within this collaborative learning environment in which Bruffee (2009) identified the social framework as instrumental in utilizing the learner's experience as a critical constituent in competency proficiency. Within this community learning environment, all associations are deemed important; how one nontraditional college student may make connections may be vastly different than how another student makes connections (Wyatt, 2011). What constitutes student engagement remains a focal point for discussion. Assuming students can successfully navigate through higher education without meaningful connections to peers, faculty, or the institution in some form is unrealistic (Drake, 2011).

Boyer's study (1990) of community learning and the positive effects of a collaborative learning atmosphere challenged institutions to do more than just impart knowledge to the student body. Since that time, moving beyond classroom borders to incorporate a collaborative learning environment has continued to gain attention (Kelly, 2013). Boyer (1990) believed by creating a community learning environment, connections with peers, staff, and especially faculty were deepened, which resulted in higher rates of student success (Schuh, Jones, & Harper, 2011). Astin (1993) echoed these same thoughts regarding the impact of relationships and connection through a community learning atmosphere, relaying the degree of involvement a student experiences directly affects the student outcomes. Developing a sense of belonging in students can effectively happen if nontraditional college students are merely alike enough to find a commonality in the community environment (Strayhorn, 2012).

Community learning environments align with Schlossberg's (1989) theory of mattering which espouses the practice of making a concentrated effort in assuring students feel valued, important, and experience a sense of belonging resulting in connections to the institution. An acquired sense of community becomes sufficient enough to raise self-esteem, driving behavior or motivation to be successful (Strayhorn, 2012).

A lack of connection has the same intensity or affect and may result in a feeling of alienation or disconnection, described in Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality, resulting in dropping out of college and not completing a degree. Strayhorn (2012) stressed the importance of students feeling as though they belong if nontraditional college students are to be retained. Lack of engagement, Petty (2014) noted, results in a lack of self-esteem and can directly impact motivation for staying and completing college.

Though the idea is to equip the nontraditional college students with a degree in order to realize a career, the social connection in a community learning environment while earning that degree is equally valuable and important (Walton, et.al., 2012). Regarding, motivation, research conducted by Scott and Lewis (2012) dispelled the fact that many nontraditional students lack motivation. Interestingly, those 50 years of age or older returning to college bring highly functioning critical thinking skills, motivation, and problem-solving skills to the classroom (Scott & Lewis, 2012). Lived experiences from aging were felt to bring optimal thought processes, attitude, and behavior in relation to learning with value added life experience to classmates and professors (Scott & Lewis, 2012).

Traditional colleges are just beginning to understand the magnitude of developing relationships with the student body majority, the nontraditional students and the importance of establishing connection with them (Uyder, 2010). Cohort models of learning, also a form of community learning, can be effective in the nontraditional college student's educational pathway (Beachboard, Beachboard, Wenling & Adkison, 2011). Beginning in the late 1990s, cohort style learning became very prominent across many venues including higher education, business, and corporate training (Rausch & Crawford, 2013). Using interpersonal relationships as a powerful tool for enhancing the learning process, nontraditional students come to higher education with greater maturity, life experiences, and objectives (Wyatt, 2011) and can add value to the educational experience in a cohort model of learning. Within the cohort model of education all students take the same courses in a sequential manner (Beachboard et al., 2011).

This style of community learning may provide an environment promoting rich, intellectual, and academic stimulation when nontraditional students are participating (Rausch & Crawford, 2013) as well as provide supportive relationships within the cohort. Establishing relationships early on in the cohort between learners as well as between learners and faculty is a critical feature of the learning experience (Beachboard et al., 2011; Rausch & Crawford, 2013). Walton et al. (2012) emphasized the power of social connections which results in increased motivation, problem-solving, teamwork, and communication, thereby contributing to the realization of achieved goals around a performance task.

**Mentoring.** Having a well-established mentoring program to reach at-risk nontraditional college students has been shown to contribute to higher outcomes for

students in a community learning environment as well (Bichy & O'Brien, 2014; Crisp, 2010). This extra layer of support may serve to strengthen the sense of belonging, both from a friendship and professional role standpoint. Hagedorn (2005) suggested mentoring can be included to involve other students, administration, faculty, and staff with outcomes resulting in higher performance, increased confidence, goal-setting, persistence, and self-realization. Related to the mentoring process is the significant impact faculty have when engaging with students resulting in an increase in confidence and competence during the education experience (Guitierrez, 2012). Hagedorn (2005) determined nontraditional college students struggle to progress through programs, necessitating nontraditional college student advocates are available to provide an additional connection or relationship for greater success.

### **Summary**

Research on nontraditional college students and assessment of their outcomes remains ongoing; however, identifying factors which motivate and keep at-risk nontraditional college students in college until degree attainment remains a focus (Petty, 2014). While the number of nontraditional college students continues to escalate, their needs are quite different from traditional students and must not be overlooked (Soares, 2013).

Higher education institutions inclusive of faculty, staff, and administration must recognize the fact that higher education is a changing demographic (Soares, 2013). Soares (2013) stated this changing demographic creates a "blind spot" (p. 2) necessitating an overall evaluation of successful education practices. Research aimed at discovering strategies for successful retention of nontraditional college students, which take into account the barriers and struggles faced by nontraditional college students, is needed in



order to support nontraditional college students reentering or coming to college for the first time (Wyatt, 2011). Effective engagement both academically and socially is critical for nontraditional college students to realize success (Webber et al., 2013). The challenge for engaging nontraditional college students must be addressed and institutions equipped to handle the influx of nontraditional college students (Goddu, 2012).

While research relating to increasing retention rates in academia is ongoing, it is important to be actively searching for new ways of reaching and retaining nontraditional college students (Soares, 2013). Engagement and connection with this group of students remains an important element for increased motivation and achievement, which can ultimately result in higher graduation rates (Komarraju, Musulkin & Bhattacharya, 2010). With nontraditional college students bringing more life experiences and having different motivations for learning, educators must be taught on how to effectively reach nontraditional college students (Matkin, 2012). Gaining a greater understanding of the challenges and barriers nontraditional college students face as college students is key to increasing retention numbers (Colvin, 2013). Chapter Three focuses on the selected methodology and research design inclusive of the description as to why a case study was chosen and the methods involved.

### Chapter Three: Methodology

In a 2002 U.S. Department of Education report, Choy (2002) stated, “nontraditional college students are much more likely than traditional students to leave postsecondary education without a degree” (p. 13). Choy’s statement is still true today. Schlossberg’s (1989) research, along with Tinto’s (2012), suggested a strong connection between students and the workforce within the institution inclusive of faculty, staff, and administration who become involved by giving students a sense of belonging. The question of the best way to retain nontraditional college students still exists (Tinto, 2012).

Connections made by nontraditional college students during the educational process can play a key role in their success or failure while attending school (Horton, 2010; Micari & Pazos, 2012). As described in Schlossberg’s (1989) theory of mattering often retention of a student is a direct result of whether the student feels a connection or is engaged. Conversely, if the student does not feel a connection, there is a greater risk of dropout (Schlossberg, 1989). While a large body of research on nontraditional college students exists, an examination of the specific connection between nontraditional college students feeling as though they matter and nontraditional college students linked in some fashion to components of a higher education institution was the focus of this research.

In this chapter, the reasons for choosing a qualitative approach to answer the research questions of this study are discussed. In addition, the instrument used is described, and the population and sample are reviewed. Dialogue regarding the procedures that were followed and method of data analysis is presented. A review of what nontraditional college students identified as mattering, as well as the perception of what was felt to be marginal during their educational process is offered.

## **Problem and Purpose Overview**

As early as 1970, Knowles et al. (2011) contended the life experiences and commitments of nontraditional college student caused them to learn much differently than traditional students. Since that time the topic has been debated repeatedly (Knowles et al., 2011). Four decades later, nontraditional college students have flooded institutions of higher education placing Knowles work back in the forefront. Equally important to this topic is Schlossberg's (1989) research on the importance of student connections to peers, faculty, and institutions during the quest for a degree.

The main goal of this study was to investigate nontraditional college students' college experiences and interactions with faculty, peers, administrators, and the cohort model of learning. Interviews conducted with nontraditional college students provided data on their perceptions of engagement, the learning environment, and the impact these factors had on the nontraditional college student's learning outcomes (Tinto, 2012). Feelings of what mattered to nontraditional college students, with regards to the concepts discussed in theories of mattering and marginality (Schlossberg, 1989) were investigated.

With the challenges facing institutions today in keeping nontraditional college students engaged and connected, it is important to understand what engages nontraditional college students to institutions of higher education and how their needs are met (Fillipponi-Berardinelli, 2013). Nontraditional college students may enter higher education with little to no shared knowledge, or cultural capital, in relation to the educational process and attaining a degree (Tinto, 2012). Using Schlossberg's (1989) theories of mattering and marginality as a compass, the intent of this study was to gain greater insight into what nontraditional college students deemed as important

contributions to their success while in attendance at a private, Midwestern, single-purpose college.

**Research questions.** The following research questions guided the study:

1. What factors do nontraditional college students who attend a private, Midwestern, single-purpose college perceive as contributing to their success?
2. What factors do nontraditional college students perceive as mattering in their educational experience at a private, Midwestern, single-purpose college?
3. What factors do nontraditional college students perceive as marginal in their educational experience at a private, Midwestern, single-purpose college?
4. What factors do college educators who teach in a private, Midwestern, single-purpose college perceive as their roles in keeping nontraditional college students engaged?

### **Research Design**

A qualitative approach was selected in order to evaluate the perceptions of nontraditional college students regarding their engagement and connection they felt, or lacked, during their college experience. Qualitative research is a natural and interpretative approach to gathering information within a particular arena, venue, or scope of a research project (Buckley & Delicath, 2013; Creswell, 2013, 2014). Essentially, all research begins in a form of qualitative investigation (Buckley & Delicath, 2013).

Researchers interested in conducting a qualitative study are concerned with three things: how individuals understand their experiences, how they see their world constructed, and what meaning is given to those experiences (Merriam, 2009). This type of qualitative research is considered the most common form in education. Merriam

(2009) asserted a prominent aspect of constructivism is interviewees establish meaning by interacting with a topic (Merriam, 2009). The data collected was designed to evaluate how nontraditional college students interpreted their experience within a two-year program (Merriam, 2009). Buckley and Delicath (2013) described qualitative research as “a conversation with a purpose” (p. 73). Merriam (2009) described qualitative research as having a focus of interpreting or uncovering meaning. Qualitative research can be viewed as a means to analyze human experiences through a philosophical approach (Buckley & Delicath, 2013). While qualitative research is not easily ascertained, explained, or interpreted, it is rather found to be a conglomeration of interwoven assumptions (Creswell, 2013).

Only after information is collected can a researcher decide the next form of research the project will take (Buckley & Delicath, 2013). Much like an effortless conversation, Buckley and Delicath (2013) noted the data collected in qualitative research may vary widely and will have unexpected answers. Creswell (2013) described it is within the parameters of qualitative research where attempts are made to make sense of information. Deciphering meaning from the participant’s perspective is often the goal in qualitative research (Creswell, 2014). In addition, nontraditional college students were viewed through another perspective; the role of the instructor. By conducting interviews from the faculty perspective, deeper understanding of the role instructors’ played in the engagement, related to mattering and marginality, was also realized.

A case study served as a structure to conduct in-depth exploration of a successful program known for achieving high graduation and retention rates. Described as a comprehensive analysis, a case study is often used when a bordered system surrounded in

real-life situations occurs such as a classroom of students (Merriam, 2009). Creswell (2014) also indicated case studies center around an evaluation of activities, processes, or programs. Merriam (2009) outlined case studies as being a good option for situations of multifaceted social factors involving real-life circumstances, often falling between “storytelling and the traditional research report” (p. 262). Case studies have also been proven to be a good research method for exploration in the area of program evaluation and innovation in education (Merriam, 2009).

In order to focus on a student’s lived experience while attending college, analysis of student and professor interview responses were garnered to identify important meaning and themes. Unlike quantitative research methods requiring a hypothesis and oftentimes a theory, the need for a more social construct was deemed appropriate for this study. It was hoped, data to support Schlossberg’s (1989) theory of mattering and marginality would be evident after extensive research had been conducted with the case study. It was also anticipated the study would provide valuable insight in uncovering the struggles and perceptions nontraditional college students faced during their education process.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Creswell (2014) discussed the importance of a researcher’s checks and consistency throughout all approaches in a qualitative study, in order to ensure both qualitative validity, as well reliability. Conducting research ethically ensures reliability and validity, with threats being greatly diminished (Merriam, 2009). Of note, two types of validity, termed internal and external, are identified (Creswell, 2014). Certain aspects of a research design, according to Creswell (2014), could threaten both. The internal threats of validity pose a potential threat to the researcher’s ability to draw correct

conclusions from the population data collected (Creswell, 2014). For this study, the threats to internal validity were addressed by use of clearly and deliberately worded interview questions. Threats to external validity can compromise the researcher's ability to "draw inferences from the sample data to other persons, setting, or past or future situations" (Creswell, 2014, p. 176).

