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Persistence Redefined: Why Men Stay

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PERSISTENCE REDEFINED: MEN WHO STAY

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my mother, Diane Coffman, who has always provided unconditional love and support. You have demonstrated strength, commitment, and courage in every aspect of your life and I am truly blessed to have such an amazing woman as my mother and role model. Thank you for showing me the way.

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PERSISTENCE REDEFINED: MEN WHO STAY

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ABSTRACT

The research addressed factors affecting degree completion for adult male students. This qualitative case study explored factors that contributed to the persistence of undergraduate adult male students and their perception of their role within the campus community. The research considered: 1) how adult male undergraduate students described their ability to persist until degree completion; 2) what factors contributed to persistence; 3) what types of social interactions enabled participants to persist; and 4) how adult male undergraduate students described their relationship to the campus community. Data were collected through interviews with nine nontraditional male graduates who earned a baccalaureate degree within the last five years. The findings of this study showed that adult male students persisted by demonstrating grit. The campus community was about what they could contribute and the support they needed to graduate. The significance of this study demonstrated the need to consider the role of institutional resources in supporting mutual engagement and degree completion for adult male students.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

How do certain values achieve social significance? The modern world values a highly skilled workforce that is able to meet the demands of a globalized economy. President Obama (2009) suggested, "America cannot lead in the 21st century unless we have the best educated, most competitive workforce in the world." The United States, previously ranked among the first in the world for degree attainment among 25-34 year-olds has recently dropped to twelfth (White House, n. d.). As a result, President Obama set a goal to increase the college completion rate by 20% before the year 2020, so that the nation would once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The focus on degree completion is in response to the growing number of jobs that will require some postsecondary education (Carnevale & Smith, 2013).

Student populations in higher education are changing in response to workforce demands and more adults are enrolling in college. Adults age 25 and older account for almost 50% of collegiate participation at degree granting institutions (NCES, 2011).

Adult students maintain various life roles (e.g. family caretakers, employees, parent, and student) and this feature is often used to distinguish them from their traditional-aged counterparts (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Kasworm, 2003; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Taniguich & Kaufman, 2005). These multilayered identities shape their goals and motivations for postsecondary enrollment. "It is difficult to describe and define an adult learner. Race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, age, and other elements of human difference all influence who adult learners are" (Hansman & Mott, 2010, p. 13). Research studies on retention explain that part-time enrollment, academic underpreparedness, and family and work responsibilities serve as persistence barriers for adult students (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Taniguich & Kaufman, 2005). Cross (1981) categorized similar factors into three groups: situational barriers, institutional barriers, and dispositional barriers. Life responsibilities and the decrease in time associated with maintaining multiple roles can serve as situational barriers. Some examples are lack of childcare, lake of time due to work responsibilities, or lack of money to pay tuition. Institutional barriers are policies and programs at the university that exclude adult students from participating such as limited and inconvenient course offerings and lack of financial aid for part-time students. Dispositional barriers relate to the adult student's confidence and self-efficacy. A lack of confidence in their ability to complete a course or program successfully can prevent an adult student from participating. Due to the barriers faced by adult students, their patterns of enrollment are often discontinuous as they take breaks from enrollment or stopout to meet life demands with the intention to return at a more convenient time. This pattern of

enrollment challenges the assumption that all students maintain continuous enrollment until degree completion (Kasworm, 2014).

Policymakers and higher education administrators want to ensure all students are graduating. Degree attainment is the most frequently used measure of college performance (Bailey & Xu, 2012). The metric used to measure the number of students earning a degree from an institution is the graduation rate which is calculated based on the number of first-time, fulltime, degree-seeking students who graduate in six years (NCES, 2015). Based on this calculation, the definition of student persistence would be continued enrollment until degree completion. Given that graduation rates are used to measure performance and compare institutions, significant research has focused on tracking students and developing models of persistence. Tinto's (1993) landmark interactionalist theory discussed the relationship between the student's belief structure and the norms of the academic and social system of the university. According to Tinto, the stronger the relationship the more likely the student will assimilate into the campus ethos and remain enrolled until graduation. He defined social integration as, "establishing via continuing interaction with other individuals the personal bonds that are the basis for membership in communities of the institution" (Tinto, 1993, p. 56). The interactionalist theory laid the groundwork for many studies on student persistence (e.g. Kelly, LaVergne, Boone, & Boone 2012; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). The path to degree completion for adult students is not always linear, and adults do not interact with the university community in the same manner as their traditional-aged counterparts due to time constraints and other life world responsibilities (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Kasworm, 2014; Tinto, 1993). Therefore, the usual definition of student persistence falls

short in describing patterns of enrollment for adult students. For this study, student persistence is defined as participation in higher education that results in degree completion although not necessarily continuous enrollment.

