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Understanding Nontraditional Transfer Student Challenges And Persistence To Degree Completion

Marcia L. Runnberg-Valadez

Hamline University

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UNDERSTANDING NONTRADITIONAL TRANSFER STUDENT

CHALLENGES AND PERSISTENCE

TO DEGREE COMPLETION

by

Marcia L. Runnberg-Valadez

A dissertation submitted to the graduate Faculty of Hamline University

In partial fulfillment of the degree

Doctorate of Education

Hamline University

St. Paul, Minnesota

July 2017

Committee Chair: Dr. Terri Christenson
Committee Member: Dr. Darryl Dietrich
Committee Member: Dr. Patricia Angulo
DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to:
All my wonderful social work students, past, present, and future, who teach me something new every time I step into the classroom.

My wonderful husband, Daniel Wayne Valadez, who provided unrelenting support and encouragement, reminding me daily that I was incredible.

My professional colleague and dear friend, Jennifer Gervais, who convinced me that I was capable and could really get a doctorate degree.

My children, Jerhmy Owen and Arianna Nason. May this study inspire you to embrace lifelong learning with passion and purpose.
What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made in the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead.

Nelson Mandela
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I want to thank Dr. Walter Enloe for believing in me and supporting my desire to make a difference in the lives of my students and society. I also want to thank the incredible talents of Julie Rustad and Dawn Christenson in supporting me through my technical writing challenges; and Dr. Bruce Loppnow and Dr. Lee Gustafson in supporting and encouraging me in my scholarly pursuits. And lastly, to Dr. Cecelia Taylor, a role model who has been there in all my worst and all my best.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Overview

U. S. higher education is a hot button topic with political, financial, and consumer interest groups. Who wants a college degree, who can afford the cost to obtain a degree, and who can successfully navigate the hurdles to obtain that degree, are all critical variables in understanding this research topic (ACE, 2014c). The role that adult education plays in our society today has transpired from an opportunity into a requirement for economic sustainability. Some critics are identifying a need for at least 60% of our country’s population to have higher-education credentials by 2025, an increase of 45% from today (Zinshteyn, 2016). There is no question that the benefits of higher education positively impact individuals, communities, and greater society in numerous ways. Socioeconomic considerations that tie education to combating poverty, health and wellness, and civic engagement and sustainability are often forgotten (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013).

Pursuing training and credentials after high school is a rapidly growing societal norm. Between 1994 and 2004, there was a 21% increase in postsecondary enrollment. Between 2004 and 2014, there was a 17% increase, from 17.3 million to 20.2 million
students. During this period, part-time enrollment increased by 16%. There is also an upward trend in nontraditional age student and student of color enrollment (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2016).

A growing number of older students are attending college. Some are choosing to delay college in order to work or raise children; often enrolling part-time when they make the decision to start college. These nontraditional students have a lower college degree completion rate than traditional age, full-time students (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005).

Adding to the complexity of this race to degree attainment is the rapidly growing financial cost of obtaining a degree. While the demand for a college education has risen over 138% over the past 40 years, the financial cost of a postsecondary education has increased as much as 34% in the past decade alone (NCES, 2016b). This situation has created a significant economic crisis on many fronts. A watch group regularly tracks public and private data from national financial sources, revealing shocking numbers of our student financial crisis (Student Loan Hero, 2017). As of 2017, approximately 44 million student borrowers make up $1.4 trillion in student loan debt. Approximately $950 billion of this debt is private loans. This trillion-dollar figure exceeds almost $620 billion more than our national credit card debt. An increase of 6% from last year, brings the average 2016 graduate holding approximately $37,000 in student loans. This equates to the average monthly student loan payment of $351. The struggle for education is challenged by the fact that state spending for public colleges and universities have been plummeting at alarming rates over the past decade, while increases in tuition at these institutions have steadily climbed. Clearly, obtaining a college degree is a
milestone that carries a hefty financial burden well beyond graduation. Students on the path to obtaining their degree are often faced with the financial stress of having to choose between finishing school and repaying multiple loans (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

Today’s student is faced with choosing an affordable, viable, and accessible path to higher education that must equate with the time and commitment required to be successful in their degree completion. In response to the challenges associated with obtaining a college degree, more students are choosing to spend their first two years of postsecondary education in two-year institutions such as a technical or community college, at a rapidly growing rate (Handel & Williams, 2012). Community colleges are increasingly serving as the entry-point for students who want to pursue a postsecondary certification or degree. Students are also delaying college entry immediately out of high school. The average age of a community college student is 28 years old (AACC, 2016). The 2015 Higher Education Spotlight (ACE, 2015) identifies 74% of students enrolled in college today are ‘post-traditional learners’ (i.e., “delayed college after high school, financially independent, had children, were single parents, or worked full time.”)

Socioeconomic challenges can also impact college enrollment and degree completion. Students may initially enroll full-time and then reduce their course load or stop out altogether and return to school at a future date. Many students never return. Outcomes from the Completing College Report (Shapiro et al., 2016) revealed that almost one in four students completed their degree from an institution other than in the one originally enrolled. Interestingly, 13% of the students who started at four-year public
institutions completed at another institution. The state of Minnesota held the highest rate of 25% followed by 24% in the state of Missouri (Shapiro et al., 2016).

In most states, traditional-age students starting at four-year public institutions had higher completion rates than the delayed entry (age 21-24) and adult learner (over age 24) groups. In six states (Arizona, California, Iowa, Michigan, New Mexico, and North Carolina), delayed entry students had a higher completion rate than traditional-age students. (Shapiro et al., 2016, p. 2)

Unfortunately, a significant number of these students struggle in their learning experience; many never completing their associate degree. Students who are successful in completing their associate degree often transfer their enrollment to a four-year college or university to obtain their bachelor’s degree. Others may depart from a four-year degree granting institution and transfer back to a two-year community college setting. These latter students often describe their reasons for this reverse transfer decision resulting from their feeling unprepared or the desire to learn in a smaller, more familiar social climate (Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer, 2009). Adding to this complexity, college completion rates are higher for traditional age students than for students who temporarily delayed entry directly out of high school and adult learners, who may move in and out of college over several years.

I found that large-scale studies do not capture the reality of common enrollment behaviors that can include variables such as multi institution enrollment. Contemporary research on higher education enrollment trends indicate that students increasingly are taking multiple pathways to reach their educational goals, while federal data on
enrollment and completion cannot tell the full story (Mullin, 2012; National College Access Network [NCAN], 2014; Reeves, Miller, & Rouse, 2011; US Department of Education [USDE], 2015b). Unfortunately, students experience many challenges along the way to reaching their educational goals. College completion rates are at a staggering decline in U.S. higher education (American Council on Education [ACE], 2014a, 2015; USDE, 2015a; 2015b, NCAN, 2014; NCES, 2016). I believe that this phenomenon creates a timely need for empirical inquiry that can inform higher education administration and faculty on best practices for intervention strategies. This research is fueled by the personal ideology that the educational experience should be one of success and lifelong learning rather than a pyramid of obstacles and defeat.

Research Problem

Students who transfer from a community college into a four-year baccalaureate degree granting institution face many challenges on the path to degree completion. The diverse background of these transfer students creates a myriad of learning scenarios that require knowledge, understanding, and sensitivity to the complexity of learner success. One major investigation sponsored by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE, n.d.), addressed the problem of student retention from 2008 to 2011, known as Non-traditional No More: Policy Solutions for Adult Learners. This research project worked with national, state, and institutional leaders to explore the profile of students who do not complete their degree plan (e.g., drop out of college without returning). Strategies were identified to address potential student barriers related to financial viability, institutional policy and practice, unintended consequences of state
policies, and insufficient understanding or knowledge of transfer/academic information (Lane, Michelau, & Palmer, 2012). Contemporary research studies, statistical data, and other scholarly sources all confirm multiple variables that may negatively impact nontraditional student persistence and degree completion (Giancola & Davidson, 2015; Handel & Williams, 2012; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Tinto, 1994, 2012).

This research addresses the problem of nontraditional student undergraduate degree completion (Wlodkowski, Raymond, Mauldin, & Campbell, 2002). This study is committed to exploring the personal experiences and realities of nontraditional adult students who transfer from a community college setting into a four-year degree granting institution. This qualitative study captures the nontraditional students’ journey to degree completion. Individual experiences and thematic findings that connect research participants to the challenges and persistence behaviors are analyzed. Participants in this study represent an undergraduate social work program that is delivered on multiple distant sites that serves predominantly nontraditional transfer students.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate and identify factors that negatively impact community college transfer students’ academic success and positively create support persistence behavior toward four-year degree completion.

The primary research question that guides this study is:

1) How do nontraditional age students who transfer from a community college into an undergraduate degree social work program describe the challenges they experienced during their journey to baccalaureate degree completion? The secondary guiding
research question will explore, 2) How do these students describe their personal efforts and/or the institutional factors that supported ability to persist through their challenge toward degree completion?

These two questions were framed out of the preliminary literature research, historical student feedback activities, continuing education experiences related to student success, and personal experiences as a professor over the past 23 years teaching and developing program delivery models that encourage student success. I believe that ongoing efforts must move us beyond relying upon quantifiable hard data that only addresses student enrollment numbers and degree awards. This research provides a deeper qualitative understanding into the worldview of each student participant and the personal realities in their journey to program completion.

The subject of study is extremely timely for the field of higher education as administrators and policy makers are scrambling to keep their school boat afloat. Through this scholarly inquiry, my findings amplify the understanding of the obstacles that are unique to nontraditional learners (NCAN, 2013; Shapiro et al., 2015). An increased awareness in the experiences of this student population will inform the development of teaching strategies, program delivery methods, and institutional infrastructure models that are likely to benefit college students, improve student persistence, retention, and degree completion. Implications of these student experiences will prove beneficial to both two-year and four-year degree granting institutions as the role of higher education continues to transform through pressing socioeconomic challenges. The premise and methodology of this research align in parallel process with
my own experience as an adult learner, and my professional history in academia. I continue to be driven by a fervent entrepreneurial spirit (Pierce, 2008) to enhance college accessibility and student success.

**Personal History**

As a social work professor in higher education, I believe an inquiry into learning and student academic success must honor the relevance of adult transformational learning theory (Mezirow, Taylor, & Associates, 2009; Wlodkowski, 2008; Palmer, 2007). This transformative ideology impacts my desire to pursue research opportunities that increase my understanding of student realities, with the ultimate goal of influencing positive change (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Creswell, 2014). I hold value in finding ways to provide a reciprocal learning climate that creates personal awareness and an opportunity for voice. “Good scholars keep asking honest, open questions of the phenomena they are studying, questions meant to deepen understanding of what that reality is all about” (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010, p. 132).

I believe my personal journey through higher education has influenced me as a social work professor and a researcher. My interest in student learning success began in 1974 with myself. I was enrolled as a first year/first generation college student, fresh out of high school. I was the eldest Caucasian woman in a middle-class family of four. I grew up in a family business that involved daily contact with the public. I experienced many different types of people, life styles, and opportunities. My parents were typical business owners of the fifties; start out with nothing, work hard, and reach your goals. Both of my parents were second generation European immigrants who entered the
workforce at a young age with farming skills and a sixth-grade education. For me, the idea of attending college and experiencing academic success was an exciting challenge. I never thought of my career choice to be filled with unsurmountable barriers. As I began my first semester of college courses, my perception of college success was to get satisfactory grades, complete the college course requirements outlined in my self-developed advisement plan, and obtain my baccalaureate degree. I believed that my degree would open the door to readily securing employment as a social worker. My goal was to make a difference in the lives of less fortunate persons than myself. Thriving on the challenge at hand, I had expectations for myself, my teachers, and my college institution; some expectations, I realized later, were realistic, others were not.

My transition from a small rural high school in Northern Minnesota to a large urban state university required many internal and external adjustments. I was not accustomed to the large classes of 200 students, minimal access to faculty and advisors, multiple buildings, and the laborious institution rules and protocols imposed on me, often with little support or direction. Having to pay rent, utilities, and navigate transportation was a new experience. I did not have any specific preparation for independence as a college student, nor family or social supports. My parents questioned the need for a degree; my friends often chose technical schooling or staying on the family farm. The ‘sink or swim’ reality of college life made me resourceful, assertive, and sometimes overwhelmed and discouraged. I quickly learned the navigation skills and mentor relationships required to help me reach my goals. I obtained my baccalaureate degree in social work within three years, attending school full-time during J-terms and summer
sessions. I readily secured employment in my chosen field and worked for two years before deciding to return to college and complete my graduate degree. The experience of obtaining my master degree in social work was quite similar to my baccalaureate college days. Returning to the same institution that I had previously attended, I held high expectations of myself and my university constituents. While I contemplated attending an out of state college for my graduate studies, I concluded that returning to a familiar environment and institutional structure would aide in my rapid degree completion; and it did.

Over 40 years later, enrolled in an urban, private, on-ground doctoral degree program, the stark reality of becoming a student once again has created a new understanding and significant appreciation for nontraditional learner challenges and the potential barriers to academic success. Becoming a student once again, now in midlife, I find that the challenges to learning new information and the efforts required to successfully complete my education are much more complex. As a young adult, fresh out of high school in the 70’s, my two part-time jobs as a waitress and childcare worker provided the financial support I needed to meet basic living expenses and payments on a $375.00 quarterly tuition bill. My learning process involved regular trips to the library, note cards, typewriters, assignments completed at 3:00 a.m., and copious amounts of White-out. My life focus was to successfully complete the education tasks required to obtain my bachelor degree in social work. I did not have children or a spouse. My biggest concerns were having bus money and ability to pay my rent.
The multiple demands and personal life obligations as a 60 year old, nontraditional adult student, require me to make a much more intentional effort in time management, fiscal budgeting, researching and tracking information, while battling information overload. I must prioritize education assignment tasks while maneuvering multiple expectations from my employer, students, and family. I have been required to increase writing, research, and technology skills to an unanticipated level. Participating in online learning environments with frustrations and defeat are common place. I regularly battled my inner fears of degree attainment failure. Just like my students, I often thought of dropping out. But, I must persist.

I have transferred my youth-laden college year experiences and my recent doctoral education learning moments, into a 23-year career as a professor of social work. During my higher education career, I have provided classroom instruction, field practicum education, student competency evaluation, and academic advisement to over 500 students. My current employment position as a social work program coordinator and professor in a private nonprofit Midwestern college requires diverse roles and responsibilities; including teaching, supervising and mentoring faculty, working with multiple administrative structures such as the recruitment office, financial aid and student support services, and the overall administration and evaluation of an undergraduate competency-driven professional program. Each of these activities requires ongoing critical evaluation skills. My desire to effectively carry out these responsibilities are fueled by my belief in and commitment to the academic success of every student who is accepted into the Social Work Program. I have experienced the young adult student who
holds every new word and idea as a gospel path to helping others; the 30 year old student, returning to school, who enters the classroom with a set of beliefs and skills, albeit valuable, determined to change the world, no matter the personal cost; the 58 year old student, who just purchased her first computer, looking for a part-time class schedule that will accommodate the caregiving responsibilities of her father; and I’ve experienced other nontraditional students, who all too frequently, commit to an academic plan that comes to a crashing halt when they realize that the challenges in being a full-time student and paying the bills make their goal of becoming a social worker appear unattainable.

Professional History

During my career in the social work department, I have experienced this undergraduate program’s evolution from a traditional-delivered, one program campus with two full-time faculty; into currently, a seven-campus program that includes six distant program delivery sites with 11 full-time faculty and over 25 adjunct instructors; educating over 225 undergraduate social work students annually. While the program’s growth is due to multiple factors, the primary reason for the department’s undergraduate enrollment success is the past decade of efforts focused on the development and implementation of an innovative distant-site delivery model that is geared for adult nontraditional transfer learners.

It has been a mission of the social work department involved in this study, as well as my academic passion, to make higher education accessible to adult learners who may not otherwise have the opportunity to obtain their social work degree. This new group of students are generally older than traditional first-year college students; some are English
language learners. Many of these students are first-generation college enrollees; some who have stopped out and returned to college multiple times. They are full or part-time employed; many with children and/or spouses; do not live on campus, requiring distance commutes; and, hold significant financial responsibilities. Over the past decade, there has been a steady increase in students of color.

The passion I hold for finding paths to making higher education accessible and successful for these nontraditional students quickly grew during the first 10 years of my teaching and leadership responsibilities. During this period, I experienced a growing social work program interest by nontraditional age students who had completed their associate degree at regional rural community colleges and now needed to transfer to a four-year college or university to obtain their baccalaureate degree in social work. Most of these transfer students were obligated to commute long distances; several from remote tribal areas. These students entered the social work major with a third-year junior level status after completing an associate degree. They carried a conviction to make a difference in their world. Social work was a calling. Each student presented a personal story of life experiences that affected them so deeply that a preparing for a career committed to problem-solving and compassion became their life goal.

The students faced many challenges in pursuing their social work degrees. Most were first-generation college enrollees, low income, students of color, single-parents, in recovery from addictions; and histories of growing up in a foster home or being a recipient themselves of social welfare services. Three of my students had lost their jobs, resulting in homelessness and living out of their car to make ends meet. Most of these
students were impoverished to such an extent that they lived month-to-month, not
knowing how their bills would be paid. There were even students who lost various public
support benefits because they were enrolled in an academic program that went beyond
blue-collar level training. These students shared feelings of intimidation about driving to
the city main campus, navigating college systems that they were not familiar with, and
the stress of managing time and costs associated with class attendance. All the students
were employed with at least one job, sometimes more.

These candid conversations and frequent crisis-laden situations prompted me to
explore how our college could create a viable education opportunity for nontraditional
students to successfully navigate the rigor of college success in tandem with the realities
of their personal obligations and unpredictable life circumstances. I wanted to transpose
our college’s Benedictine values, the values and the mission of the Social Work
Department, and the values of the social work profession into enabling these students to
fulfill their dreams of becoming a social worker.

Five years into my faculty position, I initiated a proposal for a dual-site delivery
model which involved detailed partnership planning with a rural community college.
This development was in response to interacting with several nontraditional adult learners
that were faced with commuting up to three times weekly onto our main campus from
rural Minnesota communities, sometimes as far as two hours away. Transfer students
expressed difficulty in being successful in the social work program due to the travel time
and cost that was required.
In 1999, a program delivery model was piloted that included on-ground program curriculum delivery on a rural community college campus once per week, with a once per week commute to the Main campus. By cutting down the costs associated with travel, it enabled adult learners to meet their employment and family obligations while successfully completing their degree plan. By 2005, the first fully distant delivered baccalaureate social work education partnership was developed between my college and a local tribal/community college campus system that serves a diverse, rural, first-generation student body. This partnership was crafted through a collaborative exchange of qualitative and quantitative information. Relationships were forged, data was collected, and both parties were committed to enhancing student success and degree completion. We found a way to meet the unique education needs shared among predominantly nontraditional Native and Caucasian students, while increasing the department’s enrollment numbers. The program was supported over several years with various community-based grant initiatives targeted at Native American student degree completion. The program site successfully continues today.

The uniqueness of the distant site model came out of devising programmatic delivery methods that addressed the needs of nontraditional commuter students. The average age of the first cohort of students were in their late 30’s to early 40’s. The social work program came to the community college with a model that offered students a familiar environment, small class sizes, and convenient course scheduling; all which influenced college success.
Laying the institutional groundwork for this undertaking involved many phases. Data collection for the feasibility of this investment was critical to initiating a collaboratively operational partnership between the two institutions. Beginning efforts focused on understanding the potential refer ability and readiness of the community college’s students by examining enrollment trends from two-year degree behavioral departments (i.e., human services, corrections, substance abuse, social work, early childhood education, psychology). Students from these career pathways were most interested in obtaining their degree in social work. Features that were immediately implemented included the development of a transfer articulation that provided a consumer-friendly pathway guide to transferring community college credits into their baccalaureate degree plan. Kahlenberg (2011) emphasizes the importance of developing methods that remove barriers between two and four-year institutions. Higher education literature reiterates that institutional collaborations embedded with strong articulation agreements are critical to student transfer success (National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education [NCPHE], 2011). A seamless transfer process with an accelerated curriculum delivery provided students who transferred in an associate degree with a concentration in human services and/or chemical dependency, an opportunity to enter our college’s social work program with junior level status. The transfer plan enabled full-time students a pathway to complete their bachelor degree in 18 to 24 months. Course scheduling was also tailored to requiring less on-campus time. This option quickly became very popular with the nontraditional consumer. Many authors have addressed the congruency between modified accelerated learning formats that incorporate adult learner
skills, knowledge, and needs (Mezirow et al., 2009; Wlodkowski, 2008; Woodson Day, Lovato, Tull, & Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Critical features of the new distant site social work program included program delivery that offered convenient course scheduling, small class size, developmental academic advisement activities, on-site student support counselor services, and a community college facility agreement that supported student writing, use of technology, library access, and even on-campus housing for two of our students who were not official students of the hosting community college. A strong emphasis directed toward student engagement and individual advisement provided students with an opportunity to achieve academic success (Fauria & Fuller, 2015). Students reported feeling comfortable in their (old) community college learning environment.

Contemporary higher education literature points to the positive influence of cross-institutional collaborations and transfer planning strategies that enhance the transfer student experience (Allen, Smith, & Muehleck, 2013; Eggleston & Santos Laanan, 2001; Kahlenberg, 2011; Phelps & Prevost, 2012). The distance delivery program model that originated in 2005 was so successful in recruiting, retaining, and educating nontraditional students, that by 2009, the College had developed two additional distant site social work programs that are delivered on an urban and rural community college campus sites. A fourth out-of-state, heavily urban distant site, delivered on a Southwestern state community college campus, had opened its doors in 2015, serving many first-generation Latino, African American, and Native students. At the time of this research, an
additional Southwestern urban site and a sixth Midwestern distant site social work program have begun.

The initial vision and intention of the distance site program model was derived from the belief that nontraditional adult learners require a flexible environment and course delivery options that meet their complex personal and learning needs (Eggleston, & Santos Laanan, 2001). Through community college articulation agreements and other creative collaborative efforts between the Midwestern private, nonprofit, four-year degree granting institution and community college systems, the social work program has provided a path for adult learners to seamlessly transfer into the social work program and obtain their bachelor degree. This model has proven to be more cost effective than a traditional model delivery, especially for older first-generation students, and other students who thrive in a small, familiar, student-focused learning environment. The collective 18-year history of these education development activities, and growing research in the connection between adult learning theory and theories of student success, align with the relevance of this research (Mezirow et al., 2009; Wlodkowski, 2008).

In order to support successful student outcomes (i.e., academic persistence, accreditation-driven competency attainment, program retention and completion, and postgraduation career placement), these types of efforts demand an ongoing review of three major topics: 1) best-practices in teaching pedagogy (Hernandez Sheets, 2005), 2) adult learning theory (Mezirow et al., 2009; Wlodkowski, 2008); and 3) program delivery supported at multiple institutional levels. Influenced by my professional values, personal experience as a nontraditional returning student, and as a long-time leader and facilitator
of undergraduate social work education, I focused my research topic on seeking data and a new understanding that could support academic persistence and success of the nontraditional adult transfer student.

**Background of the Study**

Over the past decade, I have witnessed growing challenges in social work program student retention and academic success within the transfer student population; especially from the distance site delivered locations. This delivery model attracts nontraditional age students who often have stopped out of their education plan due to personal life stressors, family planning, financial obligations, or changes in employment; or they are students in their early twenties who are transferring directly from a community college associates degree program into our four-year professional degree granting program.

Over the years, the Social Work Department has developed various strategies to assist students to overcome the challenges that could jeopardize their ongoing program enrollment and the ability to reach their academic and career goals. Some strategies have included the development of foundation course-integrated learning labs, enhancement of writing support opportunities, teaching methods focused on building a learning ‘community’ environment, developmental advisement models, and providing student support counselors and peer or community mentors. Programmatic infrastructures have been developed that alert administration and faculty of student struggles. Intentional retention strategies have been implemented that focus on crisis prevention, sometimes by trial and error. Incremental faculty feedback forms, deliberate academic advisement
protocols, clarifications of impaired performance, and programmatic gatekeeping tools that allow students to stop out, taking a break from school with a planned return, are efforts that have been programmatically implemented. These strategies have positively impacted student success and retention; although, it is evident that student challenges chronically persist. Student academic intervention often occurs in response to a problem versus prior to an occurring event that may jeopardize student success or program completion. The outcomes and implications of this research study can inform educators and higher education administration on prevention and/or early intervention strategies that can be implemented to support student success.

Every semester, students who are enrolled in the distance program sites, who are almost exclusively nontraditional age, struggle to attain course competency standards. Many struggle to demonstrate the abilities needed to move through the learning process with strong scholarly participation and growth. I believe if there were a greater understanding of what circumstances or challenges create the most havoc in the student learning process, recommendations and administrative planning could take place to address these limitations, increase student success, and promote degree completion.

**Significance of the Study**

This research provides an opportunity for undergraduate social work students to identify and describe the challenges and barriers that they were confronted with as they persisted in their baccalaureate social work program. My qualitative data collection methodology utilized in-depth individual interviews and focus groups. This strategy empowered participants by providing an opportunity of voice to share their experiences
and meanings. My research resulted in an increased understanding of these adult student challenges, barriers, and needs, so that additional proactive methods to assist in the promotion of student retention and academic success can be integrated. The findings and analysis of outcomes from this study have the capacity to inform educational institutions, policy makers, and communities. This research gives insight into the kinds of obstacles that students experience, and what organizational and policy efforts can support the goals of student success.

**Definition of Terms**

a) **Distant site program**: For the purposes of this study, this refers to the undergraduate program delivery model in which the junior and senior years of the program are delivered in a setting away from the home campus. The participant sample chosen for this study are associated with one or more distant sites. These sites have intentionally designed program delivery models wherein baccalaureate degree curriculum is delivered on a community college campus site.

b) **Nontraditional student**: For the purposes of this study, this term refers to a student who is at least 24 years of age and has completed two or more years of course work at a two-year degree granting institution. The term “adult learner” will be used interchangeably in this study.

c) **Student academic success**: For the purposes of this study, this term encompasses the academic situation or status of a student that has met defined educational goals and/or program competencies. This can include demonstrating academic
ability, meeting learning outcomes such as completing required program courses with a final grade of “C” or higher, advancing career, and/or achieving new skills.

d) Student persistence: For the purposes of this study, this term is used to label a student’s movement forward in a personal education plan in order to reach degree completion.

e) Student retention: For the purposes of this study, this concept refers to the status of a student who remains enrolled in their chosen institution.

f) Traditional student: For the purposes of this study, this term refers to a student who has started their post-high school education at a two or four-year degree granting institution and has solely remained enrolled in that institution. The majority of students in this category are between the ages of 18-21 and are sometimes referred to in the literature as ‘native’ students.

g) Transfer student: For the purposes of this study, this term refers to a student who has transferred course credits from a two-year degree granting community college into a baccalaureate four-year degree granting institution. This does not refer to students who transfer solely from one baccalaureate college to another.

Summary

In Chapter One, I have introduced my research topic and its significance by establishing the purpose and the timely need for the study. Research questions were presented and a context of the research was explained through a brief history into the background of the researcher and the contexts for pursuing this inquiry.
The overarching question that guides this study is: 1) How do nontraditional students who transfer from a community college into an undergraduate degree social work program describe the challenges they experienced during their journey to baccalaureate degree completion? The secondary guiding research question will explore: 2) How do these students describe their personal efforts and/or the institutional factors that supported ability to persist through their challenge toward degree completion?

After considerable exploration of the literature, my professional experience in the field of higher education as a faculty, and as a returning nontraditional student, I believe the research questions are relevant due to the many growing challenges our nation’s higher education system is encountering (ACE, 2014a, 2015; Berger & Fisher, 2013; Hunt & Tierney, 2006; USDE, 2012a). My initial literature search provided me with a wealth of perspectives and ideas, stimulating my inquiry into how academic success can be more obtainable for nontraditional adult learners. I believe my research design and methodology is diversely comprehensive and sensitive to my beliefs and values in the power of transformative education and adult learning (Mezirow, 2000; Wlodkowski, 2008). Through providing the social work students a platform for reflection and voice, this research provided me with a rich opportunity to further enhance my understanding and needs of the adult learner as well as share this information with the greater higher education system.

Preview Organization of the Study

The remaining parts of this study consist of four chapters:
Chapter Two—Literature Review will identify relevant data that describes the complexity of student success in contemporary U.S. higher education. This section will briefly provide a historical context over the past two decades that has impacted higher education delivery in community colleges and four-year degree institutions; and, various trends, theories, and frameworks used to describe the complexity of students in their pursuit of the American education dream. Lastly, the review will identify empirical data on what scholars have identified as variables in student persistence and academic success.

