

LIFE MANAGEMENT MODEL PARTICIPANTS: THEIR EXPERIENCES AND  
PERSISTENCE AS ADULT LEARNERS

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by

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## DEDICATION

To my best friend, my husband, whom I love deeply  
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Reach for the Stars, boys; Reach for the Stars!

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## ABSTRACT

Many nontraditional/adult students, defined as those who are considered underserved, underrepresented, and/or disadvantaged college students, attend community colleges. Their academic and socioemotional needs are complex. To better meet these needs, college faculty and staff can develop strategic partnerships with community-based organizations and K–12 schools to provide additional support to nontraditional college students. In this phenomenological study, a small group of adult TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) students at a Midwestern community college were interviewed to discover their experiences of participating in a life management model, a strategic model that forms a partnership between community-based organizations and the local community college. The participant responses shed light on how a community-based strategic life management model, institutional support, and personal factors influence nontraditional/adult students and enable them to persist in college.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

According to Brown (2002), “the fastest growing population on college and university campuses across the United States is the nontraditional/adult student population” (p. 67). Brown explained that these students, ranging from single mothers to midlife displaced workers and career changers to older adults who are all experiencing major life and work-related transitions, make up 50% of higher education enrollments. A potential issue arises when the major life and work-related transitions of nontraditional/adult students are coupled with their increasing enrollment rates. Namely, colleges and universities are confronted with the growing problem of rising attrition rates among women, minority, and underprepared adult students. As Brown (2002) indicated,

The participation of the students on campus, therefore, has become the focus of a great deal of attention by nontraditional/adult student academics, practitioners and policy makers, particularly in relation to their retention and persistence in academic degree programs of all levels. (p. 67)

The United States Government Accountability Office (2007) reported an increase in enrollment numbers within community colleges from 1995–2007. In its report, the Office explained that this increase has come from college students understanding that with a college degree, they will earn more and have more opportunities to grow professionally.

Between the 1995–1996 and 2006–2007 school years, overall enrollment in U.S. higher education institutions increased by about 19%, or more than an estimated 2.2 million students. The percentage of students studying full-time increased from 58% to 62% over the same time period. (United States Government Accountability Office, 2007, p. 7)

In addition, the American Association for Community Colleges (AACC) (2009) identified that the economic recession played a major role in the continued enrollment increases within community colleges from 2007 to 2009. This was, in part, because the economic recession changed the financial circumstance of many people nationwide, leading them to community colleges to develop skills, fine tune existing skills, or learn a new skill in order to obtain a job. AACC (2009) reported:

Nationally, the number of students enrolled in credit-bearing courses at community colleges in fall 2009 increased by 11.4% from fall 2008 and 16.9% from fall 2007. Full-time enrollment at U.S. community colleges increased 24.1% in a 2-year time period from fall 2007 to fall 2009. (p. 4)

Fain (2012) pointed out that there is a rising phenomenon emerging—the “reverse transfer,” a trend indicating that there are more and more students at four-year institutions who are now transferring to a community college. According to Fain, due to the current job market and economic downturn, students are more mindful of costs and looking for less expensive options. For example, “roughly 14% of first-time students who enrolled at a four-year institution in the fall of 2005 had transferred to a community college by 2011” (Fain, 2012, para. 2).

Table 1 represents statistical data related to the changing student landscape, exhibiting that 36% of all college students were nontraditional adult students in 2008 and 40% were enrolled in a two-year college in 2009, according to the Center for

Postsecondary and Economic Success (2011). Moreover, an article in *The Atlantic* noted that this increase in the adult student population is likely to continue:

The most significant shift is probably the massive growth in the adult student population in higher education. Thirty-eight percent of those enrolled in higher education are over the age of 25 and one-fourth are over the age of 30. The share of all students who are over age 25 is projected to increase another twenty-three percent by 2019. (Hess, 2011, para. 4)

Table 1

*Yesterday's Nontraditional Student is Today's Traditional Student*

<b>The percentage of undergraduates who are:</b>		
Adult's Age 25 or Older (2008)	36%	More than a third of undergraduate students are over 25. Over the next 10 years the adult student enrollment in college is projected to grow faster than for traditional age students.
Independent Students	47%	Independent Students are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 24 years or older</li> <li>• Married</li> <li>• Responsible for legal dependents other than a spouse</li> <li>• Orphans or wards of the courts (or were wards of the court until age 18) or</li> <li>• Veterans of the U.S. armed services</li> </ul>
Enrolled in a Public Two-Year College (2009)	40%	Enrollment at community colleges increased by an estimated 15% from fall 2008 to fall 2010. Fifty-nine percent of community college students attended part time; whereas, only 22% of undergraduate students attending public four-year institutions attended part time.
Enrolled Part Time (2008)	46%	Undergraduate part-time enrollment has remained relatively steady since 1980, but with growing gaps between the price of tuition and the availability of grant aid, more students may enroll part time and combine work and school.
Minority Students (2009)	36%	Black and Hispanic students are 14.8% and 13.5% of the undergraduate student population respectively. According to projections these groups will make up to 42% of the student



		population in 2019. This projected increase is mainly attributed to the expected 30% and 45% in expected overall growth in Black and Hispanic populations compared to 7% growth for White students.
Low Income (2008)	40%	The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) calculated that the total family income was less than 200% of the Federal Poverty Line for 40% of undergraduate students. Without income to cover basic living expenses, these students will most likely have to work more to cover direct and indirect college costs, which could undermine academic success.
Employed Part Time (2008)	43%	Demos reported that working while in school to finance one's education is necessary for the majority of young college students. For young community college students specifically, 63% would be unable to attend college if they did not work.
Employed Full Time (2008)	32%	Working full time can be a challenge for students who are balancing their course loads, school work, and family responsibilities; yet, almost a third of all undergraduates work 35 hours or more per week.
Parents (2008)	23%	Nearly a quarter of students are parents. Workforce investments and education may produce benefits for adult participants as well as their children. For example, encouraging evidence shows that when mothers with a minimum education complete additional education, their children appear to have improved language and reading skills.
Single Parents (2008)	13%	More than one in eight students are single parents. Compared to married parents, single parents are more likely to have low incomes. To pay tuition and arrange child care, they need more assistance, institutional, government and personal.

Note. From the Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success, 2011.

For the purpose of this study, nontraditional/adult students are defined as and will encompass those adult learners who are considered to be underserved, underrepresented,

and/or disadvantaged college students, and are recognized as students who identify with a multiplicity of daily challenges, including being low income, single parents, first-generation college students, underprepared, ethnic minorities, English language learners, and/or disabled.

According to a current annual report by the Department of Education (AACC, 2014), programs like TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) help bridge the success gap by providing support services that lead to increased student success rates for disadvantaged college students, or those who are first-generation college students, low-income students, and/or students with disabilities. The Council for Opportunity in Education (n.d.) described the Department of Education's seven TRIO support programs from a national perspective:

TRIO is a set of federally-funded college opportunity programs that motivate and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds in their pursuit of a college degree. 790,000 low-income, first-generation students and students with disabilities—from sixth grade through college graduation—are served by over 2,800 programs nationally. TRIO programs provide academic tutoring, personal counseling, mentoring, financial guidance, and other supports necessary for educational access and retention. TRIO programs provide direct support services for students, and relevant training for directors and staff. (para. 1)

TRIO SSS, in and of itself, makes a case for targeted outreach to the nontraditional student population; that case is that additional support provides them with a more productive and successful experience as they complete college. The adversities that TRIO SSS participants experience, such as disabilities, low-income levels, lack of child care, ethnic minority status, underpreparedness, and/or language barriers, all play a role in why these students need additional support. The primary problem is that these

adversities can be overwhelming and prevent college persistence. Additional support often is needed to remedy these issues and promote persistence and completion.

College administrators have seen such an influx of nontraditional/adult students that discussions have begun on how to conquer the two-sided problem of a growing population and rising attrition rates. Many researchers are looking at the origin of the problem by seeking to uncover what systemic themes present themselves as barriers to student success for this particular student population. Brown (2002) pointed out that nontraditional/adult students often have flooded colleges and universities due to the experience of a recent divorce, changes in the workplace, or an expansion of life choices.

Divorce is a common reason for adults enrolling or returning to college, which is reflective of the collapse of the traditional nuclear family, according to Brown (2002). Adult students who are divorced typically have complicated lives that require flexibility when dealing with family and work responsibilities. In this regard, Erisman and Steele (2012) recognized that oftentimes nontraditional/adult students need additional support because of health and transportation issues as well as lack of quality and consistent child care.

In addition to divorce, nontraditional students have hurried back to college in large numbers because of changes in the workplace (Brown, 2002). The institution of work, as we have known it in this country, has been constantly changing in recent decades. The idea of making a long term commitment to a particular job or organization is being phased out. Instead, many Americans have adopted more of a self-interested and survival mindset where they have little loyalty to where they work and consequently, spend less time there. Moreover, there are many other factors such as mergers,

acquisitions, downsizing, and career change that are impacting employment patterns and also are altering the gainful employment and career directions of many people (Brown, 2002, p. 69). These workplace changes and challenges are encouraging prospective students not only to return to college but to frequently and constantly update their skills because they are cognizant of market trends. Enrolling or returning to college allows adult learners an opportunity to sharpen their skills, adopt new skills, and obtain a credential in order to make them more marketable in the workplace.

The last reason put forth by Brown (2002) for adults returning to school focuses on the development of life choice as older adults. According to Brown, this is a stage in life where older adults understand the significance of life-long learning. Therefore, they also go to college in the hope of having a longer life span and better health. Enrolling in college as an adult is also often due to economic necessity and the need to remain employed longer, thus delaying their eventual retirement.

Kasworm (2008), in an article entitled “Emotional Challenges of Adult Learners in Higher Education,” described how most adult learners enter college with the goal to be successful. As they build their confidence to take the initial step to go back to school, they are taking a leap of faith, hoping that they will be able to manage their multiple responsibilities. From a psychological perspective, most are apprehensive about this transition into college. Kasworm (2008) observed that adult students entering college might become frustrated and discouraged at times, but that these individuals “present attitudes, skills, and beliefs of resilience and risk taking; they believe that they have a high probability of success and are committed to a quality learning experience and a college credential” (p. 28).

Adult learners are a concern for those who work in higher education. According to Kasworm (2008),

[Many of these] students are unsure of themselves and their future, whether they are a first-time student or a re-entry student. They often seek college entry through a life crisis, such as divorce or separation, work issues, or some other significant need such as seeking a career with financial stability. (p. 28)

The research of both Kasworm (2008) and Brown (2002) demonstrates how important it is for educators working with adult/nontraditional-students to understand their frame of reference and personal challenges. Kasworm (2008) reflected on what these students experience as they try to manage their lives:

They often have a questioning sense of who they are, what they should be doing as learners, and how they can be effective and successful in a collegiate environment. Furthermore, these adults may have fragile financial support and equally fragile interpersonal supports to pursue a college degree. (p. 28)

Characteristically, enrolling or returning to college becomes an emotional decision for adult students because of how much is at stake. Given that factor, there needs to be support for these students when they decide to take that leap of faith.

Kasworm (2008) described some issues surrounding this decision:

Given these emotional conditions, one of the first acts of hope is for the student to register for classes, and participate in collegiate courses. Drawing on their past life experiences and their evaluation of their past learning, these individuals enter the classroom with an evolving and sometimes conflicted learner identity. Research suggests that many adult learners experience significant anxiety and self-consciousness about their acceptance, place in a collegiate environment, and ability to perform as undergraduate students. (p. 28)

There is a traditional way of supporting students through the collegiate system. This support typically consists of a number of departments working together to recruit, retain, and graduate students. At a college or university, it is often enrollment management, student affairs, academic support services, and financial aid departments

that play significant roles in this process. The focus for this study is on nontraditional/adult college students in the community college setting. I have chosen the community college setting specifically because of its ongoing focus and support for nontraditional/adult learners for the past five decades.

Today's community college students are progressively more diverse, but interconnect in areas such as gender, race, age, religion, ethnicity, family history, academic preparation, economic background, motivational level, and learning styles (Ender, Chand, & Thornton, 1996). The AACC (2013) reported that community colleges serve over half of the undergraduate student population and, since 1985, more than half are women. "Community colleges also provide access to education for many nontraditional students, such as adults who are working while enrolled. The average age of a community college student is 29 and two thirds of community college students attend part-time" (AACC, 2013, para. 1). This diversity lends itself to the special programming needed to meet nontraditional students where they are. According to Culp (2005), typically, community colleges have support services such as admissions, registration, judicial affairs, financial aid, job placement, retention, advising, transfer articulation, assessment, counseling, orientation, outreach, and student activities as well as targeted programs for GED graduates, program completers, and at-risk students. These support services are necessary to help students be more productive in the classroom and to aid in their adaption to the college culture. Many community colleges employ advisors and counselors with specialties related to various nontraditional student populations so as to connect with these populations and better understand their particular needs.

The consistent challenge, which is the focus of this research, is the lack of comprehensive support to meet the needs of these students. Although there are traditional college support services, these services often need to be more comprehensive and proactive for nontraditional students if they are to become productive college students. Those services need to support the student by promoting their self-sufficiency in order to move toward completion. Culp (2005) made the following recommendation:

Student affairs practitioners need to focus on creating programs that encourage individuals to pursue higher education, convert applicants into successful students by connecting them to the institution and helping them make sense of their experiences, encourage students to become self-sufficient, and assist graduates and program completers to take the next step when they reach their educational and career goals at the community college. (p. 47)

Kasworm (2008) added that many nontraditional/adult students will struggle to battle their interpersonal issues while they simultaneously return to school to complete their college degrees. At many colleges, there is a gap between the interpersonal, professional, and academic needs of nontraditional students and the programs and services that student affairs and academic support departments offer these students. A gap exists because (a) there is a wide array of comprehensive services that should be provided to meet the many challenges faced by nontraditional/adult students, and (b) community colleges serve many of these students but have limited funding and resources. And, in these economically difficult times, funding has become even scarcer. This gap is not an intentional gap, but a gap nonetheless. This study explores options to bridge that gap.

The existence of this gap is why it is advantageous for community college leaders to look into external, community-based resources in the form of formal partnerships to

augment their existing support services and help reduce high rates of attrition amongst nontraditional/adult students. To this end, the work of Rendón, Gans, and Calleroz (1996) describes how they created an assessment model for K–16 students in the inner city. The goal of the model is to recognize the barriers that might impede student success and how to use professionals from various sectors to collaborate on problems that are faced within the community. Their partnership created a citywide alliance to collaborate on ideas, understanding that they could accomplish more by working together. Rendón et al. (1996) stress key elements of their partnerships:

A key element in the success of each partnership has been involving leaders from different sectors, who can use their personal and institutional power to come together and find solutions to shared problems. Citywide alliances have also worked together to share services and resources, develop goals, solve organizational dilemmas, and understand and resolve personal differences. They sought to overcome entrenched layers of damaging attitudes, policies, and practices that worked against student success. UPP [Urban Partnership Program] collaboratives strived to develop creative solutions, recognizing that there were multiple ways to change social services and educational systems. (p. 72)

Often nontraditional/adult students experience situational barriers when enrolled in college. Many of these students are single parents with two or more children; some receive little to no child support, are working part time, and are receiving governmental assistance. Brown (2002) explained their decision to return to school and some of the challenges connected to that decision by stating, “their lives are held together by the threads of available child care, dependable transportation, and access to health care. Any break in these sources of support threatens their success in the classroom” (p. 68).

Understanding that there has been a significant increase in nontraditional/adult student college enrollment means that some precautions and safeguards have been initiated to thwart the “revolving door” dilemma. Student services personnel, for



example, are developing programs within the college to attempt to conquer the revolving door issue. Williams (2002) stated that one solution that should be emphasized by many student affairs departments is that personnel become more knowledgeable about their students and their diverse needs:

There needs to be an understanding and appreciation for the differences among students through ongoing programs of staff development training. Student affairs staff should also be equipped and empowered to educate faculty and administrators about students' unique needs and expectations. (p. 68)

Helfgot and Culp (as cited in Williams, 2002) offered additional recommendations:

The design and delivery of student affairs programs must be flexible and adaptable, in keeping with the needs of diverse students arriving on the campus. Programs and services need to be offered in varying formats and at different times of the day and night. Holding an orientation program for new students will not serve students well if it is offered at times they are unable to attend, in formats that don't match their learning styles, or in a language that they cannot easily understand. (p. 69)

Many two-year and four-year colleges are reaching out to nontraditional/adult students by establishing specific programs on campus that meet their holistic academic and personal needs. Institutions of higher education have recognized that their diverse student population has extraordinary needs that must be met if they are to persist toward graduation. The very essence of those needs is being aided by the federal government in the form of 1,027 TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) grant awards offered at two-year and four-year higher education institutions across the nation for fiscal year 2013. TRIO SSS is a federally funded program that provides college support services to individuals who come from underprivileged backgrounds. At Palmer Community College (PCC), the pseudonym given to the college participating in this study, TRIO SSS participants have access to the following opportunities:

Programs like TRIO SSS attempt to bridge the gap for those needing additional academic support. In a program like this, intrusive academic advising is provided with smaller advisor to student ratios as well as mentoring, career exploration, college and university visits, cultural and social engagement events, financial counseling, laptop and calculator loan program, scholarship award competitions, service-learning activities, skill development seminars/workshops, transfer support, tutorial services and supplemental instruction. (Anonymous, 2013b, Teaching and learning)

Each year, TRIO program personnel are required to submit an Annual Performance Report (APR) to the Department of Education that indicates how grant objectives are being met; this report is also used to determine outcome rates for the individual institution. Based on PCC's 2012–2013 APR, its TRIO SSS program showed that academic standing, persistence, transfer rates, and graduation went up from 2006 to 2013 for those who participated in the program. This same report provided evidence that 91% of all TRIO SSS participants at PCC persisted from one academic year to the next academic year, 49% graduated, and 37% transferred to a four-year institution. In addition, the 2012–2013 APR indicated that 95 % of all enrolled participants within this TRIO SSS program met the performance level to stay in good academic standing at the college (Anonymous, 2013a, Student profile). These statistical data build the case that TRIO SSS programs have an impact on the success of nontraditional students, which includes traditional-age as well as adult students.

In addition to TRIO, programs like Jobs for American Graduates (JAG) make an effort to encourage high school completion and postsecondary education by providing additional academic support as early as middle school (iJAG, n.d.). This support provides the bridge between graduation from middle school and high school and having the necessary skills to be productive in college. According to the iJAG (n.d.) website,

“JAG provides a work-based learning experience leading to career advancement opportunities and rewarding careers” (para. 1). The success of this state-based, national non-profit organization is impressive:

[It is] dedicated to preventing dropouts among young people who are most at-risk. In more than three decades of operation, JAG has delivered consistent, compelling results—helping nearly three-quarters of a million young people stay in school through graduation, pursue postsecondary education and secure quality entry-level jobs leading to career advancement opportunities. (JAG, n.d., para. 1)

In 2012, JAG (n.d.) reported the following for participants in the class of 2012: graduation rate 93%, employment rate 55%, positive outcomes rate 77%, full-time jobs rate 70%, full-time placement rate 89%, and postsecondary education enrollment rate 43% (para. 2). JAG (n.d.) is represented in 32 states and has 895 local programs serving over 43,000 students.

Another program that supports community college students is called Achieving the Dream (ATD). In 2004, Lumina Foundation birthed the Achieving the Dream (2014) national initiative. ATD provides support to many community colleges across the country that have a strong desire to matriculate students who attend its colleges. ATD was founded as a nonprofit organization to provide support to community college students, particularly students of color and low-income students. Currently, ATD’s methodology is practiced in 34 states in over 200 community colleges and serves over 3.8 million students. ATD’s initiatives are focused on a very specific target audience—low-income and minority college students. A major asset of the organization is its ability to compile student achievement data that meet the ATD’s goals of bringing about holistic change in community colleges. Additionally, ATD expects that its program will increase

the percentage of those attaining a degree and/or a credential and it has a strong desire to move students away from merely taking remedial courses to taking credit courses.

Programs like TRIO SSS, JAG, and Achieving the Dream provide a more in-depth solution to the growing issue of supporting nontraditional students' academic needs at the college level. However, there is an argument that needs to be made which suggests that nontraditional/adult students could be more academically productive if (a) colleges also looked at forming strategic partnerships with community-based organizations, and (b) nontraditional/adult students took advantage of these supplemental services.

Likewise, community colleges need to look at ways to effectively partner with their colleagues within the K–12 system and solicit support from the greater community.

Culp (2005), for example, noted that individuals who are from low-income and minority groups frequently “do not understand how to apply to or finance college, are often academically underprepared, view testing with terror, lack support systems, or believe that college is not for them” (p. 34). These are the types of students that student affairs practitioners must identify and provide them with additional services that are going to support them. “To accomplish this, student affairs leaders must connect with their colleagues in the K–12 system and create partnerships with business and civic groups” (Culp, 2005, p. 34).