There are persistence models that account for the characteristics of adult students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014; Donaldson & Graham, 1999). Prior experiences and attitudes toward education, external forces or responsibilities, motivation, self-efficacy, and the university environment are factors that affect persistence for adult students (Bergman, 2012; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Cross, 1981; Donaldson & Graham, 1999). It is assumed that adults dropout due to external factors, experience limited access to programming, information, and academic guidance, and do not assimilate into the university community in the same manner as traditional-aged students. "Adults are thus more likely to encounter greater problems in finding on-campus time to spend making contact with faculty and student peers…" (Tinto, 1993, p. 76). Their life outside of the university which includes work and family can be viewed as another community in which they maintain membership. Donaldson and Graham (1999) call this the life-world environment. Adult students are balancing membership in both communities, and interactions in one community can affect life in the other. Tinto (1993) discussed how traditional-aged students disassociated themselves from their previous community, which included their high school and parents, before transitioning to college and adopting the norms of the college community. Not all students go through this separation as most adult students do not disassociate with their life-world environment.

The campus environment is still a critical factor in persistence for adult students. Research on the experience of adult students in higher education recommends that institutions can help adults overcome persistence barriers by providing supportive campus environments (Fincher, 2010; McGivney, 2004; Sandmann, 2010; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Supports for adult students include policies that meet the needs of adult students, evening and online classes, and accessible support services with staff trained to work with adult learners (Fincher, 2010, Sandmann, 2010, Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Research findings indicate that adults do not integrate into the campus community but benefit from an environment that is supportive of their unique needs. Metzner and Bean (1985) found that social integration variables did not have a significant effect on persistence for adult students. Bergman, Gross, Berry, and Shuck (2014) found the campus environment accounted for more of the variation in adult persistence than student entry characteristics or external factors. Logistical regression was used to investigate the influence of student entry characteristics, the external environment, and the internal campus environment on persistence. Controlling for the campus environment "yielded the largest increase in explanatory power" (Bergman et al., 2014). The findings of these two studies imply that adults could benefit from support provided by the institution but their engagement with the campus community does not result in social integration. So what does campus engagement look like for adult students? If adult males do not fully integrate into the campus community, then more needs to be known about how adult male students view their role within the campus community and how they find and use resources.

The higher education student population is changing but policy is lagging behind due to steadfast assumptions about college students (Kasworm, 2014). These assumptions not only overlook certain student populations but also certain types of institutions particularly those, usually urban universities, which do not selectively admit a traditional student population. The goal of urban universities is to provide access to students who differ in age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Natalicio & Smith, 2005). As a result, urban universities are overlooked on national rankings that use traditional measures of success because access is not commonly associated with high quality education and research (Natalicio & Smith, 2005). Urban universities by definition are located in a metropolitan area, draw students from the surrounding geographical areas, and are access-driven (Elliot, 1994). Location is a key factor in identifying urban universities, but the commitment of support to the surrounding community is what differentiates them from other types of institutions.

The American higher education system is comprised of multiple institutions (e.g. community colleges, research universities, private and public institutions, urban universities, etc.) that serve different populations. The diversity of institutional missions is regarded as one of the great strengths of the system, but it also challenges one-size-fits-all rating systems that attempt to determine the value of an institution. Given its access-driven focus and commitment to economic development in the surrounding community, an urban university is an ideal location for adults to attend college. This study focused on a subset of the nontraditional population within an urban university to explore how adult male undergraduate students perceived their place within a collegiate environment that is designed to provide access to a diverse group of students.