Chapter Three—Methodology provides an overview of the study, and describes a concise rationale for the qualitative constructivist approach used in the data collection process. I operate through a qualitative research paradigm based on the nature, research intention, and methods of data collection. The qualitative nature of the research questions aligns well with the chosen methods of investigation. This methodology is driven by process theory and constructivism (Fosnot, 2005; Holstein & Gubrium, 2011; Rodwell, 1998). The data collected is based on an appreciation and honor for the nature of the students’ learning journey over time, and the processes involved in their personal situations and events (Maxwell, 2013). In her discussion of the role of constructivist research and social work, Rodwell (1998) emphasizes, “constructivist research is a social/political process mediated and enhanced by the inquirer. Data are being created and judged in a hermeneutic process of meaning making” (p. 93). In this study, an interpretive-constructivist design through means of triangulation, is created enabling a rich collection of demographic and qualitative responses (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007;). A description of the research methodology rationale and the
construction process of my inquiry activities are guided and supported by the review of the literature and results from my data collection approach. Data collection for this research project utilizes multiple sources and methods:

a) a literature review examining: quantitative data sets and expert recommendations that provide the researcher and reader with an understanding of the research problem; b) an individual interview with the social work department chair, representing an administrative perspective; c) a focus group interview session with a team of approximately five undergraduate full-time social work program faculty that teach undergraduate social work on Midwest distance site locations; d) a focus group interview with two undergraduate social work program faculty and two community college/associate degree social work faculty that are located on Southwestern campus distance sites; and e) in-depth individual interviews with three to five nontraditional undergraduate transfer social work students who meet specific sample criteria including age, race, and first-generation student status.

The two research questions in this study identify what I want to learn. The outline structure of my interview questions is influenced by my literature review and experiences in academia. I have devised a framework of preliminary guiding questions for my participants that will be used as an open door to conversation that solicits the data. My literature investigation has guided me in framing ‘big idea’ categorical questions that will explore possible student barriers and phenomenological behaviors of persistence. As new information, experiences, and participant realities are discovered, new perspectives will
fuel the interview process. As a result of this strategy, I believe theories of social phenomena will emerge and grow as I begin collecting the data (Maxwell, 2013).

Chapter Four - Data Collection and Analysis. This chapter describes the rationale and plan for data collection and analysis. This chapter will represent the “findings/results” of the research. Reliability and trustworthiness of the collection process and the analysis validity will be addressed (Golafshani, 2003; Krueger & Casey, 2015). Participant demographics will be described; a synthesis of focus groups and participant interviews will be identified through the use of coding strategies that result in the identification of themes, meanings, and mutual interpretations (van Manen, 2016). Due to the qualitative nature of the data collection experience for both the participants and the researcher, the researcher will be sensitive to common validity threats such as researcher bias and reactivity (Maxwell, 2013). Every effort will be made to address the importance of trustworthiness, authenticity, and quality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Heppner & Heppner, 2004; Maxwell, 2013).

Chapter Five - Conclusions and Implications describes an overview of what I have learned in this research experience. I will reflect on the data collected with emphasis directed towards the described challenges and personal experiences expressed by the research participants. I also discuss the limitations of the study, implications for further research, and recommendations for new program development that can increase transfer student persistence, retention, and academic success.
CHAPTER TWO
Literature Review

This research addresses the current issue in higher education of baccalaureate degree completion. My research inquiry focuses on understanding the challenges experienced by nontraditional age community college transfer students during their path towards baccalaureate degree completion. Additionally, this research explores behavioral and institutional characteristics that influence students’ persistence to degree completion.

The population sample for this study included representatives from administration, faculty, and students of an undergraduate distant site program located in the Midwestern and Southwestern states in the U.S. The students were nontraditional age, first-generation, who have transferred from a community college into a baccalaureate degree granting social work program and are preparing to graduate.

This research inquiry is designed to answer these questions:

1) How do nontraditional age students who transfer from a community college into an undergraduate degree social work program describe the challenges they experienced during their journey to baccalaureate degree completion?

2) How do these students describe their personal efforts and/or the institutional factors that supported their ability to persist through their challenge toward degree completion?
Review Focus

This literature review focuses on investigating research outcomes, practices, and applications related to the student population studied (Galvan, 2006; Grinnell, Williams, & Unrau, 2016; Grinnell & Unrau, 2016). The goal for this literature inquiry is to identify from multiple perspectives, the central issues surrounding college completion, while providing a neutral perspective. This information is intended to provide the reader with the foundational background to understand the problem. Lastly, literature findings influenced the direction, data collection strategies, and analysis of this study.

The Literature Search

Approach. This review of literature in this study is divided into two primary sections: Contemporary Contexts and Challenges in U.S. Higher Education, and Nontraditional Student Persistence in College Degree Completion. Subheadings are developed to guide the reader in the literature discussion. To investigate my research questions, five major bodies of literature were explored: 1) Quantitative data on contexts and trends in U.S. higher education, 2) qualitative and quantitative perspectives in college retention and degree completion, 3) education policies and research initiatives that address the college retention and degree completion crisis, 4) institutional system contexts that impact student success and/or degree completion; and 5) characteristics of the nontraditional student and variables associated with college degree persistence. Due to the nature of the topic, a significant portion of the literature review process initially relied on electronic search inquiry. Many secondary data sources were then obtained from the electronic databases that are referred to in this chapter.
Thematic findings. A review of the literature reflective of this research topic revealed an emphasis in quantitative or mixed data collection methods. Longitudinal statistical based information often appears to be the driving force behind the development of proposed policy initiatives, focus groups, secondary research projects, academic white papers, and professional learning networks. Conclusions and recommendations were frequently based on a saturation of limited student behaviors (i.e., withdrawing from school or not completing a degree), rather than attempting to understand the driving forces and complexities behind those behaviors. A minimal amount of qualitative research gave voice to the student population addressed in my study.

While there were some narrowly focused journal articles and book chapters by author-driven literature reviews, my investigation found several substantially funded reports that were initiated through federal, state, or nonprofit organizations that specifically addressed the issue of college enrollment and degree completion. Interestingly, there were a plethora of blogs from higher education experts, policy makers, and college faculty voicing their concerns and frustrations related to my dissertation topic. The literature search revealed a significant amount of peripheral information on adult learning theory, definitions of the nontraditional student, and outcomes from student satisfaction surveys. Student characteristics were limitedly defined by gender, race, age, and/or college entry/drop out points. Little material was found on understanding who is the nontraditional student and what is the uniqueness of their personal academic story.
This literature inquiry revealed a consensus that 1) there is a significant need for additional research on my research topic, 2) my research topic and questions are very complex; 3) greater understanding of the nontraditional student is required; and 4) remedial strategies must address student persistence and degree completion in a holistic, systematic manner. The problem of degree completion impacts the student, educators, colleges, and society. Interestingly, my preliminary search included rich information generated from the public official website: whitehouse.gov. On January 20, 2017, coinciding with the inauguration of President Donald Trump, the data relating to issues and initiatives on U.S. higher education have been eliminated from the website. Since this time, information has slowly been distributed on other sites, including Obama archives (https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/). Findings from this literature review provides a theoretical foundation that informs and guides my research questions and data collection methodology.

**Contemporary Contexts and Challenges in U.S. Higher Education**

Our higher education system is one of the things that makes America exceptional. There's no place else that has the assets we do when it comes to higher education. People from all over the world aspire to come here and study here. And that is a good thing. (Obama, 2014, para. 14)

The vision Horace Mann had for accessible U.S. higher education in the 1800’s continues into the 21st Century through a transformational process where the quest for knowledge, socioeconomic mobility, and civic identity and autonomy are regularly
challenged (Ritchie, 2000). “In their policy report on the merits of a well-educated workforce, Berger and Fisher (2013) emphasize,

The connection between education and income is strong…States can build a strong foundation for economic success and shared prosperity by investing in education. Providing expanded access to high quality education will not only expand economic opportunity for residents, but also likely do more to strengthen the overall state economy than anything else a state government can do. (para. 3)

By 2015, 91% of adults in the U.S. had at least obtained a high school diploma. More than half of these adults had completed some college or more (NCES, 2016a).

Although the United States of America is often seen as the land of educational opportunity, the U.S. higher education system is currently consumed with a rift of concerns. The financial cost of obtaining a college degree, being educationally prepared to succeed in the classroom, and having the ability to persist through personal life demands while being a successful college student, are all significant obstacles to higher education success.

The economics of a college degree. More than half of the fastest growing occupations require postsecondary education. By 2018, more than 60% of the jobs in our country will require some form of postsecondary education (CEDCB, 2015.) “With the average earnings of college graduates at a level that is twice as high as that of workers with only a high school diploma, higher education is now the clearest pathway into the middle class” (“Higher Education,” n.d., para. 1).
Employment rates are significantly higher for persons who complete postsecondary education. As an example, the 2015 employment rate for adults between 20-24 years old was 89% for those holding a bachelor’s or higher degree compared to 51% who did not complete high school. Median annual earnings for young adults ages 25- to 34-years old with a bachelor degree was $52,000, compared to those who completed high school, only earning an average of $25,000 (NCES, 2016a, p. xxi).

Reiterating these findings, data from the 2015 U.S. Department of Labor Statistics indicates the “median weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers age 25 and older with less than a high school diploma was $488 in 2014. The median for workers with a high school diploma only (no college) was $668 per week, and the median for those with at least a bachelor’s degree was $1,193 per week” (NCES, 2016a, p. xxi). The importance of a college education is not without its challenges. Our country is experiencing a time of rapidly changing demographics that requires us to pay attention to how higher education serves their constituents. A recent report from the U.S. Department Labor Statistics emphasizes the significance of a college degree as our nation’s population is aging quickly and is concurrently becoming more racially diverse (Toosi, 2016). New international migration growth will have a significant impact on the culture diversity of our labor force, in addition to significant Hispanic population growth (Toosi, 2016).

**Enrollment characteristics.** Today’s student has many options for pursuing a college degree. Between 2002 to 2012, there was a 13% increase in the number of institutions currently offering postsecondary degrees, reaching 4,726 higher education
institutions by 2012. This includes over 21 million people attending college (NCES, 2015c). The need to pursue training and credentials after high school is a rapidly growing societal norm. Enrollment in postsecondary education in the U.S. has surged from 1.5 million in 1940 to almost 2.7 million in 1950, to more than 17 million students by 2006 (Hunt & Tierney, 2006).

A comprehensive federally funded 374-page report, *The Condition of Education*, provides data as recent as fall 2014 on education in the U.S. Notable information includes: 61% of undergraduate enrollments (10.6 million students) occurred at 4-year institutions; additionally, 39% (6.7 million students) were enrolled at 2-year institutions (NCES, 2016b).

Between 2000 and 2010, enrollment increased by 44 percent at 4-year institutions and by 29 percent at 2-year institutions…. Between 2014 and 2025, enrollment at 2-year institutions is projected to increase by 21 percent to 8.2 million students, while enrollment at 4-year institutions is projected to increase by 10 percent to 11.6 million students…. (NCES, 2016b, p. 104)

The total undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased 31% from 13.2 million in 2000 to 17.3 million in 2014. By 2025, total undergraduate enrollment is projected to increase to 19.8 million students (NCES, 2016b, p. 100).

While overall enrollment trends are currently at a moderate incline, more students are choosing to attend college on a part-time basis versus full-time. In 2000, there were a
little over five million part-time enrollees. Recent 2015 figures indicate a jump to six and a half million part-time enrolled students (NCES, 2016b).

**Education funding.** One of the greatest challenges in attending postsecondary education in the U.S. today, is the rapidly rising costs associated with getting a degree (Lorin, 2014). Currently, almost two-thirds of students attending a degree-granting institution in the U.S. take out loans to fund their education, with the average post graduation debt beginning at $20,000 (Hiler & Hatalsky, 2016). Another major think-tank venue involved in a national review of student debt cites that 7 in 10 graduating seniors in 2015 (68%) departed from college with an average debt of $30,100, a 4% increase from 2014 (Institute for College Access and Success, 2016). The National Student Loan Data System for 2017 reports that American’s owe nearly “$1.3 trillion in student loan debt; affecting approximately 44 million students.” The 2016 graduate debt is now at over $37,000, a 6% increase from 2015. The 20 to 30-year-old borrower is faced with an average monthly payment of $351 (Friedman, 2017; Student Loan Hero, 2017).

Several large-scale studies have attempted to identify phenomenology related to student loan default. A 2014 research collaboration between the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) and The Institute for College Access and Success (ICAS) embarked on a study involving nine U.S. college systems (McKibben, La Rocque, & Cocheraine, 2014). Their study found a strong correlation between student noncompletion and student loan default. Researchers found
Program completers — represented by 3 in 10 borrowers entering repayment across our nine sample colleges on average — defaulted at a rate of just 9 percent. Those who did not complete defaulted at a rate of 27 percent. Default rates were particularly high — 33 percent — for those who left their programs in the middle of an academic term. (McKibben et al., 2014, pp. 2-3)

College retention and degree completion benefits the student, institution, government, and society.

College retention and degree completion. Concerns of student readiness for college, accessibility and affordability for all, and college degree completion are at the helm of today’s higher education conversation. Economic and policy interest groups point to the urgent necessity of education reform in the United States. Policy makers and advocates in higher education commonly tag the topic: “The Completion Agenda” (Humphreys, 2012). The past decade has been deluged with grant funded initiatives resulting in executive summaries, recommendations, and policy based referendums all pointing to higher education reform strategies that can address the economic competitiveness in our current global economy.

There is an alarming indication that students, especially from minority groups and disadvantaged groups, lack the preparation necessary to succeed in postsecondary education (Buckley, 2012). A 2015 report indicates that 31% of students enrolled in a higher education institution was required to complete at least one remedial course before enrolling in required foundation courses (ACE, 2015). Coupled with the significantly low enrollment and degree completion rates among these populations, an eminent
national socioeconomic crisis appears on the horizon. Brown McNair, Albertine, Asha Cooper, McDonald, & Major (2016) have recently written a book on college student readiness. This publication gem turns the table on the old-adage of the ill-prepared student, moving greater focus onto responsibilities of the college system. The authors’ commitment to each chapter examines what makes a ‘student-ready college’ (Brown McNair et al., 2016). Emphasis of this notion is grounded on a student strengths perspective. Recommendations emphasize that the virtues of institutions must focus on social capital and student assets (Brown McNair et al., 2016). By the development of greater student-centered education, student persistence and degree completion would be less of an issue.

One significant study published more than a decade ago that directly addresses college retention concerns is, *Measuring Up 2008: The National Report Card on Higher Education*, from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2008). This comprehensive report represents a major effort to ignite concern about our nation’s education attainment record and the readiness for a rapidly growing global society. The publication acknowledges that our nation’s demographic trends impact education attainment and potential prosperity. In addition, rapidly increasing technology developments and globalization trends are forcing students to prepare for increased skills in both new and existing jobs.

The concerns identified in this national report card study (NCPPHE, 2008), are highly relevant to the questions being addressed in this dissertation. There is a consistent
pattern of themes that address current concerns in U.S. higher education. This report represents pivotal research outcomes in six major areas of concern:

- Preparation for college: How well are high school students prepared to enroll in higher education and succeed in college-level courses?
- Participation: Do young people and working adults have access to opportunities for education and training beyond high school?
- Affordability: How difficult is it to pay for college when family income, the cost of attending college, and student financial aid are taken into account?
- Completion: Do students persist in and complete certificate and degree programs in college?
- Benefits: How do college-educated and trained residents contribute to the economic and civic well-being of each state?
- Learning: How do college-educated residents perform on a variety of measures of knowledge and skills? (NCPHE 2008, p. 4).

A comprehensive 2015 report on college enrollment trends and completion reiterates college enrollment concerns (Juszkiewicz, 2015). “Over the past 3 years, the decrease in enrollment of older community college students has been the highest and most consistent (p. 3). Almost 43% of students that begin at a 2-year public institution never complete their degree, with over 70% attending part-time (p. 5). Six-year outcomes for nontraditional adult learners who started at a 2-year public institution reveal
over 50% have dropped out; only 30.2% have completed their two-year degree; 12.6% are still enrolled; 4.3% completed at a different 4-year institution (p. 6).

Frequently referenced data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development has ranked the United States as only “sixth among developed nations in the percentage of 25-to 64-year old adults with an associate degree or higher” (Handel, 2013, p. 5). Encouraging students to enroll in college in the 21st Century is not a difficult task. The importance of education is generally accepted; to get ahead in life (or get a good job), one must obtain a high school diploma and then continue on to post-secondary training/education. The college degree has been revealed as the ticket to wealth, mounting prosperity, and success. Yet for many, it has become unattainable.

A major challenge in supporting higher education success is in understanding the complexities of why students drop out of college and never complete their degree. Student success is impacted by complex factors that are influenced by multiple contextual challenges. College retention and degree completion has been a major focus of education research. The relationship between institutional characteristics, the students they serve, and college graduation rates have flooded academic literature over the past few decades. Colleges and policy makers alike, continue to search for the ideal formula for the best-practices in education delivery that can influence college persistence and degree completion (Completion by Design, 2011, 2016; Engel & Tinto, 2008; Lane et al., 2012; Tinto, 2012).

Education policies and research initiatives. Many empirical studies supported through federal and private grant initiatives have stepped up efforts to identify obstacles,
intervention methods, and assessment tools that can impact student success. A three-year study, *Non-traditional No More: Policy Solutions for Adult Learners*, worked with national, state, and institutional leaders to explore the profile of students who do not complete their degree plan (i.e., drop out of college without returning) (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education [WICHE], n.d.). Strategies were identified to address potential student barriers related to financial viability, institutional policy and practice, unintended consequences of state policies, and insufficient understanding or knowledge of transfer/academic information (Lane et al., 2012; WICHE, n.d.).

With rising college tuition, plummeting degree completions, and a climbing rate of defaults on student loans, education policy makers are furiously grappling with understanding these problems and attempting to translate them into needs that can logistically be addressed. The following literature investigation identifies a variety of research initiatives and publications that portray an attempt to understand the complexity of the state of U.S. higher education student success. A review of a few major recent grant funded policy initiatives and federal education acts are summarized. These examples indicate the wide breadth of approaches used to address the problem of inequalities and failures in the U.S. education system. This information supports an understanding of recent interventions and recommended policy-based strategies that target concerns of student success in higher education. Three themes emerge as critical issues: general student population accessibility to education; concern over data collection methods related to actual student outcomes; and recommendations for best-practices in supporting positive student outcomes.

"With this bill, we reaffirm that fundamentally American ideal—that every child, regardless of race, income, background, the zip code where they live, deserves the chance to make of their lives what they will." — President Barack Obama (USDE, 2017, para. 1)

On December 10, 2015, President Obama signed a new policy initiative titled, *Every Student Succeeds Act* (USDE, n.d.). This federal law emphasizes proactive measures to prevent and address inequities in educational opportunity and the availability and access of learning supports for children and youth (grades K-12). These efforts intend to better prepare students for continuing their education beyond high school, improving college outcomes and adult career success. This national education law aligns itself to the significance of understanding and creating enhanced opportunities for student readiness and success in the higher education setting.

A section of this policy initiative addresses our Nation’s college access inequities (USDE, n.d.). Recommended efforts directed toward greater accessibility, attainability, and affordability are primary goals of ongoing education reform. This education reform initiative identifies three paramount challenges to college enrollment and degree attainment: 1) difficulty accessing a quality education experience due to financial, ability, and/or financial constraints, 2) risk factors that create barriers to degree completion; and 3) basic affordability of the cost of a college education (USDE, n.d.). During the investigation of this reform plan, I had found a comprehensive database resource aimed at college student consumers and their families: the U.S. Department of Education-*Colleges Score Card* (2015a). This is an example of a consumer-friendly resource that
provides hands on assistance in common areas associated with college enrollment decision making.


Several large-scale studies have focused on providing recommendations that emphasize the importance of getting a more accurate picture of today’s college student. One underlying motive for these activities addresses concern for student head-counts, enrollment behaviors, and degree attainment. The premise to this concern is that quantitative data measures are inaccurate and misaligned with what intended populations are being examined. One such example is demonstrated in a substantial report commissioned by the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA), to advise the Secretary of Education in assisting two-year degree granting institutions of higher education in meeting graduation rate disclosure requirements in the Act.

The U.S. Department of Education’s Committee on *Measures of Student Success* was authorized to make recommendations which focused on how student data is collected and evaluated in relation to graduation rates (USDE, 2012b). Major recommendations from this study enhanced the understanding of today’s college student population. Major recommendations included that the Department should add part-time, degree-seeking cohort data; broaden the coverage of student graduation data to reflect the diverse student populations at two-year institutions (USDE, 2012b). Historically, graduation rates applied only to full-time, first-time degree or certificate-seeking students who enrolled in the fall. Today’s student may begin attendance full-time and then drop to a part-time plan, or via versa, or stop out and then return; and many may need to complete remedial
coursework before even starting their full degree plan. Strategies included: 1) Broaden the coverage of student graduation data to reflect the diverse student populations at two-year institutions. 2) Improve the collection of student progression and completion data. 3) Improve technical guidance to institutions in meeting statutory disclosure requirements. 4) Encourage institutions to disclose comparable data on employment outcomes and provide incentives for sharing promising practices on measuring student learning. (USDE, 2012b, p. 1)


This 84-page report from the U.S. Department of Education focuses on recommended strategies on how to better measure institutional outcomes (USDE, 2015b). This study emphasized the uniqueness of the institution and the learner.

Efforts in the field are directed towards developing more comprehensive and summative measures of institutional quality. There is still value, however, in creating separate measures of various dimensions of college performance so that individuals and stakeholders can use actionable information to assess institutions according to their own priorities (USDE, 2015b, p. 5).

The report addresses the significance of measuring learning outcomes while attempting to define quality education.

My experiential bias is that a focus on quality education and institutional infrastructures that measures how we are doing are important to the picture. Although, I believe there is a greater overarching theme that plays into the setting. Quality education
should not only be defined by student outcomes that measure linear performance reflected by enrollment numbers, course grades, or degree attainment. Remaining statistically objective removes the uniqueness of each student, their struggles, strengths, and what they can contribute to their learning experience.

Extensive research reveals a broad spectrum of student learning and completion outcomes across higher education institutions. One guiding hypothesis found in some of the literature is that students may not be making the best choices on which college to attend and that institutions may not be delivering the best outcomes for certain students. Institutions of higher education, whether they are two-year degree granting (community college) or baccalaureate degree granting, are finally beginning to realize that all institutions are not a one-size-fits-all (Engel & Tinto, 2008; Gose, 2014; Miller & Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Juszkiewicz, 2015). It is a challenge for exploratory research to connect causal impact of an institution on actual student outcomes.

The literature also reveals that differences in institutional outcomes may be more related to the diverse student population of which they serve (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Hunt & Tierney, 2006; Juszkiewicz, 2015). As an example, if a community college system has an open-admission policy, allowing any high school graduate to enroll in college courses, this can have direct effect on the potential success of that student group. Institutional outcomes are based on the needs, abilities, and interests of their consumers (Engel & Tinto, 2008; Gose, 2014; Miller & Goldrick-Rab, 2015).

For the purposes of this dissertation, the reader must remember that the challenges to student education success and degree completion are very complex. Traditional
outcome measurements that are driven by course grades, completion rates, and
demographic statistics cannot accurately embrace the issues. Unfortunately, the current
U.S. higher education structure is driven by student numbers and tuition revenue. Until
our education system transforms into a different paradigm for quality education, I believe
we will continue to get caught up in measuring success through a fiscal lens.


This Bill and Melinda Gates initiative is focused on developing human-centered
strategies that tackle student success and community college degree completion. The
project began in 2011 with nine colleges and three states (Completion by Design, 2016).
A targeted goal for the Completion by Design project was to increase completion rates
for students through initiatives that address costs, access, and quality education. This
proactive approach involved system-wide strategic planning directed to enhance the
student’s learning experience. Student-oriented supports and interventions are geared to
tackle barriers and obstacles that may impede academic success (Completion by Design,
2016). Through this college completion project, five institutional barriers were identified
which included student obstacles such as:

1) Unstructured student pathways: Problems were identified around the lack of
advisement guides and supports that mentor the student in a clear path to degree
completion. Bautsch (2013) wrote a user-friendly policy brief that highlighted the
importance of developing cross college transfer pathways that can support student
mobility in achieving their educational goals. Reverse transfers are also becoming more
of the norm for nontraditional students. This collaboration between community colleges
and four-year universities enables students to complete courses at two or more institutions, transferring them to their degree granting institution (Fain, 2012). I believe that the college I am employed in as made great strides in developing course transfer articulations with community colleges and detailed transfer course guides. I believe this has been a critical asset to our distance site delivery programs that serve almost 95% transfer students.

2) Too many academic choices: Adding to advisement planning confusion, students have too many course options to integrate into their plan. Some courses are cross-listed and fit degree requirements from multiple categories. Obviously, the academic advisement experience can go awry when there is a lack of understanding or guidance on the total degree plan. During a student’s college career, it is not uncommon to have multiple academic advisors. Adding to the complexity, is the annual change of course offerings and scheduling.

Colleges are increasingly concerned about tuition revenue and the cost of course delivery. It has been my experience over the past decade that my institution, as well as most, are addressing revenue concerns by increasing student course enrollment numbers to sometimes unmanageable amounts. If the course does not make the enrollment number, it is cancelled. This creates another set of barriers to degree completion. It also promotes a roving registration situation. Consequently, students may need to be enrolled in more than one institution to complete their course requirements in a timely manner.

3) Inconsistent or misaligned support services: Many college support services today are driven by budget allocations at a time when the student population is appearing
more and more diverse. First-generation enrolled, transfer students, students of color, veterans, rural commuters, part-time students, students with physical or mental disabilities, immigrant -English as a Second Language learners, swirling students who stop out and reenroll, vocational rehabilitation sponsored, and Baby Boomers returning in preparation for a second career, are examples of the complexity in student services. Lack of funding resources create gaps in highly needed support services, resulting in burdens on students, faculty, and administration. The student is the one who usually loses and drops out of school.

4) Inconsistent or unclear communication of information to student: As an educator and administrator in higher education for over 22 years, I have experienced the college system as a continuously evolving complex organism that guides the student through their education experience at whatever juncture they are captured at. Students are confronted with massive amounts of information that is often changing, incongruent between college departments, or inaccurate. This of course, is not intentional. I have never met an educator or administrator whose desire is to frustrate their students. Before students even begin their first course, they are exposed to multiple paths of communication; internet-based information, web links, recruiters, program brochures, transfer guides, student support services, special population services, financial aid, the business office, the registrar, admissions office, second-line faculty recruiters, student-peer advisors, academic advisors, campus housing specialist, campus public health, career services, and off-campus housing services are examples of subsystems that all must work together and communicate what is necessary to assist the student to be
successful in their learning experience. As a transfer student from another education institution, the complexity is enormous.

5) Inadequate technology to effectively guide and monitor student progress:
There is no doubt that we are a rapidly developing, technology driven society. The U.S. education system success depends on the ability to secure the technology resources required to achieve optimal education delivery. This *Completion by Design* report emphasizes the importance of engaging with students at multiple points in their academic plan. Student-centered early intervention strategies are critical to supporting student success and creating tools to overcome education obstacles.

In this initiative (Completion by Design [CBD], 2016), comprehensive strategies have been developed and continue to be developed with multiple assessment points. “The initiative uses the term “completion pathway” to describe the components that undergird the student experience. Completion pathway is defined as an integrated set of institutional policies, practices, and programs intended to maximize students’ likelihood of completing a credential” (CBD, 2016, p. 4). Several education success interventions are systematically built into education delivery including programs such as, the ‘Preventing Loss, Creating Momentum Framework’, which methodologically serves and interacts with the student from preadmission to degree completion and work-pathway planning (CBD, 2016).

**Student success.** A review of the literature on institutional efforts that positively impact student success is broad and varied in scope and nature. While the concept of student success varies depending on the institution or constituent perspective, I found that
Most literature points to degree completion as the critical definer of success. The qualitative exploratory methods used for data collection in this dissertation research focused on enhancing an understanding of the nontraditional student who has transferred from a community college system in pursuit of a Bachelor's of Arts degree in Social Work. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, a literature search into the relationship between the community college and the four-year degree institution was explored.