This conversation is one that stems from organic roots. Community college staff and K–12 staff have the same fundamental goals of ensuring student success. Building effective partnerships provides an opportunity to potentially increase student success and retention at local community colleges. Culp (2005) identified a number of community colleges that have reached out to partner with local high schools, have encouraged

students to apply to college, have taught them about financial aid, have facilitated campus visits, and have administered course placement exams. Culp (2005) detailed activities that Austin Community College (ACC), like many two-year institutions across the country, has initiated with K–12 schools:

Academic and student affairs personnel collaborate to conduct summer camps for middle school students from at-risk populations, primarily those from low socioeconomic areas whose parents never attended college. During the academic year, ACC students serve as tutors and mentors to elementary and middle school students in schools with low graduation and college-attendance rates. ACC counselors and advisers are assigned to high schools in the college's service area, are on-site at specific times to assist students and faculty, and are available via telephone and e-mail throughout the year. Student affairs staff also conducts test preparation and career choice sessions for high school students and GED candidates, as well as workshops to help parents understand the importance of education beyond high school, the college admissions process, how to finance the costs of college, and their role in encouraging family members to enter and succeed in college. (p. 34)

Culp also highlighted the need to partner with community groups because there is not enough student affairs staff to visit every community organization, but there is enough to recruit volunteers to reach out into the community to find programming and services for students.

Additionally, community-based programs such as Engaging Latino Communities for Education (ENLACE), whose purpose is to strengthen college enrollment for Latinos, are strategically collaborating with colleges. ENLACE's goal is to support selected Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), public schools, and community-based organizations so they can serve as models for change in education. ENLACE supports the partnerships between higher education and local communities that increase the community's involvement and the educational success of Latino students (Center for the Education and Study of Diverse Populations, n.d.).

## **Statement of the Problem**

Traditionally, the community college has been the place in a community where students can fine tune already existing skills, develop new and technical skills, complete the first two years of their baccalaureate degree, and/or acquire academic credentials. From a socioemotional perspective, many community college students can be described as nontraditional/adult students who develop the courage to return to school because of the need to re-enter the workforce after a layoff or other life-altering event. Some enroll or return to college because of the desire for promotion, and they need the credential to move into that next position. What many of these students have in common is that they are nontraditional/adult students who have a deep desire to be successful; but in many cases, they lack confidence and resources because of the constant life management struggles they must combat while trying to complete their degree. The community college welcomes these students and typically provides as much support as it can to recruit, retain, and graduate nontraditional/adult students. Community colleges provide this support in a variety of ways, such as through student services support, financial aid, tutors, mentors, academic advising, services for the disabled, and counseling services.

These nontraditional/adult students are flooding into community colleges in such large numbers that community college leaders are being challenged to try to balance the means by which they can successfully serve the need levels of their many diverse student populations. In many situations, nontraditional/adult students are overwhelmed with the day-to-day battles that arise from not having the personal support necessary to persist in college. Not having resources like child care and social service and/or community-based support leaves many of these students groping aimlessly through the darkness. This often

results in students falling between the cracks because of their inability to manage their socioemotional and personal dilemmas.

On the local level and for the purpose of this study, this problem relates to an inner city community within an urban area in the Midwest. The Midwestern community college's urban campus is a major focal point for the community. This low-income area attracts refugees, immigrants, many diverse ethnic groups, and displaced workers. Many of these people attend the community college, hoping that they will move out of their present situation by the empowerment of finishing their education and achieving the American Dream. However, many of these prospective students have debilitating circumstances which make earning their degree a daily struggle of interpersonal, financial, and academic battles.

In summary, the problem on both a national and local level is that the rapid increase in nontraditional/adult students at community colleges has left college leaders searching for effective ways to ameliorate the revolving door dilemma—students dropping out just as quickly as they enroll. To prevent this from continuing, colleges need to look at multiple approaches, including providing additional opportunities for nontraditional/adult students that meet their personal, professional, and academic needs. One such opportunity is to explore external partnerships with community organizations—one of the major focuses of this particular study.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of a small group of adult TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) students at a Midwestern community college and to learn from them what influence a community-based life management program and other institutional and personal factors have had on their success and persistence in college. This study aims to educate community college and community-based agency staff about how this group of nontraditional/adult students has experienced and benefited from additional involvement with a community-based support organization while enrolled in college. The relationship with the community organization can provide an additional outlet for nontraditional/adult students outside of the support services that they receive at their local community college.

### **Overview of the Institutional Research Site and Community-Based Life Management Program**

In this study, pseudonyms are used for the student participants and other participating groups; the community college is referred to as Palmer Community College (PCC); the life management program is referred to as the Helping Students Thrive Program; and the community-based organization is referred to as The Community Project. PCC is a growing community college in the Midwest. In fall 2013, there were 20,167 students attending PCC with 38% attending full time and 61% attending part time. Of those students, 54% were female and 46% were male. The majority of the students attending in the fall 2013 semester were 77% White, 7% African American, 6% Hispanic, and 3% Asian American (Anonymous, 2013a, Student profile).



PCC's TRIO SSS program is located at its urban campus within the inner city. As of fall 2013, the college's urban campus male and female demographics were the same percentages as reported for all PCC campuses: 54% female and 46% male. However, the urban campus had a higher minority enrollment than district-wide—66% White, 18% African American, 8% Hispanic, and 5% Asian American (Anonymous, 2013a, Student profile). The TRIO SSS program provides academic support, cultural activities, and personal development to approximately 200 students at the urban campus. The federally funded program provides a variety of resources to college students who are disadvantaged, first generation, low income, and/or disabled, such as tutoring, a success lab and resource room, mentoring, intrusive academic advising, skill-development workshops, transfer support, and a calculator and laptop loan program.

Helping Students Thrive is a community-based life management program housed within The Community Project. The Community Project's mission is to strengthen communities by fostering community wholeness through the creation of strategic partnerships. During the 2013 fall term, the Helping Students Thrive Program offered free child care to the urban campus students who participated in the TRIO SSS program and had younger children ages 6 weeks to 13 years old. Along with free child care, students received life management support. This support paired them with a life management coach. The coach supported them emotionally and academically and provided an outlet for these students if and when they needed coaching or counseling assistance.

## **Research Questions**

The following is the primary research question that guided this study: What are the perceptions and experiences of a small group of adult TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) community college students regarding how a community-based life management program, institutional support, and personal factors influenced their success and persistence in college? Related sub-questions for this study are:

1. What are their motivations for attending college and what personal and educational challenges have they faced along the way?
2. From their perspective, what personal factors (i.e., attitudes, skills, family, peers, and life experiences) have influenced their persistence and success?
3. From their perspective, in what ways have the TRIO SSS program and other college support programs influenced their persistence and success?
4. From their perspective, in what ways has the community-based life management program influenced their persistence and success? What benefits did their participation in the program provide them?

Understanding how to retain and support nontraditional/adult college students within the community college setting is of utmost importance. By employing a phenomenological approach, I describe “what” all participants have in common as they experience the phenomena. This description consists of “what” the participants experienced and “how” they experienced it,” according to Moustakas (as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 76).

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is to learn directly from the experiences and perspectives of nontraditional/adults and their involvement in institutional and community-based support programs about how we can most effectively meet their interpersonal, professional, and academic needs. Life management programming or programming that involves community-based support organizations can help bridge the gap that exists between college services and nontraditional/adult students' needs, enabling these students to receive critical support. By creating successful partnerships with community-based support programs, hopefully, community colleges can better accommodate, retain, and increase the completion rate of nontraditional/adult college students while helping them have a productive college experience.

Having solid answers to the questions that guided this study provides an intellectual and practical benefit to community college staff as well as the staff of community-based organizations. This research delves into how nontraditional/adult students, who utilized support from a community-based organization's life management program for one semester in college, experienced and benefited from their involvement in the program and how it impacted their college persistence. Ideally, the supplementary support services offered at a community-based organization can cater to the specific needs of individual nontraditional/adult students, providing them with the extra assistance and convenient amenities that will help meet their individual goals. The partnership model presented in this study holds the possibility of mutual benefits. It can benefit community-based support organizations by providing them with clients who will utilize their services, and it can benefit community colleges by reducing staff caseloads and

providing additional support for at-risk, nontraditional/adult students. Community-based support programs like these can improve policy and practice by having an alternative outlet for student and academic support services departments, especially those having large student-to-staff ratios.

### **Definitions**

In an effort to ensure uniformity and facilitate understanding, the following definitions of terms are used throughout this study.

- **Community-based Support Organization:** A nonprofit organization that provides individualized support to people within its community.
- **Community-based Programming:** Case management that supports a client's movement from one point to another.
- **Life Management Model:** A model in which clients are connected with various forms of support on an as needed basis.
- **Retention:** An institution's focus on course and degree completion of its students; this is usually contrasted to attrition, which is the term for students dropping out of coursework or college before attaining a degree at the institution where they are enrolled (Tinto, 1996).
- **Persistence:** Students' continued progress, from one semester to the next, toward completing their intended goals or college degree programs.
- **Nontraditional/Adult College Student:** A student who often is academically at-risk; other common terms used are underserved, underrepresented, and disadvantaged with a multiplicity of daily challenges including being low income, single parent, first-generation to attend college, underprepared, ethnic

minority, English language learner, and/or disabled. This demographic balances several responsibilities such as having multiple roles as spouse, parent, caregiver, and full-time employee.

### **Summary**

In chapter one, I introduced this study by describing nontraditional/adult students and outlining the reasons why they typically need additional support in order to be productive and persist in college. This introductory chapter also enumerated the research questions that guided this study and discussed the purpose and significance of the study. In chapter two, a review of the relevant literature in the field is provided. Chapter three follows with a discussion of the methodology employed for this study. Chapter four presents demographic data and documents the individual personal accounts that I heard during my participants' interviews. Chapter five explains the findings and commonalities shared among the study's participants. In chapter six, I present a final summary, discussion, recommendations, and reflections on my study.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A review of the current literature revealed a plethora of corroboratory evidence in support of college student persistence. Much of the literature helped me as a researcher to understand that with the influx of students and their academic needs simultaneously intersecting with their life management needs, institutional-based student support services alone cannot conquer the multitude of problems facing many nontraditional/adult students. The current literature exposed the various socioemotional elements that are connected with student success. The emotional elements uncovered a demographic trying to find meaning in their lives by enrolling or returning to college; this plays a role in student success. The literature suggested the importance of attending to the *whole* student and providing the student with the support necessary to aid in their productivity and academic success (American Council of Education, 1983). This type of support extended beyond the structural boundaries of the community college and went into the community to find life management support programs that students often need. Since community-based support characteristically is diverse, going into the community to utilize its resources can provide many nontraditional/adult students with the additional intentional support they may need to be successful.

The literature review's framework combines chronological and thematic organizational structures. The use of both of these structures was included so the reader

can understand (a) the psychosocial characteristics and motives of nontraditional/adult students to return to school, (b) what multifaceted issues nontraditional/adult students present and their psychological state of mind, (c) what the current support systems are, and (d) how to enhance support efforts for the nontraditional/adult student. The structure of the literature review first identifies the psychosocial and development needs of the nontraditional/adult student beginning with Mezirow's (2000) transformation learning theory and Charles and Carstensen's (2009) socioemotional selective theory. Beginning at this point will help pinpoint the emotional location when trying to make meaning out of the lives of nontraditional/adult students and in understanding their identity. Following this, adult learning theory and adult career crisis and transition theory shed light on how these students learn and the importance of their academic work to their lives. The latter comes from vocational psychology and how nontraditional/adult students push through crises as they transition to college. Moving on to relational cultural theory provides a psychological understanding of how a nontraditional/adult student emotionally grows through relational connections. Likewise, positive psychology provides a humanistic perspective of what is important to nontraditional/adult students as this relates to their fulfillment and motivation. Additionally, a review of college student persistence and community college support services provides a snapshot of existing mechanisms used within the college setting to support and retain nontraditional/adult students. Finally, community-based organizations and community college collaborations advocating for formal partnerships between community colleges and community-based organizations are discussed.

### **Profile of the Nontraditional/Adult Student**

It was necessary to begin this conversation by further defining who the nontraditional/adult student is as the term applies to this study. The nontraditional/adult student enrolled at the community college, particularly one who is returning to school or underprepared, often is academically at-risk. This demographic typically balances multiple roles and responsibilities as college student, spouse, parent, caregiver, and employee. This type of student may not feel it is necessary to participate in on-campus activities; most likely they are only on campus when they have a class, or need to speak with a faculty member or someone in advising, counseling, or administration. They often are academically driven by the need to attain employment, upgrade their skills to retain their current employment, or generate new skills to move into a different career.

There are several factors that psychologically impact this demographic. It is important to understand what is happening in the transition process as they contemplate college as a possibility in the future, to actually applying and enrolling in the community college. Charles and Carstensen (2013) have shed light on the phenomenon that occurs while adults age and what happens to their inner psyche as they approach life-changing decisions. Their research helped me to understand that “the most commonly reported daily stressor is interpersonal tensions, which can lead to high levels of emotional distress (Charles & Carstensen, 2013, p. 147). These researchers further explained that, for the older adult, emotional well-being depends on social relationships. Having satisfying social relationships can equate to happiness, balancing the ebb and flow of negative and positive life events and life satisfaction (Charles & Carstensen, 2013).



Charles and Carstensen's (2009) socioemotional selectivity theory explains that older adults are aware of time constraints, and this awareness presents them with the challenge to be more specific when goal setting. "When future time is constrained, emotion-related goals grow in importance. Emotional well-being takes priority over gaining new information. People engage in strategies aimed at optimizing well-being, especially decreasing the experience of negative emotion" (Charles & Carstensen, 2009, p. 1578). The researchers also highlighted the need for adults to be connected and how it is essential for them to have meaningful relationships. This may suggest that, as it relates to this study, if adults do not feel connected within their social location, they may be less productive.

What is equally profound is Erikson's (1959) discussion on psychosocial development. As can be seen in Table 2, with Erikson's Psychosocial Stages, Erikson provides a comprehensive guide throughout the entire human life span and identifies how each level is directly related and dependent on the previous level of development.

Table 2

*Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development Summary Chart*

Stage	Basic Conflict	Important Events	Outcome
Infancy (birth to 18 months)	Trust vs. Mistrust	Feeding	Children develop a sense of trust when caregivers provide reliability, care, and affection. A lack of this will lead to mistrust.
Early Childhood (2 to 3 years)	Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt	Toilet Training	Children need to develop a sense of personal control over physical skills and a

			sense of independence. Success leads to feelings of autonomy; failure results in feelings of shame and doubt.
Preschool (3 to 5 years)	Initiative vs. Guilt	Exploration	Children need to begin asserting control and power over the environment. Success in this stage leads to a sense of purpose. Children who try to exert too much power experience disapproval, resulting in a sense of guilt.
Schools Age (6 to 11 years)	Industry vs. Inferiority	School	Children need to begin asserting control and power over the environment. Success in this stage leads to a sense of purpose. Children who try to exert too much power experience disapproval, resulting in a sense of guilt.
Adolescence (12 to 18 years)	Identity vs. Role Confusion	Social Relationships	Teens need to develop a sense of self and personal identity. Success leads to an ability to stay true to yourself, while failure leads to

			role confusion and a weak sense of self
Young Adult (19 to 40 years)	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Relationships	Young adults need to form intimate, loving relationships with other people. Success leads to strong relationships, while failure results in loneliness and isolation.
Middle Adulthood (40 to 65 years)	Generativity vs. Stagnation	Work and Parenthood	Adults need to create or nurture things that will outlast them, often by having children or creating a positive change that benefits other people. Success leads to feelings of usefulness and accomplishment, while failure results in shallow involvement in the world.
Maturity (65 to death)	Ego Integrity vs. Despair	Reflection on Life	Older adults need to look back on life and feel a sense of fulfillment. Success at this stage leads to feelings of wisdom, while failure results in regret, bitterness, and despair.

Note. From Penn State University (n.d.).

When focusing on the young adult stage of Erikson's psychosocial development theory (19 to 40 years old), one can get a better understanding of where the adult is

socially and emotionally. The young adult stage explains that adults at this stage are drawn to relationships which lead to success and productivity. For some adults, productivity means raising a family and excelling in their career. Those who have lived productive lives feel a sense of accomplishment and exist in a place of integrity. Erikson's psychosocial development model provides insight into where adults are psychosocially as this relates to their intrinsic struggles of making meaning out of their lives and their external desire to make life-changing choices that make a difference.

Similar to Erikson et al. (1959) and Charles and Carstensen (2009), Mezirow's (2000) transformation theory connects an adult's social awareness with how they survive transformational experiences. Mezirow's initial research in 1978 was a study involving U.S. community college adult women who participated in a reentry program. This research helped Mezirow understand that the experience of a woman returning to school was far more complex than simply making the decision to enroll in college. Mezirow was able to see that their apprehension stemmed from cultural norms and expectations of their role as women and mothers. The women in the study had to get past the fact that culturally they were "supposed to be in the home"; they had to re-identify with who they were and their social role in society. Mezirow "labeled both the processes that these women engaged in and the transformational learning outcome that women experienced as 'perspective transformation'" (Kiely, Sandmann, & Truluck, 2004, p. 22). Mezirow (as cited in Kiely et al., 2004) defines perspective transformation as:

The process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting on these new understandings." (p. 22)

What is thought-provoking about Mezirow's theory is the belief that from the perspective of adult learners, their frame of reference clashes with their cultural identity. What they know, how they adjust, and how they retain information is predicated on their existing frames of reference, which is their cultural identity. Mezirow encouraged educators to use a filter and to facilitate the class with perspective transformation when working with these nontraditional/adult students:

[This is] the learning process by which adults come to recognize the culturally induced dependency roles and relationships and the reasons for them and take action to overcome them. . . . He [Mezirow] calls these "disorienting dilemmas" which impede one's developmental momentum. He gives those learners experiencing transformation three fundamental processes (a) critical reflection, (b) discourse to validate the critically reflective insight, and (c) action. (Kiely et al., 2004, p. 23)

Mezirow disclosed that these steps will help their perplexed viewpoints and allow them to think rationally, act more efficiently, and reflectively observe.

There are major themes in the literature that directly and indirectly relate to how some nontraditional/adult students conceptualize the college experience. For instance, Charles and Carstensen's (2009) socioemotional theory drives forth the premise that there is anxiety connected to the college experience. That anxiety stems from where that adult learner is psychologically from a stage of life point of view. Transformational learning means that the yearning that occurs is coupled with a plethora of factors. One of the biggest factors is the cultural mores that create a barrier for students as they attempt to push past disorienting dilemmas.

The following section focuses on adult learning theory and adult career crisis and transition theory which will provide relevance to Mezirow's claim that through healthy

social relationships and facilitation, there can be a space to reflect and provide opportunities for transformational learning. Mezirow theorized that perspective transformation involves a structural change in how we see ourselves and how that manifests within relationships. According to Mezirow, understanding this process can provide insight into how to help students “realize their potential for becoming more liberated, socially responsible and autonomous learners” (as cited in Kiely et al., 2004, p. 22).

### **Adult Learning Theory and Adult Career Crisis and Transition Theory**

In the preceding section, I grasped a better understanding of who the nontraditional/adult students are and their socioemotional state of mind; this created an intersection of how they make meaning in their lives. As we review and discuss those remedies, it is also important to ascertain coping mechanisms for how to push through, build sustainable relationships, connect better with self, and acquire access to resources.

Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) describe adult transition theory as “any event or nonevent that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 27). Transitions can be described as anticipated and unanticipated life events. Merriam (2005) explains that anticipated transitions are those expected events that occur, such as marriage, having children, and getting a job. Unanticipated transitions are ones in which there is neither expectation nor specific time that they should occur. They are events that can be extremely stressful because a person is not expecting them and because typically, there are few people within the person’s peer group who can relate and provide support. According to Schlossberg et al. (1995), these unexpected events look different for each person. Anticipated and unanticipated life transitions have the most potential to

stimulate motivation and encourage students through their individual dilemmas. From adult transition theory, I was able to understand that not all adults are going through a crisis when they return to school, but they are all going through a life transition and often a career transition.

Adult career crisis is a serious scenario. It means that adults are not only experiencing a transition, but a considerably abrupt transition where they are forced to develop new methods for how to deal with a particular problem within their transition. Sharf (1996) discussed a variety of different adult career transitions. What is notable in this discussion is the anxiety attached to unexpected transitions. This anxiety is directly related to a situational crisis that the adult did not expect, often leaving the person hopeless, confused, and upset. Many adults become victims to this crisis as they experience layoffs, downsizing, and the need to change their careers abruptly.

Many adults going through a significant transition like this go through very difficult stages comparable to Kübler Ross' (1997) stages of grief and dying. Once they experience the multitude of emotions attached to this experience, they may consider changing the direction of their lives in order to find purpose in other places. This may lead a frustrated adult to return to or enroll for the first time in college. In this situation, the impetus behind choosing college is not for immediate gratification, but for an opportunity to better oneself and gain skill sets that can be transferable to a future job. Getting into college and completing a degree or obtaining a credential may be a necessary step as they heal. As they approach this step and meet with college personnel, it is important for staff to understand the student's psyche, emotional state, social location, and cognitive abilities.

Kiely et al. (2004) provided an analysis of adult learning theory which helps shed light on who prospective adult students are as they seek to gain entry into the college system. The authors focused on four distinct lenses—learner, educator, process, and context. The purpose of this approach is to understand how adults learn and to highlight the different dimensions of adult learning. This model also provides a more comprehensive and holistic approach to understanding adult learning. In the learner stage, the authors refer to the term *andragogy* or “the art and science of teaching adults” (Kiely et al., 2004, p. 20). Andragogy warrants further discussion.