Problem Statement

In a global society, there is a greater demand for an educated workforce to keep up with rapidly changing technologies. Lifelong learning is necessary for the modern worker as changes in the workforce will continue to require new skills and credentials. However, higher education institutions know very little about degree completion for adult students. Fong, Jarrat, and Drekmeier (2012) surveyed 77 institutions and approximately 60 out of the 77 institutions do not know their current degree completion rate for nontraditional students. This is largely due to the institutional definition of success. In the age of data management and universal identity numbering of individuals (i.e. social security numbers in the U.S.) the government should be able to track a student's progress through the educational system outside of this narrow focus of start and finish at the same institution of higher education. "Statistical investigations of adult student patterns of leaving and subsequently reentering for college completion are not clearly delineated with these college completion reports" (Kasworm, 2014, p. 68). Adult student persistence is not tracked and their unique paths to degree completion are not recorded.

Many studies focused on adult female students and explored the role of family in their decision to remain enrolled. Family served as a motivation, a support system, and a constraint in women's pursuit of higher education (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Plageman & Sabina, 2010; Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1996; Vaccaro & Lowell, 2010). Family arrangements and the presence of support networks influenced women's decision to enroll in school. With limited qualitative studies exploring the adult male experience in higher education, it is important to learn about what factors influence the adult male students' ability to persist.

Although many adult students experience disrupted pathways due to life-world responsibilities, men are more likely than women to use a discontinuous pathway to reach degree completion (Ewert, 2010). Other gender differences exist in higher education participation and degree completion rates. Men account for less than half of the total enrollment (44%) at degree granting institutions and earn undergraduate degrees at a lesser rate than females and previous generations of males (Kena, et al., 2014). Some studies attribute these changes to gender role socialization (Harris III & Harper, 2008; Kahn, Brett, & Holmes, 2011). Gender roles are a set of behaviors and beliefs that are ascribed to a certain biological sex. Harris III & Harper (2008) found behaviors associated with dominant masculinities conflict with dispositions and behaviors that promote participation and success in higher education. However, one singular concept of masculinity does not exist. Assuming that men are a homogenized group ignores the influence of social differences such as age, class, race, and sexuality (Burke, 2013). Strayhorn (2010) looked at academic achievement of African American and Latino males. The research demonstrated a relationship between cultural/social capital and academic success. Due to these differences, men attribute meaning to their experience in higher education differently. Smith (2006) explored the challenges for nontraditional male nursing students because he found, "the empirical literature has examined male nurses/nursing students or nontraditional students but not nontraditional male nursing students" (p. 263). This is true of the literature examining student persistence. Researchers have examined traditional-aged college students and nontraditional female students but few studies have qualitatively examined the experience of adult male students.

Research Problem

Zumeta (2011) argued that higher education should be held to some measure of public accountability and viewed it as a social contract between higher education institutions and the larger society. Unequal rates of degree attainment, workforce demands, and the call for increased accountability have shifted the measure of institutional success from inputs to outcomes (Reindl & Reyna, 2011). Accountability measures are being used to make high stakes decisions and are often based on flawed data points. Adult students are often excluded in the calculation of institutional graduation rates because they do not maintain continuous enrollment, attend part-time, and may take more than six years to graduate (Kasworm, 2014). As a result, their degree attainment is not captured anywhere. Using graduation rates as an accountability measure does not accurately reflect institutional success for transfer, part-time, and students who take longer than six years to graduate. Students who fall into these categories are neglected in terms of policy and program development because current measures "incentivize practitioners to pay primary attention to not only end and measurable goals but also the students who can fulfill these goals" (Levin, 2014, p. viii).

This often puts the focus on students who can meet these goals and neglects those who are participating in nontraditional ways. This focus can limit the understanding of student success. For the purpose of this study, student success will be defined as the attainment of a bachelor's degree. This varies from the institutional definition of student success which only counts students who remain enrolled fulltime at one institution and graduate in six years. If institutions are not "getting credit" for graduating certain groups of students there is minimal incentive to develop support services, educational

programming, and retention initiatives to assist these students. "Those who are ignored in both policy and scholarship are those who are more or less invisible and who are counterpoints to the traditional conceptions of college students" (Levin, 2014, p. ix).