Field testing was necessary for the assurance of consistent meanings. Creswell (2014) illustrated the importance of field testing, indicating this testing allows accuracy assurance in content, and also provides the ability to assess or improve questions and formatting of the open-ended interview format. Field testing of questions was conducted by interviewing three students who were not involved in the two-year program. Once those interviews were completed, interview responses were transcribed and sent back to those students to check for clarity. Questions were either modified or remained based on the student feedback and responses. Steps were taken to ensure reliability of the research by gathering data from every individual interviewed using the same format, same place, and same questions. The responses from the interviews were transcribed and returned to the participants to check for accuracy. This strategy, called triangulation, is described by Creswell (2014) as the careful use of different data sources as a means to verify, or justify, certain themes rising from qualitative data. Interviewing nontraditional college students, faculty members, and returning the transcribed data back to all participants for verification of accuracy (Merriam, 2009), increased the validity of the research.

### **Population and Sample**

The population of this study was inclusive of nontraditional college students currently enrolled in a two-year cohort model of education from a private, Midwestern,

single-purpose college. The nontraditional college students were selected from two cohorts which are a blend of both first and second year students. Creswell (2014) illustrated the importance of deciding who to interview, when, and where to do it. A nonprobability sampling method is used when evaluating relationships and how similar they are with occurrences or situations within the scope of study (Merriam, 2009). Most qualitative research data can be obtained through interviews or observation of particular groups. Purposeful sampling allows for the opportunity to select specific individuals meeting certain criteria.

Students meeting any of the nontraditional college student classification criteria were considered a potential candidate, and were invited to participate in this study. From the Demographic Survey, 34 students were identified as nontraditional college students. Random selection of those qualifying students was conducted resulting in 12 students randomly selected to participate; the targeted number was 10 – 15 students. This type of identification, stratification of the population, meant the characteristics of the population would be known first in order to select the sampling (Creswell, 2014). In addition, all three faculty members who taught in the two-year program were interviewed, in an attempt to gain greater insight as to how these professors engaged their students.

### **Instrumentation**

In order to identify the sample, permission was requested through a letter (see Appendix A) to each student requesting permission to conduct a demographic screening of both cohorts. When permission was obtained (see Appendix B) students who provided consent completed a 10-question demographic survey asking such identifiers as age, ethnicity, first generation college student, current work status, and dependents. The



demographic survey served as the screening tool for identifying nontraditional college students.

Once nontraditional college students were identified, informed consent (see Appendix C) to participate was signed by each participating nontraditional college student. Interviews were conducted using an open-ended interview format consisting of 12 questions (see Appendix D) for students. The open-ended format was chosen in order to gain better insight into what students deemed as mattering or what they felt was marginal during their educational quest. Exploring the relational side of the education process was considered to fit well with qualitative research. The three faculty members teaching in the Associate of Science in Radiography Program were also invited to participate. All three expressed a willingness to participate and were given the informed consent form. Then, an open-ended interview with program faculty consisting of 9 questions (see Appendix E) was conducted.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection for this study began after receiving approval by Lindenwood University's Institutional Review Board (see Appendix F), the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix G) of the private, Midwestern, single-purpose institution where the research was conducted. From the students who had been identified by the demographic survey, nontraditional college students were selected and interview scheduling begun. Prior to each interview, informed consent to participate was signed. The interviews were face-to-face, one-to-one interviews lasting no longer than one hour and included 12 open-ended interview questions. Students were assured there were no wrong answers and all responses to questions recorded, transcribed, and e-mailed back to the participants to

validate accuracy of responses. In order to ensure no coercion with participants would occur, confidentiality and distance between the researcher and students were ensured by the use of an assigned interviewer who was not the researcher. The assigned interviewer conducted all interviews in a semi-structured style in a mutually agreed upon location.

For students and instructors, all interviews were audio-recorded and field notes were taken during the interview process. Interview responses were then accurately transcribed into a word document. Once transcribed, the responses were returned to each participant by e-mail to be verified and to ensure accuracy of intent of the answers given. Creswell (2014) described member checking as a process in which each interviewee participating in the study would be asked to review the transcribed documented report for accuracy.

### **Data Analysis**

Summarization of the data occurred after each interview, with ongoing analysis throughout the 15 interviews. Merriam (2009) described this as a very important step. Data from the first interview and comparing to each subsequent interview afterward provided continual evaluation. Merriam (2009) suggested this process as necessary for grouping the data into like categories, identifying meanings, or relational factors and/or patterns. The process of making meaning of the data collected can be a daunting task (Creswell, 2014); therefore, review of the data collected was consistent.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Merriam (2009) emphasized major concerns regarding the ethics involved with research when conducting interviews. To address these concerns, a consent form was given to each participant before the interview which explained the study, described the fact that any participation was strictly voluntary, and emphasized confidentiality for any

information provided. All data were kept in the researcher's office in a locked cabinet as well as in a locked password-protected file on the researcher's computer. Once the study was completed, all data were deleted and paper files shredded.

### **Summary**

Evaluating what contributes to the retention and completion of a degree for nontraditional college students is ongoing. Assessing the factors nontraditional college students identify as necessary positives or contributions to a sense of feeling marginal causal to success while attending college is valuable. A feeling of mattering to others at an institution can greatly affect the outcomes of nontraditional college students, and may contribute greatly to their motivation to achieve (Komarraju et. al, 2010). Additionally, feelings of marginality or lack of connection can also greatly affect the student's desire to stay in school (Tinto, 1993). Whether the intangibles of relationships and connectedness played any significant role was examined.

The intent of this study was to interview nontraditional college students currently enrolled in a two-year cohort model program in a private, Midwestern, single-purpose college. Use of open-ended survey questions to both students and faculty provided data to answer the four research questions in this study. Participation was strictly voluntary, and confidentiality was emphasized.

In Chapter Four the qualitative data and findings of the study are analyzed. Each open-ended question is evaluated and discussed individually. The themes which emerged from the qualitative study are presented and described in detail.

## **Chapter Four: Analysis of Data**

The purpose of this study was to apply Schlossberg's (1989) two theories, the theory of mattering and the theory of marginality, as frameworks to investigate factors nontraditional college students report deem as mattering or marginal in their quest to obtain an education. The research for this study was conducted in a single-purpose college utilizing interview questions that either illuminated or dispelled evidence considered as beneficial or mattering or served as a barrier, thereby marginalizing nontraditional college students in to acquiring a degree.

The data collection for this study began with interviews with students using an open-ended interview protocol comprised of 12 questions which were qualitative in nature. Varying in content, Questions One and Two focused on the students' perception of relationships and success in college. Questions Three and Four were concentrated on motivation and barriers to nontraditional students' quest for a degree. The role of faculty was addressed in Questions Five and Six of this study from the nontraditional students' perspective. Questions Seven through Nine centered on the cohort model and student performance. Last, Questions 10 through 12 were pinpointed to reflect on the relationship and role of classmates within the cohort model and the effect, if any, these factors had on nontraditional college student success.

Students and faculty were interviewed individually in a private, well-structured format. The structure of the interview provided a medium for participants to offer open, honest answers as well as time to reflect on perceptions of their experiences. The answers provided were dictated as spoken with no leading follow up questions.

Additionally, interviews for the study were conducted with faculty who taught in the cohorts the students attended. An open-ended interview protocol of nine questions was used to guide faculty interviews. Questions One through Three pertained to faculty success in teaching nontraditional students and tactics faculty use in keeping nontraditional students motivated. Barriers faculty perceived as obstacles for nontraditional college students, along with the faculty-student role, were addressed in Questions Four and Five. Questions Six and Seven were centered on success for the nontraditional student. Last, questions Eight and Nine focused on nontraditional student performance and any outlying comments faculty wanted to add.

### **Demographics**

This qualitative study was conducted at a private, Midwestern, single-purpose college which utilized a cohort model of education. The population for this study consisted of two cohorts, for a total of 33 students who chose to provide demographics identification for possible selection for the study. From the 33 demographic participants, only six were identified as traditional students in relation to age. From the 27 identified nontraditional students, 12 students were selected randomly as a sample and invited to participate in the study.

The 12 participants included five students in the age category of 23-30 years of age, five students in the 30-44 year age category, and one participant over the age of 45 years old. Additionally, this sample revealed five having dependents, seven were married, and 10 were working either full or part-time. The sample included four males and eight females. Interestingly, the number of years of nontraditional students out of school ranged from one year to twenty-six years.

## Data Analysis

During the interviews to collect data, a conscious effort was made to keep the interviews consistent and to provide layers of anonymity between participants and the researcher. All students and faculty were interviewed by the same proctor in the same location and asked the same questions. Self-disclosure was encouraged by the proctor assuring students and faculty there were no right or wrong answers. Students and faculty were not prompted nor asked to expound on answers during the interview sessions. The information gathered from the study was collected, transcribed, reviewed for accuracy, and given to the researcher. The following sections describe the data collected from both the student interviews and the faculty interviews.

**Student interviews.** This section is dedicated to the responses of the nontraditional students who agreed to participate in the study. The information, collected from the 12 questions was analyzed by each interview question.

*Interview question one. Who do you feel has helped you succeed in college, and what did they do to help you succeed?* The answers to this question varied minimally with three components to success rising from the responses. Most nontraditional students described a solid support structure with family as a monumental factor ultimately providing the motivation to continue in the pursuit of a degree. Female Student #8 reflected on her family support when she communicated, “They’ve motivated me completely, and I would not have come back if I didn’t know how important it was for them and for them to see me doing it.” This strong show of support for student success seemed to be a relatively common element for the participants. Male Student #12 described a hand-in-hand approach between the support provided from his family and the

support provided by faculty at the college as, “all working together” for effecting an optimal outcome.

The second component revealed from interviews in Question One was the support provided by faculty within the cohort program. Female Student #1 avowed faculty, “really cares about you succeeding in the program.” She further noted this trait from faculty conveyed students matter, which “helps motivate me every day.” Male Student #4 identified faculty often “tried to use unique techniques” indicative of faculty adaptability. Student #4 also relayed, “He [faculty member] won’t go on unless everybody gets it, so there’s nobody left behind.”

The last factor identified as an important support system was of peers/classmates. Most nontraditional students interviewed concluded the support of classmates and the relationships developed were an interwoven piece necessary for success. Female Student #5 stated, “We’ve just kind of pulled together as one. We just kind of help each other out.” This connectivity created the motivation to continue.

Imperative for success, it is quite possible all three factors identified are necessary for student success and beneficial to the collaborative cohort model of education. Female Student #5 summed up, “I would say it was a mixture of a couple of different things” when describing all three factors as intertwined and inter-reliant for providing strong student support systems.

*Interview question two. Tell me about the relationships you have developed while attending college? Address both faculty and staff.* Most participants communicated the relationships with both faculty and peers over the two-year program allowed students to develop stronger and deeper relationships and was a primary

motivator in their experience. The focus on the strong bonds of the class and cohort was reiterated by Female Student #2 who described the closeness in the student-faculty and the student-student relationships as, “They’ve kind of become a second family.” The focus on relationships was repeated throughout many of the student interviews. Female Student # 6 reflected on the class, inclusive of faculty and students, as being “really tight in class and so if one of us is lost, the other ones pick them up and get them back to where they need to be.” The responses conveyed components of relationship, connection, and support as being tangential to positive outcomes, thereby lowering anxiety in students. Using the phrase, “laid back,” was provided by Male Student #12.

Interestingly, out of 12 interviews only one nontraditional student did not share the same sentiments as 11 others in her class. Female Student #10 described her experience as follows:

It's been interesting, because I'm the oldest person in my class. Most of my classmates are young enough to be my children, and some of them are younger than my children. That's been different for me than when I went through college the first time. I get along really well with everybody, but I don't have the same kind of friendship, I don't think, with people that I did initially, mostly because of the age gap, I think. As far as staff goes, I can probably relate to them more now than what I did the first time I attended school.

This response was atypical compared to the other 12 participants who relayed a strong connection and bonding with other students and faculty.

Female Student #5 described her experience about her developed relationships as a mentorship with both faculty and peers indicating, “My teachers have been like mentors



to me, the same as my peers.” This also provided greater learning opportunities for students since they felt a certain comfort with the faculty, as described by Female Student #6, “If you have any questions, you are really close to them, and you can go in and get help.”

Evidenced by the answers, the cohort model provided an arena of comfort and created a prime learning atmosphere for relationship building, connection, and fostered greater learning opportunities many times not found in other higher education institutions. Female Student #2 noted, “I went to another institution for my pre-reqs [requirements], but there wasn’t anybody there that went the extra mile for me. All three instructors for the last two years have done that.” Female Student #11 also stated, “I was in college before. It wasn’t a program though, it was general classes, and it’s not that the teachers didn’t care, but they didn’t care as much, because they didn’t know us as well.” The comments reflected by these students indicated there was great value in developing relationships and connections, which nontraditional students deemed as relevant to their education experience.