The promotion of college enrollment, student retention, and degree completion are frequent themes found in federal education policy and recent literature, with increasing emphasis on the importance of educating underserved groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Engel & Tinto, 2008; Handel, 2013). While the literature identifies challenges in forming strong community college/four-year degree partnerships, much has been written about the significance of this national trend, particularly in the promotion of student success and degree completion (CBD, 2011, 2016; Fain, 2012; Hagelscamp, Schleifer, & DiStasi, 2013; Brown, McNair, Albertine, Cooper, McDonald, & Major, 2016). With student attrition at an all-time high, the measure of institutional effectiveness has been directed by factors related to student retention (ACE 2014a, 2014b; Cook & Pullaro, 2010). Much has been written and explored over the past 20 years on the importance of developing a culture of transfer success and its impact on college persistence.

The community college system. There are approximately 1,108 community colleges in the United States (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2016). Nearly half of all undergraduates attend community college in the U.S. Current
enrollment trends indicate an increase in students choosing to begin their postsecondary education experience in a two-year degree granting/community college setting, with the intention of transferring on to a four-year degree granting institution to obtain baccalaureate degree credentials. Enrollment data from fall 2014 indicates that over seven million students annually enroll in community colleges in the U.S. Recent 2017 data indicates 4.5 million (62%) are part-time enrolled. (AACC, 2017). The community college student population represents 45% of all postsecondary enrollment. The demographics of enrolled community college students include: 48% Caucasian, 52% Non-Caucasian (NCES, 2015); the average age is 28 years old with the highest percentage (49%) between the ages of 22-39 years old (AACC, 2016). First-generation to attend college is 36% (AACC, 2016).

Community colleges are often viewed as having a great open-door policy that provides our country with an opportunity to higher education and credential/degree attainment. Admission into a four-year degree institution tends to have more rigorous admission criteria (Alfonso, 2006; Eggelston & Santos Laanan, 2001). Unfortunately, data indicates that actual education attainment (degree completion) does not positively correlate with education opportunity (Alfonso, 2006). National data as recent as 2011 indicate an overall decline in community college enrollment. This decrease in enrollment has been the highest and most consistent over the past four years among older students (Juszkiewicz, 2015; NCES, n.d.). This recent data supports the identified dissertation research problem of nontraditional adult student degree completion.
Students chose to begin their college education at a community college for many reasons. One of the greatest reasons are for affordability (Baum, Little, & Pyea, 2011; CCCSE, 2017). Community college tuition is on the average 60-70% less than one year of a public university and 80-90% less than a private four-year degree granting institution (AACC, 2016). Community college settings may also provide a smaller, local geographical environment for learning, and often have minimal requirements for admission (Townsend, 2007). Interestingly, almost 85% of students admitted into a community college aspire to complete their bachelor’s degree. It is not without saying that many students begin enrollment at a community college without plans to obtain a four-year degree (Alfonso, Baily, & Scott, 2005). While the popularity of attending a community college is currently sluggish, mostly due to affordability and accessibility, the community college system is not immune from a rift of troubles of their own.

The crisis of student success or degree completion from a community college surmounts that of their four-year institution counterparts (Ma & Baum, 2016). For the student who begins their baccalaureate degree pathway at a community college, the chances of eventual four-year degree completion are significantly less than if the student began their program at a four-year degree granting institution (Alfonso, 2006).

The college transfer connection. Because this dissertation research is focused on exploring the experiences of baccalaureate degree seeking students that have transferred from a community college setting, it is critical to examine scientific inquiry related to the community college system as a catalyst to successful degree plan attainment. Community colleges have historically played a significant part in supporting students
toward baccalaureate degree completion. Kintzer (1996) has written a comprehensive essay on the community college to senior institution transfer relationship that dates to the very early 1900’s. The National Student Clearinghouse Center (http://www.studentclearinghouse.org/colleges/studenttracker/) has devoted decades of research in promoting the understanding of the role and nature of student transfer success. Dundar (2015), in a higher education seminar presentation, provided an articulate understanding of the contemporary importance of transfer and enrollment mobility in four-year degree completion. States have focused on developing initiatives that address the importance of transfer success in four-year degree attainment (Lumina Foundation, 2012; Harper-Marinick & Swarthout, 2012). Approximately one out of four students who start at a community college transfer to a four-year institution within six years (24.4%). His report identifies 36.6% of students transfer after their second year of community college enrollment, with another 24.4% transferring by year three (Dundar, 2015). An executive summary from the American Association of Community Colleges indicated that 28% of bachelor’s degree earners began at a community college and 47% enrolled in at least one community college course (Juszkiewicz, 2015).

Goldrick-Rab (2010) refers to the community college as a democratizing institution, providing the pathway for underrepresented, low income, ethnically diverse students to transfer on and obtain their four-year degree. “While the community college student body is frequently depicted as needing large amounts of remediation, it is worth noting that these colleges also serve as a starting point for academically advanced students aspiring to transfer” (Mullin, 2012, p. 4). Unfortunately, less than 22% of first-
time beginning community college students transfer to a four-year degree institution within five years (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011).

This transfer relationship is not void of its hurdles. Transfer studies reveal a significantly broad range of transfer credit formulas that leave students losing as much as 89% of their community college credits in the switch to a four-year degree institution (Keierleber, 2014). As Mullins (2012) elaborates,

There are enduring challenges with transfer. The nonlinear paths students take to traditional credential attainment—through activities such as swirling, free courses, massive open online courses, and prior learning credits—suggest that a traditional model of student progression may no longer be appropriate. (p. 4)

Dundar (2015) also identifies the importance of being able to transfer credits reversely, so that students may combine credits from both two-year and four-year granting institutions, allowing them to be awarded their intended degree by their granting institution.

As institutions of higher education scramble to combat unpredictable student enrollment and completion behaviors, much has been written and explored over the past 20 years on the importance of developing a culture of transfer success and its impact on college persistence (Nutting, 2012; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Townsend, 2007; Taylor & House, 2010; Tinto, 2012; Zajcova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005; Sandler, 2002; Phelps & Prevost, 2012). Creating this culture of transfer activity between students and institutions are surfacing to the forefront in the support of degree completion. This phenomenon significantly increases the responsibilities that community colleges and their
transfer partners have in constructing effective, streamlined advisement strategies (Allen et al., 2013; Lewis, 2013).

Major research oriented toward student advocacy efforts in supporting community college transfer students in four-year degree completion are reflected in the impressive philanthropy activities of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation (http://www.jkcf.org/about-us/). In a recent publication, *Breaking Down Walls – Increasing Access to Four-year Colleges for High Achieving Community College Students*, authors emphasize the need to recognize multiple barriers that students face in the transfer process to a four-year degree institution (Giancola & Davidson, 2015). Common barriers cited by students included lack of professional or accurate advising, financial aid limitations with ever changing federal and state rules, and complex credit transfer policies that are not uniform across multiple institutions. Major themes in other literature include the necessity of partnership strategies between community colleges and four-year universities that create accessible pathways, upfront vocation counseling, and enhanced student preparation to the university culture through well-defined pre-enrollment orientations (Allen et al., 2013; Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Lewis, 2013; McKibben et al. 2014).

**Adult Student Persistence in College Degree Completion**

Merriam-Webster (n.d.) describes *persistence* as an action of continued effort to do or achieve something despite difficulties, failure, or opposition. Synonyms include words such as “…continue, last, endure, abide. “

The connection between community college transfer activities and factors that support persistence in four-year degree completion is an important platform for
understanding the uniqueness of the nontraditional adult student. For the purposes of this research, the words “nontraditional” and “adult” learner or student will be used interchangeably in the review of literature. The identifying criteria for the student population discussed going forward, includes that: 1) A nontraditional student is at least 24 years of age. 2) The student has completed transferable credits at a two-year community college, and 3) The student intends on completing a four-year (baccalaureate) college degree from a university.

The following section of the literature review identifies scholarly information including quantitative research, institutional trends, and recommended best practices in serving and supporting the nontraditional learner toward four-year degree completion. Concepts and ideas are framed from a systems theory perspective (Rousseau & Hofkirchner, 2015). I will be referring to ‘macro’ as a representation of large systems/big picture; ‘mezzo’ will be referenced as specific groups/populations; and, ‘micro’ will refer to individual systems or persons.

A macro lens. The U.S. College Scorecard indicates over 30% of college students started college at age 25 or older (USDE, IES, NCES, 2016). In 2012, 22% of the adult population had some college credit but no degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Understanding why students drop out of college and never complete their college degree plan is a far reaching societal dilemma that impacts micro, mezzo, and macro systems in the U.S. Our country is faced with rapidly changing times in both the changing job market but also the growing population of students 50 years old and above. A larger portion of our population is remaining in the workforce longer. As an example of these
quickly changing times, Bumphus (2013) writes an article reflecting on a pilot project with the American Association of Community Colleges and other major education groups titled, “Maps to Credentials.” This three-year funded project addresses strategic education pathway planning for veterans. Credit for prior learning and specific career advisement and counseling are part of the initiative (Bumphus, 2013; Bautsch, 2013).

Students are taking longer than ever to complete their college degree. Today’s college system is scrambling to accommodate student success by expanding degree plans and requirements beyond the traditional two-year or four-year, full-time schema (Bell, 2012). Students identify multiple stressors that affect their academic success (Dill & Henley, 1998). A recent report on national trends in community college enrollment and completion data indicates the overall 6-year completion rate of community college students was 26%, and respectively 38.2% of students completed their degree either at the starting institution or another institution (Juszkiewicz, 2016). This study also categorized nontraditional adult learners as 24 years of age or older. “These students had a lower completion rate than students 20 years old or younger; but higher than students between the ages of 20 and 24, 36.6% compared to 40.7% and 25.1%, respectively” (Juszkiewicz, 2016, p. 7).

To address these trends, a major research study through the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, by Lane et al. (2012), funded by the Lumina Foundation, resulted in a 54-page report from the Non-Traditional No More project. The mission of the study was to address ways the higher education system could increase the number of college graduates and break down institutional barriers through the
development of policy and innovative practices. Six western states of higher education were examined between 2008 to 2011 (Lane et al., 2012). General recommendations of this study were focused on how to reach and reengage adults with significant college credit (Lane et al., 2012, pp. xi-xiv). In addition to the following recommendations, there was discussion on the overarching theme that institutions must be more sensitive, flexible, and open to the adult learner’s perspective. Most higher education systems were originally built with the traditional age student in mind. Contemporary postsecondary education trends must address the need for flexible education delivery at all levels. This dissertation research aimed at creating an understanding of how education delivery impacts the student experience.

The recommendations from this report (Lane, et al. 2012) were helpful in developing a macro system perspective when approaching my dissertation inquiry methodology. The following eight recommendations from this study will influence my inquiry strategies:

1) Data mining is a critical first step in reengaging ready adults. Efficient, streamlined institutional databases are critical to reaching out to students who have stopped out. Institutions are encouraged to be creative in this connection process with targeted outreach plans.

2) Strong buy-in by both state and institutional leaders is necessary to address barriers. Sustainable and effective efforts to retention can only occur when there is strong advocacy leadership.
3) Conversations between institutions and state policymakers are key. States that have formal methods of communication have a greater chance of sustaining their efforts and provide ongoing feedback.

4) Assessing how well institutions and states currently serve adult learners is important to demonstrate success. It is critical to gain data from the adult students’ perspective. Policymakers and institutions can understand strengths and gaps of unmet needs.

5) A single point of contact for returning adults can ease the entry process without significant new resources. Single entry points of contact can guide adult students through the application and readmission process.

6) Broad outreach campaigns are necessary to reach all potential students. Outreach campaigns can be creative and still address the costs of recruitment and marketing. Additional populations such as employers, military bases, and use of social media are ways to reach potentially ready adults.

7) Examining the data to better understand ready adults is an important first step to serving them efficiently outside of school, rather than their inability to handle the academic rigor. It was recommended that institutions explore how they can be more flexible in education delivery.

8) Flexibility to adjust policies and practices to meet the varied needs of ready adults is necessary to help them overcome barriers. Flexibility is critical to serving adult learners; offering flexible course scheduling, open business hours,
and opportunities to address grade challenges (i.e., incomplete grading) were major recommendations (Lane, et al. 2012).

My intention was to provide a voice for my research participants and disseminate my findings through multiple venues that have the potential to create policy changes and dismantle unnecessary barriers and challenges. By providing an opportunity for students to tell their story, from their perspective, resulted in findings that assisted in the identification of stress points in the students’ academic experience and future implications and recommendations for curriculum delivery.

A mezzo lens. While acknowledging that public policy and institutional level insights and recommendations are critical, it is highly important to review literature that offers the reader a greater worldview of the adult transfer student population. I believe this worldview must include an increased understanding of the multiple roles of adult learners, and an acknowledgement of the significance of their transfer experience (Ekal & Krebs, 2011; Dundar, 2015; Handel, 2013). This portion of my literature inquiry increases my understanding of critical aspects that I will need to keep in mind as I develop my data collection methods and procedures.

Multiple roles. Fairchild (2003) has written a chapter addressing the many roles of adult learners. These nontraditional students are faced with juggling multiple roles and responsibilities while attempting to persist in an academic setting that too often is not created to serve the needs of this growing student population. Nontraditional adult learners are often employed full-time, caregivers for children or aging parents, and have additional commitments to community entities outside their family unit (i.e., church,
volunteerism). Common traits of these students include: spending time on campus only for scheduled classes (as opposed to extracurricular activities), they navigate college systems independently without a common age cohort, reside off campus, are less apt to participate in campus activities, and finance most of their education without public grants or scholarships. This financial situation can create a stronger ‘education investment’ perception. Nontraditional students tend to take their academic requirements and responsibilities very seriously with serious commitment (Fairchild, 2003; Lane et al., 2012; Laanan, 2001).

**Barriers.** There are threats to academic persistence and degree completion that are caused by multiple role demands and institutional barriers (Fairchild, 2003). My literature review provided multiple lenses to this phenomenon. The following findings assist me in conceptualizing questions that I may use for my data collection:

Lane et al. (2012) articulated five capstone challenges that nontraditional students may face in their college completion success: 1) Students may lack sufficient information about what it takes to complete their degree; 2) Institutional policies and practices tend to be based on the traditional student, rather than the personal or learning needs of the nontraditional student; 3) Unintended state education policies may be based on lack of awareness of how it affects nontraditional students; 4) Lack of financial resources that create problems for returning students; and 5) Limited time to dedicate to college. Employment and family obligations are a major deterrent to college success.
In another major study, Mercer (1993) identified three categories of barriers to persistence: 1) Situational Barriers: family obligations, employment, and civic commitments can all compete with the students’ time, resource capacity, and energy. 2) Dispositional Barriers: role overload/contagion; students are often ill prepared to juggle multiple existing roles while now required to take on a new role as a college student. 3) Institutional Barriers: Access to offices, class hours, and student support services may not be conducive to the adult learner’s schedule. Lack of cohort age/developmental compatibility in the classroom, or learning experiences that do not acknowledge the life experiences and skills of adult learners can negatively impact student learning.

One of the greatest personal challenges to persistence for today’s college student is mental health. While there were multiple resources during my review that highlight this issue, I had difficulty finding any remarkable work that specifically addressed the nontraditional student population. In a longitudinal student study that spanned two years, including follow-up reporting, over half of the students examined, self-reported at least one mental health problem. These problems continued to persist two years later. Many students were reluctant to seek help for a self-reported mental health problem (Zivin, Eisenberg, Gollust, & Gobersten, 2008). Clearly, when students are able to seek help for mental health issues, professional intervention can positively impact personal-wellbeing and overall academic success and retention (Kitzrow, 2003).

Transitional adjustments. For the nontraditional learner who is embarking on baccalaureate degree completion through a community college transfer, new roles and
adjustment pressures emerge. Transitional pressures are common for students who move from the safety of their familiar community college campus setting, often into a larger, more anonymous environment; or, in the case of the extended site student population that this dissertation research will explore, students who may remain in their community college campus environment, but now enrolled in a four-year degree professional program.

Transfer students are faced with the move from having the luxury of learning in a familiar environment, but are now faced with new technology system requirements, curriculum delivery, new faculty and advisors, and program expectations. Community college systems and four-year colleges have been examining ways to identify barriers and obstacles in the transfer process (Zamani, 2001). Eggelston and Santos Laanan (2001) provide several insights into the student transition experience from a community college to a four-year degree senior institution. Their chapter addresses the importance of understanding and recognizing the transfer student adjustment process. “Transfer students report a need for more course articulation, counseling and advising, faculty sensitivity, academic support services, transfer-student-centered orientation programs, student activities, and knowledge of campus resources, and universities and colleges are not meeting their needs” (p. 95).

Student engagement. The propensity of transfer student persistence and success is frequently found in literature that addresses not only the significance of student engagement in education delivery and campus activities (Fauria & Fuller, 2015), but also the importance of creating a college environment that emphasizes and encourages a
relational connection between faculty and students, personalized attention, and individualized advisement (Allen et al., 2013; Laanan, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Schlossberg, 1989). Intentional supportive efforts that are directed toward student engagement throughout the degree journey results in a higher probability of course plan persistence and degree completion (Fauria & Fuller, 2015).

Understanding and supporting nontraditional transfer student persistence also requires educators to think outside the box. This means, that as a researcher of this topic, it is important to acknowledge the diverse group of adult learners that now make up our higher education consumer group. For the purposes of this study, the nontraditional student participants in this dissertation research are students who have transferred from a community college into a baccalaureate degree program. This student population is also very diverse. “Minority students, first-generation college students, students with lower levels of academic achievement in high school, and students from low-income families are all significantly overrepresented in community colleges” (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005, p. 5). I believe this is an important factor when developing my methodology strategies.

**A micro lens.** Synonyms of the word *persistence* include: “uninterrupted or lasting existence…ceaselessness, continuity, continuance, durability, duration, endurance, continuation, subsistence” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). These active verbs enlightened me with a new appreciation for my research topic and the population studied. In order to truly understand the concept of educational persistence, a researcher must possess the ability to recognize the importance of the college student’s energy, hope, and struggle. Grant and Sleeter’s (2009) section on multicultural and social justice education share rich
paradigms that connect the appreciation of difference, power, and privilege with a political participatory consciousness that is collective and problem-solving. “Social issues become more real and meaningful to students when they are encouraged to examine them from a personal viewpoint” (Grant & Sleeter, 2009, p. 263).

The literature information up to this point identifies an analysis of my research topic from a broad administrative perspective. College students have many struggles and barriers that impact their goals to receive an education and obtain their degree. Bailey and Alfonso (2005) stress the importance of creating a “culture of evidence” rather than a “culture of anecdote” when examining this topic (p. 6). Creating opportunities to not only listen and collect information on the individual student’s experience, but then make meaning of their realities appear to be a missing link in my literature search process.

Longitudinal studies on persistence and degree attainment among nontraditional students reveal student diversity in enrollment behaviors and life stressors. Reverse transfer, swirling, and stopping out with multiple returns is not uncommon (Anderson, 2015). There is a long-standing consensus that nontraditional students who are enrolled only part-time have a lower chance of completing their degrees in a reasonable (five-six year) time frame, and there is a greater chance of dropping out altogether (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Major personal characteristic differences between the nontraditional population and their traditional counterparts were best summed up by Dill and Henley (2010). Categories of difference included: academics, peer and social relations, family and network, autonomy and responsibility, and intimacy. Nontraditional students clearly experienced greater stressors related to home and family commitments. Interestingly,
stress does not appear to have as heavy of an influence on academic persistence as self-efficacy skills (Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005).

Braxton et al. (1997) described a multitiered construct related to college persistence. I believe each component does not operate in a vacuum, but influences student academic functioning and college persistence in an ecological paradigm:

1) Economic – Cost of college, ability to repay education loans, benefits of financial investment to long term vocational growth and self-sufficiency.

2) Societal – Immediate social factors, sense of belonging and integration into the social group; ability to relate and feel part of the group.

3) Psychological – The psychological maturity, developmental functioning that relates to persistence; and self-efficacy skills that strengthen the ability to overcome stressors.

4) Organizational – Organizational characteristics that support student learning, (i.e., advisement, program orientation, class size, access to resources).

5) Interactionalist – Direct interaction between the student and college representatives. Key values on perceptions of formal and informal levels of the college community.

A quantitative study involving 300 traditional and nontraditional student behaviors examined the correlation between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for learning. While intrinsic motivation for learning correlated positively with the outcome of learning success with both groups, intentional teaching strategies that validated the importance of an active partnership between the nontraditional student and instructor
were highlighted as a phenomenon that supported nontraditional student persistence (Bye et al., 2007). How students experienced social engagement by their learning cohort, instructors, and advisers should also be explored in the inquiry of challenges and persistence (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). Research emphasizes the importance of engagement with nontraditional students both within the constructs of the institution and creating opportunities outside of class (Woodson Day et al., 2011). These types of constructs will guide me in developing questions in my data collection methodology, particularly when examining persistence.

Summary of the Literature Review

This literature review discusses two major topics that inform this research study: Contemporary Contexts and Challenges in U.S. Higher Education and Nontraditional Adult Student Persistence in College Degree Completion. Six bodies of literature were highlighted pertaining to the research questions: the status of higher education in the U.S. today; issues of college retention and degree completion; education policies and research initiatives that address the college retention and degree completion crisis; institutional system efforts that have been found to positively impact student success; and nontraditional adult learner variables associated with degree persistence.

Today’s U.S. higher education system is fraught with many tensions that threaten the future viability and purpose of a college degree. The rapidly rising financial cost of a college education is stealing away the civil right and opportunity of a higher education experience for many. In addition to this crisis of accessibility, students who begin a college education are dropping out and/or falling through the cracks at alarming rates.
The face of the 20th Century college student is also changing. Adults entering the market place with a need for new skills and more education are also more diverse. National demographic trends reveal an increase in current and forthcoming generations of higher education consumers who are minority students, first-generation college students, students with lower levels of academic achievement in high school, and students from low-income families (Miller & Goldrick-Rab, 2015; NCES, 2016; USDE, 2015). More students are starting college at a later age. Many are enrolling part-time due to multiple roles and stressors. Students have less resources to afford a college education, with less opportunity to secure viable employment without a college degree or formal training.

Institutions of higher education are spending significant amounts of time and money to tackle the issues of college affordability, academic success, college enrollment retention, and degree completion. Several recent policies and initiatives are making a positive impact in the above areas, although there is still a large gap of research in understanding the nontraditional student (ACE 2014a, 2014b; Hunt & Tierney, 2006; McKibben et al., 2014).

Research is beginning to tackle what student persistence looks like and common barriers that impair student performance and retention. There are large gaps in the research about what impacts persistence among nontraditional students and what are the dependent variables that truly make a difference in degree attainment.

This literature inquiry revealed a consensus that: 1) there is a significant need for additional research on my research topic; 2) my research topic and questions are very complex; 3) greater understanding of the nontraditional student is required; and 4)
remedial strategies must address student persistence and degree completion in a holistic, systematic manner.

**Preview of Chapter Three**

The following chapter represents the research methodology used for this study. The reader will be informed of the rationale and theoretical underpinnings for the research framework, design, data collection procedures, and analysis. Appendices are provided which assist in understanding inquiry design.
CHAPTER THREE
Methodology

Overview

This study addresses the problem of college student retention and degree completion. A qualitative constructionist inquiry into this issue is devoted to nontraditional students that transfer from a community college into a four-year (baccalaureate) degree granting program. Results from the literature review consistently equate the phenomenon of ‘student success’ with degree completion (Adelman, 2013; ACE, 2014a, 2014b; Baum et al., 2013; Handel, 2013). Without degree completion, the students, the higher education institutions, and the socioeconomic structure of our society suffers.

In a response to this problem, I developed two research questions that guide my inquiry: (1) How do nontraditional age students who transfer from a community college into an undergraduate degree social work program describe the challenges they experienced during their journey to baccalaureate degree completion? and (2) How do these students describe their personal efforts and/or the institutional factors that supported their ability to persist through their challenge toward degree completion? The purpose of this study is to enhance knowledge and understanding of the challenges that these students experience during their efforts to complete their baccalaureate degree.
Secondly, this study informs the reader of the types of behaviors, values, and/or motivations that impact persistence to degree completion. The two research questions allowed me to explore the phenomenology of human struggle and educational perseverance.

As I developed my data collection methods, I was influenced by major findings from my literature review: 1) Nontraditional transfer students experience significant personal challenges and institutional barriers while completing their baccalaureate degree education (Mercer, 1993; Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005; Woodson Day et al., 2011; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). 2) Nontraditional transfer students that actively identify ways to combat challenges and barriers, can persist and complete their baccalaureate degree (Giancola & Davidson, 2015; Dowd, Bensimon, Gabbard, Singleton, Macias, et. al., 2006). 3) Nontraditional transfer students can persist through their education program when intentional institutional supports are implemented (Eggelston & Santos Laanan, 2001). 4) Personal motivational factors and goals positively influence nontraditional transfer students’ persistence through their baccalaureate degree program. This overview laid the groundwork for my research framework and chosen data collection methods. Influenced by this previous research, I chose methods that would embrace ways of inquiry that describe participants’ lived experiences (van Manen, 1990, 2014; Lane et al., 2012).

**Research Paradigm**

This chapter describes the framework that drives my research approach and the methods used in the inquiry process. The preliminary supporting theories and inquiry paradigms for this project are briefly discussed. Next, this chapter describes my
theoretical assumptions that create the underpinnings of my qualitative-driven design, and the methods and inquiry steps taken throughout the research process (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Heppner & Heppner, 2004; Mcmillan & Schumacher, 2010; Rubin & Babbie, 2011). Lastly, this chapter addresses core concepts of reliability and validity, research assumptions, and inquiry limitations.

Qualitative paradigm. Due to the nature of the described problem and the population studied, I chose to construct my research through a qualitative paradigm that was guided by two research questions and is influenced by my literature review. “Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). This qualitative approach situates me as the researcher in the participants’ world. “It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world” (Heppner & Heppner, 2004, p. 138). The data collection process involved creating an understanding of new contexts and meanings. It enhanced my scaffolding efforts in data collection and analysis. This paradigm aided me in understanding the themes of the lived daily world from the subjects’ own perspectives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This approach aligned itself well with my inquiry topic and the exploratory nature of my research questions. A qualitative paradigm is complimentary to this research in the following ways: 1) inquiry occurs in natural settings through face-to-face conversations; 2) the researcher is the key instrument for data collection, not relying on outside instruments; 3) multiple sources of data are used in the inquiry process; 4) inductive and deductive data analysis happens as themes and
databases are built upon each other; 5) the researcher remains focused on the ‘meaning’ of the participants; 6) the research design emerges as data is collected; 7) reflexivity happens with the researcher when considering interpretations and meaning-making of the data; and 8) the researcher takes the stance of a holistic practitioner, exploring a complex topic that involves many factors and experiences (Cresswell, 2014, pp. 185-186).

Constructivist paradigm. My research process was guided by a constructivist paradigm. “Constructivist inquiry highlights perceptions. These methods operationalize nonjudgmental interactions because they call for recognition of all possibilities” (Rodwell, 1998, p. 4). The inquiry methods involve a highly interaction between knowing and understanding. This paradigm encourages open-ended questions through a process of interactions between the researcher and subject (Creswell, 2014).

Phenomenology. This research represents a study on the lived experiences (or phenomenon) of nontraditional transfer degree students as well as administration and faculty of the same academic department. I wanted to understand the participant’s experience (McMillan & Schumacher, 2011). I chose a semi structured interview format that allowed for free-flowing conversation. I believe this strategy was important for creating safety in storytelling. I had anticipated that my findings would be as unique and varied as my research participants.

Two descriptive questions were developed to explore the phenomenology of student college retention and degree completion. I intentionally established my research questions to be open-ended enough that it would allow for individual nuances. I asked participants in their own words to ‘describe’ their experiences. This inquiry is focused on
two rather subjective constructs: challenges to success (or college retention) and persistence behaviors (resulting in degree completion). There is an absence of research studies that articulate the real-life experiences of nontraditional transfer students as they persist through a baccalaureate degree program. In addition, there is lack of information that creates an understanding of the personal characteristics, motivations, and strategies that are used by these students to accomplish their academic goals.

**Process theory and critical pedagogy.** The methods used in addressing the research problem and questions were driven by the value of process theory. Process theory commands a qualitative approach to research inquiry that sees the world in the contexts of people, situations, events, and connecting processes (Maxwell, 2013). Because my intention is to capture the perspective/voice of my sample populations’ lived experiences, my data collection approach was semi structured, flexible, and remained guided by my research questions (Cole & Knowles, 2001). I believed that the dynamic nature of my research could be best carried out through this qualitative approach.