In this andragogical methodology, Kiely et al. (2004) discussed six assumptions regarding the characteristics of adult learners:

1. In terms of their self-concept, adults tend to see themselves as more responsible, self-directed, and independent.
2. They have a larger, more diverse stock of knowledge and experience to draw from.
3. Their readiness to learn is based on developmental and real-life responsibilities.
4. Their orientation to learning is most often problem centered and relevant to their current life situation.
5. They have a stronger need to know the reasons for learning something.
6. They tend to be more internally motivated. (p. 19)

These characteristics lead us to believe that instructors, staff, and administrators need to be more intentional in how they support adult students. In order to teach them effectively and meet them where they are, it appears that faculty ought to lecture less and promote a participatory and facilitative environment. Furthermore, Kiely et al. (2004) asserted that college administrators and personnel also need to “anticipate possible obstacles to adult participation, including time, cost, confidence level, personal and social responsibilities, fears, and levels of self-esteem” (p. 21). According to Kiely et al. (2004), there is an



effective way to anticipate potential barriers and that is by connecting with the students' "situational realities (cost, time, life situation) or dispositional realities (beliefs, attitudes, confidence) as well as institutional norms, including inadequate support services, staff, computer access, and parking" (p. 21).

One can also examine an additional dimension and see the hidden commentary for the transitioning, prospective adult learner. The commentary shows where they might be psychologically, and it provides information on where their need levels might be as they matriculate into the college setting. Mezirow also commented on the concept of cataclysmic transformation. During this transformation, interaction with the environment should be encouraged. Mezirow and Huffman both used Piaget's work to discuss human development and the importance of experiencing every transitional stage of development; "no stage can be skipped because skills acquired at earlier stages are essential to mastery at later stages" (Huffman, 2010, p. 333). Mezirow further theorized that we are shaped by our environment; essentially we are actors in the world, and who we become affects the quality of the world in which we are formed. This concept leads to a larger sense of self, asking the "Who am I?" question, and providing a space for critical reflection on who that person is and how that relates to the world in which this individual lives.

It may be helpful to understand how the prospective adult students interact with those around them. They often will come out of cataclysmic transformations defeated, but hopeful for what is around their metaphoric corner of life. They typically are apprehensive about college because of how they have identified with "self." Going to college can be terrifying and they need encouragement, motivation, and adequate support systems as they push through the unknown hurdles of life.

## **Relational-Cultural Theory, Hopefulness, and Self-Efficacy**

Resilience is rooted in the constant battle of understanding self as it relates to where one is in life. This section will provide a brief introduction to relational-cultural theory (RCT) and some of the sociocultural and contextual challenges for adults during this stage in life. RCT examines empathic healing from the Rogerian theory point of view and carefully breaks down the concept of hopefulness and its connection with self-efficacy based on the work of Rogers (1951).

Relational-cultural theory comes from a model that reviews relational development throughout the life span. “The RCT approach to healing and helping is grounded in the fact that healing takes place in mutually empathic, growth-fostering relationships. The model deconstructs obstacles into mutuality that individuals encounter in diverse relational contexts and networks” (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 279). The question arises: “How does the RCT model relate to nontraditional/adult college students and, most importantly, the relational aspect of adults returning to college or entering college for the first time?” According to Comstock et al. (2008), at the center of RCT are essential tenets that guide the model including:

1. People grow through and toward relationship throughout the life span.
2. Movement toward mutuality rather than separation characterizes mature functioning.
3. The ability to participate in increasingly complex and diversified relational networks characterizes psychological growth.
4. Mutual empathy and mutual empowerment are at the core of growth-fostering relationships.
5. Authenticity is necessary for real engagement in growth-fostering relationships.
6. When people contribute to the development of growth fostering relationships, they grow as a result of their participation in such relationships.
7. The goal of development is the realization of increased relational competence over the life span. (p. 280)

These tenets provide the framework for the connection between adult competency and how it relates to an adult's ability to be relational. Comstock et al. (2008) pointed out that there is a tendency to make connections based on a person's demographic. For example, generally speaking, people make relational contacts based on race, gender, social class, and other demographics. The other side of the coin is how individuals make disconnections and those disconnections are based upon multiple conflicting identities. Disconnections often are based on race/ethnicity and/or social cultural identities such as social class. The authors argued that in order to understand the capacity for competency, cultural-based relational disconnections need to be considered. RCT focuses on the psyche of a disconnecting personality, noting that the complex psyche might involve shared experiences such as "isolation, shame, humiliation, oppression, marginalization, and micro aggressions are relational violations and traumas that are at the core of human suffering" (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 280). Social groups tend to hang out with others similar to themselves. It is suggested by Comstock et al. that members of these groups associate with more positive and optimistic social groups.

Comstock et al. (2008) discussed the benefits of counselors identifying these marginalized and oppressed group members during counseling sessions. The suggestion is made that bridging the inevitable disconnection can occur by being knowledgeable about the counselee's contextual factors and injustices. "Condemned isolation can result from chronic relational and/or cultural disconnections that promote the feeling of being locked out of the possibility of human connection" (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 282). The authors further explained that members of these groups feel devalued and carry a deep

sense of shame, shame that is associated with their feelings of isolation. They will usually blame themselves, even though many of these feelings are connected to their social location and the group to which they belong.

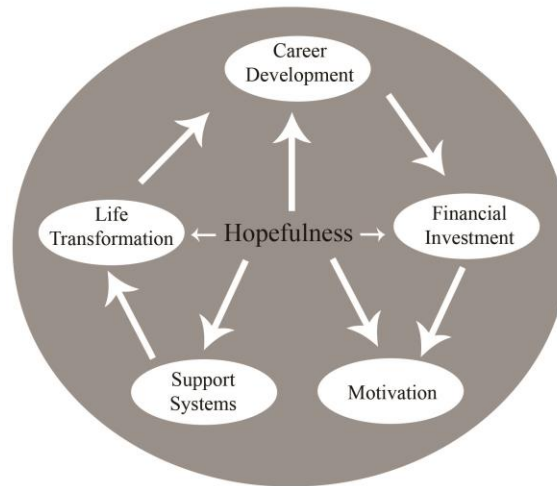
This concept of RCT can be translated into the world of higher education as well. For example, as adults experience a cataclysmic transformation, they are abruptly thrown into a position where they must metaphorically stay afloat mentally, physically, and financially. They choose college as a way to build on their skill sets and provide opportunities for their families. Many will be in a better social position if they understand the concepts of RCT and how positive relationships can boost self-esteem and provide a strong support system. These marginalized groups can emerge out of their adversity with an understanding that they must separate themselves from the adversity and negativity that exist within their social groups.

In this vein, Bentley (2000) used the research of Rodriguez (1998), LaPaglia (1994), London (1978, 1986), and Cuadraz (1993) to discuss barriers that students experience. In Bentley's (2000) literature review, the term "double bind" is used to articulate what first-generation college students experience:

First-generation college students typically experience a "double bind" as they move from one socioeconomic class to another. They have to "break into" the new culture and "break away" from the old, creating much anxiety for them in the process (LaPaglia, 1994; London, 1978, 1986). And many are plagued by self-doubt, low-self-esteem, poor academic preparation, inadequate finances, cultural discontinuity, loss of identity, and lack of support from family, peers, school personnel, and community. (p. 24)

Bentley's (2000) discussion on the concept of double bind appropriately intersects with the hopefulness that must surface after a socioeconomic transition like this. A qualitative study of nontraditional students conducted by Chao and Good (2004) explored

this notion of hopefulness and where it comes from. They noted in their study that interaction is where hopefulness originates. As shown in Figure 1, “This core category of hopefulness critically influenced five other themes: motivation, financial investment, career development, life transition, and support systems. Due to their hopefulness, nontraditional students took active roles in managing their education, employment, family, and interpersonal relationships” (Chao & Good, 2004, p. 7).



*Figure 1.* Nontraditional Students’ Perspectives of Pursuing College Education (Chao & Good, 2004).

Figure 1 suggests that nontraditional/adult students have the capacity to perceive themselves in positive ways. Hopefulness provides a map of how to navigate nontraditional/adult students toward the desired goals that help to motivate their efforts through life’s difficult transitions. Chao and Good (2004) affirmed that hopefulness

provided the resilience and self-efficacy for nontraditional/adult students to believe that they can succeed within the five areas.

Chao and Good (2004) completed their study by identifying the importance of why nontraditional students pursue additional education, connecting their theory with a previous discussion that this decision often is based on these students' social context and familial expectations. As a method of supporting nontraditional students, Chao and Good (2004) suggested that college administrators should "consider involving family members and significant others in their work with nontraditional students" (p. 11). They also asserted that counselors should seek support from outside the institution in order to take advantage of every resource possible.

After grasping the concept of hopefulness and all that it entails, it can also be beneficial to understand the importance and role that self-efficacy plays. I chose a study undertaken by Quimby and O'Brien (2004) in an effort to acquire a better understanding of how self-efficacy relates to this study. In their study, Quimby and O'Brien focused primarily on women who have entered or reentered college as nontraditional/adult students. The women they researched were those who were at-risk due to low levels of confidence, which could affect their ability to perform in the classroom or on their jobs. Quimby and O'Brien connected low self-efficacy with a lack of confidence, which can cause an absence of assurance in career decision making that can ultimately be attributed to psychological distress. These researchers discovered that all of these factors can contribute to dropping out of school. Their study looked at two similar groups of women, one group comprised of parents and another group comprised of nonparents, to gather insight into how to better assist them academically and vocationally. Quimby and

O'Brien's (2004) findings confirmed their assumptions that career barriers supported by social support lead to feelings of confidence:

As hypothesized, both perceived career barriers and social support accounted for variance in student and career decision-making self-efficacy for both groups of women, with social support adding to the prediction of self-efficacy over and above the contribution of perceived career barriers. Overwhelmingly, perceptions of few career barriers and robust social support resulted in feelings of confidence both in managing the responsibilities associated with being a student and pursuing tasks related to advancing vocational development. (p. 325)

In this section, I have defined and identified the importance of RCT, a theory that builds on escaping the confinement of negative social groups and interacting more with positive and uplifting groups, which can also be connected with Comstock et al.'s (2008) research. The theory wraps itself around empathy to help the counselor identify the state of mind of the client. RCT is significant because it provides a framework for understanding why many nontraditional/adult students are socially isolating themselves, recognizing that isolation is all they have ever known. When someone transitions from one social class to another, they feel anxiety and self-consciousness, which Bentley (2000) coined as being in a "double bind." It is evident that this transition is needed if prospective nontraditional/adult students are going to experience any hopefulness and self-efficacy. These two phases are necessary in order to provide that transitioning state of mind to a place where they are confident in what they can achieve. The following section discusses motivation as well as fulfillment and the humanistic qualities of an emerging nontraditional/adult student.

### **Fulfillment and Motivation**

Cockerham (2011) studied motivation in undergraduate college students and connected motivation with self-efficacy. Cockerham explained that failure in college can

be associated with a sense of shame and noted that there are several studies on goal orientation which have spoken to how failure and shame can affect college students' development and their academic progress. In the case of nontraditional/adult students, if academic failure occurs, it can be remedied by additional support systems. Cockerham also discussed internal and external stimuli as these relate to motivation.

Cockerham (2011) pointed out limitations in the research on belongingness as it relates to motivation:

A sense of belonging describes a psychological state usually associated with social adjustment and group adaptation. Reviews of a number of studies indicated belongingness can be associated with academic motivation yet most of the research has been done with elementary/secondary schools and few in higher education. (p. 73)

Much of the research on belongingness has focused on attrition but not motivation.

Students need to feel accepted and valued at their college; if they feel valued, then they will more likely be motivated. The preceding statement also relates to nontraditional/adult students because they feel less motivated due to how isolated they feel on college campuses. It can be assumed that if they get more involved and utilize college resources, they will be more productive and successful college students. Based on the research previously cited, this assumption affirms the need for students to get connected to the college and its academic and personal support programs.

This concept of failure is significant for nontraditional/adult students. Many walk into a course on the first day expecting to fail only because they have not been successful before, or because they have a fear of the unknown. Consequently, they live in this fear until they repeatedly receive positive reinforcement and "success." That is why the



discussion on motivation is so significant. Understanding what generally motivates this demographic is imperative in order to understand how to support them.

In Rendón and Muñoz's (2011) discussion, they described a demographic that is looking for success but experiences difficulties getting involved and feeling validated. Rendón and Muñoz's (2011) validation theory provides a space for students needing "a sense of direction and wanting guidance but not in a patronizing way. They do not succeed well in an invalidating, sterile, fiercely competitive context for learning" (p. 16). The vulnerable student referred to often struggles with overt forms of oppression, racism, and sexism (Rendón & Muñoz, 2011, p. 17). Although some students have high emotional intelligence and can push through these invalidating experiences, the authors explained that many students cannot. Rendón and Muñoz (2011) asserted:

Validation theory provides a framework that faculty and staff can employ to work with students in a way that gives them agency, affirmation, self-worth, and liberation from past invalidation. The most vulnerable students will likely benefit from external validation that can serve as a means to move students toward gaining internal strength resulting in increased confidence and agency in shaping their own lives. (p. 17)

Closely connected with Rendón and Muñoz's (2011) validation theory is Schlossberg's mattering theory. Schlossberg (1989) discussed mattering theory and how it is divided into five dimensions:

1. Attention: "The most elementary form of mattering is the feeling that one commands the interest or notice of another person" (p. 4).
2. Importance: "To believe that the other person cares about what we want, think, and do, or is concerned with our fate, is to matter" (p. 4).
3. Ego-Extension: "Ego-extension refers to the feeling that other people will be proud of our accomplishments or saddened by our failures. In other words, we feel that our success will be the success of another and our failure, the other's failure. Although knowing that our failures are critical to another can be a burden, it also reconfirms that we matter to someone" (p. 4).

4. Dependence: People's behavior is influenced by their dependence on others as well as other peoples' dependence on themselves (p. 4).
5. Appreciation: Found that study participants expressed their need to feel as though their efforts were appreciated (p. 4).

Kasworm (2003) discussed what motivates adult students:

Career pursuits were the key goal for adult enrollment, but I would suggest that it is equally helpful to consider adult life context motivators. From this perspective, adults were motivated to enroll in college and continue to be influenced in their participation by internal life developmental changes, external planning to create a different future life in their adult world, or a mixture of the two life-context motivators. (p. 6)

Further in-depth examination helps to better understand the motivating factors that influence adult students. The first motivating aspect that Kasworm addressed was the personal transitions and changes theme. I previously discussed that many adult learners experience difficult life transitions and that they find hope in the college environment. The second motivating theme is the proactive planner who is the student who has planned this collegiate phase of life. Through beliefs of self-efficacy and in future planning for their life, these adults seek new life choices that will provide greater benefits and rewards. In this regard, Kasworm and Blowers (1994) focused on interviewing adult learners who were "proactive planners and sought out college studies after several years of thinking and strategizing" (p. 7). Finally, Kasworm (2003) entitled the last theme as mixed motivators, which are a combination of the two preceding themes. This theme consists of students who are straddling managing life's transition while simultaneously pre-planning for their professional and personal future.

Kasworm and Blowers (1994) alluded to adult students' commitment and motivation stemming from societal demands and emphasized the fact that many adult students work while attending college. Their commitment to work produces an incentive

but it also produces a barrier. They are constantly contemplating how to balance their work and family commitments with that of their school schedule. They are digesting this all while they are trying to understand how they are going to pay for college. Kasworm (2003) explained that “adult undergraduates value family-supportive collegiate environments because 57% of those students are married and 53% are supporting dependents other than a spouse” (p. 8). Kasworm further asserted that some of these students are older, with adult children who are single parents. Being a single parent or being married with children places special demands on adult students. It also places strains on student services professionals regarding how to effectively provide collegiate services and support systems to the college’s adult student population.

Kasworm’s (2003) work identified the interpersonal motivators for student success; however, Mercer’s (1993) work connected the academic motivators. The academic motivators are significant in understanding student persistence. Mercer (1993) reflected on Bean and Metzner’s research which suggested that “the attrition process is more affected by variables external to school for all older students than for traditional age students” (p. 154). Some of their themes also focus on major aspects that create adversity. Mercer (1993) also commented that Bean and Metzner’s analysis of the literature identified four major themes that forecasted higher education and adult student persistence: “grade point averages, intent to leave (which is influenced by the person's conception of the utility of a college education, general satisfaction with it, goal commitment, and experienced stress), background and defining variables, environmental variables” (p. 156).

Bean and Metzner (1985) used the term *conflicting positions* to describe the many struggles that students experience as they attempt to enroll in college and complete coursework. These authors considered a way to resolve these issues, which may be more of a proactive approach rather than a reactive one, and discussed the theoretical assumption that these issues could be resolved by psychological growth and adjustment. Bean and Metzner proposed that those who are more adjusted and can cope with problems better are more likely to graduate. It was suggested that this may lead to better personal adjustment, while those with poorer adjustment may not achieve in college. Specifically speaking, people who enjoy life are happy, have a positive outlook, and do better in life, including college, than those individuals that are maladjusted.

Bean and Metzner (1985) provided some compelling evidence of what happens when one assesses the differences between older undergraduate students who persist to a baccalaureate degree versus those who drop out of college. This is a major benefit of their study because if potential dropouts can be identified while in school, then educators might be able to find a way to retain them. The underlying message learned from Bean and Metzner's study is that if people who cope better with life's struggles perform better in college, then educators need to explore ways to assist at-risk adult students to get to a healthy place in order to prevent or reduce failure. This fits with Lazarus and DeLongis' (1983) theory that people who believe in themselves can cope better since individuals' personal beliefs and values shape their evaluation of stressful events in their lives and how they handle those events. Lazarus and DeLongis further hypothesized that these beliefs include such variables as self-esteem and a sense of control.

Mercer (1993) concluded that motivational and situational variables play a major role in persistence and proposed that how people identify and cope with stressors must be deliberated further in retention studies. Mercer (1993) described the need to break the concepts down so that they are less complex:

This may mean we can break down a very complex issue into manageable dimensions and target reasonable pools of those who are more at risk for dropping out by looking at these students as complex wholes whose actions are predicted by a collection of sociodemographic, academic, and psychological equations using varying information from all of these domains. (p. 159)

Once sociodemographic elements have been identified, it is necessary to determine what preventative methods can be put in place to help these adult students. What are the traditional support systems in place in higher education that will assist in persistence? Perhaps, an even better question to ask is: “What enhanced support systems can postsecondary institutions establish to ensure the successful functioning and increase the confidence of the majority of their nontraditional/adult students?” The following discussion on support systems will highlight some of these dynamics.

### **Student Affairs Support Programs in the Community College**

Student affairs, according to Helfgot (2005), focuses on all that is related to the student and the student’s life in college that is outside of the classroom. In addition, student affairs is the administrative unit within the college that provides student support services.

These often include, but are not necessarily limited to, outreach and recruitment, admissions and records, assessment, advisement, orientation, financial aid, academic support programs, counseling, career planning and placement, student activities, athletics, health and wellness, and safety. Student development theory describes how students change, grow, and develop as a result of the college experience. (Helfgot, 2005, p. 7)

Student affairs department personnel have quite a significant job. Their principal focus consists of creating an environment that supports all students regardless of their educational goals. Student affairs personnel are involved in what occurs outside the classroom, which includes some aspects of teaching and learning. They also cooperate with academic affairs and the community to create intentionally diverse programs that meet the needs of their student population. Typically, student services functions include such areas as “admissions and registration, advising and course placement, assessment and testing, athletics, counseling, discipline, financial aid, orientation, job placement, retention, student activities and campus life, and services for special need students” (Culp, 1995, p. 35).

In order to effectively accomplish these tasks, student affairs personnel often have to overcome numerous challenges. Some of these challenges stem from a disconnect that occurs between the college community and the nontraditional/adult student. The literature is consistent in emphasizing the need to return to the basics before trying to conquer the problem. Everything that I reviewed encouraged the reader to examine the college’s mission; that mission is to help the student succeed. According to Helfgot (2005), “although student affairs *practice* may differ in the community college environment and change with more diverse students, these core values remain as constant guides to practice” (p. 8). A disconnect can occur, however, when community colleges do not refer back to their mission to educate the whole student. There also is the situation where many higher education administrators and faculty are not used to *thinking outside the box*. Thinking outside the box would entail personnel going beyond their organizational borders and trying to partner with outside resources, realizing all the while

that leaders of K–12 schools and community resources need to be willing to partner with them. Furthermore, in many cases, there may not be many available community resource options in the surrounding communities served. The fact that community college enrollment is likely to increase in the future means that there will be an opportunity for mounting diversity within the community college. Diverse student subpopulations are attracted to community colleges because of their low cost, close proximity to their communities, and they are designed to meet their comprehensive needs.

Williams (2002) quoted 1996 data from the National Center for Education Statistics that confirmed that the two-year college sector enrolled larger proportions of racial and ethnic minority students than the four-year sector:

In 1996, minority students comprised 32% of all two-year college enrollments, compared to 26% for all undergraduate enrollments in the four-year sector. During that time, almost half of all African American and Asian and Pacific Islander students enrolled in higher education attend a two-year college, along with 56% of American Indian students and 61% of all Hispanic students. In fall 1997, women comprised a majority, 58%, of students in community colleges. Fully 63% of women and 57% of men are of “nontraditional” age, which is considered to be persons 22 years of age or older. According to Phillippe and Patton (2000) the majority of nontraditional students, 63%, are enrolled on a part-time basis, and approximately half of all community college students work while they are enrolled. (p. 68)

Furthermore, the AACC (2014) reported that among all undergraduate students enrolled in fall 2012, 42% of African Americans went to a community college. In addition, 49% of Hispanics and 56% of Native Americans enrolled at community colleges. AACC also reported that 40% of first-generation students enrolled at a community college. Moreover, 12% of students with disabilities and 16% of single parents in secondary education attended a community college. In the 2007–2008 academic year, 46% of students attending a community college received some type of

aid. Within that percentage, 31% received aid in the form of federal grants or loans and 13% received state aid.