*Interview question three. What matters and motivates you to complete college?* Information that emerged from the interviews to answer Interview Question Three centered on the following topics: job advancement, supporting families, and identifying the need for a college education. Most of the nontraditional college students interviewed recognized both an intrinsic need of wanting to be a “better person” as described by Female Student #2, as well as the extrinsic need for a college education. Female Student #2 described education as being an essential factor for advancement or acquisition of a better paying job. Male Student #2 stated, “I think my motivation is just

to have a good stable future, so you want to get a good job; therefore, you need to finish college to get a good paying job.”

Nontraditional students bring life experiences into account when coming back to school and with that knowledge a greater understanding regarding the impact of opting out of college in their early years. In the interviews, hard work emerged as being necessary when obtaining a degree. Male Student #7 stated:

I spent a lot of my twenties not knowing what the future held, and it scared me to death. So, I guess, finally getting a grasp on where I want to be long term and doing the best that I can to get there is my main motivator.

What motivated each student varied somewhat, but many students communicated desires from a determination to be the best, give back, and the ability to not only provide for their families, but to set an example for loved ones as well. Female Student # 1 explained being a single mom and having a son who is watching her motivates her. Also, Male Student #4 surmised the importance being a role model and of a college education by stating, “My family is the big motivator. Even after this program, I feel like I’m not finished. Just like, I want them to look back one day and be, ‘Oh yeah, Dad did it, so I can do it, too.’”

The importance each individual nontraditional student participant placed on what matters and motivates aligned with the goals of job advancement, family provision, and role modeling. However, there were two nontraditional student responses centered on family as a motivator but in a different way. Female Student #3 had one answer, “I will be the first college graduate in my family.” This accomplishment now becomes a

significant life changing event for not only this student but the family as well. Female Student #8 also relayed a family promise she had given her grandfather before his death:

My grandpa. I had promised him before he passed away that I would get a degree. I think he was upset that I graduated high school and had a full Scholarship, and I got pregnant. I think it broke his heart, so I'm just making sure I graduate. I am fulfilling that promise. I'm no longer going to be a doctor, but I am going to be something.

Each student relayed something very significant in what motivated them in completing college, and each answer held value and promise for a brighter future, but the answer for motivating and mattering could be summed up with two words relayed by Male Student #4: “self-worth.”

*Interview question four. What barriers, personal and professional, have you experienced if any while attending college?* Responses to answer Interview Question Four given by nontraditional students indicated two main barriers that made attending and completing school a definite challenge. First, were the financial aspects of school. The magnitude of debt that often accompanies attending school along with the struggle to make ends meet during that same time period was indicated as a weighted stressor for many nontraditional students interviewed. Female Student #3 indicated, “I have loans. I’m paying absolutely everything back on my own.” This was a common concern voiced among many of the participants. Female Student #6 indicated the “money aspect” weighed heavily on her mind. The financial ramifications for not working forced this nontraditional student to work while attending school. Female Student #8 asserted, “Financially, it has been horrible.” The financial worries many nontraditional students

voiced ultimately resulted in the necessity to obtain and keep jobs while attending school. Male Student #12 validated this thought by conveying working a job created a balancing act and significant challenge due to not having enough time to study effectively.

The barriers or balancing act also included such things as time spent with families along with having to work while attending school. Female Student #11 described the balancing act as a “sacrifice,” meaning there had been a lot of “time with family that I’ve missed.” This sacrifice of time became very apparent when reviewing responses to this question. The amount of time needed to be successful in school and trying to spend time with family members can be a struggle throughout the educational process, as indicated by Female Student #8, who voiced, “It’s been hard.” However, as Male Student #4 relayed this struggle also becomes motivation in that as he stated, “It keeps you going.”

In discussing the barrier of balance, it is also important to note many students voiced not only the hardship of balancing time with family along with the time needed to be successful in college, there was also the struggle of balancing their jobs. Many nontraditional students do not have a choice but to work when they attend school. With both of these important facets placing demands on the nontraditional student, often the results are a person who is both sleep and time deprived.

Male Student #2 communicated he often works 30-35 hours per week, which is not a choice for him and relayed going to school to further his education, “made it a little bit more challenging.” Equally remarkable is Male Student #9 who indicated he works two jobs, getting off at one of his jobs in the morning in enough time for “getting to class on time.” Male Student #9 also reported any deviation from his work schedule would result in him being late for class. The tight schedule between working and school was

another source of stress since the program in the study has a policy as to the number of times students can be late.

As evidenced by the participants' responses, the barriers many nontraditional students faced were common in nature and complicated matters significantly in completing the degree. Creating an effective support system through peers and faculty within the cohort model helped provide nontraditional students substantial provision and understanding while attending college, with awareness they were not alone. Female Student #5 shared the important role the cohort model served when discussing barriers stating:

A support system is already in place, so it's kind of nice to know that you have that back up that keeps you going, and you don't really feel like giving up because you're like, I've made it this far, I just want to keep on going, and if I quit now, it will all be for nothing.

*Interview question five. How important is the student-faculty relationship in your educational pursuits?* A common response among participants to this question was, "very important." This resounding answer was stated concisely by Male Student #7 when he maintained, "It's pretty important" and "enjoyable." Female Student #1 acknowledged "having a faculty member care about you succeeding is what makes that person strive." Many times nontraditional students come in to higher education with feelings of anxiety and worry of not being able to relate, or feeling as though they do not belong, as Strayhorn (2012) cautioned. Establishing relationships with nontraditional students to let them know they matter increases the odds of retaining a student through to graduation (Tinto, 2012). Female Student #1 solidified this concept maintaining, "It [student-faculty

relationship] makes you feel like you belong, and if that hadn't been established, I may not have had the courage to vow to never give up.”

Other nontraditional students voiced the same importance of the student-faculty relationship as necessary in dealing with the whole student academically and personally in relation to barriers. Female Student #11 identified:

I think it's [student-faculty relationship]very important, because they know my story, and they know how much I've had to sacrifice to be here, and there are still things that are going on in my personal life. I think it makes them more willing to help me, like if I don't understand something they [faculty]make time outside of normal classroom hours to help us, and I know I'm not the only person they do that for, too.

Nontraditional students acknowledged facing many barriers other than academics, which also provided a foundational premise faculty used to build a relationship and worked intensely at encouraging nontraditional students to push through the struggles to attain the degree. Female Student #5 confirmed, “Building that foundation is key to success in learning and not only learning but succeeding.”

In summation regarding the responses to this question, nontraditional students reported they needed to know the faculty were there to help them succeed. With many nontraditional students lacking confidence, faculty plays a significant role in the quest for completing college by providing the foundational support that allows students to believe in themselves (Schlossberg, 1989). Male Student #9 reinforced this thought by stating, “I think it [student-faculty relationship] means everything, really.”

*Interview question six. Do you feel your professors care if you succeed or not?*

*How do you know?* Interestingly, the responses to this question varied little among participants. Most nontraditional students who were interviewed expressed the validation and support routinely received and voiced by faculty through various forms of communication as well as the faculty's ongoing investment of time. Female Student #1 stated, "They stick by you every single day, working with you, and what you're struggling with."

Communicating that students mattered was an everyday occurrence by faculty which created an optimal environment for learning. Male Student #12 described many times Male Faculty Member #1 would inquire, "What are you having a problem with..." and then going on to say, "Okay, well, maybe other people are having a problem with that as well." Male Student #12 also relayed students were never made to feel uncomfortable by asking questions or voicing a lack of understanding.

According to the interviews conducted, faculty were quick to respond when students voiced a lack of understanding to ensure everyone was on board. Safeguarding everyone was on board also meant an investment of time through various forms, such as tutoring, mentoring, or simply listening by faculty members. Male Student #7 summed it up by describing:

If you're faltering in any way, shape, or form, they [faculty] are quick to come to you and talk to you about it. If you have any problems, I mean, the definition of an open door policy is pretty much written here. It's unbelievable. I feel like I could go to any one of them and sit down, and they'd say spill everything that you've got, and tell me what's going on, and start from the beginning.

Many of the participants voiced faculty members would rearrange schedules in order to meet students where they were academically. Female Student #8 verbalized faculty “juggle our schedules around and tries to make it the best they can for us.” Effective and intentional development of relationships with a caring attitude from faculty was relayed by many of the participants. Female Student #5 expressed when students see faculty treat students with respect, there is also a natural tendency to “reciprocate that behavior.”

All 12 nontraditional students interviewed depicted a faculty team that does not “stop trying” to reach students. Expressing care on a daily basis was the norm for these students, Female Student #10 acknowledged faculty consistently “make it very well know that it is their goal that we get through it well, do well, and succeed.”

*Interview question seven. You are in a cohort model of education. Does that make a difference to you? Why or why not?* The responses elicited by this question proved to be divided in thought on whether the cohort model mattered or not during the education process. Four of the 12 participants, or 30%, reported in their interview the cohort model, as set up by this program, was not a driving factor. Male Student #12 felt “it doesn’t really matter to me.” Sharing that same sentiment was Male Student #9 who shared, “it mattered not” about progressing within a cohort model of education. Female Student #10 stated that while she was not opposed to this type of learning, “she was personally motivated,” and thus the classroom environment and structure of the coursework did not affect her motivation for achieving her degree.

Contrary to the aforementioned opinions on the cohort model, the remaining eight students who were interviewed in the study all expressed the importance of the structure of the cohort model and noted the configuration of the coursework created a positive



environment, encouraged relationships, and provided a support system inclusive of collaborative learning from each other. Male Student #7 emphasized his thoughts regarding this question with one word: “Fantastic.” Others within the cohort, such as Female Student #5, stressed the importance of relationships referring to the other students as being “like family.” Male Student #4 described the relational environment created in this cohort program model connected people and created comradery and bonding, ensuring all students not “feeling like you’re alone.” Feelings of isolation often expressed by nontraditional students became minimized, contributing to students “feeling as though they are not alone,” as Male Student #4 relayed.

Providing a supportive environment where students are comfortable to be themselves and faculty are supportive also drives motivation. Female Student #2 stated, “We motivate each other to do better. We’re all a big family.” Having the support system within the education model created a strong foundation centered on relationships and community learning. Female Student #11 stated, “It’s really great to have all the same people in all of my classes. They know exactly how hard the program is. We study together.... that helps everybody get through it.”

*Interview question eight. Has this educational experience been what you Expected, and has it affected your family?* Participants provided varied answers with regard to the expectations. Participants indicated while the program may not have been what was expected, overall it was a positive experience, nonetheless. Female Student #11 voiced having the support of other classmates who understood the stressors of obtaining a degree “was helpful.” Having the strong relationships within the cohort model helped

alleviate some of the stressors associated with the educational experience. Female

Student #3 asserted:

I didn't expect to be close to my classmates or my instructors. I just expected to go to school and come home, and I think it has affected my family in a good way, because I come home good about my day, not mad about my day.

Based on the responses to this question, many nontraditional students interviewed indicated going to school was very difficult on family with shifted responsibilities and the absence of time spent with the family a definite struggle. Female Student #11 described the experience:

I don't see them [family] very much. It's [the program] definitely put a lot more responsibility and burden on my husband to be there to pick up the kids after school, and I know they miss me. We just had Mother's Day, and they miss me a lot, and I miss them too.

***Interview question nine.*** *Some of the struggles nontraditional college students experience is the demand outside of the classroom; however, most studies point to the fact that nontraditional college students typically perform better. Why do you think this is so?* Overwhelmingly, 11 out of 12 participants in the study voiced the fact maturity plus life experiences had a profound effect and were key in driving the motivation to be successful. Female Student #6 voiced, “I feel just with age comes with a maturity that you actually want to strive harder, because usually you’re not on scholarship anymore. You're nontraditional, you're not getting paid, Mom and Dad aren't paying for it anymore.” Female Student #2 also indicated knowing what she wants, “it [the future] is just a goal that motivates myself everyday”

This thought was echoed by most other students. Female Student #11 further mentioned, “I think there is that extra motivation, because it’s not just for yourself, it’s for your family too.” The responsibilities tied to nontraditional students, such as families and work are the very things that help drive nontraditional students to staying the course. Female Student #6 described a more motivated student stating, “I think they’re just motivated more. They either have kids, or they’re trying to further their education to get a better job to help them now and in their everyday life. I think it pushes them more.” The responsibility that comes with maturity affects some nontraditional students more than others, as stated by Female Student #1:

Well, in my personal experience being a single mom and hadn't gone to school in 10 years, it's that drive that you want to make a better life for your child. Show them, actually, that college is the right way to go. So, it's a good example.