This research is driven by my belief in the importance of critical pedagogy, where teachers are researchers of their students in order to increase learning effectiveness and student success (Kincheloe, 2008). “Critical pedagogy is interested in the margins of society, the experiences and needs that individuals face with oppression and marginalization” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 23). I believe nontraditional transfer students, many who are also low income, first-generation, students of color, experience many challenging personal and environmental anchors that impact their ability to persist in degree completion.
Data Collection

Triangulation theory. The research design involved collection methods driven by a triangulation strategy, also known as triangulation theory (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). A triangulation strategy allows the researcher to collect data using multiple methods and/or sources. There is consensus throughout literature that this triangulation process enhances reliability, validity, and confidence to the research process. It also assists in gaining information about different aspects of the research phenomenon (Cresswell, 2014; Dudley, 2011; Maxwell, 2013; Rubin & Babbie, 2011).

After reviewing literature sources from educators, policy makers, financial organizations, and scholars that provided multiple perspectives on my research questions, I decided to shape my data collection using a triangulation approach. Due to time and geographic practicalities, I pursued informants that represented three different contexts of meaning-making to my questions: administration, faculty, and students. I initially piloted my data collection with an individual interview of the department chair, who represented an administrative lens. I then moved into facilitating two faculty focus groups, which resulted in lively dialogues from a teacher perspective. The last phase of my data collection involved in-depth individual interviews with four nontraditional transfer students who were getting ready to graduate with their baccalaureate degree. This triangulation strategy provided substantial data, representing multiple aspects of the phenomenon that I wished to understand (Yeasmin & Rahman, 2012). Using multiple measures of data collection also assisted me in cross-validation and analysis (Engel & Schutt, 2013; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The information collected through my
triangulation approach resulted in a meaningful perspective that enhanced the understanding of my research questions. This phenomenological perspective results in qualitative writing that combines both reflection and research (van Manen, 2016).

**Figure 1.** Qualitative Paradigm in Data Collection

**Participant selection.** Participants for this study were all employed faculty or students of one nationally accredited undergraduate degree social work program administered through a private college in the Midwest. The college delivers social work programming to main campus (traditional) students, and operates four distant sites in the Midwest and two distant sites in the Southwest, all serving nontraditional transfer students. Curriculum is delivered in a hybrid format on the six distant sites. On ground classes are held on community college campuses that are supported by community college system articulation agreements and facility use lease agreements.
Through a nonprobability, purposeful sampling technique, I identified informants that brought the convenience and personal depth required for my data collection process without compromising the richness and validity of the data (Creswell, 2014; Dudley, 2011; Engel & Schutt, 2013). I identified four population samples as key informants who were directly associated with the research phenomenon:

1) A college administrator of a baccalaureate degree social work program. This provided me with an administrative perspective in understanding program administration challenges, academic performance concerns, general student gatekeeping, and student persistence trends;

2) A group of five full-time social work undergraduate faculty employed by the college, representing five Midwestern delivery sites. Four of the five were distant sites that served only nontraditional transfer students. Collection and analysis of this interview data assisted in the further construction of student interview questions;

3) A group of four social work faculty that delivered education programs to students in the Southwest. Two were community college faculty and two were undergraduate faculty from the Midwest mother institution. Collection and analysis of this interview data assisted in the further construction of student interview questions, particularly in listening more carefully to cross-cultural influences during my student interviews; and

4) Four senior students from the Southwest social work distant site campus that would be graduating with their baccalaureate degree in the following month.
These students met eligibility sample criteria. I selected these participant populations and inquiry methods to capture a holistic informative picture of the nontraditional student experience.

**Interview development.** The data collection technique for this study involved semi-structured interviews with each participant group. Interview questions were initially derived from literature review findings. Variables connected with student challenges, barriers, persistence behaviors, and degree completion were highlighted in my question development. By using a triangulation approach within a constructivist paradigm, I was able to expand on themes and questions as I completed each subgroup of interviews.

A preliminary question framework was crafted for all sets of interviews (see Appendices D, E & F). Most questions were generalizable across all participant groups when addressing the big ideas of challenge and persistence. Additional questions were drafted to suit each participant group. As an example, expanding demographic data was more useful in understanding the students than the faculty groups; with faculty, I was more interested in listening for specific strategic academic efforts that faculty used in promoting student success (see Appendices I & J). These continued to develop through each step of the data collection process. This inquiry strategy is congruent with the qualitative nature of constructivism. Rodwell (1998) describes the uniqueness of this theoretical approach in the data collection process. Foreshadowed questions began the interview process based on my previous experiences in academia and findings during my literature review process. Adhering to prudent validity considerations, I paid special attention to keep the interview process fluid. I encouraged the participants to tell me...
stories in their own way, attempting to refrain from a structured ‘question/answer’ format. Concepts connected to the guiding research questions and their meanings reflected social construction during the interview process (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Seidman, 2013).

Influenced by my literature review, and aware of potential limitations and validity tensions, I began the interview process listening for challenges and stressors (Robotham & Julian, 2006) in three broad categories: 1) Personal Learning Limitations (i.e., as unpreparedness in knowledge or skill; confusion or lack of ability in accessing resources related to education/learning acquisition, diagnosable learning disabilities, difficulty in time management/study skills, etc.). 2) Life Challenges (i.e., unpredictable events that impact functioning: as mental or medical health crisis, loss of employment, change in family composition, caregiving, loss, etc.). 3) Environmental Barriers (i.e., lack of tangible services or supports: financial demands, employment, change in support system; childcare, transportation, accessibility to learning tools).

There are a few relevant studies that influenced my questioning and listening when I explored persistence. Hong, Haefner and Slekar (2011) produced a study that
addressed the concept of college student self-determination and self-directed learning.

Fourteen behavioral variables were identified by the participants:

- The capability of deciding and acting on one’s future plans
- Choices made based on free will without interference
- Proactively solve problems
- Taking responsibility for oneself
- The ability to direct one’s own life
- The ability to know one’s strengths and weaknesses
- Ability to make decisions, be disciplined, and solve problems
- Self-confidence to act with responsibility
- Accurate self-assessment of strengths
- Engaging in self-reflection, goals setting, and problem-solving
- The ability to set your own goals and then accomplish them
- Someone who has vision, short and long-term goals, and a plan and the motivation to achieve these
- Figuring out yourself, who and what you are, and make decisions on your own
- The belief that achievements are under their control and they are willing to exert efforts to attain it (Hong, Haefner and Slekar (2011, p. 180)).

These variables fit well with coding strategies when I examine my second question that addresses the phenomenon of persistence. Additionally, Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2015) has completed annual studies that address college retention and
completion. A recent report identifies influential variables that are also helpful in crafting questions regarding persistence.

**Timeline.**

This timeline represents the steps taken in the data collection process.

**Phase one.** The data collection process began with institutional support and approval from the following representatives: my Hamline University dissertation adviser; Hamline University, three-member dissertation committee; Hamline University’s Human Subjects Review Committee; and lastly, 4) my college’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Certification of approval from both institutions is on file. My college’s IRB required that I first complete an online tutorial certification on *Protecting Human Research Participants* (https://phrp.nihtraining.com). A certificate of completion is on file.

**Phase two.** Once all approvals were met, data collection commenced in the following order: The first interview took place with the social work department chair. The face to face interview was recorded and transcribed. This first interview served as a pilot to assist me in focus group interview development. Secondly, the faculty focus group interview #1 (Southwest) was completed the following week, through virtual face to face conferencing (Zoom), followed by the faculty focus group #2 (Midwest) using the same virtual platform. Both focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed prior to the forthcoming student interviews. The administrator and faculty interview sets were completed in approximately 50 to 80 minutes each.
Lastly, I had sent out an anonymous request via email to seven senior social work students completing their B.A. in social work on the Southwest campus site that met as many eligible criteria for this study as possible: nontraditional age, transferred from a community college, first-generation, identified as a student of color, and graduating within three months. For this study, a first-generation student is a student who is the first person in their immediate family to attend college (Brown McNair et al., 2016). A student of color is any student who does not identify as Caucasian. I chose to solicit participants from the Southwest site due to convenience of time, location, and availability. While there were approximately 14 seniors in this student cohort that at least met the two criteria of nontraditional, community college transfers, I decided to initially narrow the criteria to students that identified as many typical risk factors as possible. To maintain anonymity and avoid researcher bias, the students were instructed to contact the social work program secretary with their interest. I had decided that I would accept the first four students that responded to my request. I was open to the fact that based on what transpired during the interview process, the need for a second interview session may be indicated with any of the participants. Individual interviews with students were approximately 60 minutes each.

Following standard ethical research protocol, each participant was provided prior to the interview event, an invitation to participate, a confirmation of the desire to participate, appropriate human subjects review information materials, consent forms, (see Appendices A, B & C), and a general preparatory list of interview questions (see Appendices D, E & F). My intention was that this would allow participants to have time
to think about the research topic and consider guiding questions prior to the interview. My anticipation was that this preparation would provide more substantive answers. As I have commented in Chapter 4, most faculty had not reviewed the materials. All of the students remarked that they had reviewed the questions carefully prior to the interview.

**Phase three.** All of the interviews were auditorily recorded and fully transcribed. The virtual interviews were recorded through the Zoom system and *SpeakWrite*, a cell phone dictation recording application that allows for streamline dictation. The individual on ground interviews were recorded through *SpeakWrite*. In conjunction with a formal recording, I occasionally transcribed a thought or idea in a scratch-pad format to assist me with any relevant pieces of information that I wanted to revisit. My scratch-pad notes were destroyed, as there was little meaning to them for me in actually writing up my findings.

**Phase four.** Each interview was transcribed verbatim. I then moved into structuring data into multiple layered themes that provided clues, insights, and revelations addressing my research questions.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis in this study involved an inductive process of organizing data; categories, themes, patterns, and relationships emerged. A naturally occurring process of grounded-theory building was shaped as data was collected, interpreted, and then built upon for the next interview steps (Engel & Schutt, 2013). Interview transcript recordings were the primary data resource of my findings analysis. Utilizing triangulation methods of data collection in a qualitative constructivist paradigm can get
complex. I knew that I needed to keep open to adjusting my methods, depending on what happened in the collection process. Maxwell (2013) emphasizes the importance of linking methods and questions. Maxwell’s chapter on methodology describes how linking methods and questions can enhance or stifle analysis. He clarifies, “If your methods won’t provide you with the data you need to answer your questions, you need to either change your questions or your methods” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 116). Mcmillan and Schumacher (2010) highlight the uniqueness of qualitative approaches to analysis, particularly in my research intentions. Research analysis occurs both during and after the interviews are completed. “Data collection and analysis are interwoven, influencing one another” (Mcmillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 367). Fortunately, I found my methodology strategies very effective in obtaining a lens into my participant’s worldviews.

My data analysis was guided by a focus on participants’ meaning. I utilized a multitiered system of thematic coding in the analysis process. While categorical coding is commonly used in qualitative data analysis, this project extended beyond simple coding (Saldana, 2013). Due to the nature of my inquiry strategies, two initial levels of coding were used in this study: broad descriptive thematic coding (i.e., contexts, experiences, time frames), and more narrowly focused descriptors (i.e., reported specific behavior, emotion, or experience) (Prus, 1996). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) identifies my strategy which moves from meaning coding, to meaning condensation, and lastly, meaning interpretation. My first steps in coding identified participant responses that specifically identified a challenge, barrier, or persistence behavior. Then, through sentence analysis, I identified personal or environmental factors that influenced the three
constructs. After I had flushed through two layers of explicit data and meaning making, I was moved to explore a greater implicit level that could capture the essence of what was being said and what I observed in each story. Lastly, I re-read content that could identify implications for the phenomenon. As an example, a variable of persistence was the concept of support. This theme then went deeper into identifying the type of support (i.e. family, friend, faculty). I also considered the frequency of how and when this was mentioned. Lastly, I explored implicit meanings related to what impact this relational support had on persistence behavior (i.e. “She made me feel like I could do anything I set my mind to do.”).

I constructed informal matrices that were constructed in guiding questions and utilized in multiple ways throughout the data analysis process. The first matrix I developed was driven by data and ideas from my literature review and interview with the department chair. I had anticipated that this first matrix (thematic grid) could guide me in the faculty focus group discussions. While it was helpful, I found that the dialogue between multiple faculty versus an individual interview, was more helpful in forming my strategies for the upcoming student interviews. Thus, my matrices were flexible and continuously changing with each subgroup of participants (Maxwell, 2013).

**Reliability and validity.** Due to the individual nature of each participant’s experiences, personal strengths, and interpretation of events, reliability and validity must be soft-stepped. I had to be aware of any generalizations that I may tend to make as I interviewed each participant. As the researcher, I believe it is my responsibility to be aware of my own personal biases and the influence I may have on the subjects.
participating in the interviews (Creswell, 2014; Dudley, 2011; Engel & Schutt, 2013; Rubin & Babbie, 2011). I was cognizant of the fact that I was not a stranger to any of the research project participants. In this particular research study, I believe my relational position was definitely an asset to the data collection process. Because of the relational context, participants felt authentic and safe in our interview discussions. If I were a total stranger, I do not believe the participants would have freely shared as much as they did. Each participant in the faculty groups also knew each other. This definitely allowed for more authentic conversation than if it were a group of strangers.

As a social work clinician, I have significant experience in interpersonal interviewing. While I believe this was an asset to question development, verbal and nonverbal communication, and meaning-making, I had to constantly be aware of my own interpretations and assumptions. I followed a uniform preparatory interview protocol with each interviewee, discussing their consent to participate and reminding them of the context of my research study. I believe it was important for me to review the research consent and data collection process with the participants prior to beginning the interviews. Especially for the students, it helped to alleviate concerns of any potential power-relationship barriers.

I believe the two guiding research questions and the list of general questions I sent ahead of time were helpful, particularly for the students. Each of them shared that they felt nervous at first, but were glad that they had the question outline to review before the interview session. I was very intentional in practicing reflective listening, so that I could clarify with each interviewee if something might be confusing or up for inaccurate
interpretation (Mertens Oishi, 2003). Because of my relationship history with the participants, I was also aware that I needed to create opportunity for discovery rather than solicitation (Dudley, 2011). Due to time and geographical limitations, longitudinal data collection was not possible. I did welcome all participants to contact me through phone or email if, after the interview, they wanted to add more information.

General research assumptions. 1) All students participating in this study have transferred from a community college into the designated undergraduate social work program. 2) Student success and degree completion are personal goals of each student enrolled in the baccalaureate degree program. 3) Students who transfer from a community college into a four-year degree granting institution experience transfer and adjustment challenges. 4) Every college student is unique in their ability to persist in stressful situations, including an academic environment. Thus, generalizability is limited.

Summary of Research Framework and Methodology

This research addresses the problem of nontraditional transfer student academic success and degree completion through the utilization of a qualitative constructivist paradigm. This paradigm aids in understanding the themes of the lived daily world from the subjects’ own perspectives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The research design involves interview collection methods based on triangulation theory. This strategy allows the researcher to collect data using multiple methods and sources that build upon each other (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). Through a nonprobability, purposeful sampling technique, I identify informants that bring both the convenience and personal depth required in the data collection process, without compromising the richness and validity of
the data (Creswell, 2014; Dudley, 2011; Engel & Schutt, 2013). Ethical, reliability, and validity considerations were briefly addressed.

**Preview of Chapter Four- Data Collection and Analysis**

Chapter Four describes the rationale and plan for data collection and analysis. This chapter will represent the “findings/results” of the research. Reliability and trustworthiness of the collection process and the analysis validity will be addressed (Golafshani, 2003; Krueger & Casey, 2015). Participant demographics will be described; a synthesis of participant interviews will be identified using coding and matrix strategies that identify themes and meanings. Due to the qualitative nature of the data collection experience for both the participants and the researcher, the researcher will be sensitive to common validity threats such as researcher bias and reactivity (Maxwell, 2013). Every effort will be made to address the importance of trustworthiness, authenticity, and quality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Heppner & Heppner, 2004; Maxwell, 2013).
CHAPTER FOUR
Data Collection and Analysis

Overview

Guided by a deep qualitative inquiry through in-person interviewing, the data collected for this study reflects a rich story of struggle, triumph, and meaning-making for both teachers and learners. I believe that my professional role as an educator of nontraditional transfer students and my skills as a social work clinician, were reflected as an asset in this data collection process. The goal of my study was to increase knowledge and understanding of how nontraditional transfer students described their experiences in the journey to degree completion. The intention of this research was to provide a scholarly platform in the understanding of phenomenology related to academic success. I believe that my mission and data collection strategy created an authentic connection between the interviewees and researcher. The two research questions that I explored were: 1) How do nontraditional age students who transfer from a community college into an undergraduate degree social work program describe the challenges they experienced during their journey to baccalaureate degree completion? and 2) How do these students describe their personal efforts and/or the institutional factors that supported their ability
to persist through their challenge toward degree completion? This chapter represents my experiences and findings of this research study. The findings are powerful and insightful.

Keeping in mind the uniqueness of the experience and worldview of each research participant, I used a constructivist strategy that incrementally built upon my data collection approach. Although I had anticipated that each subset of interviews would provide me with informative direction for the following set, it was not always so pragmatic. There were times in the interview process that the participant stories were so unique, that I felt like I was left holding something that could never be transferred or duplicated.

I began my study with an interview with the department chair of the social work program. This person represented an administrative frame of view, intentionally serving as a pilot interview for forthcoming participants.

The second subset of interviews involved two faculty focus groups, providing multiple perspectives and contexts. Six faculty represented the undergraduate social work program distant sites; two faculty represented community college social work preparation programs.

The third sequence of interviews involved in depth face to face interviews with four nontraditional undergraduate social work students who had transferred into their baccalaureate degree program at the junior level and were graduating within the next month. The students met several high-risk factors reflective of my literature review (i.e., first generation; low income; Latino, African American, Indigenous; English as a Second Language; 30 to 58 years old).
Introduction of Findings

This summary of my research findings is divided into six parts. Subtitles are used to guide the reader through critical points: Part I discusses the overall interview experience between the researcher and all participants. Sharing this piece first provides an experiential context of how information was exchanged and interpreted. I describe the ‘tone and energy’ of the experience. The existential nature of this data collection process is the groundwork for my interpretation and analysis. This provides the reader a context of the overall data collection experience and the mutual meaning-making that was experienced by participants.

Part II explicitly describes through a narrative format, findings among the department chair interview and the two faculty focus group interviews. Noteworthy findings and analysis from each subset of interviews are expressed. Findings are formatted to address the participant demographics, their perceptions of nontraditional students, perceived challenges, persistence phenomenon, and the strategies they used to promote student success. This sets a framework in guiding assumptions from the educator perspective.

Part III explicitly describes through a narrative format, findings from each of the four student interviews. Noteworthy findings and analysis from the individual interviews are expressed. The narrative format begins with describing the demographics of the participant, giving the reader a sense of who the student is. The second section is titled Early Years. This sets up the story of familial and cultural contexts. The third section is titled Education Formation. This piece brings the reader into an appreciation of a context
for the student’s education development. The last section ties back to the big ideas within the research questions, and is titled *Challenge and Persistence*. I found it difficult to break these two concepts down into separate categories with the student interviews, as their stories reflected an interwoven connection between both constructs. This sets a framework in guiding assumptions from the nontraditional transfer student perspective.

Part IV moves the data into an analysis of explicitly shared *Common and Contrasting Themes* that emerged between the department chair/faculty groups. Part V. continues with *Common and Contrasting Themes* with the four students.

My findings compelled me to add a final section that became the catalyst of my research outcomes. Part VI represents a deeper analysis of my findings; a third layer of meaning-making. This is titled *Implicit Analysis*, which addresses the meaning-making experience between all interviewees. This final section webs everything together, providing a path to the summary and conclusion of this important research.

**Part I – The Experience**

College success for nontraditional students is a passionate topic for both students and educators. The qualitative data collection approach I used in this study provided an excellent catalyst for not only informing my research questions, but also resulted in creating an environment for healing and meaning-making for the participants. While I used uniform consent and interview protocols with all participants, I found that each subset of participants was clearly a unique informant. The varied cognitive and emotionally laden responses I received during the interview process provides rich data that can be used in multiple ways. After each interview experience, it was a
transformative experience for the participants and me. Several participants followed up with me after their interviews, expressing their gratitude in having the opportunity to share their ideas and experiences. It was as if they had never been heard or understood before this opportunity. Perhaps for many, this was the first time they were given the opportunity to process their story.

This inquiry experience also impacted me personally as a researcher. It not only provided new information and insights that I will be able to use as a professor and administrator going forward, but also it gave me great and long-lasting affirmations about myself; why I do what I do, and why I believe so much in what I do. I have no regrets about the strategies I used to collect my data.

As I reflect on this data, I can best explain the participants’ experiences in creating and sustaining college success by using the metaphor of a windmill spinning in the wind. It is always moving in the same circular direction, yet its speed is dependent on the wind; how slow or fast it moves. Each blade is a participant in the learning process. One always follows the other. Energy to move forward is powered by both the wind and how the blades move together. With this metaphor, I share my findings.

Part II – Findings from the Department Chair and Faculty

A. Interview 1 - Department Chair.

“Good education is a good teacher with a good student. Everything else is superfluous.” Department Chair

This interview took place with the social work department chair who also serves as the program director of the department’s graduate program located in the Midwest. Credentials: BSW, MSW, PhD in Social Work. This interviewee has a professional
history in providing social work education to nontraditional undergraduate and graduate social work students for over 20 years and has been employed with the present institution for 14 years, supervising over 20 social work faculty. This experience was used as a pilot to the forthcoming faculty and student interviews, while providing a higher education administrative context. The department chair described the nontraditional student as older than the average college entrance age, unfamiliar with the education systems because they are first-generation college students. Nontraditional students may take multiple pathways to achieve their degrees, often involving a history of multiple institution enrollments. Most are transferring from the community college system because of either or both cost factors and program availability/accessibility. Some students are returning for a second or third academic career, not performing well in previous institutions and starting over again.

**Challenges**

This department chair identified major themes related to common student challenges and institutional barriers that often impact student learning success and degree completion. Student attrition, or the tendency to stop-out and return multiple times, or to stop out completely, can be influenced by the following issues:

**College transfer shock.** It is inevitable when transferring from a community college to a senior institution. Students are faced with the adjustment demands to new learning expectations; often describing the experience for transfer students as disorienting. The department chair explained:
They somehow assume that the classes are going to be the same as those classes that they were receiving when they were in the community colleges, without really accounting for the fact that there’s a …progressively more difficult curriculum as they advance. Students are faced with new behavioral expectations associated with successful learning…many of the community colleges seem to be somewhat lax in terms of attendance, or they are providing a lot of online classes, whereas the institutions where I’ve worked have primarily been on the ground or much face-to-face work, so the attendance expectations are part of that shock.

**Lack of academic preparation.** This was evident in most of the nontraditional transfer student population. The absence of the ability to write well and demonstrate mathematical reasoning skills were cited as primary preparation problems in learning success at the baccalaureate level. This results in a host of issues with student performance, including attrition and drop-out. Assignment expectations and learning assessment are taken to an advanced level during the final years of a baccalaureate degree program. Senior level learning requires more knowledge integration, case study articulation, theory application, and a higher level of critical thinking. Nontraditional students transfer from a community college system where learning assessments may have relied more heavily on linear learning and memorization, often using objective assessment tools such as multiple exams.

Traditional students, in general, demonstrate better writing and math skills than nontraditional students because they have had more opportunity to receive attention that addresses skill development. Writing difficulties are experienced across all disciplines in
both undergraduate and graduate programs frequently resulting in student attrition, not able to keep their grades up because of fundamentals such as their (poor) writing ability. Student behavioral challenges due to this lack of preparation can be seen in overwhelming performance anxiety resulting in a resistance to complete written exercises, or choosing not to take advantage of writing support resources; thus, submitting assignments late, or not at all. Nontraditional students may lack confidence in developing those skills and fear feedback. The Department Chair identified most nontraditional transfer students as having “nonexistent math skills,” particularly among students enrolled in the social work program. The inability to demonstrate mathematical reasoning in courses, such as evidence-based statistics, can literally keep a student from completing their program.

Validity of program admission protocols and requirements. Program admission requirements and protocols were identified as a frustration for both the department chair and sometimes the student. The department chair explained that he/she has seen a trend in how, particularly with nontraditional students, present themselves in their admission application (i.e., written essay and references), and “what their writing, interpersonal communication, and critical thinking abilities actually are.” This creates challenges for students when faced with unanticipated learning expectations and inflated perceptions of their abilities.

Over-confidence in socialization with a sense of entitlement. Nontraditional students were often described as over-confident in their abilities to problem-solve and relate to other students. Because of what they thought they knew and/or experienced,
they often demonstrated an air of entitlement to a high grade. This is a critically important issue in a professional program such as social work. Nontraditional students may struggle with basic communication skills required for things such as a mock client assessment interview or participate in group oriented assignments. Because these students may have been successful in other careers and education endeavors, they expect positive feedback on their work and may not be aware of their learning deficits. Nontraditional students tend to get upset when they are required to navigate peer learning activities or if they receive a substandard grade on an assignment. Course grades in a community college setting may have been an “A,” and now they are receiving a “D.” Their first reaction is often to be angry and question their instructor rather than accept feedback on how to make paper revisions or advance their knowledge.

Weak institutional support for transfer students. The lack of institutional supports has been an ongoing concern. Lack of recognition and support for this student population directly affects college retention. Baccalaureate degree granting colleges have historically been geared for traditional age students. Writing and mathematical course support may have been less necessary for the traditional student moving from high school directly into college. The department chair expressed concern for the remedial responsibilities colleges must now take on if their students are to be successful and compete their degree programs. Higher education must catch up with the rapidly increasing transfer student demographics. This includes an increased demand for academic support services, basic technology use orientations and trainings, and remedial course opportunities. Services and programmatic strategies must be enacted that
recognize the learning needs of the nontraditional transfer learner. While there are some colleges that have expanded student services to address this need, many have not. Remedial education and support are costly to both the institution and the student. It requires more programming, faculty, and staff. A student that must complete remedial courses to move into their required major courses must stay in college longer at a greater expense, as most remedial courses are noncredit bearing.

**Disjointedness between general education requirements and academic major requirements.** The disjointedness of course requirements in their major field create a lack of meaning-making for the student. Many nontraditional transfer students desire to complete the minimum number of chosen major courses that will move them to their baccalaureate degree. When a transfer student begins major courses in their junior year, many are sequenced, making it difficult for students to complete other institution required courses outside their major of interest. They often question the relevance to their learning and complain about the expenses of tuition and time. The department chair expressed the need for institutions to, “do a far better job of tying together our curricular package(s)…, so that it would be more meaningful for the student…” The department chair emphasized:

There are many, many students that never make it past the basic general education requirements before they drop out of school completely. Students may perform poorly in pre-major, liberal arts courses because they are not seen as meaningful to the student.
The challenge of the student’s inner voice. What students believe about themselves and what previous experiences they have had in education can interestingly be an easily hidden factor to degree completion. This department chair shared an underlying challenge in persistence that students experience is actual fear and anxiety of succeeding. As was explained, “How many times they’ve been told that they cannot do well. And so, they fulfill that prophecy.” Students may be afraid to ask questions. The student may have had a negative experience in previous schools. A negative, defeatist attitude can carry into their new institution, making it difficult for faculty to support a student through their struggles. The student needs to take responsibility to overcome negative internal messages and fears.

Teaching challenges for the instructor. Challenges are also common for faculty when providing instruction to nontraditional students. Oftentimes, classrooms are made up of traditional and nontraditional students together. The age and cognitive developmental difference can create both positive and more challenging learning experiences. Older students often have different mindsets and educational objectives. Each age group has a different culture in their values, customs, norms, communication, and collaborative learning. Intersectionality between groups of students in a classroom such as race, gender, and religion are also often forgotten in the equation. Faculty that teach nontraditional transfer students must understand the unique, complex dynamics of this population. Lack of faculty knowledge and understanding can also have negative impact on student success.
Persistence

This department chair preferred to use the word perseverance rather than persistence when describing student success behaviors. He justified:

Well, they’re similar, but not necessarily the same. You can be persistent and not prevail, but people who tend to really make it are those that just keep plugging along. Perseverance is “suiting up and showing up”… perseverance has to come from the individual and there is a cost to education. Not all education can be fun, by the way… Sometimes, learning is really tough work.