These enrollment trends create challenges for the Office of Student Affairs and the college as a whole to adapt to and react quickly. Some will argue that community colleges attract more underprepared students who need additional support and, according to Williams (2002), not only are they underprepared, but they are underrepresented, underachieving, and underclass (p. 68). These challenges exacerbate the risk of these students not only due to academics, but also because of their demanding lives outside of college. The complexities of their lives often encompass being a caretaker, coupled with little personal support and a lack of financial stability. As Ortiz pointed out, “many of these students arrive on campus wrestling with the development of academic and social competence, autonomy, interpersonal relationships, sexual identity and career, work, and lifestyle needs” (as cited in Williams, 2002, p. 68).

Culp (2005) highlighted four main areas that can be improved to accommodate diverse students at community colleges: advising, counseling, student life, and transfer services. Advising, as it pertains to this particular study, is one of the most important aspects of student success. Advising not only helps academically, but it also helps students make better life and career choices. Culp (2005) particularly made note of an effective model being used today entitled FACTS, Florida’s online advising tool which links technology with the advising process. Graunke (as cited in Culp, 2005) explained that college students can use the FACTS program to access important academic information that will help them compare data and make important educational and career



decisions. According to Culp (2005), the purpose of FACTS is to function as a one-stop shop for high school, community college, and university data:

By creating one data source for high schools, community colleges, and colleges and universities, Florida provides consistent information to all parties (students, parents, faculty members, and staff), encourages students to take responsibility for acquiring basic information, and allows those who advise to focus on helping students process information, explore alternatives, evaluate consequences, and make informed decisions. (p. 42)

Moreover, Culp (2005) maintained that there is some confusion among community college faculty, staff, and administrators around the purpose and function of counselors. Some within the institution believe that the counselors should be operating from a clinical perspective, diagnosing and “therapizing” students. Others believe that counselors are highly paid information givers. In reality, according to Culp (2005), community college counselors play three major roles:

(a) information giving, helping students deal with cognitive problems by obtaining and processing data; (b) advising, assisting emotionally healthy students to deal with problems that have both emotional and cognitive content; and (c) counseling, helping students deal with intrapersonal or interpersonal problems that are reality-based, have the potential to reduce significantly their ability to function in the community college, and may have serious consequences if left unattended. (p. 44)

Culp (2005) also discussed how counselors must recognize their essential role as career counselors and get more involved in actually teaching classes. Many community college models will have counselors teach classes like college success, new student orientation, human potential, and career planning. In addition, counselors often teach non-credit classes and workshops that help students practice better time management, develop study skills, and learn how to minimize anxiety. Given that there are limited college resources and a large number of students in need, it is important for counselors

and college personnel to go outside the college for support in order to help unmotivated students and those in crisis. Collaborating with organizations outside the college can also help underperforming students with the multiplicity of issues they deal with while enrolled in school.

Tinto's (1996) research on student retention links student affairs with student life and indicates that this is significant because of how it helps students connect with their institution and community from a social integration perspective. According to Culp (2005), Tinto's findings on the importance of academic and social integration to combat student attrition "presents a significant challenge to student affairs practitioners because many community college students have work and family obligations that prevent their participation in events outside the classroom" (p. 45). What many community colleges are doing is working with faculty to include these activities as part of their class requirements such as in the form of service learning projects. "Service learning offers many opportunities for professionals in academic affairs and student affairs to work together to blend classroom knowledge with community experience" (Culp, 2005, p. 45).

A successful career services department is valuable to nontraditional/adult college students because it also provides a service that connects them with employment. Graduating and obtaining a job is a goal for these students, and career services play a major role. Career services departments support students' transition to the workforce by providing resume services, interviewing skills, assistance with job searches, and insight regarding appropriate professional attire, all of which can be addressed by student affairs staff. Likewise, those students who are transferring to a four-year university need

transfer articulation support from their student affairs department staff on how to make that transition a smooth process.

Before concluding this section about holistic solutions for student affairs personnel, it would be of value to examine Brown's (2002) seven strategies for nontraditional student success. I believe these effectively summarize what I have put forth in this section and effectively address the multiple needs of adult/nontraditional community college students.

- *Strategy One:* One must recognize the uniqueness of the nontraditional/adult student by developing a culture and a nontraditional community on campus. This community would change as the culture changed.
- *Strategy Two:* Develop a one-stop shop for nontraditional students that includes but is not limited to one-stop enrollment, advising, and registration opportunities along with financial aid and career counseling developed especially for nontraditional students with intentionality on how to communicate with these students via e-mail, website information, advising appointments, and telephone registration.
- *Strategy Three:* Provide training for student affairs staff on how to be sensitive to the need levels of nontraditional students, taking into account their educational backgrounds. Staff need to be trained and made aware of constant change and uncertainty in the workplace; family systems theory and the relationship among family, work, and academic responsibilities; adult development theory and adult learning theory; different approaches for different client groups—such as dual career couples, older adults, women, and ethnic groups.
- *Strategy Four:* Brown suggests employing a pre-employment counselor with strong interpersonal, advising, and communication skills. This person will help nontraditional/adult students set realistic goals and expectations for themselves as they enroll in the community college.
- *Strategy Five:* Develop an orientation for nontraditional/adult students with workshops and seminars that empower students. Anxiety about returning to school should be addressed as well as learning skills and academic success strategies.
- *Strategy Six:* Provide career and job counseling to meet the needs of graduating students with information on internship, service learning experiences, and volunteer opportunities.
- *Strategy Seven:* Brown encourages an inclusive pedagogy in the classroom and identifies this with faculty surveying the classroom and developing

curricula based on the culture and diversity of the classroom. (Brown, 2002, p. 72)

The literature in this section provided me with insights regarding student affairs personnel, their purpose within higher education, and their administrative and support functions. Student affairs personnel are the gatekeepers in many ways since they often are the first individuals who a nontraditional/adult student comes in contact with, and they set the tone for that student's experience. Nontraditional/adult students have a unique set of needs to respond to in order to increase their desire to enroll and persist. The literature reviewed provided a background on what student affairs departments have done in the past, but the literature also informs us on what student affairs can do better in order to respond to the diverse needs of an ever-changing student body, one that is becoming more and more nontraditional. Many suggestions were presented; however, an overwhelming theme prevailed—student affairs personnel need to be educated about who these students are and where they stand from a sociodemographic point of view. The research shows that student affairs departments that create intentional relationships with the community can become more responsive in serving their students. The following section will focus on some intentional community-based partnerships between community colleges and local nonprofits and community-based agencies. This evidence proposes that serving this body of students can become more effective with the assistance of community partnerships.

### **Community-Based Resources**

I was intrigued by Culp's (2005) comments about student affairs personnel. As mentioned previously, Culp explained that there are not enough personnel to serve every

student population. In addition to working collaboratively with K–12 schools, Culp (2005) espoused the importance of developing partnerships with community-based organizations such as churches, tribal groups, and service organizations that serve large minority populations because this can help provide access, information, and support to prospective students and their families (p. 35). As a researcher, I found it beneficial to examine some case studies of successful partnerships between community-based organizations and community colleges. The models that are presented will provide insight into why partnerships like these are important and how they can help with the persistence of adult students.

### **Case Management and Support Services**

Melendez, Falcon, and Montrichard (2004) discussed some of the physical barriers that impact the college persistence of welfare recipients; these include the lack of child care, life management skills, and recent work experience:

Welfare recipients often have multiple barriers that affect their education and employability. These barriers include the lack of quality child care for students with children, poor access to reliable transportation, involvement in substance abuse and addiction programs, lack of life management skills, lack of significant or recent work experience, and domestic violence issues. (p. 68)

According to Melendez et al. (2004), in one particular case study, in order to overcome barriers, several community colleges developed a block schedule. This schedule enabled adult students who were welfare clients the opportunity to participate in smaller class sizes and have a coordinated schedule that better met their time management needs. In addition, faculty and administrators exposed women and students who were disabled to community resources to receive referrals for substance abuse treatment and housing. The colleges in the study also made arrangements for child care

providers to help students. Their approach consisted of creating a small school environment that was manageable for these students and then dividing them into cohorts.

Melendez et al. (2004) provided examples of the college's programming:

For example, the Valencia campus created a specialized program to respond to the reality that domestic violence is a critical problem for welfare participants. In Fresno, the college adopted a "community job center" strategy modeled after two existing programs, a successful center targeting the needs of immigrant workers and a program serving disabled students. The Denver campus adopted a "track" model whereby the counselor served as case manager for a small cohort of program participants who had chosen a particular vocational track, such as bank teller training. (p. 68)

The findings of Melendez et al. (2004) provided evidence that utilizing community-based resources and getting students who are welfare clients out into the community can provide the support they need to be productive. "Community colleges have numerous specialized service centers and offices, and partnerships with community-based organizations and local social service agencies can play a pivotal role in sustaining programs serving disadvantaged populations" (Melendez et al., 2004, p. 62).

### **Linking Nontraditional/Adult Students With Child Care**

In their 2001 brief, Golonka and Matus-Grossman discussed small case studies that suggest how to better recruit and retain nontraditional/adult students. Golonka and Matus-Grossman also emphasized that community colleges must guide students to community resources, specifically those providing child care, so that students can participate in academic activities. The authors recommended that both public agencies and colleges offer support services, including child care, transportation assistance, and meals so that parents can attend orientation or recruitment sessions. In this regard, Golonka and Matus-Grossman pointed out that several Washington state community

colleges provide weekend child care so that their students can attend Saturday classes. They also have activities for older children while their parents are in class. College personnel market this program in the class schedule and pass out to students brochures that advertise their services. In addition, more and more nonprofit organizations are allowing parents to drop off their child for evening child care while the parents pursue higher education; all they have to do is produce a transcript as evidence of attendance (Golonka & Matus-Grossman, 2001).

Another example of a service that provides support to nontraditional/adult students is a program provided by the State of Iowa called PROMISE JOBS, or Promoting Independence and Self Sufficiency through Employment, which provides a range of support to students who qualify for public assistance. Participating in the program provides students with free child care if they abide by the rules of the program. The program gives participants access to many activities, including workplace essentials, job seeking skills, job search opportunities, a work experience program, monitored employment, basic education, family development services, and family planning services (Iowa Workforce Development, 2013).

### **Summary**

This chapter provides evidence for why a relationship between community colleges and community-based agencies is advantageous. These relationships are creating a lasting impression on students and student affairs personnel because they attempt to provide a much needed resource. The major research literature that informs my study discusses how nontraditional/adult students can be impacted by a college's connection to community-based resources. In this chapter, I discussed and reviewed

literature that provided insight on the profile of the nontraditional/adult student, adult learning theory, and adult career crisis and transition theory. I also discussed relational-cultural theory, hopefulness and self-efficacy, as well as fulfillment and motivation. I gathered additional information by reviewing literature about student affairs support programs in the community college, community-based resources, case management and support services, and finally, the linking of nontraditional/adult students to child care. By reviewing literature connected with these themes, I was able to understand adult/nontraditional students better. I used this knowledge to inform my study and to develop my subsequent chapters.



## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the influence that a life management model and other factors have on the perceptions and experiences of a small number of adult TRIO SSS students at Palmer Community College. This study answers the main research question: What are the perceptions and experiences of a small group of adult TRIO SSS community college students and how have a community-based life management program, institutional support, and personal factors influenced their success and persistence in college? Related sub-questions for this study are:

1. What are their motivations for attending college and what personal and educational challenges have they faced along the way?
2. From their perspective, what personal factors (i.e., attitudes, skills, family, peers, and life experiences) have influenced their persistence and success?
3. From their perspective, in what ways have the TRIO SSS program and other college support influenced their persistence and success?
4. From their perspective, in what ways has the community-based life management program influenced their persistence and success? What benefits did their participation in the program provide them?

In this chapter, I will discuss the use of qualitative inquiry to capture the lived experiences of the study's participants. This chapter will also discuss the nature of

qualitative research and why it was chosen for this study, the social constructivism perspective, the phenomenological research tradition and process, the role of the researcher, selection of the participants, the research site and life management program, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, strategies for validating the study findings, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study.

### **What is Qualitative Research?**

In modern research, qualitative research provides an alternative to quantitative research. Three themes shape its history in education: (a) philosophical ideas, (b) procedural developments, and (c) participatory and advocacy practices (Creswell, 2008, p. 49). Qualitative research became popular in the 1960s due to the fact that researchers wanted the ability to focus less on the researcher's view and more on the participants' view. The second theme that emerged was the need to focus on the procedures of qualitative research. These procedures consist of writing qualitative questions, conducting on-site observations and interviews, and analyzing themes in the lives of the participants. Lastly, qualitative research developed into a research practice that embraced underrepresented groups and began to focus on a more participatory and advocacy practice. These three themes have led to characteristics of qualitative research that are widely recognized today:

There is recognition that as researchers we need to listen to the views of participants in our studies and that we need to ask general, open questions, and collect data in places where people live and work. There is also recognition that research has a role in advocating for change and bettering the lives of individuals. (Creswell, 2008, p. 51)

Qualitative researchers take a holistic approach to research, meaning they pay close attention to the philosophical framework and the method. They are seeking

meaning, more specifically the social meaning with which individuals connect in their everyday life experiences, situations, and circumstances. They essentially try to extract meaning out of the data that is produced. They also focus more on words and text. Qualitative researchers ask their questions differently and they are always trying to understand the “why.” As researchers, their disposition is to ask how, why, or what questions.

### **Social Constructivism Perspective**

I have chosen a social constructivism worldview to provide context to my study. In social constructivism, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. “In terms of practice, the questions become broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation, a meaning typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons” (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). The goal of this worldview is to gather as much information as possible about the participants’ views of the situation (Creswell, 2013). These subjective meanings are often molded through the participants’ interactions with others. This is not a view that starts with a theory, but instead, it allows the participants to generate a theory or pattern of meaning based on their experiences and perceptions.

A social constructivism worldview asks broad and general questions so that participants can build meaning from their situation. According to Creswell (2013), “the more open ended the questioning, the better, as the researcher listens carefully” and develops themes from the participants’ responses and reactions (p. 25). Qualitative “researchers recognize that their own background shapes their interpretation and they ‘position themselves’ in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from

their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p. 25).

Essentially, qualitative researchers make an interpretation of their findings and they make this interpretation based on their own background, knowledge, and experiences.

My experience working with nontraditional/adult students within a community college has ignited a deep desire to get to the root of the problem. Through a qualitative study, I can focus on the participants’ individual lived experiences by asking semi-structured, open-ended questions. The social constructivism worldview helps shape my understanding of their stories and acknowledges the subjective meanings of their personal experiences. I appreciate that qualitative research has the potential to be rich in data. The data do not include correlations and statistics, but instead begin with the process of thinking critically about a subject, collecting information about it, and documenting the results.

### **What is Phenomenology?**

“Whereas a narrative study reports the stories of experiences of a single individual or several individuals, a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). The main purpose of phenomenology is to get to the core of the universal experience and reduce that phenomenon into a description. As the researcher grasps an understanding of the overarching theme, that researcher collects data, and from the data, the researcher then describes the themes within the experiences of all the individuals.

Historically, phenomenology has strong philosophical ties to Husserl. In *The Practice of Qualitative Research*, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) identified philosophical research developments. From the phenomenological perspective, Husserl (as cited in

Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011) explained that human consciousness is a way to get a better understanding of social reality and how one might think about reality.

Moustakas (as cited in Creswell, 2013) provided a list of several features of phenomenology:

- Looking at the phenomenon to be explored focuses on the basic concept or idea.
- The journey of the phenomenon that the group experiences is a group that includes three to four individuals or as many as 10 to 15.
- It also includes a discussion about the phenomenology. It looks at the lived experiences of the participants within the group, both subjectively and objectively.
- Sometimes bracketing takes place; this is where the researchers take themselves out of the study. They do this so that the researcher can completely focus on the study and what the participants are experiencing.
- Data collection includes interviewing individuals that experienced the phenomenon.
- Data analysis follows systematic procedures that range from analyzing significant statements to detailed descriptions that explain the “what?” and the “how?”
- The last part involves a descriptive passage that incorporates the spirit of the individuals. It explains what they experienced and how they experienced it. The “essence” is the culminating aspect of a phenomenological study. (pp. 78–79)

### **Types of Phenomenology**

I have noticed that the various types of phenomenology are similar in nature and have analogous overarching themes. As these relate to this study, there are three approaches that I will discuss. The first approach is hermeneutic phenomenology. This phenomenology focuses on lived experiences and the interpretation or textual meaning of life. Phenomenology can be described in a way that involves various research activities. Researchers first focus on a topic that interests them and as they do this, they reflect on the significant themes that are connected to the lived experience. They then write a description of the phenomenon.

Moustakas (1994) illustrated the procedures of transcendental and psychological phenomenology which consist of bracketing and how one experiences the phenomenon. Creswell (2013) details the phenomenological procedures of Moustakas in the following way:

The researcher then analyzes the data by reducing the information to significant statements or quotes and combines the statements into themes. Following that, the researcher develops a *textural description* of the experiences of the persons (what participants experienced), a *structural description* of their experiences (how they experienced it in terms of the conditions, situations, or context), and a combination of the textural and structural descriptions to convey the overall essence of the experience. (p. 80)

Alfred Schutz represents the tradition of contemporary social phenomenology. Schutz (1954) suggested an important concept associated with social sciences, more specifically within phenomenology, stating: the “primary goal of social sciences is to obtain organized knowledge of social reality” (p. 261). In addition, Schutz (1954) believed that human beings are born into their environment and their responsibility is to discover self within their social setting: “Individuals have knowledge of these various dimensions of the social world in which they live” (p. 263). Schutz asserted that a person’s awareness of his or her world is specialized and disconnected. According to Schutz, individuals alone do not have the capacity to see the societal picture; however, social scientists organize the disconnected pieces in a way that various groups can identify a more coherent picture.

Additionally, Wilson (2002) emphasized three general hypotheses, originally put forward by Schutz (1967), relating to how social scientists create models of human behavior. These models focus on three factors: (a) logical consistency in the social scientist’s constructs that differ from those of the individuals living their daily life, (b)

these constructs are subjective interpretations, and (c) the constructs created by the social scientist “should be understandable by the individual social actor and his or her fellows” (Wilson, 2002, p. 196).

### **Phenomenological Research Process**

At the heart of phenomenology are intentionality, *noema* and *noesis*. Husserl (1931) first introduced the concepts of noema and noesis. Noesis organizes the mind and spirit. It also enlightens us to the “meaning or sense of whatever is in perception, memory, judgment, thinking, and feeling” (Husserl, 1931, p. 249). “In intentional experience, there is a material side and a noetic or ideal side” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 68). Husserl (1931) offered the following explanation of these concepts:

Noesis pertains to perception and what is actually felt or remembered. Noema, another central concept, interconnects at every point of the noesis. Noema is the act of, meaning, in perception is its perceptual meaning or the perceived as such; in recollection, the remembered as such; in judging, the judged as such. (p. 258)

Noema and noesis ultimately refer to meanings and how what we see intuitively assists in constructing its meaning.

The phenomenological research process included four important processes: (a) *epoche*, (b) phenomenological reduction, (c) imaginative variation, and (d) the synthesis of meanings and essences (Moustakas, 1994). In phenomenological research, we uncover evidence from our interviewees’ recollections of their lived life experiences. The Greek word *epoche* means to stay away from and abstain, which in the researcher’s role relates directly to setting aside my own prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about the data. “We ‘invalidate,’ ‘inhibit,’ and ‘disqualify’ all commitments with reference to previous knowledge and experience” (Schmitt, 1968, p. 59). As I grasp a deeper

understanding of epoche, I understand it to mean setting aside my own prejudices, thoughts, and experiences and focusing solely on the isolated experience of the participants. This is an opportunity for me to arrive at new knowledge.

The first step into recognition is epoche and only seeing what is actually there, only seeing what actually appears, free of opinions and presumptions. In *phenomenological reduction*, according to Moustakas (1994), “the quality of the experience becomes the focus” (p. 90), and the challenge is the filling in or nature of the experience. There is intentionality with phenomenological reduction because it is a way of seeing and listening to the stream of consciousness; this is deliberate and connects us with texture and meaning.

*Bracketing* or epoche helped me stay away from what I think I know, but instead see what is really there. Moustakas (1994) refers to setting aside our *biases* and *prejudgements* as well as our *preconceived ideas*. This technique encourages the invalidation of what we think we know about the participants; further, it ensures that I am studying them with a fresh perspective. LeVasseur (2003) suggested that, although bracketing can be difficult, one way researchers can set aside their conceptions about a phenomenon is to cultivate a “persistent curiosity” regarding the phenomenon they are examining (p. 418). It is also important for me to be careful not to assume that one student/participant is exactly like another; my goal is to avoid all generalizations at this point in the process.

The next step in the research process is *imaginative variation*, which is to “seek possible meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent



perspectives, different positions, roles or functions” (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 97).

*Imaginative reduction* speaks to the “how” of what is being experienced.