***Interview question ten.*** *What type of support system or relationship do you have with your classmates in this cohort model? Explain.* The majority of responses to this interview question indicated the development of strong relationships inclusive of a support system as well as indications of collaborative learning occurring during this educational process. Female Student #6 communicated:

The relationship built during this process that began in the same lab group in the very beginning, and I think it just built our foundation together. Even though we weren't at the same clinical sites or not exactly always at the same level, and you know our studies are everything, we would always come together and talked it all out, so it's been a huge help to know you're not by yourself.

Other participants expressed much of the same in their responses citing such factors as the development of an inclusive learning environment. Male Student #12 disclosed, “Sometimes, it’s easier just to ask your classmate, or I didn’t hear something so I would prefer to ask the guy next to me than to raise my hand and interrupt the whole class.”

This collaborative learning environment was indicative of a comfortable environment in which nontraditional students felt secure in asking questions of peers as Female Student #5 illustrated, “We call each other daily and often ask, ‘Hey, did you get this?’”

While participants expressed different support system mechanisms as factors which enhanced relationships, many nontraditional students found different forms of solace in those relationships. Female Student #8 expressed, “We call each other. We can throw a fit to each other. Whatever we need. I can’t think of a single classmate that I’ve not just had a heart-to-heart with if they’re upset or whatever.”

*Interview question eleven. Does your relationship with your peers or classmates affect your education? Explain.* Participants expressed the relationship with peers did affect their education in different ways. The overall commonalities included the development of strong friendships, strong support systems, and a shared cultural environment where students felt comfortable asking each other for clarity of different material, as well as feeling safe while admitting a lack of understanding. Female Student #3 expressed:

We[peers] have the type of relationship in our classroom that if I have a question, no matter how stupid it is, I could go ask them, and they’re not going to make fun of me later. I can trust that they [peers]are going to give me the correct answer.”

This statement was indicative of the importance of a solid environment that was based upon a foundation of trust established among classmates. It was also noteworthy of the solid support system that occurred during the students' educational experiences. Female Student #1 described the peer relationship: "It [the relationship] improves it [education experience]." The relational unity expressed by most of the participants transcended between not only the support system but also provided long-term strong friendships "in a positive way" (Female Student #2). Female Student #11 expressed value in the social aspect as well as the study groups that formed within this cohort.

*Interview question twelve. Is there something you wish to tell me about your experiences that I did not ask you?* Many of the participants did not have anything to add; however, a few did express the positive experience during the educational process with Female Student #11 stating, "I've had a really good experience." Female Student #5 added, "This program is the best. I'm so glad that I went through a program where we all went through it together, and then we graduated together, and they just do it right here." Female Student #10 also summarized her thoughts by stating, "It was a great experience. I think, a lot because the instructors are very invested in us individually, not just as a whole. I think they teach to a whole class but then can tailor it to each person."

**Faculty interviews.** In addition to the 12 nontraditional students whom were interviewed, three full-time faculty were also interviewed to gain insight into the overall educational experience. The faculty consisted of one female and two male instructors with a cumulative total of 12 years of experience in teaching. The information, collected from the nine question interview protocol, is broken down and analyzed by each interview question.

*Interview question one. What do you feel has helped you succeed as a college professor in relation to your nontraditional student?* The areas focused on in this question are not related to what students learn, but in what structures students learn best. The responses to this question provided valuable insight into the important role faculty play in regards to nontraditional college students and success. Faculty who were interviewed expressed having a two-year cohort learning model created a structured community learning environment. The setting was instrumental for both faculty and students to learn how to relate to each other, thus building strong relationships.

To develop a support system between faculty and nontraditional students, the faculty interviewed noted several consistent areas. An overarching consensus by all three faculty members suggested adaptability is an extremely important component when dealing with nontraditional students. Male Faculty Member #1 expressed, “...adaptability, that ability to really tailor what you are doing to each individual student, and the time you get to spend with them is really the biggest thing in regards to that.”

Additionally, the formable bond created through relationship building was also mentioned by all three faculty. All faculty interviewed regarded this bond as a conduit to an effective learning atmosphere creating a comfortable environment for nontraditional students to speak up and ask questions. The importance of connecting to the students was also identified as an important factor in student success by the three faculty members.

Female Faculty Member #3 purported:

I was not a nontraditional student. I came straight out of high school and knew exactly what I wanted to do as a junior in high school and went and did it. I think a little bit of going back for my Master's degree has really kind of shed some light

onto that. I was working full-time as the program director. I had a young child, who was a year old and a husband and trying to juggle all of that. So, I think trying to relate to them as much as possible.

Given that connectivity was identified by the three faculty as an important factor in educating nontraditional students, Male Faculty Member #2 noted the importance of being able to work with people of varying ages. One faculty member felt working with any age student was equally important to be able to do as part of the educational process. The focus of this question clearly brought out the importance of being adaptable and working to develop and connect with nontraditional students in order to reach them. Female Faculty Member #3 relayed it clearly by stating, "I think trying to relate to them as much as possible."

*Interview question two. How do you teach differently in regards to your nontraditional college students?* The next question guiding this research was one that centered on learning styles and the ability to be flexible in the delivery of information to nontraditional students. One key factor to nontraditional student success voiced by faculty members was the importance of understanding different learning styles. Knowing faculty must be malleable to reach each student specifically was also identified as a key factor to nontraditional student success. Male Faculty Member #1 stated, "...everyone understands this stuff a lot differently, so that makes it really hard to teach just one way and everybody get it." Understanding the importance of changing delivery styles challenged faculty to employ a tool box of strategies and to provide necessary remediation, if needed, ensuring important concepts were understood.

Female Faculty Member #3 conveyed the importance of meeting nontraditional students where they are and applying the concepts to “real life.” She further clarified most nontraditional students pose the question routinely of “How is this going to apply to my real life?” She further added nontraditional students have so little time; therefore, everything points back to “real-life application” and the practicality of concepts and instruction.

All three faculty members identified flexibility and adaptation as monumental and conceptually important in reaching the nontraditional student. Male Faculty Member #2 summed it up by stating, “You just have to adapt to it. There’s differences between the way they learn...” Also significant, as stated by Male Faculty Member #1, is nontraditional students often need “a little more one-on-one time” in order to help the student with understanding of material or concepts.

*Interview question three. What do you do differently that you feel matters and motivates nontraditional students complete college?* Several cohesive answers rose from this question inclusive of connection, belonging, and relationships. This question triggered passionate responses in regards to how each faculty member motivated nontraditional college students to complete college.

Male Faculty Member #1 stated he went back to college as a nontraditional college student. Since his situation was like many of his students, he related to the students he now taught. In addition, Male Faculty Member # 1 was also a single parent and used his own life experiences to make connections with the students in the program struggling with the multiple roles they have between home and school. By having similar experiences, he was able to have open, candid conversations with nontraditional students



in both the clinical and classroom setting. Relating to the students on this level provided a stronger bond and greater understanding for both student and faculty member to meet goals and objectives together.

Faculty Member #2 expressed the importance of molding and leading by example in the professional sense. This allowed students to see a greater picture of career and professional life thus encouraging nontraditional students to find their passion in the profession to keep them focused. One of the most profound comments regarding this question came from Female Faculty Member #3, who stated what she does differently to let students know they matter:

I've been known to call or have every single person in the class text that person and say, 'Where are you? Are you okay?' because they matter to me. They are not just a number or someone sitting in a seat. They really do matter to me, and I want to make sure that they are safe. Some of these students are driving an hour and half to get to class, and I want to make sure that they are okay and they know that. They know that I really care about them, not just as a student, but as a real person.

***Interview question four.*** *What barriers, personal and professional, do you see nontraditional college students have or experienced while attending college?*

Faculty responses reflected numerous barriers nontraditional students face. One barrier noted by Male Faculty Member #1 was nontraditional students often experienced feelings of having little freedom to do some of the things traditional students do such as relaxing and putting off doing homework, or studying for tests, and exercising. This lack of time caused feelings of isolation and loneliness in nontraditional students.

Also, the biggest overarching theme or barrier expressed by two of the three faculty participants was time. The time barrier does not allow many nontraditional students to become fully engaged. Female Faculty Member #1 expressed the challenge of raising a family coupled with the need to work makes it challenging for nontraditional students to connect with other students and faculty. Likewise, Male Faculty Member #1 relayed, age and the barrier of needing to move forward and begin a career causes a sense of urgency with the nontraditional student. The time related to nontraditional students was summarized by Female Faculty Member #3:

When you have someone that's juggling work, kids, husband, and this program, you're at a deficit of time. They're not sleeping, they've barely had time to study so I think that's their biggest barrier is trying to figure out where do I need to be, when and how do I shut off a portion of their life so they can focus on what they are doing right then. One thing I always suggest, especially to the moms in the class and the dads too, but it seems like the moms try to take on more roles than the men.

Male Faculty Member #1 surmised having both traditional and nontraditional students in class creates two different viewpoints and processes for learning. Male Faculty Member #1 also expressed that while the traditional student can move through the educational system and program with seemingly varied malaise, the nontraditional student has very limited time and wants to be very succinct in the learning process. Merging these two very different types of students into the classroom becomes a responsibility of the faculty to facilitate (Male Faculty Member #1).

***Interview question five.*** *How important do you feel the student/faculty relationship is in your nontraditional college students' educational pursuits?* All faculty members interviewed felt the student/faculty role was an extremely important one but cautioned the relationships come with specific challenges. Designing a classroom where teambuilding is occurring, all while maintaining professional boundaries, is an ongoing challenge (Female Faculty Member #3). All three faculty participants expressed the essential need to build a relationship with each student, while maintaining a professional role within the program is key to creating an optimal learning environment for learning. All faculty who participated in the study felt it was important to establish definitive lines between the relationship of student/professor and not appear as though they are friends. Male Faculty Member #1 stressed the importance of intentional relationship building with the idea that upon graduation those same students often become friends and even colleagues.

***Interview question six.*** *How do you emphasize to nontraditional college students the importance of success? What indicators do they give you that they understand?* Interestingly, Male Faculty Member #2 described relating to students the program is a “two-year job interview,” and emphasizing the idea that hard work and motivation are key ingredients to success. For the nontraditional student, Male Faculty Member #1 communicated this analogy of the program as an interview resonates with nontraditional students as most have sacrificed so much to be here and need a job upon completion of the program. Coupled with the life skills and maturity nontraditional students have, Female Faculty Member #3 conveyed nontraditional students are quite aware of hard work. Male Faculty Member #1 communicated describing success was

hard to articulate. His idea of modeling the importance of success is an important component inclusive of involvement in professional organizations and giving back to the community as identifiers.

***Interview question seven.** Your program is a cohort model of education. Do you feel that makes a difference to nontraditional college students' success? Why or why not?*

The responses to this interview question were almost uniform in nature with very little difference between each of the three faculty answers. All faculty participants agreed the cohort model was a very important feature of this program, stating it did so many things for the students. Female Faculty Member #3 relayed, "I think it's probably one of the most important things I see on our graduate surveys." As described by Female Faculty Member #3, each year graduates from the program are sent surveys in order to gain insight as to the graduate's experience while in the program. Most years, Female Faculty Member #3 stated, "It was the friends and bonds that they make in this program."

The cohort style of learning also created an environment allowing the life issues that distinguish a student as either traditional or nontraditional to be erased in some aspects. Female Faculty Member #3 attributed the tight bonds created in the classroom foster not only friendships and collaboration but also encouragement between peers due to the fact classmates understand the magnitude of rigor within the program. Unlike individuals outside of the program, Female Faculty Member #3 stated, "Someone understands what you are going through."

Additionally, Male Faculty Member #1 communicated, "I think that nontraditional students have a lot of real life strengths that they have had to learn over time that the younger traditional students haven't," which fostered an environment

conducive to nontraditional students and traditional students learning from each other. Life experiences allow the nontraditional student to inadvertently help the traditional student stay focused and on task due to life experiences traditional students have not experienced to this point. Oftentimes, the younger, traditional students completely misunderstand and react inappropriately to certain issues, and it is the nontraditional students who can “be the voice of reason” (Male Faculty Member #1).

Another challenge in a cohort model are those times when a nontraditional student appears to be inflexible, which Female Faculty Member #3 relayed is the result of having no time to spare, a specific schedule, and inability to deviate from that schedule. However, the traditional student oftentimes can support the nontraditional student by modeling a calmer demeanor, as described by Male Faculty Member #1. All faculty participants stated the cohort style is a good model for establishing friendships, collaborative learning from other classmates, and providing a safe environment for learning and asking questions. Male Faculty Member #1 also conveyed, “It is important that unresolved issues be dealt with, due to the very fact it is a two-year program and if not dealt with can cause many problems during those two years.” Male Faculty Member #1 also communicated many are resolved and worked through by the students themselves.