As discussed earlier in the challenge of the student’s inner voice, the motivation to succeed and ultimately complete their degree can be a complex phenomenon. “There tends to be more energy when working with older students.” The nontraditional student may challenge their learning experience more overtly. The department chair believed that older students bring in different cognitive processes than a younger student. They have a different way of learning. “They want to see the value in what is being asked to learn.” He also emphasized that the enthusiasm portrayed by the instructor in the teaching/learning process is critical to creating student enthusiasm. Nontraditional students may fear participating fully in their learning process, such as speaking in class, because they feel ill equipped; and may have not done their reading due to work or family obligations the night before. The department chair explained how these students must persevere against the odds:

The nontraditional student is also more likely to complain about the amount of work that is required in a course… because they are balancing family, job, and
school.... and so, everything in their learning process is filtered through that lens, that multiple factors come together … It really takes a lot of, a bigger medicine bag, so to speak; you have to be able to pull more tools out and use them compared to working with more traditional students.

Ironically, the department chair noted that anger can be a positive motivator for some students. If students can hold onto their educational goals, they have a greater chance of persevering through challenges and barriers.

**Strategies that Enhance Student Success**

**Academic skill development opportunities.** One of the most significant actions the department has made to address writing and critical thinking challenges among nontraditional students, is to create remedial learning opportunities. Explicit research and writing skill development opportunities have been created for students throughout their junior and senior years. This approach over the past decade, was in response to students having inadequate developmental writing support at the institution level. Writing workshops and required academic writing labs as part of the social work program, have been developed and continuously refined to support students in the advancement of writing and critical thinking. The labs are intentionally created to incorporate elements such as APA writing standards and library research methodology. Students are introduced to reflective and skill building exercises in basic writing components, starting in their first week of classes. Students utilize concurrently enrolled course assignments to develop their academic writing. These include specific lab exercises in APA and library research tools. The assignments are relevant to what they are learning and support their
overall academic success. This programmatic enhancement has made a positive
difference in student performance and retention.

Course sequencing and scheduling. When serving nontraditional learners,
education institutions must provide program delivery models that are sensitive to
academic access (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Completion by Design, 2017). Another
programmatic strategy that has been developed as part of the social work program’s
distant education development, is to create a delivery model that fits the demographics
and needs of the nontraditional student. Each of the six distant sites are unique to the
needs of that population. As an example, one site is on a tribal community college
campus that covers over a hundred-mile radius; another is in a rural setting with
transportation challenges; others are in urban settings with a large number of full-time
employed English as a Second Language students. Course scheduling and delivery
models are designed to be sensitive to time, location, transportation, learning styles, etc.
Not only when and how a course is offered is important, but the social work program
faculty also strategically plan when major course assignments are due. Not having too
many heavy assignments due all in the same week have supported students in their
performance.

Nontraditional students also need to have the opportunity to enroll part-time or
stop out due to their financial, employment, and family obligations. Students cannot
succeed in a program that makes it difficult to attend. In response to common personal
challenges such as loss of employment, finances, mental or physical health, birth of a
child, needing to care for a parent, or other family changes, the program provides
opportunity and system advocacy that allows for a student to “step out” of the program for a period. The social work program has developed a formal stepping out process that creates support and clarity for the student. This development has proved useful in students returning to complete their degree.

Community college transfer partnerships. Community college transfer partnerships are critical to academic advisement and overall transfer success (Allen, Smith, & Muehleck, 2013; ACCT, & TICAS, 2014). The department chair remarked that students who transfer from a community college with a two-year degree into the baccalaureate degree social work program demonstrate motivation and enthusiasm. Transfer students that obtain admission into a baccalaureate degree program enter with a determination to complete their degree program and reach their career goals. Students must make concerted efforts to make their transfer successful (Anderson, 2015; CSDEXENY, 2015; Completion by Design, 2017). The department chair shared that starting at a community college often requires less rigorous steps. Students receive more guidance and support in the process. The only formal document that may be required to be admitted into a community college is their high school diploma. Jumping through the transfer and admission application hoops to become enrolled in a baccalaureate degree program is often challenging, particularly with academic transcripts, online applications, and financial aid processes. Additional challenges are created if a student is transferring within a state college system, the experience is much more seamless than from a state community college into a private four-year institution.
The social/relational connection. A social/relational connection between students, their peers, and faculty is also critical to college retention (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2016; Tinto, 1994; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). The department chair added the importance of engaging into student life and identity:

I’ve always had the belief that nontraditional students are still students and those that have been most successful, in my estimation, are those that have been willing to conform somewhat to the student role and throw themselves into the student life.

The department chair shared that there is a strong correlation between social connection and participation in the intellectual life of the college itself. A lot of nontraditional students at the college resist that. The social work program has developed regular opportunities for students to engage with each other and their faculty through community immersion experiences, agency visits, pizza parties, and other public policy events.

Intentional program and campus activities enhance motivation and perseverance.

B. Interview 2 – Faculty Focus Group with Southwest Distant Sites

“I have to really walk them through each stage of learning to be a thinker…for many of my students, they don’t think that what they think counts and is valid. I think they sort of have this, you know… that internalized oppression,”

Faculty Focus Group-Southwest

Three social work faculty participated in this group discussion. A fourth faculty was invited, but was unable to attend the meeting at the last minute. The Southwest Faculty Focus Group included: two community college full-time faculty that have headed social work preparatory programs at the associates degree level on two separate campus sites in the Southwest. One community college faculty has taught this population for
over 14 years; the other community college faculty has taught for 19 years; the third full-time social work faculty has instructed baccalaureate degree seeking students on two Southwest distant social work program sites for the past year. These three participants almost exclusively instruct nontraditional students. It was remarked that nontraditional students make up the majority of the entire community college system as well as the baccalaureate sites in reference.

This faculty group described the average age of their nontraditional student population being around 28 years old; serving a significant number of veteran and first-generation college students who are enrolled in the community college system pre-social work program. First-generation students are at risk of not going to college or starting college and then not completing their degree, as a result of other risk factors in their life. The community college settings of the two pre-social work faculty, serve a significant number of Hispanic, Latino, and Native American first-generation students. Many of them come from families who may have only completed through early years of high school and are employed in family and/or low wage, blue collar jobs. Most of these students are working full-time in one or more entry level jobs. There is a lot more responsibility on their shoulders (than traditional students); a lot of them have families of their own that they are supporting; there is also more mental health challenges.

Challenges

The tone of this focus group discussion painted a detailed, exhausting picture of the nontraditional students’ struggles to reach their goals. This lively discussion was highlighted with personal stories and descriptions of the “push/pull” factors that students
experience and the incredible dynamics that they were faced to overcome. I believe this was framed by the unique demographic identity of this student population. Poverty, lack of a historical place for the importance of higher education, and multiple cultural contexts all played into the complexities of student success. In addition, these are faculty experiences and beliefs about nontraditional students who hold significant personal experiences in economic poverty, marginalization, and cultural disparity, that want to become social workers and change the world.

**Academically underprepared.** This faculty group quickly identified lack of academic preparation as one of the greatest challenges for the nontraditional student. It was emphasized that at both the community college and baccalaureate transfer level, these students were ill prepared for the skills they need to be successful in college. As explained, “I mostly see them as being academically underprepared and really not knowing what’s expected from them to learn the culture of a community college…. the culture of expectations is much higher than they expect it to be.” Writing and mathematical ability is a significant concern at both levels of education. Many students must complete multiple remedial noncredit bearing courses in order to be placed in an entry college written communications or math course required for their degree pathway.

**Students are academically ill prepared in meeting assignment requirements.** Students struggle with mastering their organization of time and planning, often not seeing the relevance of what is required of them. These students are more comfortable in talking about their personal experiences and often value this information over the required readings or written assignments. They can contribute to a very rich classroom discussion.
But, they cannot relate their experience to the theory, because they are not doing the required readings, and then struggle to get their ideas on paper. Examples given were:

Many of them do not value it or enjoy it. It’s a chore. It’s some that they just think it’s a waste of time. They want to just get it and talk and have an opinion. They want to talk about their past and so having them learn the value of academic research and reading is a mountain for them. And then, followed by writing. Okay, I’ve sort of read it, I may or may not understand it, now I have to write something and produce something? It’s like a shock.

Another example was:

Some of them think, I’m showing up and that’s good enough… If I come and I talk with a partner that’s enough, or somebody will cover it… cover the material for me. It’s almost like there’s a learned helplessness. This under preparedness trails into the transfer experience, when students begin their junior years at the baccalaureate degree granting institution. Students then need to learn another set of higher level academic expectations.

An example of faculty frustration was shared:

Once you get into the four-year colleges, there’s just this kind of assumption that of course you know that already and let’s just keep moving on… there were things, like when I was first teaching this cohort, was like, “Wow, I thought they would have known that already.” But, I kind of caught on that they didn’t.

Poverty, lack of understanding education value, and cultural contexts. There is often lack of family support for members to continue their education beyond high school.
“But often times, especially for the young Latinas, it is, get a job, help pay, and you know, pull your own… or, shouldn’t you be getting married kind of pressure.” One of the faculty believed that there has been a slow change in this attitude over the past five years, with more support for female Latinas to attend college. There also appears to be what was described as a learned helplessness. One faculty reflected:

I was thinking about how a lot of my students, especially in our introductory course, when I ask for feedback, they… a lot of them want to be spoon-fed more from me. They want me to tell them. They don’t want to struggle. They don’t want to have to apply. It’s almost like we have to teach them how to be an engaged and active learner and college student. And I wonder, you know, where that comes from and you can’t help but think that we are the least funded of all primary and secondary education here.... We really are known to teach to a test and they think in terms of taking a test, not kind of doing.

Self-deprecation/internalized oppression. There was also an interesting dynamic of self-deprecation among nontraditional students that had faced a lifetime of marginalization. Faculty remarked that students did not demonstrate an ability to think; students feared that their ideas and experiences were not important or could be wrong. As one faculty explained:

I have to really walk them through each stage of learning to be a thinker, and I think for many of my students, they don’t think that what they think counts and is valid. I think they sort of have this, you know… that internalized oppression where, “I don’t really matter anyway what I think, it’s not going to make much of
a difference no matter what I do.” So, I think there’s some internal barriers that are culturally… they’re socialized into. “You don’t have much of an opinion, you don’t really count.” Those kinds of social messages influence their learning.

Many personal challenges. Personal chronic or unanticipated challenges can draw nontraditional students away from their education commitment. Many students have had substance abuse issues, struggles with domestic violence, incarceration, and chronic mental health challenges. A faculty tells the story of a student:

When she got into school, she really had no idea what was expected. Then she unexpectedly got pregnant, and then she had a miscarriage, then she got very depressed, but I can’t tell you how many students related to certain aspects of her life story.

Persistence

This focus group discussion was energetically infused with many stories of student despair and resilience. The faculty were passionate about their ideas and experiences. The nontraditional students for the most part, are fighters. Many have what appear to be unsurmountable challenges; yet, they persist. This focus group discussion was quick to highlight the personal strengths and self-empowerment that nontraditional students held. One faculty shared their experiences with students working toward degree completion:

It looks like a roller coaster. You know, it’s like… it’s just this ride that they’re on, it’s not a straight line, but it’s more, you know, getting through those times when they just think they’re ready to give it up. Yeah, I think it’s knowing that
they have an inner strength or an ability to overcome whatever life presents or whatever academics presents and drawing upon their past strengths and reminding them of that. You know, helping them to bring that to mind, that they can use that in whatever comes up.

Other observed persistence phenomenology included:

…I’ve seen an increase in family support of Latinos in college. They want them to complete, rather than do the traditional get married and… you know, support your family.

…A lot of them need to earn more money, and realizing that they need a degree for that and they have a responsibility of supporting the family that they have.

…I think a lot of them have a drive to be an example for their children.

the desire to want to help because they’ve been helped, or they’ve needed help, or someone in their family has needed help.

…I think that’s probably the major motivation, or fuel for our students, for wanting to learn that their life has been touched by adversity or injustice or trauma and they have to… they want to go on to touch other people’s lives… and it’s really a personal passion and mission for them that… that leads them on to complete… or want to complete [their degree]. I think the financial part is almost… secondary to that. I think they want to be a social worker, be a change agent.
Strategies that Enhance Student Success

Student persistence was a team sport between the faculty and the student. It was clear that the faculty felt it took a village to support a student in their academic success; often, it required a large bag of skills. Many ideas and stories were shared about how faculty teamed with students to help them move forward toward their completion goal. It was evident that the faculty believed in the abilities of every student that entered their classroom. Faculty constantly played the roles of cheerleader and mentor. One of the pressures remarked by the community college faculty were the large class enrollment restrictions placed on the faculty. Nontraditional students have many learning and personal needs that cannot be separated from their degree attainment success. One faculty cited the barrier of having as many as 36 students in their course.

Faculty believe that social work students most often have a desire to help others because they have been helped themselves, or they’ve needed help. This is seen as a student strength that can be carried into the classroom.

Relational interventions. Relational-based interventions are an important key to supporting students through difficult challenges. The faculty discussed the importance of treating each student as a unique individual. This view is transferred into providing constructive, candid feedback to students from the very beginning of their program. Expectations at all learning levels must be made very clear with frequent feedback from the instructor and even between peers in the classroom. Students struggle with the idea of studying and coming prepared for class.
Adult learning theory. Assignments and learning activities are structured with adult learning theory in mind. Students are taught how to break down information and critically apply new information to preexisting knowledge and experience. This strategy fuels persistence.

Meaning-making. Another strategy is focused on the importance of relational/introspective work. One faculty described it as a sublative pedagogy where content learning was designed to help the student make meaning of the content through self-reflection. If students could find a way to relate the content to themselves, they could use critical thinking skills easier in demonstrating their learning. One faculty remarked:

Kind of help them look at the inner landscape that is preventing them, you know, the way they think and the way that they perceive things and how they relate to the material as well. We do a lot of reflective writing where they’re exposed to a concept or research and they have to… relate to it in some way.

Co-construction of community learning experiences. The intentional co-construction of community learning opportunities enhances an exchange of resources, knowledge, and skills between students. This also creates an inner atmosphere of support and team spirit motivation. One faculty shared:

If I have a student that develops a passion… but they don’t have the reading skills or the writing skills, or their lives are filled with sick children and parents and losing their jobs, you know how it goes… I try to pair them with someone who has had similar situations, but hung in there. And so… sometimes, I’ll put them
together in a group on purpose. Sometimes, I’ll introduce them outside of class and say, “I think you guys can really help each other.” And that has been sort of my… true back up. When I do that I know that there’s someone that really needs a lot of help and doesn’t have the time to go see the counseling department, they just need someone to help them get this assignment done… It helps both of them. The one that’s sort of doing the peer mentoring and the one receiving it, because it fits right in with what they are experiencing. They’re wanting to help and pass it on.

Development of peer mentor opportunities. The faculty shared about the benefits of relational interventions such as using peer mentors and providing in and out of classroom experiences where students can talk with other social workers and alum who have overcome obstacles and are involved in activities that relate to the students’ goals. Strategic efforts to build community early on, such as exchanging phone numbers, email addresses, social media, and team group assignments help reinforce a study-buddy mentality. The faculty believed that if their students can gravitate to persons that they can relate and connect with, that they have a strong chance for academic success. These efforts also instill a sense of empowerment and hope that students can overcome challenges to their goal of completion. One faculty expressed a frustration in her own limitations:

I’m sometimes feeling that there isn’t enough of me to go around for everyone in the classroom… We don’t just teach. Teaching is the least of the difficulties. Teaching easy, pie, cake… It’s being available, you know, to the other aspects of
who are students are, what they bring into the classroom and into the social work profession. That being able to mentor and shape them and respond compassionately to them that is the greater calling.

C. Interview 3 - Faculty Focus Group with Midwest Distant Sites

“They have more life experience to say, “this isn’t the end of the world for me.” They’re going to make it through. It may not look pretty, but it’ll be their way. It’ll be done.” Faculty Focus Group- Midwest

Four full-time undergraduate social work faculty participated in this discussion. A fifth faculty was unable to attend, but submitted a document that addressed the guiding focus group questions. This later faculty’s information is included in this report summary. These faculty represent five undergraduate social work distant sites located in the Midwest. Each site annually serves approximately 25 to 60 students. Almost 100% of the students are nontraditional transfer students. Faculty experience in teaching nontraditional transfer students ranged from 1 to 15 years. The focus group included four women, one man; two faculty were of color. Site context includes: The oldest student in one of the urban cohorts is 56 years old. One site has a significant number of Somali, Latino, African American, men, veterans, parents, single parents, and students challenged with mental health issues. Another two sites serve long distant commuters; one of them focuses on American Indian student enrollment. The tone of this lively conversation emphasized the connection between student challenges, behaviors, and intentional strategies that are required to target retention concerns.

This faculty group described their nontraditional transfer student population as employed full-time or part-time; may have taken some time off after high school before
they entered a degree granting program. They are often first-generation, financially independent, and have a family and children; many single parents. Some of these students come to the social work program seeking preparation for a second career. Many are military veterans. These students are diverse in age, culture, and ability. A large majority are female. These students are challenged with limited financial aid and loan capabilities. Most have taken more than two years to obtain their associates degree, or they have completed a degree that is just not working for their career goals. More nontraditional students need student accommodations for learning, mental health, and/or physical limitations. One faculty focused on greater strengths in their student description, including:

[The nontraditional student] has motivation, maturity, self-confidence, autonomy, solid decision-making abilities, more practical, multitasking ability, open minded, results oriented; differs in many ways than traditional learners, sometimes generationally, culturally, or individually. Many learn by doing, being introduced to a concept and then needing to do it! Practice, curious, brings some life experience.

Challenges

According to this faculty group, the students’ personal challenges collide with education plans in five significant ways.

Financial. Nontraditional students struggle significantly with finances and the ability to persist in their academic plan. Because of their family and employment obligations, it is difficult to pay for the costs of tuition and expenses related to staying in
school. Many of the students have exhausted their subsidized financial aid opportunities because they have been in school for so long; some have been forced to live off student loans because of the inability to work full-time while in school. They carry with them a history of hardships and defaults that result in student loan ineligibility.

**Family obligations.** The second greatest challenge involves a spiral of personal crisis concerns. An older nontraditional student brings significant personal obligations into the academic arena. As one faculty shared:

A lot of my nontraditional individuals are the caretakers for their immediate or extended families. And… caretaking, when you talk about absences or what gets in the way of completing things or how well they transition is a lot of that caretaking duty or role. Sometimes they need counsel for providing boundaries of what they can and can’t do. Or, sometimes, when they’re pushed out of that role into self-care, or autonomous roles, that results in, you know, marriages lapsing and relationships ending; … but I’ve also had a lot of relationship endings, people move out, people lose their spouse, their partner, because they’ve made decisions for themselves and I think that’s particularly true to the field of social work. I don’t know that that would be in any other field.

**Personal cultural dilemmas.** There is often what I would define as an ethical/cultural dilemma for students when they are faced with a personal crisis and the need to prioritize their obligations. Many students, including American Indian students, are not only caregivers in their families, but have expectations placed on them by their communities. “Somebody goes missing, somebody OD’s. It’s almost like a value
conflict for them to take, you know; this is my individual plan versus my community needs me now. It’s really, really hard.”

**Mental and physical health.** During the faculty discussion, it was emphasized that there is a growing need for learning accommodation services among nontraditional learners. Students are routinely encouraged to participate in professional counseling support for mental health needs. “We’ve got a lot of students with really high anxiety, ADHD, and just sometimes the ability to have some time to focus.” Some students struggle with chronic health conditions, or health issues with their family members. Many students chose not to pursue assistance for fear of being labelled. One insight was shared relating to students, especially of color, that come from populations of historical trauma. They are very hesitant to call attention to themselves, especially for mental health symptoms. It is easier to miss class for a physical ailment. Students who are on the main campus or are geographically close, can receive direct support counseling and veteran services via the main campus. Other distant site students do not have access to these services and are provided more ancillary accommodations directly related to learning tasks, such as note takers or extra time for assignments through the college accommodation center. The lack of these services on distant sites is detrimental to student success. Student absences are more frequent. Faculty expressed the importance of respecting the fine line between being a trained therapist… “and the role of being a teacher when dealing with student crisis.”

**Academically underprepared.** Faculty emphasized the gap of academic rigor between community colleges and four-year institutions. “My thinking is that there is a
difference in persistence from an A.A. to persistence in completing a four-year degree.”
Challenges in academic writing and critical thinking were emphasized. Nontraditional students are extremely diverse in personal contexts and learning styles. This requires much more effort for faculty to help students close the gaps on learning, such as academic writing and critical thinking. Course content requires the ability for students to apply theories, knowledge, and skills. Faculty need to routinely develop explicit exercises and assignments that assist students to develop necessary critical thinking skills. The use of technology as a requirement for learning and assessing content is also a challenge. Nontraditional students are at a wide continuum of skill and comfort in using the computer and technological enhanced learning environments. This gap is evident, depending on the age of the student and how long they might have been out of college prior to their transfer.

**Persistence**

Nontraditional students seem to have an ability to bounce back from what life throws at them. This ability can work in their favor given the appropriate support and the willingness to be vulnerable and continue moving forward. These students were described as having the flexibility to shift gears when faced with unanticipated challenges. This faculty group used the word ‘grit’ often in their examples. As one faculty explained the grit that her students possessed:

So they tripped up on that, or so they screwed it up, but they come into the office; they talk to me face-to-face and they persevere through it. They accept the ‘F’ if that’s what I’m going to give them, and they move on, or they just don’t give up.
They have more life experience to say, “this isn’t the end of the world for me…” They’re going to make it through. It may not look pretty, but it’ll be their way. It’ll be done. I’m not saying that’s 100%, I’m saying that’s like 80%.

Another example given highlighted the deep personal crisis some students experience, but still move forward:

My student’s child was murdered, their spouse was diagnosed with cancer, and three weeks from graduation the student has been diagnosed with heart conditions that could affect whether they will be able to work, and the student is in my office talking about projects every week; making sure that they’re on track. The student has struggled; had [needed]a lot of face-to-face time [with faculty], but that’s grit.

While nontraditional students may require extra sensitivity to their diverse learning needs and personal challenges, one faculty emphasized that the social work profession really needs diverse students with “fresh perspectives, increasingly with our changing, diverse world.” Faculty defined their students as driven. Life experience puts them in a different place. They are a lot more secure and confident about what they need to do.

**The importance of relationships and connection.** One faculty discussed the complexity of the relational context in honoring the student learning process and supporting student grit, while managing boundaries that promote success:

I think that most of my students, especially my older ones, are driven… the life experience puts them in a different place. They’re a lot more secure and confident about what they need to do. And so, they make it a little bit easier
because it’s really just, kind of, moving them through the rough spots, so they kind of come in with this particular piece; and I think that the working relationship with the faculty is really critical in that, in a couple of different ways. I think not only do we need to also be a support when there’s a need for support, and not crossing that fine line of therapy, but also to be the driver and kind of the gatekeeper to be real with students about what’s working and what’s not working and whether this works for them. So… making sure that there’s balance in that relationship… is really important because that motivates people.

**Appreciation for developmental process.** The faculty reiterated a developmental process that takes place with students as they persist. There seems to be this relational dance between the faculty and the students as knowledge and experiences are shared. This promotes persistence behavior. A faculty emphasized:

Students discover they can literally see themselves; they can feel, you know, sort of them in the profession and the profession in them. It really helps to drive them towards success. It’s amazing. I refer to it as them finding their voice.

**Strategies that Enhance Student Success**

**The significance of connection.** This faculty group stressed many ideas and strategies that take on a cheerleader mentality when supporting student success. It was evident that these faculty really liked teaching nontraditional students. Relationship connections and creating a sense of a learning community was at the forefront of every challenge context. Each distant site has intentionally developed strategies that begin with new student orientation to completing their final coursework that encourage an
atmosphere of community; students helping each other; creating safety and respect of
difference, and creating a sense of program identity and belonging. Students are also
encouraged to identify at least one outside support person, whether it be a friend,
neighbor, or family member. From the very beginning of the student’s transfer
experience, faculty send a direct message of faith in the ability and success of each
student:

I think we incorporate that attitude of: we believe in our program and we believe
in you, that people do go on. I think that we might be the first, in some cases, the
first to say, “you’re graduate school material.”

Building professional relationships. The faculty emphasized the importance of
building professional relationships and supporting ongoing communication with their
community college transfer partners. These faculty make intentional connections with
community college faculty and prospective transfer students on a regular basis. As
faculty shared:

With all of those organizations, all those schools, I have personal connections,
personal relationships with the Human Service instructors. I go to classes on a
regular basis; as students are graduating and they are encouraged to really take
into consideration being a part of our program… I would say there’s probably a
95-97% completion rate for students who come from those schools. They get in,
they do the work, and they finish.

Providing the roles of teacher, advisor, coach, mentor. Faculty emphasized the
importance in the multiple roles of teacher, advisor, coach, and mentor that faculty must
play in supporting student success. The faculty shared a unified philosophy of student success through statements such as:

…We become a support and an advocate for that person.

…They’ve gotten through so many barriers to get there, that we can’t be another barrier.

…I think that the working relationship with the faculty is really critical in that, in a couple of different ways…not only do we need to also be a support when there’s a need for support, and not crossing that fine line of therapy, but also to be the driver and kind of the gatekeeper to be real with students about what’s working and what’s not working, and whether this works for them.

…I have one student that I think has come to my office four times this year and said she was quitting the program. And through a simple half hour conversation and encouragement, she gets back on board and is ready to follow through again, so I think the relationship is huge.

Department team collaboration. The faculty also expressed the importance of supporting each other through regular team collaboration. When faculty faced significant issues with their students, they consulted with their faculty team. Communication among faculty was important. They unanimously identified frustrations with the reality of time limitations they have to connect with their students. Faculty felt that there was never enough time to “tend to those [student] relationships.”

Programmatic delivery considerations. Planning and delivering academic programming that intentionally acknowledges the needs and challenges of the
nontraditional student are critical to student success. Faculty acknowledged the realities of transfer shock and common writing and assignment challenges the students bring into their early learning experience. The faculty take on a sort of developmental mindset that allows for more of a ‘soft touch’ during the students’ first semester. One faculty explained:

Juniors need a lot of hand holding, a lot of walking through, a lot of mentoring, a lot of other pieces. And I’m real clear with them as seniors, I’m no longer your professor, I am your social work supervisor. And, I want things to be done with clients in mind and mistakes and late, and all those things just don’t count. And watching them make the transition based on what the expectations are I think it’s really important to kind of put forward to students; if you present it in the proper way, they can hear and they can make the adjustments.

Course content and delivery is also customized to fit a student cohort’s learning styles and remedial needs. This faculty team identified the need to be flexible in teaching course content and paying attention to what the students were and were not learning. Another faculty emphasized the value of participation in the classroom as a critical piece to learning. Course content is intentionally delivered to create a participatory learning setting using a flipped classroom model. Small group work is also used. This method allows students to be empowered to share their knowledge. Conversation creates knowledge and meaning for these students. Intentional coordination of classroom and online discussions also require creating a safe, respectful environment. Faculty shared:
I try and maintain a certain degree of creativity in my work with students. So…
even though I teach the same courses, it would be almost fair to say I never teach
them the same way twice. And, it depends on my cohorts, so I early on do some
activities so that I can get a sense of who is in the room, who my learners are,
what their style is, what their preferences are; and then I slowly tweak my lessons,
or my lectures, or my videos, or whatever it is to kind of fit and match the
personality of that cohort. And it seems to work. It’s always a moving target. It
probably creates more work for me than I need to do, but I find that it is the most
fulfilling for me as well as it is for the students because I’ll find something along
the line that I’ll engage all of the learning styles in the room, from the introverts
to the extroverts; so it’s always a moving target. And I’m getting better at it. It’s
kind of nice to see after about six years, I can size folks up in the first month and
come up with a strategy on how to pull them in.

Another faculty emphasized risk taking and safety:

There is a lot of risk taking when it comes to saying what would you do to
problem solve this, or to get students to critically think. I think there’s a push
outside the safety zone, while maintaining a respectful, diverse atmosphere where
of course everyone is safe to share, but not safe enough where you don’t get
called out.

**Course scheduling and delivery methods.** Each of the distant sites have
determined an appropriate course schedule with hybrid delivery methods that
complement the needs of their particular student population. This includes part-time,
full-time, and accelerated plans. Some online courses may be cross-registered between multiple sites. The faculty are also utilizing virtual face-to-face course delivery models that can address the needs of long distance commuters. These strategies have a significant positive impact on student retention and completion.

Part III - Findings from the Students

The following interpretations of findings represent my interview experiences with four undergraduate degree seeking, nontraditional transfer social work students. These students completed their upper level coursework on a distant site social work program located in a Southwestern state, in the U.S. They participated in courses online and on ground as students of a baccalaureate degree granting institution that was located on a community college campus site. Each student anticipates obtaining their baccalaureate degree within the next month. This section describes a detailed summary of each individual interview, reflecting the uniqueness of each student, much in the same format used in the preceding three educator interviews. In order to retain anonymity, students are identified as A, B, C, and D.