The last and final step of the phenomenological research process is *synthesis*, which correlates with the essence of the experience. Sartre (1965) referred to essence as the principle of the series, the “concatenation of appearances” (p. xlvi). Sartre stated that “the essence finally is radically severed from the individual appearance which manifests it, since on principle it is that which must be able to be manifested by any infinite series of individual manifestations” (p. xlviii). Moustakas (1994) provided concluding comments regarding the process:

Epoche, Phenomenological Reduction, Imaginative Variation, and Synthesis are necessary in order to conduct phenomenological research. Through phenomenology, a significant methodology is developed for investigating human experience and for deriving knowledge from a state of pure consciousness. One learns to see naively and freshly again, to value conscious experience, to respect the evidence of one’s senses, and to move toward an intersubjective knowing of things, people, and everyday experiences. (p. 101)

### **The Role of the Researcher**

As the researcher, I am responsible for the collection of the data and for understanding the importance of that data as well as the bias that may also follow. I acknowledge that although I did not share the perceived lived experiences of my participants, I do have a connection with this particular demographic. As a college faculty member and nonprofit business owner, I work with this demographic every day. I empathize and make an effort to understand their experiences from their perspective in order for us to have a productive relationship. I imagine that my role as owner and operator may have impacted the participants’ involvement in the study and may have created some bias; however, I made an effort to be as transparent as possible. Being the

owner gave me insight as to the inner workings of the organization and it helped me build rapport more quickly and easily with my participants. I did not have contact with four of the five participants, but I was given their email addresses in order to contact them regarding the free child care opportunity for the fall term. I asked them to contact the child care center (and they did) in order to enroll their children in the program. After the semester was over and I was approved by IRB, I emailed and called them to set up an interview. I did know the fifth participant personally because she worked for me at the nonprofit and was recommended by the program director. There were strategic steps taken with her to mediate bias; however, I don't know how her role as one of my staff may have impacted her responses.

My work in developing nonprofit organizations that support nontraditional/adult students is where my passion lies. I am impressed daily by their ability to multitask and persevere through adversity. I have been amazed by their stories of determination and wanted to create a formal location to document those stories. In order to make sure that I limited my bias, I used probes, asking questions like: "Can you tell me more about that?" or "Give me an example?" and "Can you describe that experience?" I made an effort not to judge but to collect information for my knowledge base.

Again, to limit the bias, I made sure that I was consciously aware of myself as the researcher and that I understood and followed the steps within the phenomenological research process. It was comforting to some of the participants that I was an instructor at Palmer Community College and that I run a nonprofit. My nonprofit organization has historically provided support to students like those being studied, persons who daily juggle multiple responsibilities with limited resources.

I have a strong educational background as a helping professional and I am classically trained as a counselor. My counseling background has enabled me to acquire strong interviewing skills as well as the ability to empathize and take a nonjudgmental stance. My counseling background and knowledge of qualitative research also has taught me the importance of reflexivity and utilizing a reflective journal, which I used to assist me throughout the entire process.

### **Data Collection**

#### **Selection of the Participants, Institutional Site, and Program Site**

I selected the participants for this study by using purposeful sampling where I intentionally selected individuals that were current students at Palmer Community College's urban campus. According to Creswell (2008), purposeful sampling is "when researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon" (p. 217).

To be eligible for TRIO SSS program, students must meet at least one or more of the following criteria: (a) be a first-generation college student, (b) meet low-income guidelines set by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, or (c) possess a documented physical or learning disability according to TRIO SSS guidelines. In addition, to be accepted in the TRIO SSS program at this particular institution, participants must be taking a minimum of nine college-level credit hours, be in good academic standing, and be pursuing an associate degree based at Palmer Community College's urban campus. For the purpose of this study, participants also were a biological parent, caregiver, or guardian of one or more children between the ages of six

weeks to 13 years old and were participants within Helping Students Thrive life management program.

To recruit potential participants, the TRIO SSS director sent out an e-mail to all program participants notifying them of a free child care opportunity for the 2013 fall term. If interested, students were asked to contact the director or their assigned TRIO SSS academic advisor for additional information. Interested TRIO SSS students were then invited to participate in the Helping Students Thrive program. Participants were able to utilize free child care and agency resources, including life management support, for the duration of the fall semester. Four TRIO SSS students who met the criteria communicated an interest in the program. The fifth participant was not a TRIO SSS student but worked at the nonprofit. I notified my director at the nonprofit that I had fewer participants than I would have liked for my study. She gave me names of three participants that met the criteria and who were already enrolled with the Helping Students Thrive program. I selected one of these as a fifth participant because she closely met the criteria of the study. She met all Department of Education guidelines; she did not meet the Palmer Community College TRIO SSS criteria because she was enrolled part time with 3 credit hours instead of 9 credit hours. She met all other criteria for the study and was enrolled in Helping Students Thrive program and was referred to me by a Helping Students Thrive program member; she also expressed an interest in participating in the study. Once the participants enrolled their children in the program, Helping Students Thrive program staff attended to the needs of the children as well as to the parent participant. The Helping Students Thrive program staff provided child care, life management, and socioemotional support.

In January 2014, I phoned and e-mailed prospective participants and invited them to be a part of the study. For the interview, we met at an off-campus location of their choosing. I asked them to share their experience in the Helping Students Thrive program as well as how institutional support and personal factors influenced their success and persistence at Palmer Community College.

### **Interviews**

I conducted individual personal interviews with five participants, three women and two men. I asked open-ended, in-depth, semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix A). Each interview was face-to-face and was between 60–90 minutes in length. With their consent, the interviews were captured using an audio recorder. Each participant was asked to complete a consent form prior to the beginning of the interview (see Appendix B); I explained that their participation was voluntary and that they may choose to withdraw at any time and/or choose not to answer a specific question. I built rapport with my participants during the interview process by making the question process conversational so that they did not feel as if they were being interrogated. Additionally, I made eye contact with the participants so as to show them that I was engaged and open to what they had to say.

### **Demographic Survey**

Prior to the interview, I mailed and e-mailed the demographic survey (see Appendix C) to each participant. They all brought the survey with them to the interview per my instructions. I used their survey responses to gather demographic data related to their backgrounds such as age, ethnic/racial identity, number of children, and employment status.

## **Observational Notes**

During the interviews, I took very brief written observational notes to document how the participants' body language responded to certain questions. Since I was recording the interviews, I spent a good deal of our time together watching and listening.

## **Data Analysis**

I used a professional transcriptionist who committed to confidentiality and helped transcribe the lived experiences of the participants as reported in the interview transcripts. I changed the name of each of the participants and each was given a secure code known only by me in order to maintain anonymity. After all interview data were transcribed, I then carefully analyzed the data by taking the data apart to interpret it. I did this by “spiraling” the data, as outlined by Creswell (2013). Creswell stated that the researcher must first organize the data and encouraged putting data from the interviews into a computer filing system. After organizing the data, Creswell exhorted researchers to read the participant's transcript in its entirety several times, taking notes on what they read. The next step consists of describing, classifying, and interpreting the data. Creswell (2013) explained that “researchers build detailed descriptions, develop themes or dimensions, and provide an interpretation in light of their own views or views of perspectives in the literature” (p. 184). The coding process required breaking apart the text into smaller parts. Creswell (2013) suggested no more than 30 categories of information. I developed 17 categories of information. As the researcher, along with coding, I arranged the data gleaming it thematically or into common ideas. I interpreted it by going beyond the codes and finding themes within those codes to help focus on the larger meaning. Although the spiral process begins with codes, it evolves into generating

larger units of information that help make sense out of the data. The last part of the spiral process includes representing the data. This stage of the spiral exists to transform data into a visual image.

Although Moustakas (1994) led the phenomenological analysis movement, Creswell (2013) further clarified the connection to phenomenological analysis according to Moustakas. The first step in phenomenological analysis involves describing personal experiences with the phenomenon, beginning with a full description of the researcher's own personal experiences (Creswell, 2013). This stage helped me be reflexive and set aside my own personal experiences and focus more on the participants' experiences. Moustakas directed that the next step for the researcher was to develop a list of statements from the interviews and other data to show how participants are experiencing their phenomenon. Moustakas termed the process of listing statements and treating each statement as having equal worth as *horizontalization of the data*. The next step involves taking noteworthy statements and placing them in larger units called *meaning units*.

These significant statements and themes are then used to write a description of the participants' experience (textural description). They are also used to write a description of the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon, called *imaginative variation or structural description*. (Creswell, 2013, p. 82)

Creswell's (2013) last stage of phenomenological analysis consists of the researcher then writing "a composite description that presents the 'essence' of the phenomenon, called the *essential, invariant structure (or essence)*. It means that all experiences have an underlying structure" (p. 82).

## **Strategies for Validating Findings**

The research was validated by following the guidelines of phenomenological research put forth by Moustakas (1994) as well as Creswell's (2013) standards for assessing the quality of a phenomenology. Validation is based on addressing the following questions:

- (a) Does the author convey an understanding of the philosophical tenets of phenomenology?
- (b) Does the author have a clear "phenomenon" to study that is articulated in a concise way?
- (c) Does the author use procedures of data analysis in phenomenology?
- (d) Does the author convey the overall essence of the experience of the participants? Does this essence include a description of the experience and the context in which it occurred?
- (e) Is the author reflexive throughout the study? (Creswell, 2013, p. 260)

In addition, Creswell's (2013) directives were assiduously followed to ensure that information was correctly documented. Three phenomena are the focus of this study. One phenomenon is the participants' experiences in a life management program. Another phenomenon explored is their college experience and involvement in the TRIO SSS program. The third phenomenon is their personal life experiences and perceptions related to their motivations, challenges, and persistence in college. I sought to uncover the commonalities the participants shared and to determine what their sociological location was. The essence of the participants' individual life experiences are captured in chapter four of this study. In chapter five, I discuss the participants' commonalities or their common lived experiences related to the phenomena that are the focus of this study. In order to take into account reflexivity, I ensured that I was aware of my personal biases prior to each interview and throughout the data analysis stage.



Creswell (2007) discussed several strategies in regard to validating qualitative research: (a) prolonged and persistent engagement in the field to gain the trust of participants and learn their culture, which is particularly useful in ethnographic studies; (b) the use of triangulation to corroborate different data sources to shed light on themes; (c) peer review or debriefing; (d) clarifying research bias; (e) member checking; (f) providing rich, thick descriptions of data for the allowance of transferability; and (g) external audits. I used three validation strategies with my study. The first is thick descriptions. Creswell (2007) quoted Denzin who defined thick descriptions as the narrative that “presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships . . . [and] evokes emotionality and self-feelings. The voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard” (p. 194). In addition to providing thick descriptions to validate participants’ experiences, I verified the intended meaning through the procedure of member checking where participants reviewed their individual interview transcripts to correct, clarify, and elaborate upon the information that was given during the interview. Finally, self-reflection and clarifying researcher bias also played an important role in the study’s validation strategies.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The overall ethicality of the study is crucial and was taken very seriously. I protected my participants by replacing their names with pseudonyms to protect their identity. I also protected the names of instructors and staff at the college as well as staff at the community-based organization. There are 200 students within the TRIO SSS program, so there is little risk of participants being identified; however, it was important

to keep their children's names and any other identities protected. Pseudonyms also were given to the higher education institution, the life management program, and the community-based organization involved. I was guided by the standards set up by the Institutional Review Board at Benedictine University as well as at Palmer Community College. All data will remain stored in a locked electronic file for at least seven years and destroyed afterwards if no longer needed. All computer files used for this study will be kept on a secure server.

### **Limitations**

To conduct this qualitative survey, I used a phenomenological research design to describe "what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). This study involved the use of open-ended, semi-structured questions as the primary method. I used TRIO SSS staff at Palmer Community College to discuss the study with potential participants and subsequently, provide an opportunity for the participants to become involved in the study. Involvement in this study was limited to five participants at Palmer Community College's urban campus. Another limitation was that I had a smaller group of participants and less diversity than what I had originally hoped to have involved with the life management program, which limited my potential participant pool. An additional key limitation of my study was the constrained amount of time that participants were involved in the life management program. They were enrolled in the life management program for only one semester. A full year or more in the program would have provided additional experiences and perspectives for the participants to share and likely would have a greater impact on their prolonged persistence.

In addition, there were two personal limitations of this study. The first limitation was that I have been employed part time at Palmer Community College for the past six years as an adjunct instructor. Another limitation was that I am the founder of The Community Project, which is the community organization that partnered with Palmer Community College. I addressed these limitations by ensuring that the participants' self-reported information was released only to this researcher. In order to address the potential bias that may arise because of my position at The Community Project, I hired a staff member, a life management coach, who acted as the go-between agent for the college and the organization.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I explained why I chose qualitative research and presented a comprehensive description of the methodology that was used for this study. I provided background information about my connection with the study. I noted the personal biases I have that could have negatively impacted the study and the steps I took to neutralize them. Additionally, I elaborated on what qualitative research is, what phenomenology is, and outlined the different types of phenomenology. The study participant selection process was detailed, and I discussed the data collection methods and data analysis procedures used as well as the strategies for validating findings. I reviewed my role as a researcher and the ethical issues that needed to be taken into consideration.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE INDIVIDUAL PROFILES OF THE PARTICIPANTS**

My participants, all nontraditional/adult college students, represented various demographics. I interviewed two men and three women. Two of my participants were African American and the other three were Caucasian. At the time of the interviews, four were in their 30s and one was in her 20s. All but one participant identified themselves as being single; however, three of the five have live-in partners. Regarding their pre-collegiate educational background, three of the five participants received a GED instead of a high school diploma. Two of the participants were attending Palmer Community College part time and the other three were attending full time. There was one participant who worked full time; two that were not employed; and two that worked part time. In addition, all were first generation college students and low income. Four of the five study participants were participants in Palmer Community College's TRIO SSS program; the remaining participant met the Department of Education TRIO guidelines, but was not program eligible because she was not enrolled in enough credit hours, which was a program requirement of this community college. Furthermore, all five were involved in the Helping Students Thrive Program during fall 2013. Their children were ages six weeks to 13 years old, which made them eligible to be involved in the Helping Students Thrive life management model.

A demographic summary of the participants who contributed to this study is provided in Table 2, which shows gender, current age, marital status, ethnic/racial background, the year they graduated from high school, and whether they received a diploma or GED. Table 2 also reflects whether the participants have full-time or part-time enrollment status, their major or degree program, their employment status, and the number of children they have and their ages.

Table 3

*Demographic Summary of Study Participants*

Name	Gender	Age	Age of Children	Marital and/or Partnership Live-In Status	Ethnic/Racial Background	Year Graduated from HS	GED or High School Diploma	College Enrollment Status: Full-time or Part-time	Major/Degree Program	Employment Status
Aaron	Male	37	4, 2	Single/Live-in	African American	1995	Diploma	Full-time	Human Services	Part-time
Allison	Female	23	6, 4, 2	Single/Live-in	African American & Caucasian	2009	GED	Part-time (3-6 credits)	Human Services	Full-time
Anthony	Male	38	21, 13, 2	Married	Caucasian	1997	GED	Full-time	Business Admin.	Unemployed
Sherry	Female	31	16, 7, 2	Single	Caucasian	2000	GED	Full-time	Associate in Arts	Part-time
Stephanie	Female	32	10, 6	Single	Caucasian	1999	Diploma	Part-time (9+ credits)	Human Services	Unemployed

Personal profiles of the participants were documented in order to understand their backgrounds more clearly and to also gain a better understanding of their personal experiences. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identity and family, the institution, and staff members. The following participant profiles are listed in alphabetical order.

## Aaron

*We are making this work together. We can do this . . . because we just don't have a choice not to.*

Aaron is a 37-year-old male who has two children, ages four and two. He is single, African American, and graduated from high school in 1995 with a diploma. He is enrolled at the college full time as a human services major and he works part time. He began his story by telling me that his high school experience involved a lot of moving back and forth from Georgia to the Midwestern community where he now lives. He was an athlete but did not like school. In retrospect, his friends were not the best influence on him. Many of them went to prison and got into trouble. He learned to separate himself from them by watching his parents work hard and persevere through adversity. After he graduated, he was adamant about never returning to school because of his experience. Upon receiving his high school diploma, he made the 1,000 mile journey down South to help his father with his business. Three years later, his dad passed away and his mom was diagnosed with cancer. He moved back to the Midwest to take care of his mom.

Aaron took a job at a local non-profit human service agency, initially, as someone who drove the van and picked up kids. Over a period of time, he was promoted to training and developing staff. He explained to me that he really likes his job; however, he noticed that he was not being compensated for additional duties. His boss explained to him that without postsecondary education, he would never be able to move forward into an official leadership position and he would not make more money. This prompted Aaron to enroll in college. He was motivated by his late father who was a hard worker. Year after year, Aaron had watched him work hard and run his business, and he began to

desire that for himself. He told me that he wanted to move forward with his life and wanted to advance in his career.

Aaron explained that his journey to college did not happen without bumps in the road. A personal challenge he experienced was when he encountered an opportunity to follow in his father's footsteps as a blue collar worker at a concrete plant. He was torn because he was enticed by money and a large paycheck; however, he knew that it was not a position that would make him happy. Instead, he really had a desire to help people and that is why he was a human services major at Palmer Community College, and at the time of the interview, he was working on his internship at a nonprofit agency.

Aaron considers his family to be a huge support system. He also credits Brian, his advisor with TRIO SSS, as playing a major role in helping direct his educational path. He explained that Brian advises him to take the classes he needs, not the ones he does not. Aaron communicated that he is in a really good place right now—content and happy. Over time, he became aware that his ideal learning situation is group work and a lecture format. He feeds off the energy of human interaction.

Aaron's immediate reaction to the Helping Students Thrive program was, "What's the catch?" He explained that he was thrilled to be accepted into the program because it was free and gave him the time he needs to get his work done. He likes the structure, and he is less stressed about child care for his children who live with him and his girlfriend.

### **Allison**

*College makes me feel like I'm doing something with my life. I'm not just working and being at home. I'm actually trying to be something, even though it's slow. I'm only doing two classes a semester. Who knows how long I'll be in school for.*

*I don't care what people say. I'm still going and that's all that really matters.  
You can say what you want to say as long as I'm in there and I'm doing it.  
However long it takes me, I'm still going to be doing it.*

Allison is a 23-year-old female who has three children, ages six, four, and two. She is single and African American and Caucasian; she graduated in 2009 with a GED. She attends college part time, pursuing an associate degree in human services, and she works full time. Allison used the word “rocky” to describe her high school experience. She said that she started out by attending high school near Palmer Community College; but in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, she moved back to her home town, Las Vegas, Nevada. “Um. I can’t really . . . I can’t say that in high school . . . I skipped a lot. I don’t know why. I didn’t go a lot, like every day, but when I did go, I didn’t go a lot.” She got pregnant with her first child while in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. She then moved back to the Midwestern community near Palmer Community College. A combination of life changes and a lack of motivation lead Allison to transfer to an alternative school where she received her GED. She explained that she completed her GED in two weeks, confirming that she was not stupid, but that she did not have patience and did not apply herself. “I just didn’t like going to class and sitting there and listening to the teacher and stuff. I just . . . I wanted to do other things. I didn’t want to go to school and learn.”

Allison shared with me that she had five siblings who had different fathers; she said that there was a lot of moving back and forth. They ended up back in the Midwest because that was where her stepfather lived. She said that, for the most part, growing up was a positive experience and that she had a mother and father figure in her life. When growing up, she considered her family to be middle class. Her mom has rheumatoid



arthritis and lupus and does not work, but her dad does work. After getting pregnant, she admitted that her mom was upset.

Allison is in a committed relationship with a woman. They have been together for over a year. She revealed that what she likes about her partner is that she is not like the children's fathers—stern and more of a disciplinarian. She mentioned that they kept their same-sex relationship a secret for a while. She said that they both have similar views on how to raise a family and that her significant other does a great job in helping her parent. They currently live together, and her children like her partner a lot. She expressed some reservations about how to tell her children about her relationship, stating that she did not know how to explain it to them. So, they decided to wait a bit.

When asked what made her decide to enroll in college after not liking high school, Allison explained that she kind of missed school. And so far, according to Allison, she is doing well in college and receives As and Bs. She said that she is comfortable and happy with where her life is right now. She works full time and goes to school part time. She likes her job as the lead teacher at a child care and feels like her life is manageable right now.

Allison admitted that she did have some apprehension when enrolling in college. She did not know what to expect. When she started at Palmer Community College, she thought she would take online classes. She quickly learned that this was not going to work well with her learning style. "Like I said, I learn better from somebody actually standing in front of me," she told me.

College is easy for Allison. She explained that making up for high school is her motivation. She is the person in class who is very outspoken, and she learns by asking

questions and getting feedback. Her children are her motivation and they help her to push towards success. However, most of her support comes from her family and her relationship with her partner. She had a difficult time identifying how she works through stress when asked; however, she told me that she had never really thought about it. “I feel like I just do it. I just deal with it. I don’t know how I do it. I just do.” Her response to overcoming personal and academic adversity was consistently, “Just get over it and do it.”

Allison has the ability to overcome adversity because she has consistently had to overcome many hurdles, without support from others. Her experience within Helping Students Thrive has been a positive one for her and her children. She had many suggestions for the sustainability of the Helping Students Thrive life management program, like having continual child care that spans over several semesters so that parents do not have to take their children out of the supportive environment to which they have become accustomed. She also commented that having the Helping Students Thrive program as an extension of the college was extremely helpful because people at Helping Students Thrive are familiar with some of the barriers that are presented when attempting to work full time and complete school, so they help her through it. When asked about TRIO SSS, Allison explained that she was not a participant because she was taking a lower number of credits than required, but would like to learn more about the program.