With the cohort model, Male Faculty Member #1 expressed students oftentimes still need “individualized attention” based on their individual needs. Not spending enough time individually with students to get to know them and connect can often create feelings of isolation as not all students, nontraditional or traditional, may adapt well to the cohort model of learning described by Male Faculty Member #1 as “personality quirks”

resulting in disharmony. However, creating bonds of support between traditional and nontraditional students ultimately resulted in solid friendships and encouraged nontraditional students to stay motivated, which many times erased the lines of age (Male Faculty Member #2). Female Faculty Member #3 reported the valuable bonds created among peers and faculty are often described on the exiting graduate surveys as being significant during the student's education program and attainment of a degree.

*Interview question eight. Some of the struggles nontraditional college students experience are the demands outside of the classroom; however, most studies point to the fact that nontraditional college students typically perform better. Why do you think this is so?* All three faculty were in agreement in their responses regarding nontraditional student performance. Why the performance of nontraditional students is better varied little in their answers. Overall, the enormity of responsibility on the nontraditional college student outside of the classroom, faculty believed, forces nontraditional students to be well organized and efficient in their study time. Male Faculty Member #2 stated, "I think it's their life experience, their ability to juggle all of that and not get overwhelmed. I also think they come from a background of hard working, sacrificing a little bit more, time commitment."

In one instance, Male Faculty Member #1 witnessed a nontraditional student explaining to another student, "Wait, here's what's going on, and here's what you need to do" in order to help the student out. While the struggles of nontraditional students might be a little bit more, outside of the classroom, the professor felt nontraditional students tend to perform better because they have the ability to balance and yet remain focused. Nontraditional students often have a clearer idea of what they want and why because of

their life experience. The Female Faculty Member #3 felt nontraditional students simply are more organized in nature, again, due in part, to the necessity of having so much to do in a limited amount of time.

*Interview question nine. Is there something you wish to tell me about your experience as a faculty member educating nontraditional college students that I did not ask you?* Male Faculty Member #1 stated, “I think as an instructor going through a lot of the same struggles outside the classroom as the nontraditional students do, I think, too often, in education we are asked to take the personal relationship out.”

Female Faculty Member #3 added the important component of students knowing the faculty genuinely care in addition to knowing what the students are facing and getting ready to go through in the program. Determined to help students become successful, Female Faculty Member #3 also relayed the importance of building those relationships so when the program does get tough, students will have a sounding board upon which to lean. Last, Female Faculty Member #3 communicated it was especially hard to watch as nontraditional and traditional students graduated from college with no job to go to due to the economy. Many of the nontraditional students at that time were devastated relaying they had wasted two years of time.

**Interview data analysis.** In addition to the data results, all interview material was examined multiple times before beginning the process of deducing and formulation of ideas and key concepts. The first reading of collected data was performed in order to view both student and faculty responses broadly. This provided an initial over-view assessment of all collected data described by Merriam (2009) as one of the most important aspects of the qualitative exploration process.

Next, the process of reading through collected data again was conducted. This allowed the researcher to begin formulating consistent and recurring themes and/or any subthemes, as well as deducing information to find consistencies in thought, indicated by Creswell (2014) as an ongoing process. Summarization using extensive notes and tallies were made of each question in an effort to highlight recurring themes or topics. Additionally, once themes and sub-themes were formulated manually, the process of re-reading the excerpts given by students and faculty were then read a third time to provide citations supporting the findings. Creswell (2014) indicated this important step of thematic analysis regarding multiple readings, processing, coding, and numerous readings of the data over time with calculated precision for validating general themes rising from the data. The following themes were developed to encapsulate the entirety and results of this study.

**Emerging theme: Connectivity.** Most participants inclusive of both students and faculty expressed a strong degree of connection on varying levels during this education experience. The connectivity that occurred within the cohort model orchestrated a design of diminished boundaries fostering an optimal learning environment. The establishment of trust within the connection between both students and faculty resulted in nontraditional students feeling comfortable to ask questions, voice lack of understanding, and work towards a common goal of graduating on time and together as a unit.

The common goal of graduating together and on time appeared to rise to the top which resulted in unifying the class rather than other factors that many times divide students into the categories of traditional and nontraditional. Factors such as age,



dependents, marital status, and necessity to work became irrelevant in the relationship. The bonds formed also created liaisons with peers, faculty, and provided a strong support system inclusive of friendships and a nurturing collaborative learning environment, absent of barriers that often divide, with students learning from both faculty and each other.

**Emerging theme: Tenacity.** Passion was a foundational premise demonstrated throughout the interviews of faculty and students with multiple elements provided as significant components contributing to the nontraditional college student's experience and degree completion. Faculty participants often exhibited invasive tendencies for creating and protecting the best learning environment possible. Often serving in multiple roles, faculty aided in listening to struggles of nontraditional students, deflating conflict, breaking down walls, and serving as catalysts for consistency which created a positive learning environment. The multiple roles included serving as educator, mentor, counselor, encourager, and problem solver during the process.

Faculty participants indicated the absolute necessity of meeting students where they are were, which also fostered an optimal learning environment and kept nontraditional students engaged. Equally significant was faculty recognized the importance of such factors as curriculum sequencing, tutoring, and the need of meeting with students at convenient times for them [students]. The meetings often occurred beyond faculty workdays.

Nontraditional students demonstrated a determined tenacity in related to the goal of completing the degree. Along with that goal, was the understanding of shifting family responsibilities to spouses and other family members, which motivated nontraditional

students to stay the course. Strong family and peer support also played a substantial role in continually persevering towards the degree and keeping nontraditional students focused.

**Emerging theme: Sacrifice.** Student and faculty participants indicated significant sacrifice presented in areas of the deficit of time, lack of sleep, and absence from family as necessary for completing the degree. Nontraditional student participants relayed having children or spouses served as motivating mechanisms that kept them moving forward, identifying the sacrifice of time spent away from them as momentous. Other forms of sacrifice were also noted related to the financial aspect. Lost wages resulting from the need to not work while attending school was considered an unavoidable necessity. Consequently, many nontraditional student participants indicated this also created the motivation to continue the program in order to obtain a better paying job after college.

Not only did nontraditional student participants relay numerous elements of sacrifice necessary for success, but faculty also expressed sacrificing for the success of students was essential in student success. Faculty also sacrificed for student success relaying spending extra time on tough concepts, countless hours of tutoring outside of the classroom, and time spent away from family. Expressing the importance of meeting students where they were academically often meant faculty being away from their own families or working outside of normal faculty hours to ensure students had what they needed to be successful.

## Summary

In this chapter nontraditional students and faculty participants from a private, Midwestern, single-purpose college were interviewed and the data were analyzed to determine perceptions felt to be significant factors related to success during the college experience. Of the two groups interviewed for this research, 12 were nontraditional students and three were faculty members at the private single-purpose college. A total of 12 questions were given to each nontraditional student and nine open-ended interview questions were given to participating faculty members. It was determined through the data collected from the interviews a significant element noted by both students and faculty was the cohort model of study. Students and faculty reported the cohort model created an environment conducive to learning, expressing ideas, and asking questions. Additionally, faculty played a significant role in the success of the cohort often serving as facilitators for problem solving and role modeling.

The themes rising from the research clearly indicated a connection on all levels played a significant role during the nontraditional student's college experience. Also pertinent was the underlying theme of tenacity in relation to both the nontraditional student's determination and the faculty's determination to retain and graduate students. The last pertinent and very relevant theme identified was sacrifice which was instrumental in success for the student. These three themes are discussed in further detail in Chapter Five. Provided in Chapter Five, is an in-depth summary and conclusion complete with all findings of the study, emerging themes, conclusions, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research on this topic.

## Chapter Five: Summary and Conclusions

As Merriam and Bierema (2014) accurately described, nontraditional college students are now the majority in most higher education institutions. The complexity of education delivery to nontraditional college students who sometimes are culturally deficient in higher education is not easily summarized in one thought, concept, or mode (Knowles et al., 2011). Rather, colleges and universities must broaden the scope of how to connect to nontraditional students who enter the classroom with a multitude of barriers threatening retention and college completion (Strayhorn, 2012). Research conducted in this study supported the importance of student engagement, connection, and relationship building and the contributions each makes in nontraditional students staying the course and completing a degree.

This qualitative study was conducted to ascertain specific factors nontraditional college students identified as significant or entirely irrelevant during the pursuit of a college degree. The research was conducted at a private, Midwestern, single-purpose college within a cohort model of education. The data gathered provided a window into the experiences of nontraditional students and faculty within a specific cohort program of which greater than half are nontraditional students. The data were gathered using an open-ended individual interview protocol.

This chapter, the outcomes, and findings of the study are described. Categorical literature to sustain the findings of the study is addressed. Implications for practice in the areas of raising retention and completion rates of higher education for nontraditional students are noted. Finally, a discussion takes place regarding recommendations for future investigation.

## **Findings**

The qualitative study included questions presented in an open-ended format to both nontraditional students and faculty. The interview questions allowed both students and faculty to express their opinions. The participants answered openly and honestly. Both students and faculty who participated in the study were assured there were no right or wrong answers.

For both the nontraditional students and faculty, questions one through three centered on identifying contributors to success, discussing relationships developed in the program, and identifying motivators for completing college. Questions four through seven included questions related to barriers from both the student and faculty perspective regarding college completion, student and faculty relationship and perceptions, in addition to both groups' perceptions of the cohort model of education. For students, questions eight through 12 centered on nontraditional students' perception of the experience, performance, and support system within the cohort model. Questions eight and nine for faculty focused on faculty perceptions of nontraditional students' struggles, subsequent success in the classroom, and any additional information faculty wished to share. The interview questions are used as an outline to discuss the findings of the research.

**Students.** The following information is a summary of the results obtained from the interviews with nontraditional students. Twelve students participated in the study. In order to obtain non-biased results and to provide appropriate distance from the researcher, a proctor was used to garner the information during the interviews.

***Interview question one.*** *Who do you feel has helped you succeed in college, and what did they do to help you succeed?* Nontraditional student participant responses indicated a strong family support system citing that support as a “big part” (Female Student #5) of the success. Additionally, most participants noted a strong support system of both faculty and classmates as an integral element necessary for success in the program. Students relayed family, peers, and faculty provided the necessary support resulting in motivation to stay the course.

***Interview question two.*** *Tell me about the relationships you have developed while attending college. Address both faculty and staff.* The answers provided by participants delivered a clear picture of the natural development of strong relationships within the two-year cohort model between classmates and faculty. Relationships developed and strengthened over the time period offering a solid, foundational support system for a comfortable learning environment and fostered collaborative learning for nontraditional students. This bond created unbreakable ties that became so intense students would not allow another student to lag, as Male Student #4 expressed, “It’s not every man for himself, it’s no brother left behind...”

***Interview question three.*** *What matters and motivates you to complete college?* While a variation of responses was given to this question, the data reflected a couple of commonalities inclusive of family needs and the acquisition of better paying jobs. Female Student #2 stated, “...just being a better person and wanting to do better for me and my husband.”

***Interview question four.*** *What barriers, personal and professional, have you experienced, if any, while attending college?* A variety of answers were given in regards

to the barriers identified by nontraditional college students. However, the commonalities included: sacrifice of family time, the necessity to work while seeking a degree, and financial sacrifice that goes with being a student with outside responsibilities.

***Interview question five.*** *How important is the student-faculty relationship in your educational pursuits?* Responses to this question provided similar replies with the majority of participants indicating the student-faculty relationship as extremely valuable and important. Specifically, students indicated faculty set the tone in the classroom through role-modeling in the way they care for and support students. Male Student #4 expressed, “I think it’s everything....I think real learning comes from whenever you respect someone enough to trust what they are doing and to trust the process.” As evidenced, this factor contributed greatly to enhancing learning initiatives and outcomes.

***Interview question six.*** *Do you feel your professors care if you succeed or not? How do you know?* Participants responded with virtually parallel and passionate responses to this question indicating nontraditional students knew faculty cared as evidenced by routine communication, tutoring, flexibility, and modeled commitment to student learning. Male Student #7 expressed, “Absolutely, one hundred percent” which is indicative of the intensity to which the faculty invests in the success of the students.

***Interview question seven.*** *You are in a cohort model of education. Does that make a difference to you? Why or why not?* The answers gathered for this question varied significantly ranging from 30% of the nontraditional students in the study expressing the cohort model of education did not matter at all, to the remaining 70% indicating the cohort model was an important factor which kept them progressing. The nontraditional students in the study who expressed the importance of the model also indicated this

model contributed to a collaborative learning environment, eliminated feelings of isolation, and provided much needed support to finish the program. This summation was validated by Male Student #7 who indicated, “It’s been pretty fantastic.”

***Interview question eight.*** *Has this educational experience been what you expected, and has it affected your family?* Participant responses varied to this question with several students indicating it was not at all what they expected and others indicating they did not know what to expect. Many nontraditional students cited the experience as being extremely hard on their families with many family members having to assume more responsibility during this time, lack of sleep for the students, and lack of understanding from the family as to the programmatic rigor involved. Female Student #11 related:

It has been really, really hard, but I didn’t think that I was going to be able to do it as easily as I have, and I think that is because there are other people doing it with me that does help a lot, having a support group. I don’t see my family very much. It’s definitely put a lot more responsibility and burden on my husband to be there to pick up the kids after school, and I know they miss me. We just had Mother’s Day and they miss me, and I miss them too.