A. Interview 4 – Student A

“When you’re tired... or that exhaustion, it’s temporary. Satisfaction is forever. That satisfaction will be that moment that I get my degree.” Student A

Student “A” is a 30-year-old Latina, married, female, and the mother of two children, ages 2 and 5. While A was born in the U.S., she lived in Mexico for several years and then transitioned back to the U.S., where she now resides. She has four siblings and is the middle child. When describing her family, she was quick to explain the significance of all 18 members.
My immediate family…includes my husband and my kids, my 5-year-old, my 2-year-old, my parents and every single member of my family; I guess I feel like they were my support system. Even my brother-in-laws, my sisters; there’s about 18 of us. All 18 of them were in my support system that helped me through this journey.

The early years. When A was eight years old, her family moved back to Mexico to start a family business. A resided in a small town in Mexico for three years. After the first year, the business did not do well, so A’s father needed to return to the U.S. to provide for his family. He obtained legal amnesty and U.S. residency status. He worked in the U.S. for two years while A and her mother and siblings remained in Mexico. When A was in sixth grade, she and her family were reunited with her father in the U.S. A recollects the return to the U.S. as very difficult. She much preferred the culture and slow pace of her village in Mexico.

Education formation. A shared about the importance that she and her family had placed on education. Because her parents married in their teens and did not complete high school, it was a strong family value to get as much education as possible. There was an aunt that provided a strong support relationship for A while she was in school. This aunt had persisted for many years herself to obtain a college degree. She was a role model for A. Shortly after finishing high school, A enrolled in a few courses at a local community college. She did not have a direction on what she wanted to do with her education, but felt it was the thing to do. She married when she was 21-years-old and had her first child three years later. She distinctly recalled that it was the birth of her first
child that motivated her to return to college and pursue a degree. She realized that she needed to further her education to get a better job for her family. Ever since she was in high school, she wanted to be a social worker. She liked helping people and working with children. She thought:

I really need to finish school because one day, I want them to say, like, ‘mommy has a degree.’ So that means that they have to also, you know, get a degree. And… I wanted to prove to them that, like, mommy can do it. So… that’s when I was like, “Oh, I need to get my things straight.” It was like, “I have to enroll in college.” So, that’s when I decided to go full-time and finish school.

She chose to attend a community college because she did not feel confident about the education that she had in Mexico. She did not think she was capable of being successful in a university. As a student in the U.S. education system, she was always labelled as an ESL student because English was not her primary language. She felt the label was negative and made her feel like she had a disability. She liked the smaller setting and class size at the community college. She was enrolled in several “ESL” labelled courses in the community college, but she appreciated the time that the instructors gave her; she felt successful. A attended the community college part-time for seven years. She completed an associate degree with a concentration on early childhood education, but then found out that she did not want to pursue a teaching career. She knew that she liked helping people. By this time, she had two children.

In addition to going to school, for the past ten years, A had been working full-time for a school district in various positions including a teachers’ aide in a Head Start
Program and served several years as a K-8th grade school secretary. She enthusiastically shared about how much she appreciated her past employment experiences in the social work program that she is now completing. She explained:

I brought some of that experience with me when I enrolled in this program. The fact that I was able to have a relationship with parents, you know, always helping them with their kids and that, I feel that experience, working in a school helped me with my… to pursue my education, but I needed that, how can I say it? Even though I had that experience, working at the school, but I didn’t have the knowledge how to approach some of the struggles in the school. Like, I didn’t know how to necessarily… approach any problems or how to… create a treatment plan… for the kids, and I didn’t know how to do that and with this program it helped me. It taught me how to do it.

A believed that her experience working in the school system had a great impact in motivating her to develop career goals in the field of social work. Her commitment to the parents and children kept her in her position. She passionately shared her excitement and motivation:

When I got into the school, it was like, “yes, this is where I belong. I want to help children and I want to help the families.” Especially the Hispanic population because sometimes the parents are not too involved, you know, in their child’s education. So, I felt like it was my responsibility, I need to address this to the parents. I need to tell them they have to be more involved in their child’s education, because my parents were not as much involved because they didn’t
have that bilingual person at the school that could help them. They [parents] always thought twice, like, “oh should I go to the school to ask questions? But I don’t really speak English, how can I go?” So… that was one of the motivations for me to go… that was one of the reasons why I also stayed for that long because I felt like I was the middle man every time, you know, a mom had a problem with their child and wanted to go talk to the principal. I was there to help this person, this mom, especially, that didn’t speak any English. So… I felt like, “Okay, I can help this, you know, I could give back to the community by providing my services, by translating.” So… that’s what kept me there.

A felt stuck in her job and knew that she needed to obtain a baccalaureate degree in social work. Now that she was the mother of two children, she was more motivated than ever to make some changes in her life to pursue her dream career. She decided to apply to the local university social work program. She was told that the admission counselor told her that she was a mother and would not be successful in completing her degree because all of the classes were every day in the morning. She was angry and frustrated. Shortly after that experience, she heard about an evening social work program for working nontraditional age students. She met with an admission counselor and felt that she found what she needed. She shared:

And it was like, this is perfect; it’s meant to be. So that’s when I decided to enroll because I decided that this program was going to meet my needs as a mom, you know, as a student, and definitely as an ESL student because it says it was more tailored to working adults.
**Challenge and persistence.** A quickly stated that she experienced many challenges and barriers to obtaining her degree in social work. Her greatest challenge was feeling like she was the primary caregiver to her two children. Her husband’s primary language is Spanish. This made it more difficult for him to navigate through the systems and deal with some of the children’s needs. She shared how she was ready to withdraw from the program her first day:

Even before I started the program; the first day of class, I remember, my son was having some issues at school and I felt like he needed my full attention. Even before the first day of class I remember I opened my laptop and I was going to write this email that I’m not enrolling. I’m not going to continue because I can’t because my son needs my attention. But, I’m like, “You know what? I’m just going to go. I’m going to go and see how it works. If I feel that it will work, I will continue. If I felt like, no, it’s going to be too much, I will stop.

A did a lot of “self-talk” to move her through obstacles to remaining in school. But I said to myself that “the minute I get to that class, they’re going to be okay. They’re 2, 3 hours with their dad, they’ll be fine.” So, I had to say that to myself. The minute I walk into that class, it’s just me and my education. My kids, they can wait. They will survive. So, I had to make that separation… My school is my self-care. Because I love to learn… that is my self-care. So the minute I go to [school], the minute I go to a conference, you know, it’s me time, not my kids’ times. So, I had to put that separation.

A identified the challenges of being a Latina woman and mother and the role it played in adding stress to her college and career goals. She shared that her husband was
raised to expect his wife to meet all of his needs. Shopping, cooking, laundry, housekeeping, and childcare were all the responsibility of a Latina woman/mother. Her husband has struggled with seeing A as superior to him. She identified these cultural expectations as challenging her degree completion. She emphasizes that she is not the same person that she was two years ago, before starting the social work program. A describes an energetic empowerment because of her persisting through her academic plan:

I know that I’m not the same person that I was two years ago and that is because of all the… everything that I’ve been exposed to… The conferences, the education that I’m getting, my classes have made me realize, wait, you know, there’s more to explore; there’s more to learn. You don’t always have to be living day by day. You have to grow as a person. So, that’s why I feel now like two years ago I was living day by day… I wasn’t growing as a person. Now today, I feel like I’m growing as a person, you know? And stuff is hard because I try to tell my husband, “Come on, let’s live… let’s grow together.” But, when that person doesn’t want to do it, it’s difficult.

A identified a significant challenge in her writing ability. She shared the complexity of not feeling secure in her writing, hesitating to ask for help, and feeling very inadequate:

I struggle. I’m like, “Ugh…” and my stomach starts hurting every time there’s a paper and I’m like, “Oh, no another paper due!” Because I’ve never been confident with my writing, and I feel like I need help, you know? … But the
A identified her third largest barrier is finances. She had to leave her full-time job, resulting in her family having significantly less income. She was faced with taking out student loans for her schooling, but then was also faced with the dilemma of needing to cover family living expenses. Her husband had to take on extra work; he is now working three jobs. The situation is very stressful, especially the last six months because she feels that she is now the main child care provider. In addition, she is completing a final internship for her degree that requires 20 hours per week. A explains this exhausting dilemma for many working nontraditional students, but her mindset allows her to persist:

The minute that I get home I start cooking, taking care of the kids. I don’t open my laptop the minute I get home, because the time that I’m with my kids is 2, 3 hours, it’s time for them. So, I don’t open my laptop… comes 8:30, 9; it’s like, “Okay, you’re in bed. I can open my laptop.” But, I’m not functioning like I would function at 1 or 2 in the afternoon.

She described behaviors and strategies that would help her get through:
I started listening to inspirational speakers… listening how to basically motivate myself, and meditation… that has helped me a lot… I’m so tired, I’m like, “I don’t care!” I read a quote that said, when you’re tired… or that exhaustion, it’s temporary. [The] satisfaction is forever. That satisfaction will be that moment that I get my degree!

At the end of her junior year, she had decided to withdraw from the social work program and take some time off. She reflected that transitioning from a community college into her junior year social work program was very difficult and she thought about quitting at least 50 times. The academic expectations along with the stressors of caring for her family and having less income was overwhelming. Her plan to withdraw was intercepted by an unexpected event. A had been nominated by her social work program faculty to be a keynote speaker at an upcoming fall faculty institute. This was a very prestigious event for A. A would have all expenses paid to fly to the Midwest campus and ironically give a speech on the love of learning. It was the extra boost she needed to hang in there, believe in herself, and move into her senior studies.

In tandem with A’s concerns for finances, she spoke at length about the professional 450-hour internship she is required to complete for her degree. The internship is unpaid except for a small amount for mileage reimbursement. A’s internship involves using her own vehicle and gas; working with high risk children and their families. Serving as a behavioral coach, her responsibilities included a substantial amount of weekly home visits and intensive interventions with the parents and children. She has taken it upon herself to regularly purchase arts and crafts supplies at the Dollar
Store. She shared that she can get her clients to ‘open up’ more and talk about their feelings if they are doing craft projects with her.

She believes her internship experience has directly affected her ability to persist through all of the personal struggles and demands of her academic program. Her eagerness to embrace new learning opportunities is evident to her success. These experiences also have made her want to continue developing her career in the future and pursue a master degree in social work. She explained:

When I first started with my internship, I was introduced to several learning disabilities, several mental disabilities… I was like, I know some, but I don’t know all of them… How am I going to work with this child if I don’t have that background? So, that made me realize, like okay, I need to learn. I need to keep growing as a person, as a future social worker. I need to continue expanding my knowledge. So, I noticed that I needed more mental health background when I worked with my kids. And that made me realize I need to further my education so I can meet my clients’ needs; so I can better know how to work with a child that has ADHD, or has dementia, or has a mental disability. It made me realize I need to further my knowledge, I need to grow as a social worker.

At the beginning of A’s senior year, she experienced a significant challenge. A was involved in a very serious auto accident. She suffered a major head concussion that resulted in loss of class time, school work, and debilitating pain and headaches. She had difficulty concentrating and reading, frequently needing to rest. The memories of the experience still create anxiety for her when she drives. A has persisted through this
experience with a goal-driven mindset. She did not withdraw from school, but she took this event as a sign to assess her priorities.

I think it also has to do a lot with your attitude and how you see things; and I always said to myself, “Sometimes God gives you… puts you in positions to make you realize, wait, you need to slow down. You need to slow down because you’re just pushing yourself to the extreme.” So, I think that this car accident made me realize, like, “Wait I need to appreciate more of myself.” I need to appreciate more my family and I need to slow down, because I’m just rush, rush, rush, rush, and I’m not looking at myself, and I’m not really paying attention to things that I really need to be paying attention to.

A excitingly shared that she has decided to take some time off after she graduates this month. She plans on taking a one-month vacation back to Mexico with her husband and children. We ended the interview discussing the importance of self-care and the role that spirituality plays in her life. She believes the experiences over the past two years have made her more of a spiritual person. Her spirituality has helped her view situations more positively in order to get through them. She expresses more mindfulness and meditates more often. She has also been inspired by her social work professors and believes it is important to surround oneself with inspirational, supportive people.

B. Interview 5 – Student B

“When I left the reservation, she kept telling me, “You’re going to do something. You’re going to be somebody. You’re going to come back and, you know, you’re going to make something of yourself.” Student B
Student “B” is a 35-year-old female that identifies as ‘Dine’ from the Navajo Nation. She is married, and the mother of two children. She is employed part-time, and works in an unpaid internship approximately 20 hours per week. She is finishing her last semester of college as a full-time student. B is the middle child of three girls. She was raised primarily by her mother and grandmother. Her parents divorced when she was 8 years old. She is the first in her family of origin to receive a baccalaureate degree.

The early years. B grew up on the Navajo reservation among a tight knit, rural reservation community of multiple disparities and barriers including poverty; poor education and healthcare; long distance access to goods and services; and high rates of alcoholism, drug use, violence, and gang activity. At the age of 13, her mother pressured her to apply to attend a type of dormitory-based high school in an urban community, 200 miles away from her home. B described that it was not her decision. She explained:

She [mother] was very protective. I guess, she wanted more for me. She knew that the cousins and friends that I had were influential, she thought… I think she was just trying to make sure that I continued my education and not be involved with whatever mayhem that my cousins were getting into… It [the off-reservation school] was only open for different types of Native Americans, and we would have to receive permissions from our school board. They would have to look at our grade records, and I would have to write a letter of interest why I wanted to leave the reservation because the dorm [school] was in X… it was on one of our closer border town reservations; so, once I went through that process, I
was able to be accepted into the dormitory. Then, from the dormitory, I had to keep a certain grade level average to stay in that dormitory.

B sought employment while enrolled in high school. She did some modeling and retail sales. She explained that the employment was short lived, “Mainly because I was living in a dorm since I was 14 until when I graduated high school. So, transportation was an issue, and I did not see myself at a fast food joint.”

When not away from the reservation, she mostly lived with her grandmother and her aunt, who she felt the closest to. Her aunt did not have any children, so it was mostly the three of them. From time to time, she would stay with her mother, father, and sisters; occasionally, one of her cousin’s sisters would also reside in the home. The residences were in close proximity to each other.

B graduated from the distant off-reservation high school and was encouraged by a guidance counselor to explore college options. B did not think at the time that college was for her. She emphasized that she had a very independent personality. She shared, “I didn’t know what to do. I had no plans at all to continue. I think it was more of, “Don’t tell me what to do until I figure it out.” Shortly after high school, at 18 years old, B became pregnant. “So, it wasn’t until I got pregnant at a very young age that I figured out what needed to be done… once I figured out I was pregnant, I thought about jobs, I thought about my whole lifespan.

Education formation. B secured employment at a Head Start program on the reservation with the help of her sister. The second year she advanced into a position working as a disability teacher assistant. B really enjoyed the experience. In her third
year, she was referred to another advanced position with Head Start. At 22 years old, she decided that she wanted to be a teacher and decided to apply to a tribal college to pursue her teaching degree. B started college on a part-time basis and took on another job working at the local hospital. She also worked as a waitress. Her medical experiences influenced her to switch gears and pursue a nursing degree or something in the medical field. She lived on school scholarships and part-time employment. She was able to secure full-time employment as a medical emergency responder and then continued schooling to become a licensed EMT. This experience took place over five years. B aggressively persisted through her training and felt driven to make a difference.

I was an intern for maybe less than a year and then I got my basics. I quickly moved up the ranks because… every time I was in my rural community and my limitations were so short. I couldn’t be able to assist a client or a patient that I wanted, so I knew that I needed a higher level to help this client and I just… it became more of a need to… this is what I need to do. And, that’s where I kept wanting to go bigger.

When B was asked about what fueled her employment and education motivation, she shared that her father was helpful in supporting her financial needs for education, such as books, tuition, etc. When she had her first child, she decided that she wanted to be successful and not fulfill any negative prophecy from her friends and family. B shared that she has always been a person that did not want to depend on any one or be told what to do. If someone had a negative opinion of her, she would prove them wrong. She believed the ongoing encouragement and support she got from her sisters and other
extended family members, and her now husband, had a direct influence on her success in higher education.

After marrying her husband, she and her immediate family relocated to the Phoenix area. This transition was difficult for her. She had to find a part-time job, take a significant pay cut; her children had to start new schools and daycare. She still had dreams of pursuing a nursing career and started part-time coursework at a community college. She wanted to make a difference in her community; and “even take over Indian Health Service”… [IHS] shouldn’t be run the way it is, and there were certain people you knew that would run the hospital so, I was like, “I’ll be that person.” B completed her associate degree, but continued to question what career would be right for her. She emphasized that she did not have anyone to help her decide what to do next. This was a significant barrier for her. She spent a lot of time researching jobs and education requirements. She shared how she decided to pursue a baccalaureate degree in social work, and was strongly influenced in this direction by her grandmother.

I wanted to help my tribe. I wanted to, you know, change policies, or give them resources. And, you know, do all of these exciting things that I kept thinking about, but I felt like it never existed. So, it wasn’t until I actually talked to somebody who understood what I wanted to become.

B was strongly motivated by her grandmother to persist through her challenges:

When I left the reservation, she kept telling me, you know, “you’re going to do something. You’re going to be somebody. You’re going to come back and, you know, you’re going to make something of yourself.” And, like… I love my
grandma because I knew she wanted the best for me. And so that was... I guess that left a big mark, because I kept sitting there, like, “What does she mean?”

**Challenge and persistence.** B made the decision to start the undergraduate social work program full-time. She would receive her baccalaureate degree in two years. She describes her experience as, “really hard when I first started.” B describes her transfer shock experience:

Our first assignment, I feel like I bombed it because... I guess I just didn’t know what social work was. Like, I was in this program. I have this dream. I have these ideas. I have these goals. But, you’re in this program and you have to use, you know, skills. And I didn’t know most of what it meant and we’re supposed to dissect this movie, and I’m like, “I hope I’m doing this right,” but I really couldn’t feel the connection. I struggled a lot because it was like finding myself at the same time... using all these different... questions, and practicing on students. It was hard because I didn’t feel comfortable giving so much information, and it just made me super uncomfortable for the first semester. And, there was nobody I could talk to because I had sisters who were, you know, in the medical field, or I had, you know, cousins who were in the medical field. I had nobody to turn to. It was just a huge struggle for me.

B described another challenge as being the only Native American in her cohort and the lack of knowledge and understanding about who she was and her culture. She described that “everything else was easy.” Her struggle with how her peers assumed and generalized about her was frustrating.
There was the part that I was Native American and that was a big… it was so frustrating to think and I couldn’t believe that everybody thought that Native Americans had everything paid for them… And I would get defensive, and upset, and frustrated, and I think I kind of made people realize that we were all different, hopefully. Some people, not so much, but that’s okay… They’ll never know. I constantly have to defend myself.

B also described the challenge of paying for school. She did not get any federal aid, so she had to seek out other resources. Financial struggles made her think about quitting school. She emphasized, “and I’m already the type of person that doesn’t ask for help…and I kind of figured it out on my own.” She shared how obtaining a scholarship from the Navajo Nation was a very stressful struggle. Paperwork was frequently lost; phone calls were not returned. She did eventually obtain a scholarship from her tribe the first year, but decided not to go through the struggle of obtaining assistance the second year because of the previous negative experience. She discussed her strategies for finding money to pay for books and tuition. She paid her tuition with a low interest credit card and made regular payments. She identified it as a behavior that she developed growing up.

But, I have this whole plan and even before as a single mother, I’ve always had a small plan… organized plan… I had a schedule, a set routine down. So that way, you know, if something happened, or if my vehicle broke down, because that’s happened before. That’s been a big struggle. You know… I learned from that barrier that I had; and I would try to fix it or prepare for it and that’s what I
constantly did as a child. Even when I left home, certain things would happen. I couldn’t afford a lot of the trips that the other kids did because my mother was also a single parent, so… I took odd-end jobs. I was like, okay, what pays the most right now and how can I get this much money and then you know, still play around and mess around, and then go to school… I had this whole plan, if you will. So, it was just… it was just this ongoing mindset.

B experienced challenges in developing and writing her assignments. She identified the three greatest challenges being in the social work program as: the assignments, paperwork, and finding myself. Much of her coursework required writing papers and analyzing questions. She identified this as a big struggle. She would get information mixed up and often had to redo them once they were submitted. She shared the learning struggles that plagued her from an early age. She shared strategies that tried to keep her learning challenges hidden.

I think it was because I knew I was going to have a test, and I already had a strategy for my test, so I figured, I don’t want to be in those classes, and I knew a way, just like I did with everything. I figured that that’s what was going to happen and I planned that. You know, I didn’t want to be in this type of situation. I don’t want people to look down on me so I made sure that I comprehend everything I did, and I did it carefully.

Although B would get frustrated and worried about finances and doing well in her courses, her persistence prevailed with every hurdle. She shared that the biggest influences in continuing her education was the support she received from family
members, especially her husband, grandmother, and other family. B was driven to reach her academic goals so she could pursue the dream to make a difference in her tribe. She has a plan.

I have this plan or idea to start some type of organization and… that has some type of social work… big social work agency that I can bring to the reservation where they can treat substance abuse; where they can counsel veterans… where they can counsel women… people from domestic violence, not just necessarily women. You know, we can have services, provide resources; where they can come to my agency. And if there’s a LBGTQ person who needs a home or a place to live, because they were kicked out of their house, they could come to my agency. That is my ideal goal is to start this whole organization. I don’t know how, and I guess this is what I’ve always wanted to do. And, like I said, until I got that phone call, and someone told me, like, “This is what you do as a social worker. And, that’s my motivation!”

C. Interview 6 – Student C

“There’s a lot of things that get affected. A lot of goals that you let go of because you have a bigger picture for yourself.” Student C

Student “C” is a 26-year-old Hispanic single male. He is a full-time enrolled senior in the social work program and has maintained full-time employment in the mental health field throughout his baccalaureate education. He is the youngest of seven children and lives with his elderly father. His parents divorced when he was 4 years old. C does not have his citizenship papers and has been attending school with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status.
The early years. C was 9 months old when he immigrated with his teen parents from Mexico to the U.S. By the time C was in 6th grade, he knew that he wanted to get a college degree someday. Education was something that C always enjoyed. He said it was almost like a hobby. C came from a Mexican family system where his father and siblings worked in construction and the food service industry. It was a cultural norm for C; everyone appeared content with what they were doing. His father encouraged him to stay in school and get a good education, as to avoid working in heavy labor jobs. He explained what it was like growing up in his home:

So, I came from a home that nobody really talked about the importance of going to school. It was more of, well, we go to work because we need to pay for stuff and that’s kind of what we do. And I grew up with my dad. So it was kind of like, well if you go to school… you won’t have to do this type of work, you know, if you continue going to school… so you don’t have to work like I work. Because he’s always working construction.

C recalled never receiving any support or assistance with school work. His father had only completed 6th grade and married very young. In Mexico, his father worked with his family. C’s siblings were much older than him; most did not value attending school. C remembers having to stay motivated to do his work, although learning was easy for him. Although his father had only primary education from Mexico, he was quick to remind C of the importance of continuing. C recalls a story about how he supported his older sister to complete her high school education. C was only 14 years old at the time; his sister was 15 and pregnant:
I actually had to, push her to finish school because she got pregnant, and she was not going to go to school anymore; and at that time, I already had a vehicle, so I would pick her up every morning at 4:45 and take her and myself to school. I had to go to a different type of school to be able to help her finish and we graduated together. So, she graduated a year late… it was me and her… but before that we only had one sister which was kind of like our mom that graduated [from high school]. And I remember that I just told her, all I want is for you to finish school… what you do and what happens after that, like, I’m going to support you, but the only thing I’m going to be mad at, is if you don’t finish school. So, that’s what I did. I must have been almost 15, she was going to be 16.

Even at 12 years old, C knew that he wanted to have a career one day that could help people. C participated in career days during high school. He once took a career interest test; it identified social work as an appropriate career.

I want to do, I don’t know, work… just help people… I wanted to be a counselor. I wanted to talk to people about their problems and how to deal with it, because for some reason I felt like I had a lot of problems, and I dealt with them pretty okay. So, I wanted to be there for somebody else. Like, for other people as a support because… I remember thinking, like, “If I have these experiences, I’m assuming other people have them too.”

Education formation. In his teen years, C worked part-time in food service jobs. While C was finishing high school, he decided to enroll in a few courses at a local community college. C graduated six months early from high school and remained
enrolled in the community college on a part-time basis. It took C nine years to complete his associates degree. C recalls, “I had to pay out of pocket, so that’s what we could afford. It was like, one or two classes here and there. I think I might have taken a semester off here and there just because I needed to catch up on other bills and stuff like that.” C did not feel that he received much guidance from advisors and career counselors. At times, he felt like he was floundering, but continued to complete courses. He expressed discouragement over the lack of support he received. Because C did not have any type of permanent residency status in the U.S., he was not eligible for any financial aid. C always felt at a disadvantage to other students. He recalls that laws were always changing. Tuition for college was sometimes twice or three times higher because he did not have legal status. Advisors did not know how to counsel him. When asked if C ever thought of giving up and not continuing his education, he shared:

Yeah. A lot of times. I think that a lot of it had to do with the maturity and the level of support around me, because it wasn’t only being a student and coming from a family that wasn’t what a family should look like, in a sense of it was a broken family. So, when it comes to the emotional and support and maturity wasn’t there, so a lot of the times having this extra pressure was really difficult, because it was like, “Well, why do I have to continue if I have all this other stuff to deal with? And nobody else did it, so why should I? … They seem like they’re living okay, so then why should I keep going?” But, I don’t know, somehow, I just kept going. I kept going and I remember… I think that [my] friend… she really motivated me to continue…. I started working in a place
where everybody else was talking about going to school and continuing education and I just kept going… I just kept going. Even now, like, I’ve learned so much and I’ve been able to do so much, and I still want to continue.

While C was enrolled in college, he became employed for a few years in a Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) program where he was able to help new mothers obtain nutritional assistance. C went on to obtain employment in a human service organization as an integrated health service assistant. He has remained at this organization, advancing into more responsible human service-oriented positions.

**Challenge and persistence.** C shared a wealth of stories about his challenges and persistence. He helped his sister finish high school; he contributed financially to his family, making many sacrifices. He kept on moving forward. C persisted through barriers of legal and financial hurdles that discouraged him from completing his two-year degree. C had a ‘matter of fact’ attitude about his challenges. At 25 years old, he completed his Associate degree. He credits a good family friend to being his greatest cheerleader and trying to surround himself with persons that have the same goals and want the same things.

C recollected that he always got in trouble in elementary and secondary school for talking too much. He still is easily distracted and has difficulty reading, although he enjoys it. He was often discouraged by his teachers and counselors through his education career. He shared in humor that he has always been a ‘helper’ and now he is able to transfer those childhood memories to children that he works with. He explained with humor, “I was easily distracted. I wanted to help other people instead of finishing my
homework… And sometimes I would hurry up and finish mine, and then I would go and help other people. So, those were my struggles.”

He found humor in his struggles and his personal calling to the social work profession:

   It’s funny because now that I work in behavioral health and sometimes I see kids and they’re getting in trouble for the same things… I can see how bright they are and I feel that, you know, I remember 6th grade social studies teacher told me, like, “Well, you’re never going to be anything in your life.” Like, he talked so much, “Here, that’s all you’re going to do,” you know. And now, it’s funny because I’m getting paid for talking. And so, that was one of my struggles and, I don’t know, because I had good grades, I just wasn’t able to pay attention for so long.

C shared at length about the language challenges he still experiences. Because his family of origin primarily speaks Spanish, he is continuously challenged with the English language at both work and school.

The turning point for C to decide to continue his education beyond community college is when he enrolled in an introduction to social work course at his community college. He learned more about the profession and participated in a presentation from a baccalaureate degree transfer program. C could complete his Associates degree and transfer easily to the B.A. in social work program while remaining on the community college campus site. The growing amount of experiences he was having in professional helper roles in his employment also helped him decide that a social work degree was a good fit for him. His best friend and his roommate encouraged him. When he began the
B.A. program, he felt affirmed that this was the right track and that he’d eventually want to pursue his master’s degree in social work.

C had difficulty identifying challenges other than general finances and the added stress of writing and translating from his primary language to English. Writing has been a struggle for him. He did emphasize that pursuing his baccalaureate degree required sacrifice. Time management, relationships, and personal stress were all things that he had to deal with. C emphasized that his greatest goal is to get his social work degree. His goal helped him figure things out when the going got rough. He explained:

There’s a lot of things that get affected; a lot of goals that you let go of because you have a bigger picture for yourself. And, I think that priority, because being a full-time employee and having my full-time career development, you know, going to school and working on that, takes a lot from a family and other relationships. So, I’ve had to really construct myself around what I really expect for myself and I have to be okay with letting go of some of the other things that I really wanted.