We ended our interview by Allison commenting that she appreciated that it felt like we were just having a friendly conversation. “I can tell you whatever and that’s how I feel most students feel like with a teacher or an advisor; they want to feel like they can come to you.” She went on to explain that the student-teacher relationship should be

relaxed; however, there should be a line, not too laid back, but almost a comfort level so that the person can open up.

### **Anthony**

*If you do what you love, then you never work a day in your life.*

Anthony is a 38-year-old male with three children ages 21, 13, and two. He is married, Caucasian, and graduated in 1997 with a GED. He attends college full time as a business administration major, and he currently is unemployed. Anthony met me early in the lobby of the library located right outside of our interview room. He looked me straight in the eye, shook my hand, and thanked me for allowing him to be a part of the Helping Students Thrive program. I thanked him and showed him into the interview room and we began our journey into his life. We started out by discussing Anthony's high school experience.

I, unfortunately, was more into partying and having a good time. I mean it's not that I wasn't intelligent. I spent three years in 9<sup>th</sup> grade and did one chapter of social studies in three years. I mean I just wasn't too into school.

Anthony explained that when he turned 17 he took the GED and passed the test with really high scores. He thinks that his lack of focus in high school had to do with a combination of partying and having a good time. He suggested that it could have been that he was not challenged because they put him into special education classes and that did not help. He wound up leaving high school a few times and going to an alternative school. He excelled there, but it just was not what he wanted to do and so he dropped out.

We then began talking about his home life and how he got to where he is now. According to Anthony, he did not engage in a lot of criminal activity, and he did not

actually get “caught” until after he turned 18 years old. He indicated that growing up he was allowed to do whatever he wanted, and because of that, he experimented with a lot of drugs. “My house was kind of a party house.” His mother was a stay-at-home mom, and his dad was a truck driver. After his parents divorced, his father became ill and passed away. He has three siblings—two brothers and a sister. Growing up, they had money. They were able to buy the things they wanted and needed; but after his parent’s divorce and his father’s death, they fell below the poverty line and lived off his mom’s social security.

Anthony was surrounded by friends growing up. He considered his house a party house and when they were not in school, they were at his house. Anthony stated that he does not have a lot of those friends now.

I don’t have a whole lot of friends at the moment. I had some pretty serious drug use problems and things like that, and a lot of issues with the law, which probably stems from my drug use.

Anthony admitted that after his children were taken away, he started to separate himself from those friends. He observed that once you make a lifestyle choice not to continue to use drugs, you lose a lot of your former friends. “I still talk to a few of them, but they are not the kind of people you want to be around,” he stated.

Anthony went into more detail about his drug use and his experiences in jail. He discussed the fact that he had a felony for drug possession and 81 cases against him at the state level. He disclosed this to me to stress the importance of needing to change his life. He did this for his children, so as to be an example to them. He explained that his transition into college had a lot to do with his children and being a positive role model in their eyes. His educational journey began by trying to find a job; however, this became

difficult because of his criminal record. After months of trying, his wife encouraged him to enroll in college. He applied for federal student aid, received confirmation of aid, and then enrolled in college.

Anthony admitted that he was nervous about that first day of class. He had not been in school for over 20 years, and he had years of drug use that he was afraid would become an issue. He was pleasantly surprised when he raised the bar with As and Bs in his first semester and, he said proudly, in his second semester, he made the President's List. With his bachelor's degree in business administration, he hopes to open a tattoo parlor. Also, he revealed that he is a visual learner.

Anthony credited his wife as one of his strongest support systems. "She is the one who pretty much kicked me in the butt and told me to get back into school." He also credits Brian within the TRIO SSS program for his success. Anthony mentioned that there is no one in his family who has gone to college and very few who even have a GED or high school diploma. Those factors motivate him. He relayed to me that hopefully, his children will see him achieving and will have the desire to achieve as well.

Brian, his TRIO SSS advisor, was the person who suggested that Anthony enroll in the Helping Students Thrive program. Anthony smiled as he explained that he was probably the first to apply for the opportunity to receive free child care. He said that there were several factors that contributed to taking advantage of the opportunity. "It was real tough to get my school work done. I had to do it right there at school and I had to find time in between classes, and I just didn't have enough time at school." Anthony said that the flexibility to drop off his children at 6:30 a.m. and pick them up later allowed him the time to complete his homework and participate in required group projects

assigned by his teachers. He liked the fact that the Helping Students Thrive program allowed him as much time as he needed on campus. The child care assistance provided through the state limited his access to child care to only when he was in class.

Anthony suggested providing the Helping Students Thrive program as a scholarship option so that students could benefit from the free child care by taking more classes and participating in academic programming throughout the day. He also suggested that the life management coach offer conferences with parents to let them know how their child is progressing and areas in which they need more support. Anthony has decided to keep his child in the program because of how he has adjusted and the convenience of the Helping Students Thrive program being more connected with Palmer Community College.

### **Sherry**

*My past has been my motivation to do better as a person. The reason I've stuck through it and going to school this long is because I don't want my kids to think that they can start something and not finish it. That's the only reason . . . If I don't finish what I start, that's just giving them an excuse for starting and not finishing. I refuse to be that mom. I want the kids to be like, 'My mom struggled and she finished. So, if my mom can do it, then I can!'*

Sherry was one of my first interviews on a chilly Friday morning. While getting dressed, I received a call from her. Her faint voice coming through the phone was hard to make out, but she managed to hoarsely whisper what sounded like she was sick and needed to reschedule for later that day. Sherry was experiencing a migraine, having some issues with child care, and had no idea how she was going to follow through on our interview. I asked her if it would be helpful if I came to her. There was a long pause and she admitted that if I could do that, she would appreciate it. Sherry greeted me at the

door, wearing flannel pajama pants and a tank top. Her nose was bright red from what looked like a nasty cold. She apologized for her appearance and invited me to come into the house.

Sherry is a 31-year-old female with three children, ages 16, seven, and two. She is single, Caucasian, and graduated in 2000 with a GED. She attends the college full time and works part time; she is working towards a general associate in arts degree. She works a couple of days a week at a veterinarian clinic where she grooms dogs. Sherry started out by telling me about her experience in high school. She got pregnant at the beginning of her freshman year, right after she turned 14. She did not have the best relationship with her mother. She mentioned that there were mostly White people in her high school and even though she was White, she did not feel like she fit in.

I've always been the person who hung out with Black people, not-so preppy people, but going to a school where there are mostly White people and they let it be known that they don't like Black people . . . It was really bad.

Sherry explained that she did not fit in and that she ended up having to go to an alternative school which was in the "hood."

Sherry had contemplated getting an abortion. She walked into the clinic, paid the fee, but after they told her what they were going to do, she walked out and told them to keep the money. Several months later she gave birth to a baby girl. Her daughter contracted spinal meningitis when she was four months old and almost died in Sherry's arms, but she got her to the hospital just in time. Her daughter was in the hospital for two weeks. When Sherry tried to return home, her mother said that she could not come back home. Her mother told her to "get away" because Sherry had her daughter hanging out with people that were addicted to drugs, and it was not safe for her and the baby. She

then moved in with her aunt and raised her child. She explained that many people told her that she would not graduate on time, “They [her high school administrators] told me that I was not going to graduate, and were surprised that I did graduate on time because I pretty much skipped the whole ninth grade.”

Sherry confided that before she got pregnant, her mother “kind of lost her mind” after her stepfather passed away, so she took care of her siblings. She described her living situation as very poor while growing up. “We couldn’t use a lot of toilet paper because we couldn’t afford it. We could only take a bath once or twice a week because of the water bill.” She admitted that after the pregnancy, when she was forced to move in with her aunt, things got much better. She spoke about how comforting it was not to worry about when she would eat her next meal; she was amazed by the fact that at her aunt’s house she had everything that she needed. A major life transition occurred when she applied and became eligible for Section 8 housing. Sherry enrolled in Palmer Community College with aspirations of becoming a veterinarian technician. She learned very quickly that she also needed business classes to complete her dream, so she also enrolled in business classes.

Sherry described herself as a hands-on learner who finds it “really hard to learn sitting at a computer, so online classes would really suck.” At this point, Sherry is one semester away from graduating from Palmer Community College with her associate in arts degree. She mentioned that she likes having access to her instructors. She likes being able to physically talk to them because when “life happens,” she wants to bring them into the loop. She talked to me about some of the issues she had last semester:



I had a hormone issue and cysts on my ovaries and endometriosis and like my mental health wasn't very good. I had mental health issues. I had a breakdown and I was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder last semester. The only problem I didn't have was child care (laughing).

She went on to explain that all of her instructors worked with her. "They [her instructor's] worked with me. That's why I do the class stuff. I don't really think I learn as much online."

Sherry's TRIO SSS advisor, Brian, was another support system that Sherry used at Palmer Community College. He pushed her even when she wanted to quit. "He would not allow me to drop that class, because I'm begging him. 'Please!' He's like, 'Sherry you have to.'" She went on to explain that Brian is a huge reason why she is still at the college. Simply, he would not let her quit, period.

We talked a little about her seven-year-old son who also has medical issues, primarily attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). She is proud of him because of how smart he is, even though he is on medication. Her oldest daughter, who is 16, was described by Sherry as being headstrong and a child who does everything she can not to be like her mom and repeat the same mistakes. I met Sherry's youngest, a two-year-old daughter, who was fascinated by my iPad and the recorder function. She danced in and out of the family room several times during the Disney Channel's commercial breaks.

Our conversation transitioned from her family to how the Helping Students Thrive program had been a resource for her family situation. When asked what motivated her to participate, she explained that Brian volunteered her and told her it would be a good program for her. She reminisced and recollected her experience within the Helping Students Thrive program. She explained that the staff were really nice and

occasionally checked in on her. She was thankful that they took the time to work with her two-year-old daughter in getting her acclimated to a new environment. She smiled as she explained that, at first, her daughter would not speak or socialize with anyone. “Towards the end of the program, she was saying ‘bye’ to the teachers.” She shared that Helping Students Thrive staff and the life management coach would also check in with her: “‘How are your finals? How are you doing with . . . ?’ Even the teachers were like, ‘Are you alive?’ So, they did show that they knew . . . that they could tell what was going on and stuff.” Recently, Sherry discussed with Brian the availability of the Helping Students Thrive program for the spring semester.

### **Stephanie**

*I knew God had something better for me than this, I was scared, but I had faith that there was more for me out there.*

Stephanie’s smile was contagious and it never left her face. She walked confidently into our interview room, gave me a hug, and I watched her beautiful smile light up the room. Her presence just made me feel better, and I was intrigued about what made her so happy. While she told her story, even through the tough parts, she continued to smile. Stephanie is a 32-year-old female with two children, 10 and 6 years old. She is single, Caucasian, and graduated from high school in 1999 with a diploma. She attends the college part time and is unemployed. She began her interview by exclaiming, “Maria is awesome,” referring to the TRIO SSS director at Palmer Community College. Her feelings about Brian, her TRIO SSS advisor, were similar. “He’s just that good. I don’t know why. It’s like a family . . . He is just that good. He genuinely cares. He genuinely tries to help you. They are fabulous people!”

I asked Stephanie to share with me her high school experience so that I could learn more about how she got to this place in her life. She explained that she was bullied all through junior high and high school. It was a horrifying experience for her. Stephanie was born with two club feet and she had four surgeries to correct them. She also had a cleft lip and palate that had to be corrected. Her mother drank heavily, so heavily that she was born with fetal alcohol syndrome where certain placements of her eyes and nose show resemblance of the disease. Stephanie said that she was impacted by the bullying so badly that she started hanging out with the wrong group. On one particular day she did something so bad that she got kicked out of high school. Shortly thereafter, she was suspended, and she dropped out.

Stephanie's older sister helped raise her, and her stepfather became a major role model in her life. After dropping out of school, people bullied her even more. They made fun of the way she looked, so she did not feel like she really had any friends. "The one's I thought were my friends eventually told me they didn't want to be my friends because they were afraid of being picked on themselves. So, I had no friends." She received her high school diploma from Palmer Community College, which serves as the host college for this study, and that was her first introduction to college.

She shared with me that her children are her inspiration. She is really trying to be the mother figure who teaches them what they should not be doing. She also makes a point not to drink around them. Shortly after starting college, she had to take time off because of her heart disease. At the same time, her then two-year-old son was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome. She explained that was the reason why it was taking her so long to complete her degree. Her motivation for returning to college came from her

being tired of “being broke.” She wanted to be financially independent, not relying so much on governmental support. All of this motivated her to go to college. She was scared at first because she was older.

Stephanie said that she does not have a lot of issues from an educational perspective. “I’m a hard worker when it comes to it. I just get tired easily sometimes. And, sometimes, I get exhausted a lot more than I probably should.” She uses TRIO SSS services as a support system. Stephanie also credits her church family as a positive and motivating reason why she has decided to go to college.

Stephanie has learned that she enjoys learning via the lecture method. She likes to be in class and does not like online classes. She likes the face-to-face interaction. Her studies have helped her discover that she is a gifted listener and someone who enjoys helping other people. She is considering a career in human services. Her ability to practice patience encourages her to deal with the challenges of life one day at a time:

I have to focus now. So, I think that’s really helped me because you know Brian told me a while ago all these things that are coming to you . . . ‘You can only deal with one thing at a time today. Look at tomorrow but only deal with today.’ So, I think that’s how I’ve done it. I think it has made me a stronger leader; I’ll tell you that much. Because I am a leader, but I think one day at a time.

Stephanie laughed when I asked her what made her decide to be a part of the Helping Students Thrive program. “Because I needed it!” She explained that having the ability to drop off her children early and pick them up later allowed her the opportunity to stay at the college longer to get her work done. She liked the fact that she had access to uninterrupted time. She also liked the staff at Helping Students Thrive and appreciated the fact that her older daughter was provided with a quiet room to complete her

homework. Stephanie recommended that the life management coach be more intentional in providing counseling services.

My five participants' individual profiles helped me learn about who they were as unique individuals. In chapter five, I provide common themes and describe how those themes relate to my participants. I use the "seasons" of life to show their personal journeys in life.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **NONTRADITIONAL/ADULT COLLEGE STUDENTS: THEIR PERSONAL JOURNEYS**

Amidst the hustle and bustle of a thriving urban community live five nontraditional/adult college students who share similar life and educational undertakings. For this study, they allowed me to listen to their life experiences; they told me about their struggles and about their ability to overcome adversity when all odds were against them. Most importantly, they reflected on where the strength to persevere came from and how they refused to return to their previous lives—lives without hope.

To complete this phenomenological study, I used Moustakas' (1994) procedures and engaged deeply in each of the four processes during the analysis: epoche and bracketing, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and the synthesis of meanings and essences. My data analysis procedures consisted of several approaches, as outlined by Creswell (2013). First, I carefully analyzed the data by taking the information apart to interpret it by means of “spiraling” the data. Second, I organized the data from the interviews into a computer filing system. Third, I read and re-read my participants' transcripts, taking careful notes each time. Fourth, I described, classified, and interpreted the data in order to develop themes according to Creswell (2013). I then coded the data, breaking apart the text into smaller parts and arranging the data thematically, which showed me common ideas. As I coded the data, I began to make sense out of the themes, which produced a visual representation of what I heard and

observed. Thus, I created 17 thematic categories.

In chapter four, I mentioned that these interviews were very profound and I was amazed at their transparency and candidness. I was extremely moved by the interviews and catalogued these moments in my mind afterwards. Before I wrote anything, I meditated on their words, body language, and how participants responded to external stimuli within the interview room. In the margins of the interview transcripts, I wrote notes incessantly, not knowing how or why they were connected but just ensuring that I wrote what first came to mind. Chapter four allowed me the space to reflect on each participant as an individual; I reflected on meaningful quotes that surfaced throughout the interview. I reviewed my notes and arranged the quotations so that they were organized into thematic units. After I had developed individual and collective group themes, as recommended by Moustakas (1994), I began writing and reflecting. This concluded the coding and analysis process, and what resulted was the trailer for an Oscar-worthy documentary, a beautiful collection of stories that document when “life happens” to five nontraditional/adult college students and their intrinsic motivation to be successful by any means necessary.

### **Essential Structure of the Participants’ Experiences**

The organization of this chapter stemmed from listening to the experiences of my participants and noticing an overarching theme. That theme reflected the optimism behind entering a new season of life. In fact, the participants all appeared to have experienced three distinct seasons: winter, spring, and summer. Most of my participants agreed that it was difficult living within their winter seasons; however, most explained that without winter, they would not have appreciated the warmth of spring. The season

of spring, for my participants, blossomed hope, faith, and determination to overcome adversity regardless of how their circumstances would try to push them back. Their summer season showed them where they could go and provided a blueprint on how to get there. Enjoying a warm summer sun kiss on your cheeks, unapologetically, does not mean that there is not rain in the forecast; but it does mean that you can enjoy the sun and as a precaution, bring your umbrella, just in case it rains. My participants have experienced many metaphoric storms within their lives. This chapter will explain their common experiences with the phenomena thematically, focusing on those three distinct seasons of life.

### **Common Experiences of the Participants: Surviving Winter**

*If we had no winter, the spring would not be so pleasant: if we did not sometimes taste of adversity, prosperity would not be so welcome. ~ Anne Bradstreet*

I used the season of winter as a metaphor to illustrate the adversity that my participants experienced within the earlier stages of their lives. Their winter season, individually and collectively, represents a sense of silence and darkness, or making the decision to be or live defiantly. Living in the dark is a metaphor for living outside of what is “socially acceptable.” This season also represents hibernation; I see hibernation as a symbol of the participants’ separating themselves from the positive and uplifting things in life. This includes finding a false sense of safety in avoiding the issue instead of working towards a productive way to resolve it. My participants recognized that within this season, a part of them needed to “die” a little in order for them to remove themselves from the negativity and to “spring” into a new and positive season.



This section will include the three subthemes of their winter season: (a) their experience in high school - negative feelings, failure, and shame; (b) their interpersonal struggles; and (c) the learned lessons from their family—positive and negative role models.

### **On Their Experience in High School—Negative Feelings, Failure, and Shame**

The winter season for most of my participants was a brutal introduction to reality. For this study, I encouraged my participants to reminiscently return to high school and begin sharing their experiences in the halls of their high school buildings. Many of their experiences in high school laid the framework for the seasonal transitions that abruptly hit their lives. My interviews revealed that Sherry, Allison, Anthony, and Stephanie, four of the five participants, were impacted by this common theme of shame and failure during high school. Although Aaron, the fifth participant, did not express experiencing shame and failure during this time, he stated that he did not like high school and never wanted to return there because of negative experiences.

For example, Sherry got pregnant at the age of 14 with her first child. After contemplating getting an abortion, she decided against it, vowing to take care of the child herself. “Everybody was like, ‘Oh my God!’ You’re 14. Do you think you will be able to do this?” There were few in her peer group that could relate and she felt extremely isolated and alone because she did not have a lot of support. Similarly, Allison commented quite often in her interview that she wanted to do something with her life. In high school, she did not apply herself and she never went to class. Her bad decisions did not make her family happy, and she was encouraged to attend an alternative school. Allison also discussed failure and staying as far away as possible from being like her

alcoholic mother. Stephanie's mother was also an alcoholic, who she considered a failure, stating: "She was a bad alcoholic and they committed her like three or four times. And when she finally sobered up and got married, I was done with my mother." My conversations with my participants alluded to some of that failure and shame, but each was determined not to repeat the cycle. Allison confessed: "If I could go back, I wouldn't do it again." The "it" Allison was referring to was the skipping and ditching school when she was in high school. Anthony, too, reflected on how long he had been sober and how that related to his personal decision to move past his feelings of failure and shame in high school. "As I look back, I wish that I would have put a lot more effort in." Having negative experiences in high school was a common theme among all of the participants; as a subtheme, most also shared the feelings of shame and failure.

Anthony disclosed that his experience in high school was one where he hung around with a lot of people who liked to party. He described his house as the "party house." Drugs and alcohol were regularly present in his home. After Anthony's children were taken away, he realized that he had to change who his friends were in order to live a clean lifestyle. "I don't know if life is easier right now because life is fairly easy when all you have to think about is your next high." All four of these participants, Sherry, Allison, Anthony, and Stephanie, shared negative feelings, shame, and guilt.

Erikson's (1959) developmental theory explains that during this stage of development, 12–18 years of age, teenagers need to develop a sense of identity and further postulates that a sense of failure may develop from not understanding who you are and where you socially fit. Stephanie and Sherry, for example, both communicated that they felt awkward and that they did not belong. They both examined who they were as

they dealt with adversity within their teenage years. Erikson notes that this may lead to a weak sense of self. Erikson's psychosocial development theory also maintains that success lies in strong and positive relationships; failure, on the other hand, is a result of isolation and loneliness—experiences that the majority of the participants shared with me.

The common theme of what the participants experienced stems from being unmotivated in high school and that lack of motivation seemed to lead them down a less constructive path. Their difficult childhoods contributed to their lack of motivation. The path can be directly connected to what they were going through in life and how they channeled what they were facing.

### **On Their Interpersonal Struggles**

As emerging adults, my participants experienced a plethora of interpersonal struggles. All five participants, Allison, Aaron, Sherry, Anthony, and Stephanie, shared this theme. Stephanie's medical issues included heart problems, fetal alcohol syndrome, club feet, cleft lip; she was also parenting a child who was exhibiting the early stages of Asperger Syndrome. She was bullied because of her health issues. Stephanie explained it in this manner:

Because of the way I looked, people used to make fun of me every day. . . . I was in the out group because everyone bullied me. They always made fun of the way I looked so I really didn't have any [friends].