***Interview question nine.*** *Some of the struggles nontraditional college students experience are the demands outside of the classroom; however, most studies point to the fact that nontraditional college students typically perform better. Why do you think this is so?* Interestingly, many nontraditional students cited maturity and life experience as reasons for better performance. Johnson and Nussbaum (2012) determined this performance by nontraditional students comes from life experiences resulting in



increased motivation and better coping skills, something traditional students are often lacking. In addition to life experience and maturity, families also played a significant role in motivating nontraditional students, which motivated students to perform in the best possible way. Female Student #11 noted, “I think there is that extra motivation, because it’s not just for yourself, it’s for your family, too.”

*Interview question ten. What type of support system or relationship do you have with your classmates in this cohort model? Explain.* A resounding answer emerged from this question; most of the nontraditional students in this cohort had experienced a positive outcome because of the cohort model. Such factors as a strong support system, lifelong friendships, and enhanced collaborative learning environment were outcomes summarized by Female Student #5.

*Interview question eleven. Does your relationship with your peers or classmates affect your education? Explain.* Most nontraditional students interviewed felt the relationship with peers was a very important element and provided not only a support system, but also created a community learning environment. This support system also provided much needed encouragement between peers to move forward at times when the rigor of the program seems almost overwhelming. Also expressed by students was the level of comfort among peers that occurred as a result of the community environment in which students felt the freedom to express a lack of understanding of difficult concepts or information not easily understood. Classmates often provided positive support for each other through the difficult times by providing encouragement to stay the course.

*Interview question twelve. Is there something you wish to tell me about your experiences that I did not ask you?* Only a couple of participants had anything to add to

this question other than reiterating the supreme quality of the program starting with friendships that were made with the outstanding faculty who helped students achieve established goals of graduating with a degree.

**Faculty.** The following information is a summary of the results obtained from the interviews with faculty teaching in the cohort program. Three faculty participated in the study. In order to obtain non-biased results, and to provide appropriate distance from the researcher, a proctor conducted the interview sessions.

*Interview question one.* *What do you feel has helped you succeed as a college professor in relation to your nontraditional college students?* The answers to this question were similar. All three faculty reiterated the importance of developing strong relationships with students and noted building bonds takes time to develop and understand each student individually. Faculty also expressed the importance of creating an environment conducive to learning, which is produced through being flexible and adaptable in teaching plans, delivery methods, and extra support when needed.

Another important factor noted in the interviews was faculty had the opportunity to spend two years with the students, allowing them to learn the students' different learning styles. The importance of time spent with students was validated by Male Faculty Member #1 who relayed, "You get to know the students, and you get to know what they need, and you're able to kind of provide that more because based upon the time you spend with them." Faculty relayed the importance of understanding the complexity of nontraditional students attending school, and juggling multiple roles and responsibilities outside of school can create angst in the students. This tension challenges

faculty to adapt teaching styles, due dates, and additional tutoring when needed so nontraditional students to succeed.

***Interview question two.*** *How do you teach differently in regards to your nontraditional college students?* Faculty mentioned oftentimes it takes going the extra mile to adjust teaching, delivery, and learning styles. Male Faculty Member #1 explained, “Everyone understands this stuff a lot differently, so that makes it really hard to teach just one way and everybody get it.” Using different methods of delivery, such as different teaching methods and real-life applications, is essential when teaching nontraditional students. Consequently, it takes incorporating multiple avenues of delivery to reach each student.

***Interview question three.*** *What do you do differently that you feel matters and motivates nontraditional college students to complete college?* The answers provided by the faculty varied, but answers pointed back to the importance of relationships. Male Faculty Member #2 shared that his personal life experiences of also being a nontraditional student played a significant role in the connection and relationship between faculty and nontraditional students and the numerous barriers other nontraditional students face while attending school. Additionally, Male Faculty Member #1 felt being respectful of nontraditional students’ time and preparing “purposeful teaching” was meaningful and providing succinct instruction contributing to improved outcomes.

***Interview question four.*** *What barriers, personal and professional, do you see nontraditional college students have or experience while attending college?* All three participants expressed *age* as a significant barrier with students of varying ages within the

cohort. This age barrier initially seemed to be important and a divisive measure, but over the two-year period, this barrier diminished within the community learning environment. Male Faculty Member #2 cited the age of the faculty in relation to nontraditional students who are oftentimes older and can bring significant challenges in attitudes. Maturity and life experiences are the factors that contribute to the attitude barrier. The deficit of time is also a significant barrier for nontraditional students. Many nontraditional students face multiple obligations outside of the classroom inclusive of dependents and jobs, which can be very challenging.

*Interview question five. How important do you feel the student/faculty relationship is in your nontraditional college student' educational pursuits?* This question generated responses that were similar with all faculty participants believing establishing a relationship was significant and of great importance. Likewise, Faculty member #1 asserted, "In order to establish a solid relationship with nontraditional students, it was important to establish trust and then build from there."

*Interview question six. How do you emphasize to nontraditional college students the importance of success? What indicators do they give you that they understand?* Male Faculty Member #2 specified they often present the program to students as a two-year job interview. This job interview analogy is significant in that this description helps nontraditional students place the program in a real-life situation that is understandable and relatable. Many times nontraditional students will often tutor other peers when performing well in the class as a result of the growth, success, and confidence attained in their knowledge base.

*Interview question seven. Your program is a cohort model of education. Do you feel that makes a difference to nontraditional college students' success? Why or why not?*

All three faculty participants indicated overwhelmingly the cohort model created a significant support system for nontraditional students. Male Faculty Member #2 described the cohort model as an ideal support system where strong bonds of friendship were created. Faculty participants surmised these bonds occur when strong relationships are formed which most often are a natural occurrence in a cohort model.

*Interview question eight. Some of the struggles nontraditional college students experience are the demands outside of the classroom; however, most studies point to the fact that nontraditional college students typically perform better. Why do you think this is so?* All three faculty participants responded similarly stating nontraditional students enter the program with different and varied life experiences and numerous outside responsibilities, which can be barriers or motivators to complete school. Male Faculty Member #2 described the reason he felt nontraditional students are successful is a result of having a different "mindset" which comes from their life experiences and the need to get in and out of college as quickly as possible due to time limitations. Also, because of the time constraints, many nontraditional students are more focused, have better organization skills, and participate more in the classroom as described by Wyatt (2011).

*Interview question nine. Is there something you wish to tell me about your experience as a professor educating nontraditional college students that I did not ask you?* Female Faculty Member #3 added, above all else, nontraditional students know the faculty care about them. Faculty and students asserted the constant and ever present discussion with regard to study habits, perseverance, tenacity, fortitude, and

encouragement to see nontraditional students through the program but assuring those same students daily, they are capable.

**Emerging themes.** After analyzing the data from all the interviews, themes emerged, which created an overreaching premise. The themes are reflective of the information gathered from all perspectives. According to Creswell (2014) “researchers review all the data, make sense of it, and organize it into categories or themes that cut across all the data sources” (p.186). The themes for this study are as follows:

*Connectivity.* An important factor related to success in the nontraditional students’ college experience appeared to be that of establishing connections or relationships. This theme was expressed by both faculty and nontraditional students. The development of important relationships among and between peers as well as faculty was ongoing and resonated throughout most participant responses. Relationships are an important constituent of the education process which was expressed by most nontraditional students in the study. The importance of relationships was evidenced by reports of peer support, value, and encouragement. Additionally, the benefits of these relationships served only to strengthen the collaborative and community-learning setting thus creating an optimal environment for learning from each other. Female Student #5 relayed, “We’ve just kind of pulled together as one. We just kind of help each other out.” Additionally, “My peers have been like my sisters. I’ve developed a lot of close relationships in this program. It’s been a blessing.”

*Tenacity.* Nontraditional students also expressed a tenacious fortitude for not quitting. This determination was enforced by the support provided the students that came in many forms inclusive of family, faculty, and peer support. Many nontraditional student

responses pointed to the varying support systems, which kept students focused and highly motivated.

Faculty also expressed nontraditional students must have a tenacious determination to finish the program. This, in part, they believed was due to the fact they must be organized and aggressive in their pursuit of a degree because of the lack of time they often have to complete the degree. Female Faculty Member #3 stated, “I’ve always thought this and have no studies to back this up but it seems like when you have more on your plate, you have to be organized and you can’t procrastinate.” Male Faculty Member #1 supported this by stating, “I think, while nontraditional students balance a lot more, I think their experience in life has made them a little bit more capable than that... they can balance and are more focused.”

*Sacrifice.* Most of the participants alluded to having to compromise certain aspects of the life they knew outside of school. This sacrifice, explained by many of the nontraditional students, though challenging and at times questionable, was supremely worth it in the end. Many expressed the sacrifice of time as a major component that mattered immensely while attending school.

Not only did nontraditional students relay they sacrificed much to be in school, faculty also sacrificed the way they teach, time spent on subject matter, and their own personal time in order to see the students succeed. Female Faculty Member #3 relayed, “they [nontraditionals] need more time” which forces faculty to spend time outside of the classroom meeting and tutoring students.

## Conclusions

In this section, the findings from the study are discussed and compared with the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Many of the findings were consistent with current literature on nontraditional students with several themes rising from the data. The conclusions are deliberated, and the research questions from the study are used as a guide.

*Research question number one. What factors do nontraditional students who attend a private, Midwestern, single-purpose college perceive as contributing to their success?* Over this two-year program, the connectivity students experienced matured into collaborative relationships, which continued to be strengthened. Collaboration and the growth of personal bonds provided a support system indicative of Schlossberg's (1989) research related to the theories of mattering and marginality. Schlossberg (1989) believed the extent to which an individual feels connected can quite possibly be coupled to outcomes achieved, either positive or negative.

Both nontraditional students and faculty validated this thought many times in their interview responses. Female Faculty Member #3 corroborated student responses indicating an intentional measure to ensure students understand, above all else, that faculty care about them and student success is always at the forefront of their [faculty] thinking. This rather simple but monumental quality in their cohort education process validated Schlossberg's (1989) work. Female Faculty Member #3 noted:

Because they matter to me, they are not just a number or someone sitting in a seat. They really do matter to me, and I want to make sure that they are safe. Some of these students are driving an hour and half to get to class, and I want to make sure



that they are okay and they know that. They know that I really care about them, not just as a student but as a real person.

Nontraditional students also spoke of the importance of establishing connectivity within the classroom between their peers and also faculty. Many nontraditional students explained the significance of the student-faculty relationship as what kept them going.

Female Student #5 stated:

It's very important. I think when you have a close relationship with your faculty, I think it enables you to ask questions, to get a little bit deeper in your education. It allows you to speak openly about things you are not understanding and allows you to get better clarification, I think, when you have that relationship that's a little bit more open. If you're not understanding something, or even if it's a personal matter, they're just all around there for you, and I think that building, that foundation, is key to success in learning and not only in learning but succeeding.

The connectivity of the students and staff in this study also aligned with Mezirow's (2000) work in which he noted transformative learning was largely affected by both the relationships students build and their experiences during the educational process. The results of connections and relationships are also supported by Bruffee (1999), who described this as a social process that pulls individuals together for a common interest but transitions into bonds of security and the formation of strong friendships.

Research Question One was also supported by *Tenacity*. A by-product of nontraditional students *tenacity* was used to describe students who brought both maturity and vast life experience to the classroom. The result of these experiences created a sense of urgency to complete the program. While Sasso and DeVitis (2015) determined these

life skills can also be barriers to student success, Shillingford and Karlin (2013) believed what drives each student is dependent on varying intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

Within the cohort the participants believed the factors that determined these students to be nontraditional initially also created a bond and determination for encouragement and support of peers in similar situations. This bond was also propelled by the unwavering support and encouragement of faculty through communication, time, and role-modeling. Female Student #1 voiced the motivation as a result of the relationships within the cohort as: "I've never been in something quite so family orientation. It's amazing." This powerful tool in the form of interpersonal relationships, as Wyatt (2011) discussed, becomes the mechanism for motivation, thereby experiencing greater outcomes. Motivation then becomes a by-product of increased confidence.

*Sacrifice* also provided support to answer research question one. Time, or the lack thereof, resulted in sacrificing countless hours away from children, spouses, and life events outside of school. Fillipponi-Berardinelli (2013) described the demands of living in two different worlds often adds significant tension to an already stressful situation and many times is often associated with guilt. Female adult students, more so than male students, often struggle specifically with the guilt of attending college due to having children or families needing them (Filipponi-Berardinelli, 2013; O'Shea & Stone, 2011; Stone & O'Shea, 2013). While time spent away from family was monumentally difficult, the sacrifice was instrumental in keeping nontraditional students focused. Wyatt (2011) noted stress related to time spent away from families often causes nontraditional students to drop out altogether from college.