He described the mindset that he developed to persist through his academic obligations:

Because there’s a lot of things that happen outside of school. There’s a lot of things that go on. Life continues and school is a hat you wear. You know, you’re a student, it’s a hat you wear when you’re in school and when you’re out of school... You know, you’re always learning. You’re always a student, but you’re really wearing different hats all the time, I feel, when it comes to family, relationships, school, work, it’s just different… So one of my biggest challenges
was being able to stay motivated and... being able to handle the pressure of having to stay focused.

C shared many personal emotions about how completing his degree and persisting through his employment and school expectations have taken a toll on relationships that he hoped he could have invested more time into. In the same story, he shared the many positive connections he had with persons that encouraged him to complete his degree. He expressed appreciation for the teachers and staff that worked with him individually to overcome financial and writing obstacles. The social work program helped him understand himself and what others are going through in their lives. With each story, he persisted in growing as a young adult and as a student. He kept his career goals as his priority. C explained:

There’s that one thing that you really, really love to do because it helps you feel like you’re someone. Because I felt like... school was something for me that I’m learning; and I’m learning from other people that I never would have encountered if I didn’t continue school; and I’ve learned so much... I’ve had such a different experience now that I’m older... Honestly, I don’t know why I stayed in school before, but I know why it’s worth it now.

The one thing that he said really impacted his ability to complete his degree was the support he was surrounded with by his family and friends:

I knew that it wasn’t only about me wanting it anymore. It was about other people believing that I could. Because for the longest time...my dad, and...my siblings...want to say they’re happy for me, and they’re coming to my graduation;
so that’s exciting… because I see that there’s people that really care about me also becoming someone, and that wasn’t there before.

D. Interview 7 – Student D

“I didn’t understand at first what was being said, but once I got in the book, I was like, “I lived through all of this,” and you know, I just didn’t know how to put it together.” Student D

Student “D” is a 57-year-old African American woman who started community college when she was 50 years old. She is married with two living children, (two are deceased). She has been employed part-time throughout her schooling and is currently completing a 20 hour per week senior internship that recently transferred into an employment position.

The early years.  D grew up in Florida as the sixth daughter of nine children. When she was 12 years old, she moved to Iowa with her mother and siblings. This was a major transition for her being a young African American in a predominantly white community. She had difficulty in high school and was expelled. Under the pressure of her mother, she then attempted to complete her high school requirements in the Job Corps, but got expelled from that program also. At 17, she found out that she was pregnant. The father of her child and her mother pressured her to get her GED. At 18, she completed her GED through another program, motivated by the fact that she would be eligible for employment with the phone company if she had her GED. D then moved with family members and her son to Colorado where she remained employed for 20 years. At 20 years old, she had a second child that passed away at six weeks old. Her sisters and mother remained very supportive of her though those turbulent years. While
in Colorado, she met her present husband. D, her sisters, and present husband then relocated to New Mexico to be with her mother. D married and then moved to Arizona.

**Education formation.** At 50 years old, D found herself in a new community once again; her husband had started college on the G.I. Bill and D was faced with decisions about her future. Her husband encouraged her to go to a local community college and take a career interest inventory and academic placement exams. With the strong support from her husband and community college admission in place, D started classes as a full-time student at 50 years old. D recalls that she was the oldest in all of her classes. She emphasized how new everything was to her, including basic technology skills that were required of her if she were to succeed. She took many risks, reaching out to peers to help her navigate the college system and learn how to use the computer. She frequently experienced fears and apprehensions, but she was also very excited about learning; taking many risks to succeed. There were times when she made attempts to connect with some older African American students at the college, but she felt that she did not fit well with them. She persisted in making connections that would support her learning. She developed a sense of belonging:

I just kind of did my own thing, and I found my niche because… I knew a lot of people on the X campus; and I’m so thankful. I could go in any department and they know who I am, and I can get what I need. Not what I want, but I get what I need. And it’s really a good feeling. That’s where I found a lot of friends.

She had decided from the very beginning of her community college coursework that she wanted to pursue a four-year degree in social work, although she did not have a
lot of confidence that she could be successful. Growing up, she observed her mother active in the community and served as a role model for D. She knew that she would eventually have to transfer out of the community college system to get her baccalaureate degree, so she worked closely with advisors to complete the correct prerequisite transfer courses. While enrolled at the community college, she pursued various work study and service-learning opportunities to understand the profession better. These were very rewarding experiences for D. Her skills and confidence was reinforced and kept her motivated. She reiterated situations when her family and husband were very supportive of her academic success. These experiences reinforced her desire to pursue social work and helped persist toward her academic goals.

**Challenge and persistence.** D was influenced by her peers and husband to transfer into a baccalaureate degree social work program. She chose a program was delivered on her community college campus in a hybrid format with in-class and online learning. She believed that the individual attention she received from her faculty and advisor on assignment struggles supported her persistence. When addressing questions related to her preparation for upper level courses, she explained how her challenges turned into exciting learning moments:

I didn’t understand at first what was being said, but once I got in the book, I was like, “I lived through all of this,” and you know, I just didn’t know how to put it together. I didn’t realize, which I should have, because, quite frankly, we did grow up on the system… powdered milk and cheese and stuff like that here. But still, my mother didn’t talk about, and I didn’t know… All I knew was that I was
never hungry. Never hungry. So, as we’re in public [policy] class, talking about these systems, and I’m just like, “Wow,” and so I found that a lot of it, I kind of knew because I was like, kind of caught up in it.

D has experienced some significant crisis and losses in her life while she has been pursuing her degree. She referred briefly about having a sister murdered in a domestic violence situation and another sister having a heart transplant. During D’s last year in her baccalaureate program [2016], she experienced an unexpected tragic death of her 29-year-old son. D embraced the crisis and continued moving forward. She shared:

So, I was in school and I never thought about quitting; because I knew I needed something to keep me busy, so, and that’s the main thing I did. In fact, I was running so hard, I was training for a manager position in my job, and I never stopped doing that… And in fact, nobody on the job even knew. I didn’t even tell them. I was still just doing my thing, and trying to be myself…

Because… I don’t know, I just didn’t want them to feel sorry for me, and they didn’t really know me like that… I was only there, maybe 5 months, and I just didn’t want to, you know, I don’t know, pressure them with that… It’s just like Beyonce, “don’t tell anybody anything until, like, you feel good about it.”... and then they can look back and say, “Wow,” and they’re going to say, “D”, you really went through that and you didn’t tell us?” And that way, you know, I just want to inspire somebody to, you know… we all go through something.

D also shared about the role spirituality was playing in her ability to face challenges head on and persist.
I love the Lord. I believe that He guides me, gives me my strength, and keeps me going. [The Lord] takes care of my family, me, and my husband… You know, he’s [husband] not perfect and I’m not perfect, but 17 years and we’re just doing it. I don’t worry about, you know, anything, and yeah. [God is] a huge, huge part.

Part IV – Common and Contrasting Themes Among
the Department Chair and Faculty Groups

There were commonalities and surprising differences expressed among the department chair/faculty groups. Going forward, I refer to all of these persons as educators. If there is a significant point about an interviewee or subgroup, I will articulate that reference. I am sensitive to the fact that the responses were impacted somewhat by my methods of collection (face-to-face interview with the department chair, and virtual face-to-face conferencing through Zoom with the two faculty focus groups). The department chair was interviewed at her/his home with few interruptions. The two faculty focus group participants were either on a home computer or in their office. Some faculty struggled with poor home internet connections; a couple of faculty felt stressed for time; some faculty were not prepared at the time the interview was supposed to start. Particularly with the first faculty focus group, there was a greater sense of chaos and minimal preparation. A fourth faculty in the Southwest group was unable to attend because she got a flat tire on the way to her office.

My biggest take-away from interviewing these faculty was the incredible commitment they had to their students. Teaching in their program sites was not an occupation, but a calling. Everything each faculty did in their academic institution was
relationship-based. Every faculty reminded me of a mother hen; watching, guiding, and protecting their young. I was also surprised in the cathartic experience that these faculty found in participating in my research. I experienced a parallel process of challenge and persistence between the faculty and their students. Every school year seemed to be another new beginning of teaching, learning, understanding, struggling, and triumphs.

**Common Themes**

Commonalities among the majority of educators included a lack of demonstrated preparation readiness for the interview. Although I prepared each participant for the interview process the same way, which included a list of guiding questions and a demographic questionnaire that was given several days prior to the interview, many educators voiced that they had not taken the time to review guiding interview questions or completing their demographic background sheet. Some faculty did not have the correct technology equipment to communicate seamlessly, although I informed them of the instructions and technology requirements prior to the event. I believe that this was not indicative of their lack of interest in the topic or process, but more a symptom of their demanding schedules as educators and various learning styles. Nevertheless, it is important to note.

Teaching strategies and supportive tactics among the faculty required continual refinement. Faculty felt that they needed to “always be thinking on their feet.” Teaching pedagogies that worked one year, might need to be reexamined the next year. All faculty acknowledge the reality of student diversity in their classroom; diversity in age, life
experience, intersectionality, and cultural context. Faculty needed to be skilled in multiple adult learning styles and methods of delivering the same content.

Working with nontraditional students required a mastery in classroom/student management skills. Faculty were often dealing with students who were academically ill prepared, especially in writing and critical thinking; students had self-doubts about their abilities, fighting demons from a history of failures and negative experiences in education. Their students required ongoing affirmations and often individual attention outside of the classroom to support students learning and program retention. There was either a lack of institutional support resources for students, such as in writing tutoring; or, students had services available, but did not use them. Faculty experienced students as having incongruent personal awareness, often thinking their abilities and skills were greater than they were. Sometimes students would battle the social work program or the institution with a sense of entitlement to accommodations because of their personal circumstances. All faculty shared stories about how they had to be very assertive and set limitations with students. Each faculty had their own style or methods to intervene with difficult nontraditional students.

Students experienced college transfer shock. This transfer challenge was routinely experienced by all students their first year of transfer. There was a consensus that nontraditional transfer students were ill-prepared for critically thinking and writing learning integration papers. It was believed that the community college system spent more time ‘teaching to the test’, assessing students with objective multiple-choice exams, rather than applied learning opportunities. Educators experienced students needing to
spend a significant amount of time adjusting to the academic rigor of higher level courses.

**Students were challenged by multiple personal struggles.** Faculty unanimously cited multiple examples of day to day life challenges this student population encounters that adversely affects their ability to either perform to their true ability or complete their degree program. Because nontraditional students are usually working in jobs and internships, caring for family members, and experiencing financial aid denials due to ineligibility, they struggle with the time and attention that school work demands. Student mental health concerns or crisis such as death in the family, an unplanned pregnancy, divorce, or even homelessness was intertwined challenges creating anxiety and depression. Many students also identified as having mental health challenges upon entering the program. Student requests for learning accommodations or counseling support services were common.

**Financial stress had a ripple effect.** Above all, tuition, texts, and other costs related to attending school was the biggest challenge for their students. Financial assistance opportunities for nontraditional transfer students were diminishing annually. Federal and state budget cuts for higher education assistance, students exhausting their financial aid limits because they have been enrolled in the community college system beyond their limited years, or students that are unable to obtain school loans due to inadequate income or poor credit rating. These ongoing pressures affected students in multiple academic functions.
Strategies that supported student success and persistence. The use of intentional strategies to promote academic success appeared to be universal with these faculty. There were generally two categorical approaches that faculty and administration relied on to support student success. The first method involved relational approaches in providing support and mentoring. Students are provided interpersonal opportunities to monitor their successes in the program. This may occur in regular individual advisement, small group assignments, in-class quizzes, peer feedback opportunities, and learning community building activities such as pizza parties and ice breaker exercises. The second pragmatic approach involves intentional strategic planning in teaching methodologies and site-specific program delivery. These intentional efforts address the environmental context of students (urban, rural, tribal, and lengths of commuting), and adult learning strategies sensitive to student remedial needs. Approaches such as hybrid program delivery (online and on ground), full-time and part-time enrollment options, evening course scheduling, classes offered on smaller and familiar community college campus sites, utilization of a flipped classroom model that encourages vibrant dialogue and critical thinking, and in-class exercises that build a learning community, were observable on all sites.

Some educators commented on one student support element that was only evident on the community college campus sites for their associate degree seeking students. Generally, community college systems were viewed as providing more comprehensive institutional infrastructures that are specifically built to support students through [associate] degree completion. Examples cited were: As a community college enrolled
student, there were more population specific services such as TRIO (first-generation), Hoop of Learning (American Indian), and Veterans Outreach that provided comprehensive support services for learning, financial aid, and completion tracking. The community college system also provided several remedial courses addressing reading, writing, critical thinking, college readiness, and ELL learning. The baccalaureate distant social work program sites offered minimal, if any, of these site-based services. The main campus, which primarily serves traditional age students, provided opportunities for student engagement, tutors, and culturally sensitive supports. Faculty believed that extending such services and courses to nontraditional baccalaureate students on distant campus sites were important to student retention and completion. It is interesting to note though, that even with heavy remedial opportunity and support on the community college campuses, these transfer students are still moving into baccalaureate programs ill equipped for writing and learning demands.

**Contrasting Themes**

Differences in participant responses appeared to be somewhat reflective of their roles within the education system. Unexpectedly, I observed interestingly different attitudes and worldviews between the department chair, the faculty group #1 (Southwest), and faculty group #2 (Midwest) when discussing nontraditional transfer students. Each of the three interviews expressed a different tone and philosophy about student challenges, persistence, and success. In addition, depending on what geographical location their program was delivered, faculty would prospectively identify student issues more reflective of their population, especially in the area of cultural norms and
expectations. Thus, the following contrasting themes are broken down between subgroup informants.

The chair of the social work department was the first person that I interviewed in this study. This faculty person has a more administratively responsible role than the other eight faculty that participated in the focus groups. I needed to take this into consideration as I crafted my questions and facilitated the individual interview. Of all the interviews, my experience with the department chair was the most non-emotional/matter of fact. The department chair expressed greater frustration and hardline thinking about his/her students, faculty, and college institution. This person possessed the longest period working with nontraditional students and was often the first person in an educational system to have to deal with infractions of student behavior, policies, and out of date regulations. The department chair gave several examples of students challenging the program or the college, with exhaustion over ill-prepared students or lack of college understanding and sensitivity to this student population.

Faculty focus group #1 was made up of two community college social work faculty leaders and an undergraduate baccalaureate social work program faculty located in a Southwestern state in the U.S. All three were instructors in the Southwest. Transfer students currently enrolled in the undergraduate social work program examined were often referred by the community college faculty participating in this interview. Keeping this context in mind, this faculty group described student challenges in robust detail. Nontraditional transfer students were described as a fierce, resilient, persevering group that experienced chronic hurdles; often with cultural expectation clashes and extreme
poverty. The lack of college preparation at both the community college and senior institution levels were staggering concerns. This condition was greatly influenced by student struggles with English as their second language and the need to be employed in one or more jobs while attending school and their internship. Contemporary political events especially around immigration and family detention/deportation crises were common themes with many students. The students that these faculty described were also confronted by self-defeat and weak authenticity. This population per capita had a less amount of first generation associate degree level history, let alone four-year degree. Higher education role models for these nontraditional students were less accessible. Interestingly, I experienced this faculty group to be very committed to their students’ success, no matter what it took; much like their student population: fierce, relentless, resilient, and persevering.

Faculty focus group #2 was made up of five undergraduate social work faculty; each having coordinator, advisement, and teaching responsibilities on various Midwest distant education sites of the college’s social work program. This group represented a much larger population of nontraditional students than in focus group #1. These faculty described the nontraditional student learner in more detail that the first faculty group. Interestingly, this faculty group also spent more time emphasizing the strengths and qualities of the nontraditional student, even in the issues and dilemmas they experienced. While this might have been influenced by the larger number in the group, this focus group had more of a spirit of, “We’re all in this together, and nontraditional student are super!” One faculty even exclaimed, “I love nontraditional students!” This faculty group
also focused more on identifying student ‘obligations’ outside of the classroom. For this group, these obligations were viewed less of a negative feature, but rather a piece of who they are. These faculty identified a developmental process that students experience in their path to degree completion. This faculty group also seemed to ‘think outside of the box’ a bit more when it required being creative to course delivery and positive student outcomes.

I believe that one reason for the difference in responses was that the first faculty group, which included two community college instructors, is often bombarded with different faculty performance expectations; larger student numbers in courses and heavier teaching loads. If their course enrollment does not meet the institution enrollment standard, often 25 or 30 students, their course is cancelled. This potentially results in less pay and stressors of having to teach a course at the last minute, that they are not prepared to teach. This faculty group may also be more isolated in colleague support. The second faculty group experiences smaller class sizes and greater collegial acknowledgement, collaboration, and support. The first faculty group also taught in a slightly different context, so they could not as easily address some of the questions as the second group.

Part V – Common and Contrasting Themes Among Students

The richness of stories and personal feelings that were shared is reflective of the significantly diverse student group that I had the honor of interviewing. I was most eager to hear details of their harrowing struggles and challenges with the anticipation of finding new meaning to my past experiences with nontraditional transfer students. I was searching for the ‘secret’ to finding ways that could positively impact students to reach
their degree attainment goals. Just like my students, I want to make a difference in people’s lives; to be a change agent. How could I understand the connection between challenge and success for nontraditional students? Every student interview, left me emotionally exhausted and passionately uplifted; much like what the students had shared about their journey to degree completion.

**Common Themes**

**Demographic similarities.** Identifying the demographic similarities of the student participants set the stage for understanding their struggle. All students came from large families that were living in poverty. They grew up in extended family systems with single parent and relative nurturing. Three of the four students were married with children; all identifying significant caregiving responsibilities. While none of the students’ parents had completed a high school degree, they were supportive of their children pursuing post high school education. The sentiment was that a college education would help you get ahead and provide you better employment opportunities.

**Significant supportive persons.** Significant supportive persons that pressured and encouraged them to embark on a college education and complete their degree were anchors to their success. These individuals were long term supports for the student. All students began minimum wage employment in their later teens, and persisted with employment throughout their college years. Their employment was identified as an important activity to contribute to their household/family. Students and their support systems viewed a college education as an opportunity to support the greater good of the
family. The students shared stories of numerous geographical relocations during their child and adult years which were fueled by seeking greater opportunity for the family.

**A major event or circumstance.** For these students, there was a major life event or circumstance that influenced their decision to begin a community college education; birth of a child, struggle of a family member, or status change of a spouse were examples. These events seemed to fuel the students’ passions for education goals. Three of the four students shared stories of struggling in secondary education. All students were at a crossroads when they felt that their current employment was not enough; their employment experiences appeared to positively support their decision-making about developing the long-term goal to complete a degree in social work.

**Fears of academic success.** Students routinely expressed a fear in succeeding in their college program related to a history of adverse experiences in personal, education, and/or employment. This created tensions about being successful in their community college and four-year institution. Students felt ill prepared for postsecondary learning. Students persisted through community college as part-time students for several years before transferring to the baccalaureate degree social work program.

**Major challenges.** Major challenges for these students were identified as: having the financial ability to support their family while enrolled in school, and the pressures of affording tuition and books; challenges of family responsibilities (i.e., caregiving to a child or parent); feelings of education unpreparedness-chronic challenges in writing, reading, and dissemination of learning; major life crisis during their college years (such as family death, auto accident, marital struggle, legal status). As students of color, they
were confronted with the realities of cultural clashes such as the role of being a Latino wife and mother, an undocumented migrant student, painful generalizations of Indigenous proprieties, or finding a sense of belonging in a diverse learning community.

**Persistence phenomenology.** Powerful persistent behaviors were one of the most impactful pieces for me in the research study. While these four students shared rich stories of struggles that began in early childhood, infused with developmental hurdles that could only result in failure, they all possessed a magical grit that guided their career aspirations and college completion goals. Every student persisted with the purpose of obtaining a professional helping degree that would allow them to ‘make a difference’ in their society. They had a passion for giving to others and they all identified that they ‘had a plan.’ Their challenges were diminished through positive self-talk and a keen desire to learn, understand, and take risks. These students are courageous in every sense. They had the capacity to embrace new learning opportunities and build upon developed knowledge. Each student identified the major reason for choosing to transfer from the community college and complete their baccalaureate degree, was the individual advisement attention and ongoing academic support they received from their receiving four-year institution; and easy accessibility through evening course delivery.

These students persisted through multiple roles and expectations whether it be in their family caregiving responsibilities, social relationships, or learning community. The students felt accountable to themselves, their family, and community. They all identified the importance of self-care/burn-out awareness and the strength that was gained from spiritual beliefs and esoteric thinking.
Contrasting Themes

Student differences were more difficult to identify, which is quite remarkable. Two of the students were English as a Second Language learners. They also travelled back and forth between Mexico and the U.S. during their child and young adult years. I believe this was an additional layer of academic challenge in all areas of higher level learning.

The age of each student diversely was reflected in their employment history, but interestingly, their grit and resilience to challenges appeared to not be associated with age, as one might assume. As an example, the old adage is, “if you have lived longer, you are able to roll with the punches easier.” The youngest and oldest student demonstrated the same positive, goal-driven, persevering attitude about life’s challenges.

Particularly with the two female Indigenous and Latina students, there appeared to be an extra layer of cultural tension between what is expected of a woman and the challenges they faced having to excel as a student, wife, and mother. This was also expressed with the faculty focus group #1 from the Southwest.

Part VI - Implicit Analysis

As I began my data collection, I was looking for student described challenges and persistence phenomenology. I quickly learned that there was another construct to student success that coexisted with my two big ideas. This enlightenment came after completing my interviews with the department chair and the two faculty focus groups (i.e., educators); it was emphatically reinforced after completing the individual student interviews. It left me astounded and transformed.
I could not complete my data analysis without pushing my findings further. Obviously, interpreting my findings into explicitly coded themes was not enough. My passion and ethics as a researcher pressured me to push the meaning of these findings further. I believe that the connection between my explicit and implicit findings are critically important to understanding student success and persistence among this population. This integral piece can create future conversation and research agendas.

The Educators

When the educators described how they perceived their students’ challenges and shortcomings, they were quick to emphasize their students’ strengths, energy, and persisting grit. I observed this as a parallel process between how the educators perceived their students and the roles they played in educating their students for success. As an influential unit, the administrator and faculty possessed a remarkable ability to develop, collaborate, and empower student success through a professional mindset of ongoing creative education strategies and professional vulnerability among themselves. These educators were in it for the long haul with a commitment to carry their students to the end. Just as the students identified their ongoing persistence as a calling, so did the educator group. Both the students and the educators had a strong emotional/relational investment in academic success and degree completion.

The Students

Each student’s story was not laden with descriptions of harrowing challenges impacting their college success; instead, they spoke of their challenges as inconsequential events to their success. The path to obtaining their baccalaureate degree was directly
related to the student’s self-efficacy. It was much more about the messages they told themselves about who they were and what they could do. They possessed the ability to harness positive influence and support; the ability to have dreams and create goals. The students all entered their baccalaureate degree program with apprehensions about being able to complete. They demonstrated the willingness to take courageous leaps into the unknown.

All Participants

Educators’ and students’ stories painted a powerful picture that wove together three common implicit themes:

(1) *Teaching and learning are a reciprocal, transformative process.* Freire (2008) emphasizes in many of his writings regarding the significance of the transformative relationship that moves between the student and their teacher, emphasizing that every teacher must also be willing to become a student in the education process. It was clearly evident in this data collection process that teachers were continually learning from their students; students learned from their teachers; students learned from each other; and the education process for these nontraditional students was very introspective. Students learned new facts and information about their academic topics, but students also learned about themselves and significant persons in their lives. This learning experience transforms the student, the teacher, and society.

(2) *Teaching and learning involve challenges of mutual goals and self-discovery.* Every participant, whether student or faculty, had a common goal of academic success and degree completion. Each participant could identify the roles and responsibilities they
had to make this occur. Faculty were faced with the responsibility to disseminate, teach, and support students with information and learning experiences that aided students in their learning and practice mastery. Students identified their importance of accomplishing the required tasks of their coursework, which included writing and mathematical skills, completing assignments on time, and prioritizing personal and student obligations. Everyone’s end goal was for the students to successfully obtain their baccalaureate degree and become an effective social worker.

(3) Teaching and learning are powerful tools. Participating in the roles of educator and student is dynamic, especially in the field of social work. The participants in this study, whether teachers or students, were constantly evaluating their motives, actions, and beliefs. Self-reflection was common and ongoing. Activities were frequently assessed in relation to others; concepts of boundaries, limitations, and self-care frequently came up in conversation. Faculty sometimes questioned if they were doing too much for the student, yet expressed frustration with not having enough time to give students the individual attention and support they needed. Students continuously grappled with their obligations to others and learning priorities that were regularly challenged. All participants voiced self-doubt at times about what they were doing and if it was the right thing to do. Ironically, this movement was transformative in personal growth and mastery.

Preview of Chapter Five

This chapter described my findings and critical components of analysis. Findings were coded and analyzed through the development of thematic coding. Explicit and
implicit information was described; meaning-making reflected the qualitative nature of how the data was collected. The following final chapter addresses summary and conclusions of this research. A synopsis of major findings in areas of challenge and persistence are discussed. Personal lessons learned and recommendations are shared. Research limitations are identified. Lastly, implications for future research and the dissemination of my findings are identified.
CHAPTER FIVE

Summary and Conclusions

Research Summary

My research approach was driven by a significant problem currently expressed in U.S. higher education; that problem was plummeting college degree completion (Sandeen, 2013). I am very passionate about this topic because of the work I do in higher education with nontraditional transfer students. I wanted to make a difference with my research. If I could somehow understand the problem better, I could share these new revelations with the higher education community. I proceeded to develop two questions that guided my inquiry: 1) How do nontraditional age students who transfer from a community college into an undergraduate degree social work program describe the challenges they experienced during their journey to baccalaureate degree completion? and 2) How do these students describe their personal efforts and/or the institutional factors that supported their ability to persist through their challenge toward degree completion? After an extensive literature review, I chose a data collection methodology that would give a qualitative voice to this topic, and include constituents that represented the higher education administration, faculty, and student perspectives. I believed that if I could identify how students experienced challenges, and from a strengths perspective, the
essence of their persistence, I could create new information on this complex topic. The choice to use triangulation theory to facilitate my data collection produced interesting surprises. By constructing a data collection strategy that started with administration, moving to faculty groups, and then to individual students, assisted me in approaching each interview subgroup and revealed a parallel meaning making process of struggle and persistence among all.

As part of the interview process, it is important to remember that participant interviews were guided by my research questions. As I collected my data, the two big ideas circulated around understanding challenges, listening for the barriers that created those challenges, and how I could objectify the phenomenology of persistence. I also listened for variables relating to educator best practices. My interview strategies increased the opportunity for freer flowing dialogue, allowing the participants to take the conversation where they wish. I created layers of questions that allowed my findings to be sifted into themes. This provided a greater opportunity to identify commonalities and contrasts in meaning-making and analysis. I immersed myself in scientific research pedagogy on qualitative coding and analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Saldana, 2016; Seidman, 2013; van Manen, 1990). My research experience resulted in findings that needed to go deeper than explicit thematic coding. I then stepped back and moved into examining deeper implicit meanings. The implicit meaning brought my entire research project to a new level of importance.

The data collected in this study came from interviews representing higher education administration, undergraduate social work faculty, and nontraditional transfer
students that were preparing to graduate with their bachelor degree. Responses to
research questions were reflections, ideas, and interpretations within the context of the
participant’s role and worldview. Through qualitative storytelling and meaning-making,
each participant provided rich data that enhanced ideas and knowledge. Research
findings were revealed through a framework of common and contrasting themes among
participants.

Challenges in Degree Completion

Students and faculty were quick to identify major challenges which were thematic
throughout the interview process. These explicit challenges affirmed what has been
expressed in literature. Major challenge phenomenon for these nontraditional transfer
students were: 1) comprehensive financial struggles associated with the cost of a college
education; 2) tensions between dual roles and responsibilities of being a college student
and family member, caregiver, and employee; 3) a substantial lack of preparation in
meeting scholarly expectations and academic standards of higher level coursework
(especially writing skills, critical thinking, and executive functions); 4) intersectionality
tensions between institutional, learning community, and family/community systems
associated with culture, religion, and/or race norms and expectations; and 5) transferred
into a baccalaureate degree program with an uncertainty of their ability to complete the
degree.
Because educators could articulate similar student challenges, this reflected a sensitivity to their students’ needs. Educators collaborated with their peers and students to create degree completion success for their students. Educators identified the importance of institutional support through creating support services and education delivery models that are sensitive to the needs of nontraditional adult learners.