My participants were less productive when they hung around people who were not positive role models. As they moved into their spring season, they were notably more successful when they surrounded themselves with positive people. While in their winter season, they continued to battle the negativity and a lack of hope. Anthony and Aaron

both had positive father figures who passed away. Their fathers' deaths led their families into positions where governmental assistance was required in order to survive. Sherry, on the other hand, had this existent negativity throughout her childhood. She grew up in a situation where her mother was rarely present and when present, she was often drunk. Sherry admitted that for a good majority of her life, her basic needs were not taken care of. Sherry stated: "So, we were very poor. Things were very minimal. We couldn't use a lot of paper because we couldn't afford it. We could only take a bath once or twice a week because of the water bill."

I revisited Erikson's (1959) theory because it provides insight on what my participants were going through during the winter season. When people experience intrinsic struggles, it is often easier for them to surround themselves with what is comfortable and familiar. In other words, it is easier to be around negativity because it is what is most familiar to them. It is also important to recognize that there were not many successful or positive people in my participants' lives during their winter seasons; this kept them from moving forward. As my participants moved into their spring and summer seasons, they were able to realize that positivity can push them out of negativity and help them deal with adversity better. For many of my participants, their interpersonal struggles seemed to play an important role in how they found a way to move out of their winter seasons. All five participants provided examples of their interpersonal struggles. During their winter season, each one of the five participants experienced interpersonal struggles.

### **On Learned Lessons from Their Family: Positive and Negative Role Models**

My participants learned both positive and negative lessons from their parental role models. Stephanie, Anthony, and Sherry articulated that they had negative maternal role models growing up. Allison and Aaron, on the other hand, had positive parental figures. Both Stephanie and Sherry expressed the fact that they were trying to do everything different from how their mothers raised them. Comstock et al. (2008) believe that people must find a way to separate themselves from adversity and pessimism so that they can live productive lives. What my participants were learning was that when you separate yourself from pessimism and adversity, you can live more productive lives. Within their winter season, they were around a lot of negativity, and this negativity prevented them from moving forward. Anthony illustrated this when he talked about his drug use and confrontations with the law. Dying to negativity allowed them to experience productivity. Throughout much of their lives, Stephanie's and Sherry's mothers were not there and when they were there, they were an embarrassment. Sherry said that "everything I do, I do to beat her." Their experiences with their mothers initially brought them a lack of confidence, which caused psychological distress; but what they both shared was the ability to eventually use those negative situations as sources of motivation. Aaron and Allison, on the other hand, both appreciated their family upbringing. They used the way they were brought up as a model for how they raise their children. According to Aaron's and Allison's feedback, the support they received from their families limited their psychological distress because of the positive support system. Allison, for instance, explained that after getting pregnant, her parents were not happy with her, but they still supported her:

Of course, whose mother wouldn't be upset . . . but, yeah, she supported me. She helped me out. I lived with her. She was the one that was always there for me when I needed help with the baby and so, yeah, I had support.

Stephanie and Sherry's experience of negative maternal role models and Aaron and Allison's positive role models illustrate the lessons they learned from their family, both positive and negative. My participants' winter season enabled them to move past negativity with winter's three subthemes—their experience in high school, their interpersonal struggles, and the learned lessons from their family. They moved from winter into their spring thaw, where they emerged from the bitter cold of winter into a spring season of new beginnings.

### **Common Experiences of the Participants: The Spring Thaw**

*Except. What is normal at any given time? We change just as the seasons change, and each spring brings new growth. So nothing is ever quite the same. ~ Sherwood Smith*

I entitled this section the spring thaw because of how the metaphor of spring reflects the experience of my participants. Spring represents growth and maturity in my participants' lives. A part of them had to “die” in winter in order to make room for the new growth of spring. The positive seeds that were planted are now beginning the photosynthetic process, the initial stages of a healthy harvest. Within this theme, my participants realized that they needed to be separated from the constant cycle of negativity. In this theme, they give themselves permission to learn a different way to live. Related to this theme, the interviews with my participants reveal more positivity as they began talking less about where they came from and more about where they were going.

This section includes the three subthemes of their spring season: (a) their motivation and transition to college; (b) their individual needs as learners; and (c) their academic and personal support systems.

### **On Their Motivation and Transition to College**

There were two components within this theme: what motivated the participants to go on to college and what they experienced as they transitioned into college. I noticed a significant shift in demeanor when Allison, Aaron, Sherry, Anthony, and Stephanie discussed their entry and transition to college. Each one had individual goals and different reasons for why college was needed. What was most significant as they unveiled their experiences was the underlying motivation for going to college, and that motivation is what appeared to drive them and keep them on track. For example, Anthony's motivation to attend college developed because he had simply run out of options:

I had some pretty serious drug use problems and things like that and a lot of issues with the law, which probably stems from my drug use and so when they took away my children, I quit using all together.

Anthony described his turning point as the place where he wanted a legal job and a life free of drugs, but because of his criminal record, no one would hire him.

I've got a lengthy criminal record and to think that somebody like me is going to go out there and find a job right around the time that the economy started to go down. Now not only do I have the normal things working against me but now there's hundreds of other applicants that are going to apply for every job that I am.

He contacted workforce development for guidance on what he should do and they said:

"Why don't you enroll in college?" That was Anthony's "aha" moment. This was the moment where he stood on the crossroads of going back to what was comfortable versus

moving his life in a different direction. He chose the latter and never looked back. He shared with me:

My wife has been really supportive. She's the one who pretty much kicked me in the butt and told me to get back into school. It meant a lot to me that she was willing to support me through this. It meant a lot that she believed that I could do it.

Aaron's journey, from reflection to action, was slightly different. His job at a nonprofit agency allowed him the flexibility to learn and grow. Aaron and his boss had a good relationship where his boss coached him on how to train and develop incoming staff. Aaron's issue with the arrangement was that he was not being compensated, nor was he being recognized for his efforts. He realized that without furthering his education past a high school diploma, he would never receive the compensation he deserved. "I kept noticing that people would get jobs. I would train them. They would get promoted, but I would stay where I was. I just did not understand why I was not getting more money."

Allison, too, was working at a nonprofit organization as a child care provider when one of her colleagues, who was a work-study student, started talking to her about her college experience. That prompted Allison to learn more about her educational options and what going to college might look like for her. "I feel like I'm older and college makes me feel like, even though I have a full-time job, I feel like I am constantly moving." She said that she was trying to "make up" for her high school experience by enrolling in college.

As Sherry transitioned into her job as a veterinarian technician, she began to enjoy it, and her boss promised her the business when she retired, provided that she pursued



additional education. She received notice that she was eligible for Section 8 housing and child care assistance, and she accepted this as an opportunity to swallow her pride and take advantage of the help. As Sherry told me,

I had never taken advantage of anything like that. I had always lived like normal people do. So when I got approved for that, I thought to myself this is the perfect time for me to take advantage of everything and do it all at once. If public housing is based on my income, I won't have to struggle and was eligible for child care [assistance] and so—I'm like so ready.

Each one of my participants made the choice to walk down a road less traveled.

They did this not knowing the outcome. Stephanie, for instance, said:

When I first started, it was scary. I had my first anxiety attack going in because I was just scared of being older and going to college, but I had no choice. I was just tired of sitting at home. There had to be something better than this.

Stephanie's reality was that as she was transitioning, she experienced continual medical problems which were making her feel stagnant. Stephanie reflected on her situation and stated:

I was tired of being broke [laughs]. I was more than broke half of the time, you know what I mean? I knew I could do something more than just sitting at home on disability, living on Section 8 housing, with two kids. I knew I wanted more for them. So, I knew I had to get up and figure out something.

Anthony commented that he was also nervous because he had not been in school for a very long time. "I was really nervous, just not being in school for that long, compiled with all of my drug use. I was really worried." Charles and Carstensen (2013) offered the explanation that their anxiety stems from where they are at in life. If they are experiencing something that is not indicative of their cultural norm, this may produce a barrier. Schlossberg et al. (1995) used the term transition to explain extremely stressful events that are not expected. These are events that few within my participants' peer

group can relate to. Sharf (1996) noted that these events or transitions cause anxiety, leaving the person hopeless, confused, and upset. All of the participants were first-generation college students, so they did not have the luxury of going to someone within their family or social context to get advice or support. They were paving the path, and they were doing it by themselves. All of my participants were optimistic about breaking away from their old lives and stepping into their new destinies. What is intriguing is that they had no idea what the outcome would be, but they stepped out on faith, hoping that it would be better than where they were.

I again reviewed the work of Kiely et al. (2004) to get clarification on why their transition was significant. Kiely et al. discussed Mezirow's transformation theory and how critical events impede one's developmental momentum. In other words, transformation theory explains how important life events can aid or hinder personal growth. Mezirow breaks down these stages into three parts: (a) reflection, (b) dialogue about your reflection, and (c) action. Returning to Mezirow's theory aided in understanding my participants responses to my questions of "Why now?" and "Why go to school now?" and "What has happened to prompt you to make that decision?"

My participants' motivation to enter college was impacted by the common experience of optimism as they transitioned to a healthier season of understanding themselves and their potential. I have explained what they experienced as they transitioned into college.

### **Individual Needs as Learners**

Even though they were empowered by their spring thaw, Allison, Anthony, Sherry, and Stephanie experienced educational struggles that tempted them to return to

adverse times. Stephanie, for instance, reported that her medical issues did not just go away when she started school; they were still there. Now, she had to create a place inside of her to push through the defeat she felt so that she would not give in to the temptation to drop out of school.

I am a hard worker when it comes to it. I study and all, but I get tired easily when my platelets and blood pressure are low. My medical issues never went away. And sometimes I get exhausted but I find a way to push through. It doesn't come easy, but I just find a way to get through it.

Anthony, too, described the few times that he struggled and how he persevered and pushed through. He identified resilience as doing the things you do, not what you want to do, and staying focused. Anthony said:

There are a few times when I have struggled. I'm trying not to go back to high school where if something isn't your thing, you don't do it. I can sit down and work on homework all day and night, but once I get to subjects that are a little more difficult, I have to work on it a little bit. My biggest issue has been staying focused.

Allison, on the other hand, was able to articulate her need for balance. Unlike Stephanie and Anthony, she did not struggle with the same issues that she experienced in high school. Her new normal was battling balance—the ebb and flow of working, being a parent, and going to school part time. Sherry's struggles stemmed from dropping out of class due to a lack of child care.

I found that a huge part of the transitional process is interconnected with the participants' need not only to work through those struggles productively, but also to recognize the root of the struggles. Consequently, they must understand how to prevent or how to resolve struggles once they occur. Anthony recognized what type of learner he was after he tried taking classes online and realized that being in the classroom was a

better method for his particular learning style. He stated: “I pick up some from the books, but I’m a tremendously slow reader. I read it four times and not only do I read slow, but after I read it, I’ve got to re-read it.” Sherry explained that she benefited from the interaction with her instructors, saying: “I don’t feel like I learn as much if I do not have a relationship with my professor.”

Kiely et al. (2004) are very specific in how they characterize this period of transition. They use the word andragogy, specific teaching strategies to help nontraditional/adult students, to describe the method in which you teach this type of adult learner. Reflecting on this subtheme, one would hope that if those nontraditional/adult college students are taught properly, they will possess the tools to thrive; but it is crucial for the students to know how they learn before they can be accommodated.

### **On Academic Support Systems and Personal Support Systems**

Analyzing the data and listening to the experiences of my participants as they talked about academic support systems was another opportunity for me to see subthemes and common experiences that they shared. Each participant, Sherry, Anthony, Stephanie, Allison, and Aaron, used a variety of academic support resources. Within their interviews, they all said that their preference was to take face-to-face classes as opposed to online learning. They all commented that they liked having physical interaction with their instructors. Stephanie explained that her neighbor told her about Brian at TRIO SSS and she went to meet with him. “I had no clue what I was getting myself into. He was like, ‘It [the program] will help you a lot.’ And so I did [apply] and I got immediately accepted and then they helped me out tremendously.” Stephanie remarked that TRIO SSS is like a family, and Brian helps students deal with life one day at a time. TRIO SSS

at Palmer Community College is a formal student and academic support program in which participants receive intrusive academic advising, access to tutors, a study and resource lab, and a laptop and calculator loan program. Within the TRIO SSS program, the staff members typically use a strong case management and referral approach and have a relatively small case load.

Additionally, Aaron said that his family and his home provide academic support. His wife was the one who encouraged him to go to college, and Brian from TRIO SSS also has helped him persist in college.

He [Brian] knows exactly where I'm at. I mean before I met with him, you know, I started my college career. I'm in student life. I mean they just throw a schedule together and all that. Didn't have any real direction about how to accomplish this, you know, your degree. Brian is right there by my side the entire time. If I have any issues or anything like that, that's the first place that I go.

Aaron also commented on the fact that Brian put him in the right classes, not just any classes, the classes that he needs. Sherry, too, explained that Brian pushed her and held her hand through difficult times. "Holding her hand" can be implied to explain how supportive the intrusive advising program is for many students involved with TRIO SSS. She said that TRIO SSS provides her with everything that she needs, including the appropriate type of academic advising and emotional and educational support. The four participants in this study who are members of the TRIO SSS program at Palmer Community College commented on the significance the program's services and the impact that their academic advisor had in their academic progress and their decision to stick it out.

I did notice some intersection with the experiences of my participants and what the literature is saying about student and academic support systems. My reading

uncovered information on how intrusive academic advising, coupled with counseling and social service support, can engage students' emotional and mental state of mind. Culp (2005) discussed how important advising is as it pertains to persistence. Culp (2005) stressed that advising helps students make better life and career decisions. My interviews with my participants revealed that Brian was very much the advisor who helped them deal with intrapersonal and interpersonal problems, while attending to their academic needs and ensuring they stay focused on their graduation plan and, therefore, made informed decisions (Culp, 2005). None of the participants accused him of “therapizing” them; simply, he just knew what type of academic advice and support was needed at each intersection of their academic experience and guided them in the right direction during their season of spring.

All five participants had academic and personal support systems that helped them through their spring season. Through their spring thaw with its three subthemes—their motivation and transition to college, their individual needs as learners and their academic and personal support systems—the study participants lived into the next theme—summer.

### **Common Experiences of the Participants: An Energizing and Optimistic Summer**

*Summertime is always the best of what might be. ~ Charles Bowden*

Summer's sunlight kissed the cheeks of my participants and enlightened them to what happens when they make an effort to work outside of their comfort zone. After a spring thaw, they are now living within a fruitful bloom. This bloom represents optimism for their future. It helped them recognize that when you “die” to negativity and less constructive behaviors, you open yourself up to the warmth of summer and all of the hope and prosperity it has to offer.

My participants identified with this hope after their spring thaw and I captured what they experienced by identifying their common themes from what they communicated. Examination of the participants' season of summer surfaced four subthemes: (a) what inspires them and makes them a success story—children and family; (b) what they want to be; (c) utilizing the Helping Students Thrive program; and (d) their reaction to the Helping Students Thrive program staff and the life management coach.

### **On What Inspires Them and Makes Them a Success Story—Children and Family**

Once again, I was able to witness a shift in body language and demeanor as the participants talked about the changes in their lives and shifted focus to their summer season. A level of confidence found its way into our interview room, and doubt and low self-esteem were replaced with an "*I can do it because I am doing it*" attitude. I was inspired by Allison, Aaron, Sherry, Anthony, and Stephanie's contagious energy. I asked them what inspired them. Stephanie and Sherry confided an experience that included raising their kids in a completely opposite way than that of their mothers. Sherry cried as she reflected on the motivating factors that have impacted her:

Everything I do is to beat her [her mother]. It's good that my mother is not here anymore. And it hurts me, because I shouldn't have to say that. I shouldn't have to be this way. But my mother is my motivation to be better.

Anthony, too, reflected that his children inspire him and that he wants to be a role model for them:

When people tell me they are proud of me, it makes me feel proud. When people use drugs and you go through treatment, they always tell you that you have to change for yourself. That really has not been the case for me. I've never been driven by myself; it's my children that have given me that drive. I want to give them more than I can right now. I want to be the role model that I am now, not the role model I was 10 years ago.

Allison also credited her children for inspiration. By her actions, she wants to be a role model and encourage them to one day go to college. She explained that she got to a point where she stopped caring about what people think: “As long as I am in there and I am doing it, however long it takes me, I’m still going to be doing it.” Comstock’s (2005) RCT explains that the college’s purpose in the midst of transition is to provide adult students with productive options in order to provide for their families. It is a process of helping people through their adversity and replacing that negativity with positivity, similar to Sherry’s philosophy, which was: “When people tell me I can’t do it, that’s my motivation to do it!” Sherry admitted that the only reason why she stuck with college this long was because of her children. Sherry wants her kids to see that she completed something so that they will not start something and not finish it:

My kids make me feel proud, because I am an example to them. I missed out on a lot and it was a struggle having her [her oldest child] at such a young age. But she is growing up with a mom and she is experiencing a different life than I did because of that.

Their ability to relate being successful to what they had overcome brought the study full circle. Sherry, Anthony, Aaron, Allison, and Stephanie’s ability to overcome led them to a place where they became more knowledgeable about who they were and how that would help them understand what they wanted to be, which is the next subtheme to be discussed.

### **On What They Want To Be**

Three of the five participants, Stephanie, Aaron, and Allison, said that they like the field of human services because they enjoy helping people. Aaron, for example, said that he has aspirations of starting or managing a nonprofit one day. Too, Stephanie



explained that she likes building people up, stating: “That’s how I figured out that I wanted to be in human services, because I really enjoy helping other people and I am good at it.” Anthony chose business administration because he wants to open a tattoo parlor and is taking classes that will help him with a startup.

I’m getting my associate in business administration, with an entrepreneurship certificate. When I was 17 years old, I ran a tattoo shop that only lasted a few months because of drug use—but that is what I want to do, open my own tattoo shop.

And Sherry chose being a veterinarian technician because she plans to take over her boss’s grooming business one day.

The study participants’ educational and career aspirations and persistence fit within career development and learning theory because those who have set career goals, long and short term, are more likely to succeed in the classroom. They are more likely to be successful academically and persist and complete their goals. According to Super’s (as cited in Zunker, 1994) model of self-concept,

Vocational self-concept develops through physical and mental growth, observations of work, identification with working adults, general environment, and general experiences . . . As experiences become broader in relation to awareness of world of work, the more sophisticated vocational self-concept is formed. (p. 30)

Super (1957) theorized that once individuals get to this stage, they are ready to set new goals for themselves in order to move them to their next stage of life. Hopefulness becomes more attainable because they have set goals and they have something to work towards. Chao and Good (2004) contended that feeling a sense of hopefulness helps nontraditional/adult students take on an active role in managing their lives. Furthermore, these authors explain that hopefulness is how nontraditional/adult students are able to see

themselves in a positive way because hopefulness creates a passageway to their desired goals, and it motivates them to walk down that passageway. For many of my participants, this was the first time that they believed in themselves and believing in themselves appeared to bring about a greater desire to succeed. Stephanie, Aaron, and Allison articulated what they wanted to be. Their professional interests intersect with what they had experienced and how those experiences impacted their lives.

### **On Utilizing the Helping Students Thrive Program**

Involvement and time/stress management were underlying themes for Allison, Aaron, Sherry, Anthony, and Stephanie's utilization of the Helping Students Thrive program. Anthony, for example, explained how difficult it was to get his school work done, attend TRIO SSS functions, and be a part of college clubs. He stressed that "there is more to college than the classes." He laughed as he said, "I was probably the first one to sign up for the Helping Students Thrive program." While his child participated in Helping Students Thrive, Anthony was able to take more classes, get more involved in student organizations, and get his homework done before he picked up his son. He liked this aspect because when he got home, he was home and completely present for his son. Stephanie's exact words were that she "needs it." With the life management services for her children, Stephanie was able to stay at the college longer to get her school work done. She also loved the fact that her older daughter had a quiet room at the Helping Students Thrive program where she could do her homework. In their 1994 study, Kasworm and Blowers (1994) identified this struggle—the balancing act between work, family, and school similar to the experience my participants were facing when they were given the opportunity to participate in the Helping Students Thrive program. This program

provided the needed assistance for them to better manage work, family, and school.

Aaron explained that when he found out about this opportunity, his first thoughts were:

“What’s the catch?” However, he was immediately drawn to the fact that it was free and his child would have more structure.

Sherry’s experience was an opportunity that came right at the perfect time. She was two semesters away from graduating, but she had to stop intermittently for medical and child care issues. When she was introduced to the Helping Students Thrive program, she was excited because she would be able to take more face-to-face classes. Her grades improved and she had one less stressor in her life. The reality that the program was free was an added bonus. Sherry further reflected on the program’s benefits:

The fact that I was going to have a program that was going to help me have less stress about a safe and reliable place for my daughter was the biggest thing. They [TRIO SSS] came to us. They offered us the program.

The five participants’ experiences were similar in how they explained their involvement utilizing the life management program and how the life management program positively impacted their academic performance, their lives, and their children’s lives.