*Research question number two. What factors do nontraditional students perceive as mattering in their educational experience at a private, Midwestern, single-purpose college?* This research question had many responses similar to Research Question One; much of the data is reflective of the importance of mattering. While nontraditional students and traditional students entered the cohort with varying life experiences that separated them in relation to age, dependents, and jobs, the participants immediately expressed upon enrolling in the program, friendships and community learning began to develop, thus creating a sense of belonging.

Strayhorn (2012) asserted this connection can become quite effective in community learning when students find a commonality linking them together. The process of mattering allowed many of the issues and life experiences that initially separated students to diminish over time. Female Faculty Member #3 stated, “The friends and bonds they make are forever.” The feeling of mattering or being part of something bigger than one’s self became the focus and a valuable learning tool where students assisted and encouraged each other. Female Student #1 noted, “We’re constantly saying, ‘You can do this. If I can do it, you can do it too.’ We’re constantly lifting each other up to make sure we don’t fall behind.”

Much like Schlossberg’s (1989) theory of mattering, a collaborative learning style established through the connection to others within the classroom, resulted in strong relationships through community-learning. However, the common bond created through community learning affected by both a student’s surroundings and the relationships the student builds within the varied contexts or differences of the educational pathway, results in a tenacity to stay the course. Mezirow (2000) described these varying

differences as related to age, social class, and background, as well as numerous other differences which may provide students an opportunity to learn from each other through a cooperative learning atmosphere (Lau, 2003). Finding common ground through cooperative learning (Lau, 2003), much like Schlossberg's (1989) theory of mattering, allows students to develop connections. These connections then create important bonds inclusive of increased social support, relationships, and acceptance (Mezirow, 2000). Feeling as though one does not fit in, or the idea of being in two different worlds, may contribute to a feeling of marginality (Schlossberg, 1989).

Because there was a sense of belonging, learning became a team effort and *tenacity* to succeed existed. Each individual strived to ensure everyone stayed the course and moved forward. Female Student #1 voiced the encouragement and camaraderie created a no-quit atmosphere among peers stating, "We do support each other and we help each other if we don't exactly understand." This statement from Student #1 corroborates Schlossberg's (1989) theory of mattering, which espouses the idea of connection and value during the educational experience and may raise retention and graduation rates.

The notable differences, such as age, dependents, work environment, and life experiences identified by Mezirow (2000), all play a significant role in the collaborative learning environment. Tinto (2012) also described the benefits that occur when relationships are formed in the educational realm; knowledge is increased, and has a great impact in the community environment often resulting in better outcomes for students. While common ground may be what initiates connectivity, Mezirow (2000) determined it

is the common bond that strengthens the relationship, thereby almost eliminating boundary lines of those things that grouped students initially into categories.

The theme *Sacrifice* was also evident in the conclusions of Research Question Two. Information which emerged from both student and faculty interviews indicated faculty were perceived to sacrifice for all students within the cohort who needed help in understanding or clarifying the content of the course, further deepening the concept of mattering to students. Students indicated how faculty reworked schedules, and made themselves available to ensure student success was considered routine. While the faculty did not indicate or imply in the interviews feeling burdened by their actions, sacrifice on faculty personal time was noted. Male Student #4 summarized by stating:

There's no such thing as office hours for them. Geez, one of them, I think, is here more than he is at home. After hours, he walks by our classroom every day, after we've all left to make sure there is no one left in there. If so, he stops and helps them however he can. I think that's a big thing.

The role faculty play with regard to student success is epic. While many times institutions become barriers to education, it is the connection of faculty to students that can make the difference. This important connection further validates Schlossberg's (1989) research and the importance of involvement, which are closely tied to the self-efficacy process, that results ultimately cause students to believe in their ability to be successful.

***Research question number three.*** *What factors do nontraditional students perceive as marginal in their educational experience at a private, Midwestern, single-purpose college?* Interestingly, the data collected from nontraditional student participants did not reveal any specific factor as marginal during the educational process.

Additionally, every student participating in this research study spoke favorably about the program as a whole. Specifically students articulated how much the faculty and organization of the program overall were both very beneficial and rewarding. Only a few students articulated indifference related to being part of a cohort model.

However, many students did cite huge financial concerns as a factor that weighed heavy on nontraditional students' minds. Nontraditional students often cannot work or must work fewer hours causing significant strain on the finances. This financial burden may often result in students sleeping less and working more, thereby sacrificing the time needed to study (Hogan, Bryant, & Overmyer-Day, 2013). For those with dependents, the struggle can become insurmountable at times (Petty & Thomas, 2014). Female Student #3 voiced her concerns by stating, "Our financial situation stinks," relating to the loss of income she and her husband have experienced while she has been attending college.

The financial stressors are of real concern to nontraditional students due to the varied situational barriers they bring with them (Hogan et al., 2013). This often results in unfavorable outcomes for the nontraditional student who many times elects to forgo an education due because of the mounting debt or lack of finances (Hogan et al., 2013). Many of the students voiced similar opinions regarding the financial aspect of their education. Female Student #3 stated:

I know when I take a loan out, that's my money that I have to pay back. So I have my drive that I have to do this, and I have to do this right, and I have to do it right the first time.

However, faculty expressed a different view that could be analyzed as a feeling of marginality from the students' perspective relative to the numerous responsibilities nontraditional students have and trying to juggle between family life, school, and jobs. Faculty also mentioned the financial burden on the nontraditional student as a factor.

*Research question number four. What factors do college educators who teach in a private, Midwestern, single-purpose college perceive as their roles in keeping nontraditional students engaged?* The three faculty members expressed a passion for student success citing the importance of connecting with their students within the cohort as nonnegotiable. Also faculty members relayed that connecting with students within the cohort was an intentional and deliberate act to break down barriers and raise confidence, as all three understood the challenges face by nontraditional students. Two of the faculty members identified as being nontraditional students themselves. Female Faculty Member #3 gained a greater understanding when she began a master's degree while having a job and family: "I had a young child, who was a year old and a husband and trying to juggle all of that" (Female Faculty Member #3). Faculty participants expressed their intense desire for role modeling in preparing students for workplace professionalism.

The data collected from faculty also revealed a tenacity to provide not only support for nontraditional students within the classroom but outside of the classroom as well. Male Faculty Member #1 relayed the importance of getting to know each student as an important asset, and identified "the time you get to spend with them [nontraditional students] is really the biggest thing [factor]." Faculty participants expressed serving as role models, facilitators, encouragers, and counselors during the educational experience. This purposeful engagement greatly enhanced the students' experience validating

Schlossberg (1989) belief of an evolutionary or self-efficacy process that occurs, which enhances the students' self-confidence ultimately resulting in greater outcomes for students.

The steadfastness held by many of the nontraditional students was also a by-product of the tenacious and unwavering faculty belief system and support provided to students during the educational experience. The message continually reinforced by faculty to nontraditional students was one which delivered constant encouragement, essentially propelling students to a self-efficacy process and belief in themselves. Female Student #5 expressed, "They [faculty] tell us every day. Not only do they tell us, but they show us." Fuentes, Alvarado, Berdan, and DeAngelo (2014) asserted through the interaction and relational development between students and faculty, both sides often benefit causing faculty to have an increased mindfulness of life struggles and experiences of their students.

Knowing their students are dealing with so many outside factors challenges faculty to adapt and be increasingly flexible in relation to the struggles of nontraditional students, acknowledging the vast responsibilities pulling at them from outside the classroom walls (Fuentes et al., 2014). Not only do students sacrifice, but faculty who are hugely committed to student success, must also sacrifice. Being intentional in their connecting with students did require faculty to sacrifice much of their own time to spend needed time with students to ensure understanding of content, tutoring, hours of counseling, and unending support. Male Faculty Member #1: "Everything is built on purpose." The tenacious and purposeful determination and sacrifices faculty made proved



beneficial for nontraditional students, which have resulted in a pass rate of 100% on the registry for greater than 25 years.

All themes rising from this study were deemed as paramount; all three were interrelated. However, the one underlying foundational factor of engagement is necessary and vital to success. When relationships developed, the tenacity to stay the course also increased, solidifying the need to make sacrifices with a determination to complete the program together. Interestingly, it is the process of engagement that transcended into the other themes mentioned in this study, and the importance of mattering cannot be underestimated.

### **Implications for Practice**

As institutions continue to see an influx of nontraditional students seeking degrees, a dominant presence by nontraditional students across college campuses has become the reality, as identified by Ross-Gordon (2011) and how to engage and retain this group must be addressed. The number of nontraditional students who attended higher education has surpassed traditional students (Wyatt, 2011). With the change in the student population demographic, it is understandable why college completion rates hover at just above the 50% mark and the time it takes to complete a college degree is in excess of five years. Completion rates are a staggering 60%, with many students taking upwards of six years to complete (Bettinger et al., 2013). A concentrated and intentional blueprint to engage all students in higher education must be the focus at all levels. In order to fully engage students, the most prevailing and necessary ingredient must include a passion for education and the profession, coupled with a desire to interact with students as a foundational premise for reaching all students.

While institutions continue to look for effective ways to raise graduation numbers, it is important to delineate the significant barriers nontraditional students face upon entering college. It is essential college leaders, faculty, and staff utilize research and formulate plans for college-wide efforts for reaching and retaining this group of students (Kuh et al., 2010). Evaluation of not only the curricular mechanisms of education delivery and dissemination but all areas in relation to the stumbling blocks nontraditional students face while attending college would prove beneficial. Based upon the results obtained from this study, three implications for practice exist:

**Enhancing and connecting the higher education environment to nontraditional students.** Institutions of higher education have become significant barriers to nontraditional students (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Kelly and Strawn, (2011) asserted the nontraditional college students' return to college comes with significant roadblocks both personally and professionally. Many nontraditional students enter college comprised of a blue-collar milieu significantly behind their counterparts and are deficient of the many processes and policies within the institution.

Educating nontraditional students on process specifics could help alleviate many of the frustrations and feelings of detachment often felt upon entering higher education. Higher education institutions are often viewed by nontraditional students as rigid and unwilling to work with students (Tinto, 1993). It is essential, as Kuh et al. (2011) suggested that institutions place as much effort into building relationships with students as students spend preparing coursework. Effective communication and education of effective processes related to college success for nontraditional students might defray some of the fear of the unknown and negative thoughts.

Successful institutions could begin a process by identifying nontraditional students and provide assistance in various areas of the college. Greater lengths can be taken to connect nontraditional students through areas as advising, tutoring, and mentoring programs (Lightweis, 2014). Providing enhanced social services support, such as personal and career counseling, transportation possibilities, and an ongoing effort to identify additional delivery methods, could also raise retention outcomes (Hoffman & Reindl, 2011). Since nontraditional students may be socially and academically challenged to higher education, Lightweis (2014) suggested instituting a well-designed mentoring program matching students with like interests or commonalities as beneficial. This socialization could address pertinent topics of how to study, along with computer basics, and would help nontraditional students prepare for the educational experience. Drake (2011) summarized that the core value of every higher education institution should be student success.

**Faculty education for relationship development.** As the need to meet nontraditional college students where they are increases, so does the need to equip faculty with important intangible tools for engaging nontraditional students. Tinto (2012) surmised in order to fully engage with students, all processes within an institution must be evaluated and intentional. However, faculty play the most significant role in the retention of nontraditional students.

Moving beyond the mechanics of education delivery is a must in today's environment. Therefore, professional development education for faculty inclusive of seminars, workshops, or adult education programs related to student-faculty relationships and engagement would be constructive. Drake (2011) asserted professional development

education which enhances the connection between the instructor and nontraditional students is vitally important as a means to support the students' academic success.

Fostering relationships with nontraditional students also provides the nontraditional students a greater sense of belonging, which ultimately results in increased motivation to do well (Strayhorn, 2012).

**Importance of mattering.** Much of the data collected from students and faculty revealed a resounding message of the importance of mattering supporting Schlossberg's (1989) theories of mattering and marginality. Nontraditional students who enter higher education often feel inadequate and out of sync in the higher education world and need to figure out how and where they fit (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). Establishing a social connectedness ultimately creates constructive effects in relation to positive psychological well-being (Cwir, 2011). It is through collaborative activities, such as a cohort model or shared experiences, Cwir (2011), surmised that enhanced motivation also results. The cohort model studied in this research project revealed a strong sense of connection between the students as well as students and faculty as indicated by Male Student #4: "It's a tight knit group."