Constructs address considerations for learning environment, accessibility, ongoing advisement and mentoring, and support systems. Secondly, through alleviating institutional barriers through strategic planning and creating programs that provide developmental advisement, academic skill building, cultural sensitivity, mental health support, and accessible education delivery models that support student degree completion. Lastly, while both faculty and students emphasized the urgency of higher education tuition reform, there was no discussion on how to address this affordability issue, except that students have chosen to attend part-time over several years.

**The Phenomenon of Persistence**

Students were successful and persisted when they were affirmed by faculty and felt connected to their institution, faculty, and peers. These nontraditional students emphasized the importance of experiencing a sense of belonging within the context of a
learning community. Through storytelling, the students readily emphasized their personal attributes of persistence, rather than dwelling on difficult challenges.

All of the students: 1) identified close relational ties to their family system; this positively impacted academic success but was also seen as a tension due to role expectations, 2) felt strongly supported to complete their education by person(s) in their family or community, 3) were employed during their college enrollment, 4) chose to attend community college part-time over several years due to affordability and caregiving responsibilities, 5) had a clear vision about their career choice when transferring to the baccalaureate program, 6) stated that their career choice was influenced by personal experiences in marginalization/disparity, 7) chose to complete their baccalaureate degree with the anticipation of economically sustainable employment, 8) courageously persisted through personal challenges while driven by their career goals, 9) utilized spirituality to support their resiliency, and 10) acknowledged the importance of self-care.

![Diagram](image.png)

*Figure 4.* Student identified factors positively influencing academic persistence and college success.
Lessons and Recommendations

This qualitative research explored a theme of struggle in the human condition. Van Manen (1990) describes this as the “text of life” (p. 90). The nuggets of explicit theme analysis can only tell part of the story. Because my interview experiences revealed such human depth, I believe it is important to share the following recommendations as part of my conclusion chapter. I appreciate what van Manen (1990) shared about the art of researching a phenomenon. Phenomenological themes cannot be objectified or generalized. “Metaphorically speaking they are more like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes” (van Manen, 1990, p. 90). There were many things I learned from my participants, but the following three implicit themes will guide me into future research as I continue to explore new understandings in how I can support my students’ success:

**Sense of belonging and connection.** While both students and educators were genuinely devoted to student success, each individual participant was driven by ideas, visions, goals, and a sense of purpose. Faculty were successful with their students when they were collaborating, strategizing, and supporting each other in the common cause. Students were able to demonstrate persistence because they felt that they mattered; that they belonged to a learning community that cared about their success. Students could show vulnerability because peers and faculty had their back.

**Transformation and success are intentional.** Student success is shaped by explicit intention. Clear institutional strategies must be in place that acknowledge the uniqueness
of the nontraditional transfer student. Without this foundation, students will continue to fail. Educators and students in this study identified the importance of remedial education and support, and delivery strategies that targeted the importance of education accessibility to degree attainment. Barriers to financial support, ongoing advisement, and course scheduling create learning challenges. No conversation about degree completion should begin with identifying what the student needs to do to be successful, but rather what roles the institution can play to support student success.

Stories are grounding and give power. Conversations about needs and experiences must never end. Educators and students should have an ongoing opportunity to share their stories and voices about their realities. Conversation can create change. Ideas and solutions are born out of understanding needs and contexts. This research study involved collecting data from only 13 individuals; yet for these persons, the experience of my inquiry made a positive difference in understanding student success. The participants expressed significant gratitude in having the opportunity to tell their stories collectively or individually, for the first time. The interview experiences provided positive affirmation to the participants.

Research Limitations

There were obvious limitations to my data collection and analysis:

Outcome validity through participant saturation and context was limited (Engel & Schutt, 2013; Heppner & Heppner, 2004; Maxwell, 2013). This research involved one administrator, eight faculty, and four students. They were all part of one undergraduate degree granting institution, positioned in a baccalaureate degree social work program.
Most of the educators were employed on the Midwest campus sites. The four students were enrolled on the Southwest campus site. While all educators and students were connected to the same social work program, curriculum, and similar delivery model, the student body archetypes were as diverse as their community and cultural context. I chose this approach due to time and accessibility of participants. Obviously, this study was not developed and cannot be used to make generalizations about all nontraditional transfer students. Generalization was not my goal in the data collection process. Although, my explicit findings identified student challenges to degree completion which are consistently aligned with current research.

The information shared is dependent on the willingness, abilities, and perspectives of the participants. The accuracy of thoughts and experiences were within the context of one-time faculty focus groups or individual interviews. I needed to be sensitive to “understanding the particular contexts within which the participants act, and the influence that this context has on their actions” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 30).

Researcher bias in the data collection process. As my Chapter 1 reflects, I am passionately immersed in this topic. I have almost two and a half decades of higher education experience in recruiting, developing distant site models of delivery, advising, teaching, and evaluating nontraditional transfer student success. I was also a nontraditional student ‘late bloomer.’ I chose to complete my doctorate degree at 60 years old. My degree completion challenges are parallel with the students I am studying. The faculty and students were not strangers to me. I was aware of many of their heroic struggles. These situations required me to be hyper vigilant about research validity and
bias in the data collection and interpretation process. I could not steer the students in a direction that I’d hoped that they would go. Ironically, I believe these variables also contributed to obtaining rich data due to my sensitivity and understanding.

**The controversial validity of qualitative interviewing methods.** I immersed myself in research literature that weighed the pros and cons of qualitative interviewing, and what kind of data it could produce. My research intention, the way my questions were worded, the time, setting, and personal situations of the participants and myself the day of the interview, all have impact on what I asked and what was said. Also, I wonder what I would have found if I followed up with these participants for a second interview? Would my implicit analysis be as strong? What if I approached data collection another way through using student focus groups?

**Virtual interview methods.** The two faculty focus groups were conducted via Zoom. The first faculty group had difficulty with their broadband connections and computer equipment. The discussion was frequently interrupted. If I were to have conducted on ground focus group interviews, more might have been shared. I would also be able to more easily observe body language that could assist me in question formation.

**Data collection was facilitated solely by me.** While I believe this enhanced an element of reliability/consistency in the interview process, I was challenged to be constantly aware of my personal position as a faculty in the social work program of which I am inquiring, and how that may impact my interpretation of the discussions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Maxwell, 2013; van Manen, 1990). This became a challenge that required continual awareness (Probst, 2015).
Implications for Future Research

Expanding research. There are many avenues that this research could take from here. There are many ‘what-ifs’ I have considered. Most importantly, the genre of this study could be duplicated on larger scales. This could be expanded to include students from other social work programs or other areas of education; student populations could be expanded to address different geographical areas, and/or cultural contexts. My research questions could be explored using different data collection methodologies (i.e., additional focus groups, surveys, memo analysis, longitudinal case studies, student videos or projects, in class observations).

There is significance in my thematic findings. Thematic inquiry could be taken to a deeper level, focusing on my outcomes with specific populations (i.e. administration, faculty, students). New research questions related to themes could be developed with various methods of qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods collection. I believe these research outcomes are beneficial to multiple disciplines and levels of education, from secondary to graduate. Most importantly, this research is strong enough to stand alone and inform educators on ideas for best practices with nontraditional transfer students.

Implications for higher education administration. As the outcomes of this study indicate, the roles and responsibilities of U.S. community colleges and four-year institutions are extremely significant to student success. Today’s college student is very different than what academic institutions were originally designed to serve. Economic challenges and disparities are at the forefront of nontraditional student attendance and persistence phenomenology. Enrollment trends reflect new kinds of students that are
more culturally diverse, older, financially challenged, and often need remedial education. Students request greater academic flexibility and mentoring in transfer advisement, course offerings, scheduling, and delivery methods. In order to genuinely address issues of degree completion, higher education must face the reality of the need to create a one-stop shopping environment that can systematically respond to the learning and support needs of the nontraditional student.

**Implications for college faculty.** It is evident that faculty are seeing a growing increase of culturally and generationally diverse students in their classrooms. Combine this demographic diversity with increasing learning challenges in English as a second language, scholarly writing, critical thinking, and mental health concerns, faculty must possess an instructional tool kit that can educate multiple types of students. Faculty are faced with the need to utilize flexible instruction and assessment strategies. It is clear that faculty cannot operate in a vacuum, but must seek ongoing support and remain informed on best practices for teaching this new type of nontraditional student.

**Implications for nontraditional transfer students.** Implications from this study provide insights into the importance of proactively establishing support systems within their familial, social, community, and education settings. Establishing academic and career goals, prioritizing roles and responsibilities, and reaching out for learning support, are key indicators to academic success. Becoming a successful nontraditional student is hard work that pays off. Students must have realistic self-expectations and a keen awareness of the importance of self-care.
Conclusion

Boyer’s model of academic scholarship. This research represents professoriate scholarship that is reflective of Boyer’s (1997) Model of Scholarship. Scholarship aligned with discovery, integration, application, and teaching are evident. New knowledge (discovery) has been built upon existing literature related to my research topic. Through qualitative strategies that encouraged voice and meaning-making, this study promoted insight into the nontraditional transfer student and their academic struggles. A comprehensive literature review is evident in this study (integration), embracing various perspectives and contexts of the college degree completion problem. Application of this discovery is extensive, as these findings can enhance academic institutions, policy makers, and provide the platform for expanding study into ways to support student success (application). Findings and analysis from this study identifies several implications for best-practices in serving nontraditional transfer students in the classroom and program delivery (teaching).

I entered this research with a passionate spirit of inquiry. The topic and research questions had significant meaning to me as an educator. I wanted to uncover something that could make a difference in the field of higher education. I wanted to construct a study that could have the potential to empower marginalized students. I chose a data collection strategy that could also give back to educators and students, by giving them an opportunity to be heard; to tell their stories; because they mattered.

Many of my findings expanded on education challenges that were reflected in literature. But the real gem was digging into the phenomenon of persistence. I had no
idea what I would find. A key to persistence and college success for both students and educators emerged as a powerful gift. Persevering through challenges cannot be isolated. It is intertwined between the learner and the teacher with connection, affirmations, courage, vulnerability, and occasional tears. There will always be struggles and successes. Teaching and learning are not easy. One cannot happen without the other. Just like the windmill, energy cannot not be created without movement and struggle.


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Sample Message Inviting Educator Participation in the Interview

Dear Social Work Department Chair,

I am completing an education doctorate at Hamline University, St. Paul, MN. As part of my doctoral program, I am researching the barriers to college degree completion and the phenomenon of academic persistence among nontraditional students who transfer from a community college into a baccalaureate degree college setting.

As an administrator, leader, and professor of undergraduate social work education, I believe your experiences and knowledge on this topic are vital to promoting academic success among this student population. To add your perspective to this research topic, you are invited to participate in an individual face-to-face interview with me. Our discussion will explore your experiences and ideas on this timely topic. Your input is needed to address the following research questions:

1) How do nontraditional age students who transfer from a community college into an undergraduate degree social work program describe the challenges they experienced during their journey to baccalaureate degree completion?

2) How do these students describe their personal efforts and/or the institutional factors that supported their ability to persist through their challenge toward degree completion?

I anticipate that this interview will last for approximately 60 minutes and will be conducted at your convenience through Zoom virtual online conferencing. This conference tool allows us to use both auditory and visual communication. If you are interested in participating, please contact me within the next seven days at mrunnberg01@hamline.edu. Your participation in this interview will be completely confidential.

Thank you for considering contributing to this most important conversation.

Sincerely,

Marcia Runnberg-Valadez, MSW, LICSW
Graduate Student, Hamline University
Sample Message Confirming the Interview with Participants

Dear ________________

Thank you for expressing interest in participating in the individual interview regarding nontraditional transfer student challenges and influences on degree persistence. I am excited about what can be learned from your experiences and perspectives! Your input will be highly valued.

The interview has been scheduled for (date) at (time) through Zoom system virtual streaming. We will use the following link to enter our mutual chat room https://zoom.us/j/291696687. The room will be open 10 minutes prior to the discussion, allowing you to check visual and auditory functions. It is anticipated that the interview will run approximately 60 minutes.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about utilizing the Zoom conference room. I can be reached at: mrunnberg01@hamline.edu

Attached you will find the following documents:

1. Consent to participate in this research project
2. Demographic data questionnaire
3. A list of general interview questions is attached to this consent form. This provides an opportunity for you to review and consider items that we will be discussing during our interview.
Sample Informed Consent to Participate in the Individual Interview

Informed Consent to Participate in Research Study

You are invited to participate in an individual face-to-face interview examining the barriers that nontraditional transfer students experience throughout their journey to degree completion. The interview will also provide an opportunity to discuss your experiences and ideas related to student persistence. You have been selected to participate because of your expertise in administering and teaching in undergraduate social work programs that serve significant numbers of nontraditional students who have transferred from a community college. This form represents you understanding and willingness to participate in this research process.

Please read this form and feel free to ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate. Thank you.

Research Study Title
Understanding the Challenges and Persistence Behaviors of Nontraditional Transfer Students in Baccalaureate Degree Completion

This research project is being conducted by:
Marcia L. Runnberg-Valadez, Graduate Student
The College of Education, Hamline University, St. Paul MN.

Purpose of the Study
U. S. higher education is a hot button topic today with political, financial, and consumer interest groups. Who wants a college degree, who can afford the cost to obtain a degree, and who is able to successfully navigate the hurdles to obtain that degree, are all critical variables in understanding this research topic. This research addresses the current issue in higher education of baccalaureate degree completion. My inquiry focuses on understanding the challenges experienced by nontraditional age community college transfer students during their journey toward baccalaureate degree completion. Additionally, this research explores behavioral and institutional characteristics that influence students’ persistence to degree completion. This qualitative study is designed to capture the voice and realities of faculty and nontraditional students in higher education. Your contribution in this inquiry process is greatly valued.
Procedures
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:
1. Participate in one individual interview at a convenient time and location. The interview will take approximately one hour.
2. A list of general interview questions is attached to this consent form. This provides an opportunity for you to review and consider items that we will be discussing during our interview.
3. Share your expertise in working with nontraditional transfer students in higher education settings and engage in a one-on-one discussion about the research topic.
4. The conversation will be audio taped and transcribed to provide the researcher with an authentic record of what will be said.
5. The researcher will also be transcribing information during the interview.

Benefits
Response from this study will be used to inform the work of higher education programs and the students that they serve.

Risks
The risks to me in this project are minimal. I understand that any risk would likely be nothing more than mild embarrassment or stress from sharing my experience or opinion. It is possible that I may be frustrated by the questions asked or the time required to participate. I understand that my participation in this research is completely voluntary and I can skip a question or opt out of the project at any time.

Confidentiality
Your participation in this study will be completely confidential. In any report that I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you. The audio taped records of this interview will be kept private. Audio tapes and transcripts will be stored and locked securely in a file in my home office. Only the researcher and my dissertation advisor working on this study will have access to the records.

Voluntary Nature of the Study
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Hamline University or the institution you
are currently employed with. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions
If you have questions regarding this study, you may ask them now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact me, Marcia L. Runnberg-Valadez, at: munnberg01@hamline.edu; Or, call (651)247-9313, or my dissertation advisor, Dr. Teresa Christenson at: tchristenson01@hamline.edu; phone (952) 686-0184.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher or her advisor, you are encouraged to contact the Research Subjects’ Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 55455; (612) 625-1650.

Statement of Consent
I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers to my satisfaction. I understand the nature of the research and give permission for my responses to be tape recorded. I understand that I can withdraw from the research project at any stage and have any information that I provided destroyed. I agree that the research data gathered for this study may be published provided I am not identifiable.

I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: ____________________________ Date: ______________

Signature of Investigator: ____________________________ Date: ______________

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.
APPENDIX D

Interview Guide for the Individual Interview with the Department Chair

Research Interview Guide

In preparation for our interview, please review the following dissertation research questions. These two questions guide the data collection process:

1.) How do nontraditional age students who transfer from a community college into an undergraduate degree social work program describe the challenges they experienced during their journey to baccalaureate degree completion?

2) How do these students describe their personal efforts and/or the institutional factors that supported their ability to persist through their challenge toward degree completion?

I. Introduction and description of the research study: review of research questions, terminology, and the interview process; acknowledgement of consent, demographic questionnaire, and any questions, clarifications, etc.

II. Demographic background of participant
   a. Please explain your current title and credentials
   b. Please describe your roles and responsibilities in your current academic setting.
   c. How long have you been employed in this setting?
   d. Please describe additional experience you have had in higher education.
   e. Please describe your experience in academia specifically with nontraditional transfer students.

III. Administrative perceptions.
   a. This research addresses the problem of college retention and four-year degree completion among nontraditional transfer students; How have you experienced this problem during your academic career?
   b. What do you believe are the responsibilities of the higher education system in addressing these issues?
   c. During the past decade of your career, can you describe any public policy, institutional system, or specific programmatic practices that you believe are positively and/or negatively impacting student success and degree completion.
d. As a leader and program manager in undergraduate social work education, what do you believe are best-practice solutions to addressing the concerns of college retention and degree completion among students in your college’s undergraduate social work program?

e. How do you believe transferring from a community college supports or discourages degree completion success at a baccalaureate level?

III. The nontraditional transfer student.

a. How would you describe the nontraditional learner?

b. What do you believe are the reasons that nontraditional students have transferred into the baccalaureate degree social work program?

c. Please describe any particular circumstances or learning characteristics that your teaching faculty commonly experience with nontraditional transfer students.

d. Please describe any programmatic strategies that the social work program has developed to accommodate the nontraditional transfer student.

e. What problem areas were targeted in these strategies. Were they successful? If so, why or why not.

IV. Challenges experienced by nontraditional transfer students toward degree completion.

a. Please describe how you have experienced nontraditional students’ struggle to complete their degree program? Please feel free to share examples.

b. What have you observed to be the most frequent barriers or challenges among your nontraditional students?

c. What types of factors do you believe negatively impact their success? Please feel free to share examples.

d. What efforts have you personally made either as a professor or an administrator to respond to their struggles? Please feel free to share examples.

e. What has been the outcome of these efforts?

f. What in your opinion is the most serious challenge or barrier toward academic success and degree completion among nontraditional students?

V. Student persistence toward degree completion.

a. How would you describe what “student persistence” looks like?

b. Please describe how you have experienced nontraditional students succeed in completing their degree program? Please feel free to share examples.

c. Do you believe there are specific behaviors, attitudes, or personality traits that correlate with academic persistence? Please explain and/or share examples.

d. What types of factors do you believe positively impact their success? Please feel free to share examples.

e. What efforts have you made either as a professor or an administrator to respond to support their persistence? Please feel free to share examples.
f. What has been the outcome of these efforts?


g. What do you believe nontraditional students need to be able to persist towards their baccalaureate degree completion? Why do you believe this?

IV. Additional comments/closure of session.

a. Please feel free to share any other thoughts, ideas, or opinions that have not been discussed in this interview.

b. Do you have any further questions of me?
Research Interview Guide for the Distance Site Faculty Focus Groups

Research Interview Guide

In preparation for our interview, please review the following dissertation research questions. These two questions guide the data collection process:

1.) How do nontraditional age students who transfer from a community college into an undergraduate degree social work program describe the challenges they experienced during their journey to baccalaureate degree completion?

2) How do these students describe their personal efforts and/or the institutional factors that supported their ability to persist through their challenge toward degree completion?

I. Introduction:
Description of the research study, review of research questions and terminology, Q. & A; consent to participate; role and operation of the focus group format.

II. Demographics:
Background/context of participant; identification of current title, role/responsibilities, setting overview of experience in academia and working with nontraditional transfer students

III. Focus Group guiding questions:

A. Describing the nontraditional transfer student

1. How would you describe the nontraditional learner?
2. What do you believe are the reasons and/or circumstances nontraditional students have transferred into the baccalaureate degree social work program?
3. How do you believe transferring from a community college supports or discourages degree completion success at a baccalaureate level?
4. This research addresses the problem of college retention and four-year degree completion among nontraditional transfer students; How have you experienced this problem during your academic career?

B. Challenges experienced by nontraditional transfer students toward degree completion:
1. Can you please describe how you have experienced nontraditional students’ struggle to complete their degree program? Please feel free to share examples.
2. What types of factors/barriers do you believe negatively impact their success? Please feel free to share examples.
3. What efforts have you made either as a professor or an administrator to respond to their struggles? Please feel free to share examples.
4. What has been the outcome of these efforts?

C. Student persistence toward degree completion.

1. How would you describe what “student persistence” looks like?
2. Can you describe how you have experienced nontraditional students succeed in completing their degree program? Please feel free to share examples.
3. What types of factors do you believe positively impact their success? Please feel free to share examples.
4. What efforts have you made either as a professor or an administrator to respond to support their persistence? Please feel free to share examples.
5. What has been the outcome of these efforts?
6. What do you believe nontraditional students need to be able to persist towards their baccalaureate degree completion? Why do you believe this?

IV. Additional comments/closure of session.
APPENDIX F

Demographic Data Questionnaire for the Department Chair and Faculty

Demographic Data Questionnaire for Research Participants

In order to assist me in describing the participants of my research and preparing my interview questions, I would appreciate if you could complete this brief questionnaire. It is provided to you via email in a Word document. You may choose to answer all, some, or none of the questions. This data will not identify you personally in any way. This will not affect your eligibility to participate in the research project.

Please submit this to me at least 48 hours prior to our interview time at: mrunnberg01@hamline.edu

Thank you.

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<th>You age</th>
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<td>Your gender</td>
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<td>Your race</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment:</td>
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<td>Your current title</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brief description of your responsibilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>How many years have you been in your current setting</td>
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<td>Education:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Your most recent college degree</td>
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<td>Other professional credentials</td>
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<td>Approximately how many nontraditional transfer students have you provided college instruction to? (These are students who are at least 24 years of age, and who have transferred from a community college into a</td>
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<td>four-year degree program)</td>
<td>Of these students, approximately what percentage do you believe were either first-generation or students of color?</td>
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APPENDIX G

Message Inviting Student Participation in an Individual Interview

Dear Student,

I am completing an education doctorate at Hamline University, St. Paul, MN. As part of my doctoral program, I am involved in my final dissertation research that addresses the challenges that nontraditional transfer students face in their attempt to complete their four-year degree, and the factors that support their persistence to degree completion.

I invite your participation in this inquiry, as you have been identified as an undergraduate, nontraditional age student that has transferred into a four-year degree program, who will obtain their degree within the next six months. For this portion of my research, I am inviting students who identify themselves as a first-generation college student of color.

Your participation in this study involves an individual, face-to-face interview with myself. There may be an opportunity for a second interview session, depending on the interests and needs of the student and the interview process. This qualitative interview experience will provide an opportunity for students to share their experiences, ideas, and insights on this timely topic. Your input is needed to address the following two research questions:

1) How do nontraditional age students who transfer from a community college into an undergraduate degree social work program describe the challenges they experienced during their journey to baccalaureate degree completion?

2) How do these students describe their personal efforts and/or the institutional factors that supported their ability to persist through their challenge toward degree completion?

This important topic provides an opportunity for you to share your experiences as you transitioned from a community college into an undergraduate degree program. Your story has the potential to inform higher education administrators and faculty about the realities and needs of first-generation college students. It is my hope that your story will influence how the needs of first-generation students are met in the future.
The interview will last for approximately 60 to 90 minutes and will be conducted at a convenient time and location. Your participation in this discussion will be completely confidential. If you are interested in participating, please contact me within the next seven days by either calling me at (651) 247-9313 or email me at mrunnberg01@hamline.edu.

In return, as an appreciation for your time and contribution, you will receive a $25.00 Amazon gift card and an opportunity to serve as a valuable resource for educators and students nationwide. Thank you for considering contributing to this most important conversation.

Sincerely,

Marcia Runnberg-Valadez, MSW, LICSW
Graduate Student, Hamline University
APPENDIX H

Message Confirming the Interview with the Student

Dear Student,

Thank you for expressing interest in participating in the individual interview regarding nontraditional transfer student challenges and influences on degree persistence. I am excited about what can be learned from your experiences and perspectives! Your input will be highly valued.

The interview has been scheduled for date/time/ location. Please see the following link for directions: XXXXX Parking is ____________. The room will be open 15 minutes prior to the interview, allowing you to get a beverage and a snack in our room. It is anticipated that the interview will run approximately 60 to 90 minutes. A second, follow-up interview time may be scheduled if appropriate.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about the interview process.

Attached you will find the following documents:

1. Consent to participate in this research project

2. Demographic data questionnaire

3. A list of general interview questions is attached to this consent form. This provides an opportunity for you to review and consider items that we will be discussing during our interview.
Demographic Data Questionnaire for Research Student Participants

In order to assist me in describing the participants of my research and preparing my interview questions, I would appreciate if you could complete this brief questionnaire. It is provided to you via email in a Word document. You may choose to answer all, some, or none of the questions. This data will not identify you personally in any way. This will not affect your eligibility to participate in the research project.

Please submit this to me at least 48 hours prior to our interview time at: mrunnberg01@hamline.edu or, you may print this completed form and bring it with you to our interview.

Thank you.

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<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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<td>Marital status</td>
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<td>Do you have children? If yes, ages</td>
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<td>Are you employed? If yes, how many hours per week</td>
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<td>Are you currently involved in an academic internship? If so, how many</td>
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<td>hours per week</td>
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<td>Do you regularly volunteer in the community? If so, approximately how</td>
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<td>many hours per month</td>
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<td>How many colleges have you been enrolled in during your educational</td>
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<td>career, counting your current institution?</td>
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<td>What degrees do you currently hold?</td>
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<td>Please list other certifications or credentials</td>
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<td>Current student status: full time or part time</td>
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<td><strong>Average number of credits that you complete per semester</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Your most recent GPA (your last semester)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Anticipated graduation date</strong></td>
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Research Interview Guide for the Individual Student Interview

Research Interview Guide

In preparation for our interview, please review the following dissertation research questions. These two questions guide the data collection process:

1.) How do nontraditional age students who transfer from a community college into an undergraduate degree social work program describe the challenges they experienced during their journey to baccalaureate degree completion?

2) How do these students describe their personal efforts and/or the institutional factors that supported their ability to persist through their challenge toward degree completion?

The following is a general outline of topics that we might discuss during our interview. Phrases in italics clarify the purpose for the set of questions.

• As a reminder, you may choose to not answer any question and/or topic area.
• You may also choose to end the interview at any time.
• In preparation for our interview feel free to jot down any notes and bring this page with you.

Guiding Topics

1. Introduction (reviews and examines questions, purpose, and methods of the research).
   a. description of the research study: review of research problem, questions, terminology, participants
   b. review and acknowledgement of consent, demographic questionnaire,
   c. the interview process
   d. any questions, clarifications, etc.

2. Demographics (information that tells me who you are/your status).
   a. Nontraditional student status
   b. First-generation/student of color status
   c. Family system constellation
   d. Vocation background
   e. Internship background
   f. History of high school, community college, or other postsecondary attendance
   g. Enrollment in current degree program
3. Education History: (assists me in understanding your motivations, circumstances of
college path to four-year degree).
   a. High school experiences and influence
   b. Community college planning, expectations, experiences, and influences
   c. Decision-making to transfer to a four-year degree program
   d. Influential factors driving vocation/four-year degree
   e. Four-year degree planning, expectations, experiences, and influences

4. Cognitive/Emotional/Developmental History related to education success: (assists me
in understanding challenging and supportive influential factors related to your
learning/education plan).
   a. Learning/cognition
   b. Emotional functioning
   c. Health
   d. Legal
   e. Relationship influences
   f. Spirituality/faith influences
   g. Significant supports, resources, systems

5. Transition period moving from a community college into a four-year degree program
(guides me in understanding your journey).
   a. decision-making, influences
   b. expectations
   c. initial experiences
   d. initial needs
   e. initial challenges
   f. supports
   g. situations, circumstances, persistence influence

6. The junior (first) year in B.A. program (guides me in understanding your journey).
   a. expectations
   b. experiences
   c. needs
   d. initial challenges
   e. barriers
   f. supports
   g. situations, circumstances, persistence influence

7. The senior (final) year in B.A. program (guides me in understanding your journey).
   a. expectations
   b. experiences
   c. needs
   d. initial challenges
   e. barriers
   f. situations, circumstances, persistence influence
8. Conclusion (*allows for wrap up/closure, ending of interview*).
   a. other information
   b. review of interview session
   c. future opportunity to add information