### **On Reactions to the Helping Students Thrive Program Staff and Life Management Coach**

Chapter two included a review of the literature on case management, child care, and community-based resources, and it sheds light on programming that already exists. This information also provided insight on new developments and opportunities for growth within these areas. I was interested in learning if the Helping Students Thrive program staff provided the necessary pieces for a holistic life management program. The

strategy behind a community-based program is that it needs to be an extension of the college and operate in connection with the college to provide quality programs on an interpersonal level. All five participants, Sherry, Allison, Aaron, Stephanie, and Aaron, commented that the staff were nice and supportive. Aaron explained that the staff worked with him on his schedule and compromised with him so as to relieve his stress. Aaron acknowledged: “At first, it was a challenge getting my son from the Helping Students Thrive program to preschool, but the staff worked with me. They had him fed and waiting for me when I arrived.” Sherry told a story about her child’s blanket. She described her daughter as being one that has social anxiety issues and uses her “blanky” to protect her. She related how the staff worked with her daughter through her anxiety: “They worked with her. They let her give up her blanket on her own.” By the end of the program, Sherry’s daughter was eating appropriately and shouting “goodbye” to her friends as she went home. Sherry also liked the fact that the life management coach would ask her how she was doing and would check in with her periodically.

Another example that Anthony offered was that sometimes when he would get out of class early, he would sneak back to his child’s room at Helping Students Thrive and peek through the window. He would witness his child doing jumping jacks and, on another occasion, he got to see him participate in a learning exercise. Anthony took a video of the experience on his phone because he was so proud and stated: “He seems very settled in over there. You know when I’d drop him off, there wasn’t a second that passed and all the kids were like, ‘Andy’s here. Andy’s here.’ My son loves it there!” Allison expressed that it was “nice having someone onsite that knows about the college, almost

like an extension of the college. That way you can get the help you need, when you need it.”

Sherry, Allison, Aaron, Stephanie, and Anthony articulated their reactions to and their experience of the staff and the life management coach at the community-based organization. They all had positive experiences, and many provided insight on how to make the program better. From their optimistic summer season, the study participants experienced and reflected on the following four subthemes—what inspires them to be a success story, what they want to be, their experience in the Helping Students Thrive program, and their reactions to the life management staff and life management coach.

### **Reflections**

There were various themes that emerged, themes that were common to many of my participants. I used the three seasons—winter, spring, and summer—as the overarching theme to discuss the common experiences or subthemes that the study participants’ interviews surfaced. They first experienced winter, as they dealt with negative feelings of failure and shame and interpersonal struggles. Next, I discussed their spring thaw. This season is when they became motivated by transition and they established a clear direction and understanding of what their needs were as learners. Their summer season is when they developed optimism and they reflected on what inspired them. The three seasons of life not only empowered them but taught them about who they were and how they could establish their future direction and goals. My analysis of the interviews, coupled with coding the themes, exposed rich and descriptive narratives. These thick descriptions, in combination with the reported data, present a framework for learning about a resilient and optimistic group of humble people. The

personal accounts they shared with me represent the very essence of perseverance through very difficult seasons of life. Their lived experiences illuminate the very essence of nontraditional/adult college students who aspire to attain a slice of the American dream.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND REFLECTIONS**

This is a qualitative phenomenological study. Its purpose is to explore the perceptions and experiences of a small group of community college TRIO SSS students and learn from them how a life management program and other institutional and personal factors have influenced their success and persistence in college. This chapter provides a summary, a comprehensive discussion of the study, recommendations for leaders in the field, recommendations for prospective future research, and my personal reflections.

According to a brief from The Aspen Institute (2011),

Post-secondary training or education is critical to securing and maintaining high-quality employment, and for businesses, highly skilled employees are essential for success in today's economy. However, the demographics of our workforce are changing. Labor force data project an aging and more racially and ethnically diverse workforce, with a significant segment that is foreign-born. In addition, skill requirements in our workplaces are evolving, and competition in the global economy is increasing. In this context, new and growing demands are being placed on our post-secondary institutions. (p. 1)

In terms of meeting the needs of the increasing number of nontraditional/adult students, it is imperative that community colleges provide necessary support systems and pursue partnerships with local community-based organizations.

Partnerships with community-based organizations provide increased support for students' social, interpersonal, and economic needs. Partnerships between student and academic support programs and local community-based organizations can provide a

systematic, preventative method for ensuring that students attain their goals and persist on to graduation. College staff, faculty, administrators, policymakers, and community-based organizational staff can all benefit from this study because they will gain insight on how to better support the nontraditional/adult student from the perspective and experiences of the student.

### **Experiences of Life Management Model Participants**

The nontraditional/adult college student participants in this study were five completely different individuals who shared many common experiences. Their personal perceptions and life experiences followed the seasonal cycles of life where they had to overcome overwhelming barriers to appreciate their season of success and accomplishment. I categorized their experiences by using the seasons of winter, spring, and summer to identify with their common themes and how each season related to where they were in life. The winter season encompasses their negative high school experiences and failures, interpersonal struggles, and both the negative and positive insights that they had gleaned from their families. Winter represents “dying” to their destructive lifestyles, with an understanding that their poor decisions will prevent them from moving forward. The second theme, spring, represents their potential and the possibility of being a new and positive individual. I identified their motivations and transition to college, the individual needs they have as learners, and their student and academic support systems as subthemes to illustrate their journey into spring. Their summer season represents optimism and a reflection on how far they had come. These subthemes consist of what inspired them, what they wanted to be, their experiences utilizing the Helping Students Thrive life management program, and their reactions to Helping Students Thrive program



staff members who supported their efforts. Their perception is that they are better now than they were before. Although their experiences were different, they all overcame adversity by following a centralized theme, the theme of taking control of their lives by any means necessary. They did this by pruning negativity and replacing it with positivity and living each day, one day at a time.

The feedback on the productivity of the community-based life management program was consistent across the board. Participants benefited from the program because the free child care program in particular allowed them to take more classes, provided them with additional time to complete homework and work on group classroom projects, enabled them to participate in student clubs and organizations, and freed them of the financial stress of having to come up with payment for the program because it was free.

Many of my participants benefited greatly from the TRIO SSS program at Palmer Community College. They appreciated the intrusive academic advising that helped them choose the right classes and develop a graduation plan. They commented on their TRIO SSS advisor's ability to coach them through difficult times, preventing them from dropping out. In addition, having the tutoring lab, along with free laptops, provided them with the comprehensive services and tools that they needed to be successful.

Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) transition theory defines a transition as "any event or nonevent that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 27). As my participants transitioned from winter to summer they gained insight into the need to change their behavior and as a result, gained positive feedback from others, enrolled in college, and did well in school. My participants learned how to move past the anxiety

that was connected to their transitions. According to Schlossberg et al. (1995), unanticipated and anticipated life transitions sometimes stimulate motivation, which seemed to ring true for the five participants in this study. Motivation also can be stimulated by nontraditional/adult students surrounding themselves with a positive support group that can help them find positive ways to deal with stressful life events—something these five participants experienced both inside and outside of the college setting.

### **Life Management Model Participants' Motivations and Challenges Related to College**

Each participant had different motivations for starting college. One participant said that he had no other options. He was living below the poverty line, had multiple criminal charges against him, and as a felon, it was virtually impossible for him to get a legal job. He chose college in order to equip himself with the business skills he needed to start his own business. He is still learning to push through his personal and educational struggles due to his drug use, but he appreciates his life sober and his brain being stimulated. Another participant was tired of collecting a check from the government and lying around on the couch all day due to health reasons. She believed that there had to be more to life than that. She continues to be challenged by major health issues, which sometimes cause her to miss classes. However, she is empowered by her children and her ultimate goal of becoming a human services professional, and that is what has pushed her through. Motivation set in for another participant when he knew that he could only advance so far within his job without a college education. All five participants were motivated by their children and wanting to be a positive role model for them. Cockerham

(2011) asserted that motivation is connected to a sense of belonging, and that positive academic motivation is associated with social adjustment, again, going back to belongingness. My participants shared that once they were socially adjusted, they lived with less anxiety and more optimism; they entered a better state of mind, which included being a positive role model for their children. As reflected in chapter five, each life management participant was motivated by the challenges they experienced as they related to transitioning to college. Their motivation stemmed from life-altering situations that forced them into a different path to achieve their personal goals, and, in turn, led to the necessity of obtaining a college education.

### **Personal Factors Influencing Participants' Persistence and Success**

All five of my participants said that they were presently successful because they were motivated by where they had come from. They had been through so much adversity and became empowered by the lessons that they had to learn along the way. Many of them had to purge negative relationships that were triggers to their previous lifestyles. In essence, they had to change the way they used to think about what they had always known. Family, for most of the participants, seemed to be a driving force which has helped them persist and arrive at success. Chao and Good (2004) maintained that family plays a major role in the nontraditional student's academic success, and that students care a lot about meeting their family's expectations. They want to be consistent and they want their family to believe in them. In this vein, Chao and Good (2004) suggested that student affairs staff need to get families more involved in the nontraditional/adult student's academic experience.

### **Summary Based on the Findings**

The participants in this study felt the college as a whole lacked the support systems needed for students with children and interpersonal struggles. They were attracted to TRIO SSS because they received proactive, one-on-one support from a caring person whom they trusted. They appreciated the TRIO SSS advisor's transparency and his consistency in helping them through their daily struggles. Outside of the walls of TRIO SSS, they felt lost and like a "number" at the institution. A few commented on how other support staff outside of TRIO SSS put them in random classes that did not fulfill their academic requirements; the participants were frustrated with the fact that those individuals were not honest with them, and the consequences of that dishonesty affected their academic progress towards degree completion. Aaron articulated this difference:

You're just a number when you register with your advisor downstairs. When I register with my TRIO SSS advisor, I feel like he spends more time with me and puts me in the right classes that will help me graduate.

The participants in this study desperately needed child care. Sherry, for example, shared a little about her experience with this challenge:

I'm thankful for you because I actually got to use the child care to take the time to do extra studying and assignments, which was really hard for me, and I'm supposed to graduate next semester. So, I don't think that I would have made it this far without it, because of the stress of finding the money or the time for studies. I actually did really good with my grades last semester, and I don't think I would have done as good if I wouldn't have had some of the stress relieved.

Child care appeared to be the number one stressor for most of my participants as they transitioned to and persisted in college. Not having adequate and reliable child care meant they were not able to attend classes or participate in clubs or organizations as other students do. Anthony commented that the state's system of offering to pay limited child care expenses is a flawed system:

They give you 30 minutes to get to class and 30 minutes to get back to the child care center to pick up your child. The system does not give you time to do your homework, participate in academic clubs, or attend group project meetings for your classes.

Most agreed that the system needs to be fixed in order for the influx of adult students with children to persist in college.

Two participants, Anthony and Aaron, suggested making the Helping Students Thrive Program a scholarship-based opportunity for students who are close to graduation; they recommended that students apply and be accepted and, provided they keep up their grades, that they stay in the program until they graduate. They further suggested that this could be a grant-funded program that would be supported by the nonprofit.

Even though the five participants are presently living in a season of summer, this does not mean that they will never experience a blistering cold winter again. One proactive approach to aid in their persistence is to provide them with free child care and life management programming at a community-based agency that has partnered with the community college until they graduate.

### **Recommendations for Community-Based Organizations**

It is important for community-based organizations that have a tie to higher education to be intentional in who they hire, making sure that managers have a broad knowledge base related to higher education and nonprofit management. This is important because community-based organizations that have connections with institutions of higher education can provide additional services to nontraditional/adult students that are aimed at supporting their persistence. Many community-based organizations rely on funding from the government to pay for personnel salaries and program development. Partnering

with a local college can relieve some of these financial burdens and, through state and federal grants, can also serve as an additional stream of revenue. Most importantly, community-based organizations will provide underrepresented populations with additional tools and skillsets that will propel them forward in life and empower them to be self-sufficient.

### **Recommendations for Higher Education Leaders, Faculty, Staff, and Policy Makers**

My first recommendation for higher education institutions is to have administrative staff members who are familiar with community-based programming. Ideally, they could have one person from academic affairs and one person from student affairs. My suggestion is that their job should entail networking outside of the college to find and manage strategic relationships with community leaders and organizations. These individuals must be knowledgeable about the needs of the underrepresented/adult student demographic; they also must know and understand that this demographic represents the future of higher education. These individuals should not only be bringing community leaders onto campus for presentations and interaction with the students and staff, but should also be moving college staff off of the campus and into the community-based organizations so that they have a better understanding of what is taking place in the community. I think future round table discussions can be beneficial with local leaders, nontraditional/adult college students, and college staff. These students want to tell their story; they just need someone to listen. Most importantly, higher education leaders must listen to underrepresented students if they want to positively impact the persistence and completion agenda.

In a day and age of so many underprepared nontraditional/adult college students, it is imperative to have services that cater to their needs so that they do not get lost and fall between the cracks. A program like TRIO SSS offers an individualized and comprehensive program that provides support to underrepresented college students. If TRIO SSS is not available, then a similar support model should be offered that provides personal and academic support, cultural activities, and personal development programming.

Also, it could be beneficial for community colleges to integrate an intrusive academic advising model into their college's advising system. According to the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) (2013),

Students who are more actively engaged in college life and have a strong connection to a faculty or staff member are more likely to stay in school and succeed academically. Intrusive advising anticipates students' needs and gets them on-track academically as soon as they are admitted. While this advising model is particularly effective with first-year and transfer students, the model can be applied to advising any on-campus or online student population. This model increases the probability for academic success for all students, but especially for first-year and transfer students who are considered at risk, including first-generation and minority students, students with financial difficulties, and students taking remedial classes. . . .

The intrusive advising model, also referred to as "proactive advising," assists advisors in building relationships with students by anticipating their needs and connecting them to appropriate resources and support from the beginning of their academic careers." (para. 1–3)

Programs like Achieving the Dream and TRIO SSS should be available at all community colleges so that nontraditional/adult students can receive the personal and academic support that they need to be successful. These targeted support programs and interventions, such as intrusive academic advising and intentional mentoring systems, can provide support to at-risk students and prevent them from falling between the cracks.

Receiving support services from TRIO SSS, in combination with community-based support, amounts to a more confident and better equipped nontraditional/adult students, those who are more likely to persist because of the resources available to them. I agree with Davis (2010) who recommends Schlossberg's adult transition theory as a good resource for staff at community colleges:

The main use of Schlossberg's transition theory is with adult learners and their return to higher education. Compared to traditional students, non-tradition students are generally at many different points in their life due to the various types of transitions they have undergone. Programming developed on the 4 S's can help adult learners to recognize and draw upon their assets in coping with the perception of moving into the challenge of returning to school instead of only seeing what their limitation might be. However, the entire transition process of moving in, moving through and moving on can be used as a guide in student affairs to facilitate all stages of college student development, not just adult learners, in how they interpret their college experiences and use that knowledge to further develop. (para 2)

The 4 S's are situation, self, support, and strategies. Davis (2010) explained that this concept

refers to the relationship the person has with the transition (i.e., personal, interpersonal, or community) and the setting where the transition occurs. Impact would be assessed by understanding how much a person's daily life has been altered. Schlossberg outlined the transition process with the terms of "moving in," "moving through," and "moving out." Methods for coping with transition, whether positive or negative, come from assessing a person's assets and liabilities in the four areas. (para 1)

In this regard, The Aspen Institute recognizes the challenges and stresses the importance of developing college and community-based partnerships to provide this student population, particularly the low-income adult, with access to skills and education. According to The Aspen Institute (2011),

Recognizing the challenges that low-income adult students' face, community colleges and non-profit workforce development providers are coming together to provide a range of academic and personal supports to make training that is linked



to credentials and employment opportunities more accessible and achievable. Together, these institutions can provide low-income adults the opportunity to gain skills and education that will lead to better jobs. (pp. 1–2)

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

In order to further explore this topic and learn more about the experiences of nontraditional/adult students, I recommend additional research in the form of a quantitative mixed-methods study. A mixed-methods study would capture both the lived experiences and relevant statistical data needed to determine whether or not and in what ways community-based life management programs such as Helping Students Thrive impact student success and student persistence. Future research should be conducted at multiple colleges in order to obtain significance across institutions. In addition, it would be valuable to conduct additional qualitative research with a larger sample of nontraditional/adult students who have participated in community-based life management programs and other community support programs for more than one semester in order to explore prolonged persistence and college completion. It would also be useful to conduct research specifically focusing on adult students' experiences and success with student affairs programs and targeted programs like TRIO SSS and Achieving the Dream. Most of the available research looks at all students and not at adult learners specifically.

### **Final Reflections on the Study**

I will forever be grateful to the participants of this study. I believe that the data they provided is rich and can be used to make a difference in the lives of other nontraditional/adult students. As a current faculty member, I see the struggles of this demographic daily, and it has always been a dream of mine to develop a model that can provide support in order to aid in persistence. I hope that the qualitative data collected

and the life management program can be marketed to other colleges, encouraging a strategic partnership with a community-based organization.

I offer a personally meaningful passage from Psalm 23:1–3 (NIV):

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

I was drawn to this scripture because of its ability to create a warm, soothing calmness in my spirit whenever I am tempted to doubt my potential. It also reminds me to never forget where my faith should come from. My life, as I know it, has been forever changed by the stories of my participants. Their courageous stories of perseverance, coupled with the ability to hurdle one negative situation after another, create a new definition for the word humble. I am changed.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**INTERVIEW GUIDE**

## **APPENDIX A**

### **Interview Guide**

1. Please tell me about your high school experience.
2. Can you talk to me about your family (parents, guardians)?
3. How were you brought up? What was your socioeconomic status growing up?
4. Tell me about your friends, and the community you lived in.
5. What personal and educational challenges have you experienced as you have attempted to graduate from high school and enroll in college?
6. Tell me about your children, your spouse (or their father(s) what are some similarities/differences in how they are being brought up and how you were brought up
7. What motivated you to attend or return to college
8. How would describe yourself as a learner and tell me about your experiences as a college student.
9. What personal factors (i.e., attitudes, skills, family, peers, and life experiences) have helped you persist in college and in life?
10. What has been your involvement in the TRIO Student Support Services Program? How has it helped you to succeed and persist in college?
11. What other college support services have you used? How have these services, college personnel, and/or college events or experiences helped you to succeed and persist in college?
12. Talk about what strategies (internal or external) you have used to overcome your personal and educational challenges and/or to be successful in college?
13. What motivated you to participate in the life management program?
14. What has been your level of involvement and experience thus far in the life management program?
15. What has been your child's experience thus far in the life management program? How does it work together with other support systems you have?

16. What has been your and your child's experience with a life management coach?
17. Do you plan to continue in the life management program after the semester is over? Why or why not?
18. Do you think the life management program would benefit other nontraditional students at the host college, or at other colleges? How so?
19. Have your grades or your time management improved by volunteering in the life management program?

**APPENDIX B**  
**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**



## APPENDIX B

### Informed Consent Form

Date:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

You are invited to participate in a study entitled, Life Management Model Participants: Their Experiences and Persistence as Adult Learners, conducted by Melissa Patton, a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education and Organizational Change (HEOC) program at Benedictine University. The purpose of this study is to explore the influence that a life management model and other factors have on the perceptions and experiences of adult students. My main research questions is: *What are the perceptions and experiences of a small group of adult TRIO SSS community college students and how have a community-based life management program, institutional support, and personal factors influenced their success and persistence in college?*

This is a voluntary study that you can withdraw from at any time or may choose not to answer a particular question. The study does not have any known or potential risks. You are invited to participate in an interview to discuss your experience in the Life Management Program. The interview will last between 60-90 minutes at a location of your choice. The interview will be audio taped. Follow-up contact may be requested depending on the research needs and purposes. A transcription of the interview will be given to you to review for accuracy.

In order to maintain confidentiality, the transcripts from your interview will be stored in a locked cabinet for seven-years and destroyed afterwards if it is no longer needed. Your actual name will only be known to the researcher (me). The interview will be given a pseudonym and a secure code in order to keep all information confidential. Excerpts from your interview may be included in the dissertation or in other publications but your name will never appear in those writings. If, at a subsequent date, biographical data were relevant to a publication, a separate release form would be sent to you.

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of Benedictine University. The Chair of the IRB is Dr. Alandra Weller-Clarke who can be reached at [awclarke@ben.edu](mailto:awclarke@ben.edu); or at (630) 829-6295.

This study is being conducted in part to fulfill requirements for my Ed.D. degree at the graduate school of Benedictine University in Lisle, IL. I thank you in advance for

signing this form on the line provided below showing that you have read and agree with the contents.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please feel to contact me at (515) 422-4628; or at [mepatton7@hotmail.com](mailto:mepatton7@hotmail.com) . You can also contact my dissertation director, Dr. Norma Perez at [nlperezkahler@dmacc.edu](mailto:nlperezkahler@dmacc.edu); or at (515) 556-9498.

You will be given a copy of your signed consent form. Please acknowledge with your signatures below your consent to participate in this study and to record your interview.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Melissa Patton

***I consent to participate in this study***

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

***I give my permission to record this interview***

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX C**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY**

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Demographic Survey**

The purpose of this survey is to obtain background information about study-participants. Each participant will be given a pseudonym and a secure code to protect his/her identity.

Background/demographic information:

1. Gender?
2. Current age?
3. Marital status?
4. Ethnic/racial background?
5. Year that you graduated from high school? Diploma or GED?
6. How many years have you been attending the host college? List any other colleges you have attended.
7. Do you attend full time or part time?
8. Current level in college? How many college credits have you achieved?
9. Do you receive financial aid? If so, what kind?
10. Major and degree program?
11. Employed; full time, part time, or not employed?
12. How many children do you have? What are their ages?