Schlossberg's (1989) work coincided with the data collected from this research study revealing students participating in a community style learning environment often felt a greater sense of belonging. In addition, the nontraditional students in this cohort developed strong relationships of friendship and a family-like atmosphere expressing the importance of connection and camaraderie as a result. Female Student #2 expressed, "They've kind of become a second family." Interestingly, the strong relationships that developed also resulted in an increased motivation to succeed both individually and as a

group. This was confirmed by Male Student #4 who stated, “There’s nobody left behind...” The transformation of this cohort group resulted in a positive community learning environment in which students felt safe to admit a lack of understanding or needing help. Tinto (2012) described engagement with each other and the community learning environment often results in the experience of gaining knowledge. In this cohort, every student felt a sense of mattering to the others.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

It should be noted, while this study focused on engagement in relation to greater retention with nontraditional students, it is not a complete and comprehensive study. The breadth and scope of the need and how to engagement nontraditional students is far-reaching and expansive. Many facets of how to engage the nontraditional student exist, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

The limitations listed in Chapter One and associated with study included limited sample demographics. These limitations could be corrected by reproducing this study in larger private and public higher education institutions. Different geographic locations and programs nationally would also contribute to gaining an in-depth view of the theories of mattering and marginality in relation to nontraditional college students. Very few studies using Schlossberg’s (1989) theories of mattering and marginality as a foundational premise have been performed. Therefore, it would be interesting to conduct a long-term study using the Schlossberg’s research and intentional engagement as the compass to gauge student outcomes.

Additionally, the study was conducted in a small, private, Midwestern college and cultural differences in larger private institutions or in different geographic areas of the

nation could significantly impact the data. Long-term research and data collection with tracking should be conducted in order to examine the intentional engagement of nontraditional students in different programs, areas, and outcomes. These data could be tracked for a substantial length of time to validate or disqualify the idea of engagement affecting retention outcomes with nontraditional college students.

### **Summary**

Students in today's higher education world look vastly different than years past. Flooded with nontraditional college students, many are identified as adult learners, a term coined by Cross (1981) who identified nontraditional students as adult learners or lifelong learners. While the exact definition for nontraditional students varies, typically, these students are identified as students who have families, jobs, are older, and normally paying their own way in college (Wyatt, 2011). With greater than 85% of all students in higher education comprised of nontraditional students (Soares, 2013), it is a major focus for most institutions in reaching and retaining nontraditional college students in the hope that increased graduation rates will be the result.

As discussed in Chapter One, the nontraditional student faces many challenges upon returning to college. With an increased knowledge of the need for a college education, ongoing assessment of how to increase retention rates and graduation outcomes is also rising (Laitinen, 2012). Schlossberg's (1989) theory of mattering and marginality was used as the theoretical framework to guide this study and discover key elements needed for better outcomes to success for nontraditional students.

A review of current and historical literature related to nontraditional student retention, along with Schlossberg's (1989) theories of mattering and marginality, were

presented in Chapter Two. Identified in the research was confirmation nontraditional students face three distinctive barriers inclusive of dispositional barriers related to self-confidence, situational barriers which are demands outside of the classroom, and institutional barriers where oftentimes colleges are not equipped or trained to meet the nontraditional students' needs (Kinghorn & Smith, 2013). Existing literature focused on the importance of engagement and establishing connections with nontraditional students as a vital element contributing to retention and eventual graduation.

The methodology of the study was the focus of Chapter Three. A qualitative design was chosen for the research and centered around a case study involving a two-year cohort model of education in a private, Midwestern, single-purpose college. By conducting this study, four research questions served as a means to answer perceptions of the education process using Schlossberg's (1989) theories of mattering and marginality as a foundation. Twelve nontraditional students and three faculty members were identified and consented to participate in the study. The data collected were used to appraise how nontraditional students and faculty construed their education experience within this two-year program.

In Chapter Four the findings of the open-ended interview questions were reported. The data were transcribed and the process of deduction and formulation of thoughts began to identify overarching ideas. Three common themes, connectivity, tenacity, and sacrifice were identified. Finally in Chapter Five, summarization of the research study was presented. Students and faculty provided valuable insight into their experience in the cohort model, and they expressed many things mattered and contributed greatly to their college experience. Answers provided by nontraditional student participants noted faculty

played a valuable role in student success through support, encouragement, and relationship building.

The findings from the research were compared and tied to background and current research in the conclusions. The tenacity and sacrifice offered by both students and faculty indicated a strong connection that ultimately motivated and, in essence, propelled nontraditional students, creating confidence and fortitude to complete the program. Peer friendships were also developed creating a collaborative learning environment and adding significant strength and support to the nontraditional students to stay focused. Students spoke of offering support to each other but also relayed the importance of the faculty relationship as instrumental as well.

Implications for this study surrounded suggestions to support the institution at every level in working with nontraditional students. How students perform in institutions across the United States does matter (Farnsworth, 2010). However, the process of changing a culture or an organization's focus takes time (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Relationship building is a vital means to enhancing the environment where student success can be achieved (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

Recommendations for future research were made to encourage future studies with different populations. In order to address some of the limitations of the study, different institutions based on size and geography were proposed. Longitudinal studies were also recommended. The cohort model proved to be very beneficial to the success of the nontraditional student. The question remains as to how to incorporate this type of model throughout institutions, rather than pods of successful education within an institution. It is not merely enough to have great programs, but rather organizations should be striving to



have great institutions. Collins (2001) asserted, “Good is the enemy of great,” meaning it becomes very easy to settle into good without striving or even desiring to move toward becoming a great institution. However, when discussing students, institutions of higher education, inclusive of all members of the workforce, should never settle for good.

**Appendix A****LINDENWOOD****Recruitment Letter**

Study of the Theory of Mattering and Marginality in Relation to Nontraditional Students in a Private, Midwestern, Single-purpose College

Dear Student,

I am currently a doctoral candidate at Lindenwood University in St. Charles, Missouri, completing an Educational Doctorate in Higher Education Administration. Additionally, I am the Undergraduate Dean at Cox College, Springfield, Missouri.

For my dissertation, I am conducting research to identify what nontraditional college students feel matters or is considered a marginal effect on success while a student in a cohort health professional program.

However, in order to conduct this research, I must identify nontraditionals within the program. With your permission, I would like to send a demographic survey to you that will identify those of you who are considered nontraditional student. Once identified, 10-12 students will be selected to participate in a brief face-to-face, one-to-one interview with a designated research interviewer.

If you are identified as a nontraditional student and are interested in participating, I would ask that you provide contact information to your program chair so that you may be contacted for scheduling an interview. Should you have any questions about this process, please do not hesitate to contact me at [sonya.hayter@](mailto:sonya.hayter@). You may also contact my Professor Dr. Rhonda Bishop at [Rbishop@](mailto:Rbishop@) with any questions or concerns regarding this research.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sonya Hayter  
Doctoral Candidate  
Lindenwood University

**Appendix B**

## Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your current age? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is your ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_
3. How many dependents do you have? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Is this your first experience with higher education? \_\_\_\_\_
5. What is your marital status? \_\_\_\_\_
6. How many years have you been in school? \_\_\_\_\_
7. How many years were you out of school (i.e. high school or higher education) before returning? \_\_\_\_\_
8. What is your employment status? \_\_\_\_\_
9. If employed, how many hours do you typically work each week? \_\_\_\_\_
10. How would you prefer to be contacted should you be chosen to schedule an interview for this research? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature\_\_\_\_\_  
Date\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Printed Name\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Investigator Date\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Printed Name

## Appendix C

# LINDENWOOD

## INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Study of the Theory of Mattering and Marginality in Relation to Nontraditional Students in a Private, Midwestern, Single-purpose College

Principal Investigator  Sonya M. Hayter

E-mail: [smh166@lionmail.lindenwood.edu](mailto:smh166@lionmail.lindenwood.edu)

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1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Sonya M. Hayter under the guidance of Rhonda Bishop, Ed.D. The purpose of this research is to evaluate what nontraditional college students deem as mattering or marginal in their pursuit of an educational degree.
2. a) Your participation will involve:
  - Completing a demographic survey.
  - Participation in an interview conducted by an assigned proctor at a mutually agreed upon time. *Each interview session will be audio taped.*
  - Participation in a member check for verification of accuracy of transcribed answers from your interview.b) The amount of time involved in your participation will be no longer than one hour.
3. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research.
4. There are no direct benefits for your participation in this study. However, your participation will contribute to gaining a greater understanding of nontraditional college students in relation to retention. Additionally, your participation may also assist institutions of higher education in evaluating retention processes for supporting nontraditional college students in their quest for degree completion.
5. Your participation is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You may choose not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.
6. We will do everything possible to protect your privacy. Personal demographic information will be de-identified and not published or revealed in any publication or

presentation that may result from this study and the information collected will remain in the possession of the investigator in a locked, safe location.

7. Should you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator, Sonya Hayter, [REDACTED] or the Supervising Faculty, Dr. Rhonda Bishop, @rbishop@lindenwood.edu. You may also ask questions of or state concerns regarding your participation to the Lindenwood Institutional Review Board (IRB) by contacting Dr. Jann Weitzel, Vice President for Academic Affairs at 636-949-4846.

**I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I may retain a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature                      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Investigator    Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Printed Name

## Appendix D

### Student Interview Questions

1. Who do you feel has helped you succeed in college, and what did they do to help you succeed?
2. Tell me about the relationships you have developed while attending college. Address both faculty and staff.
3. What matters and motivates you to complete college?
4. What barriers, personal and professional, have you experienced, if any, while attending college?
5. How important is the student/faculty relationship in your educational pursuits?
6. Do you feel your professors care if you succeed or not? How do you know?
7. You are in a cohort model of education. Does that make a difference to you? Why or why not?
8. Has this educational experience been what you expected, and has it affected your family?
9. Some of the struggles nontraditional college students experience are the demands outside of the classroom; however, most studies point to the fact that nontraditional college students typically perform better. Why do you think this is so?
10. What type of support system or relationship do you have with your classmates in this cohort model? Explain.
11. Does your relationship with your peers or classmates affect your education? Explain.
12. Is there something you wish to tell me about your experiences that I did not ask you?

## Appendix E

### Faculty Interview Questions

1. What do you feel has helped you succeed as a college professor in relation to your nontraditional college students?
2. How do you teach differently in regards to your nontraditional college students?
3. What do you do differently that you feel matters and motivates nontraditional college students to complete college?
4. What barriers, personal and professional, do you see nontraditional college students have or experience while attending college?
5. How important do you feel the student/faculty relationship is in your nontraditional college student' educational pursuits?
6. How do you emphasize to nontraditional college students the importance of success? What indicators do they give you that they understand?
7. Your program is a cohort model of education. Do you feel that makes a difference to nontraditional college students' success? Why or why not?
8. Some of the struggles nontraditional college students experience are the demands outside of the classroom; however, most studies point to the fact that nontraditional college students typically perform better. Why do you think this is so?
9. Is there something you wish to tell me about your experience as a professor educating nontraditional college students that I did not ask you?

## Appendix F

# LINDENWOOD

LINDENWOOD UNIVERSITY ST. CHARLES, MISSOURI

DATE: May 11, 2015

TO: Sonya Hayter, EdD  
FROM: Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board

STUDY TITLE: [095831-1] Study of the Theory of Mattering and Marginality in Relation to Nontraditional Students in a Private, Midwestern, Single-purpose College

IRB REFERENCE #:  
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED  
APPROVAL DATE: May 1, 2015  
EXPIRATION DATE: May 11, 2018  
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research project. Lindenwood 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.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to the IRB.

This project has been determined to be a Minimal Risk project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the completion/amendment form for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of May 11, 2018.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years.



## Appendix G

April 15, 2015

Sonya -

Certainly, please feel free to proceed with the research project described.

Thank you.

Lance

President,

**From:** Hayter, Sonya

**Sent:** Monday, April 13, 2015 1:14 PM

**To: Subject:** Research request

Dr.

I have attached a letter requesting permission to conduct research at \_\_\_\_\_ College.  
Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Respectfully,

**Sonya Hayter**

CONFIDENTIALITY NOTICE: This e-mail message, including any attachments, is for the sole use of the intended recipient(s) and may contain confidential and privileged information protected by law. Any unauthorized review, use, disclosure or distribution is prohibited. If you are not the intended recipient, please contact the sender by reply e-mail and destroy all copies of the original message.

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### **Vita**

Sonya Hayter currently serves as Dean of General Education and Student Advancement at Cox College in Springfield, Missouri, where she oversees all general education and serves as an advocate for all students college-wide. Prior to this role, Hayter served as the Undergraduate Dean at Cox College overseeing all undergraduate health profession programs. Hayter holds a Bachelor of Business Administration and a Master of Organizational Leadership from Evangel University, Springfield, Missouri.

Additionally, Hayter has been awarded the Student First award three times: 2010, 2012, and 2015. Hayter was also awarded the Evangel University Adult Education, Award of Excellence, 2006.

Hayter also serves on the Taney County Health Department Board, in Branson, Missouri. Hayter is currently a CoxHealth Ambassador in Springfield, Missouri and serves on the Leadership Cabinet, Policy and Compliance Council, Institutional Effectiveness Council, and multiple advisory committees within Cox College.