Kim (2002) argued "rather than looking generally at nontraditional students it is of greater value to examine specific subpopulations by focusing on characteristics that all members of a group share…" (p. 85). Gaps in collegiate participation and degree attainment exist between men and women and these gaps are predicted to grow (Kena et al., 2014). Most of the qualitative research studies on adult students focused on the experience of women (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Plageman & Sabina, 2010; Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1996; Vaccaro & Lowell, 2010). Although many studies have explored issues of women and nontraditional status few have qualitatively investigated adult males. As more adults are enrolling in college there is a need to know how they persist until graduation. "Information is particularly lacking on factors affecting degree completion among adult learners" (Sandmann, 2010, p. 228). Few studies explore the experience of adult male students in higher education (Smith, 2006). "As higher education institutions gain more adult learners, it is important to track the completion of this population as well as look at factors that support persistence" (Davidson & Holbrook, 2014, p. 87). Research is needed to more clearly understand how adults, especially men, make meaning of their collegiate experience. This theory building case study investigated the adult male undergraduate experience in higher education and how they perceived their role within the university community.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore factors that contributed to the persistence of undergraduate adult male students and their perception of their role within the campus community. Research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1.) How do adult male undergraduate students describe their ability to persist until degree completion?
2.) What factors contribute to how adult male undergraduate students are able to persist until degree completion?
3.) What types of social interaction enable adult male undergraduate students to persist to degree completion?
4.) How do adult male undergraduate students describe their relationship to the university?

Significance of the Study

This study addressed the gap in current research about the adult undergraduate male student experience in higher education. Understanding these experiences helped to identify persistence factors and patterns of enrollment for adult male students. This study also demonstrated a need to reconsider how we define student persistence, because patterns of enrollment for adult male students are not continuous and often include episodes of stopping out. In addition, this research examined the role of the campus community in adult male student persistence. Understanding how adult male students access resources and engage in the campus community, will help higher education institutions make decisions about how to allocate resources and create structures that meet the needs of adult male students.

Definition of Terms

Adult students-students age 25 and older

Belong- the feeling of fitting into the campus environment experienced by students

Campus Community-the physical structures on campus, student organizations, institutional support, academic advising, and the relational space of human interactions on campus with people who work in these offices, students, and faculty

Degree Attainment- the action of achieving a bachelor's degree

Discontinuous Enrollment-occurs when a student does not register for consecutive semesters as they move toward degree completion

Engage-purposeful actions that extend beyond required interactions to function as a student

Graduation Rate-"the rate required for disclosure and/or reporting purposes under the Student-Right-to-Know Act. This rate is calculated as the total number of completers within 150% of normal time divided by the revised adjusted cohort" (NCES, 2015, Glossary, letter G).

Identify-identification with the student role when an individual sees themselves as a student

Institutional Agents- representatives of the university (e.g. faculty and staff)

Institutional Success- is commonly defined in terms of student retention and graduation rates.

Interact-basic contact that is needed to function as a university student. Some examples are applying for admission, registering for classes, interacting with faculty and staff, planning transportation and parking, etc.

Nontraditional Students- a student who identifies with at least one of these seven factors: (1) maintaining employment when enrolled, (2) financially independent in terms of eligibility for financial aid, (3) delays enrollment, (4) attending part time, (5) having dependents other than a spouse, (6) being a single parent, (7) having a certificate of completion or GED instead of a standard high school diploma (Choy, 2002).

Persistence- participation in higher education that results in degree completion with or without continuous enrollment

Position- a point when students are able to situated themselves in a meaningful way within the hierarchy of higher education.

Social Interaction- an exchange between a student and other members of the university community.

Social Integration- occurs when individuals are able to "establish via continuing interaction with other individuals the personal bonds that are the basis for membership in communities of the institution" (Tinto, 1993, p. 56).

Student Retention- "is the percent of first-time bachelors degree-seeking undergraduates from the previous fall who are again enrolled in the current fall" (NCES, 2015, Glossary, letter R).

Stopout-a student who left the university and returned at a later date.

Structured Interactions-interactions that rely on the university infrastructure

Student Success- undergraduate degree attainment

Unstructured Interactions- interactions that do not rely on the university infrastructure

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review for this study will provide a supporting argument for examining the factors that influence persistence for adult male students. It will include a discussion of adult students, student persistence, and adult development. The review will begin by exploring participation statistics and nontraditional student characteristics followed by a discussion of two adult development theories to provide the context of how adults develop and change over time. This is followed by a discussion of the barriers to degree completion that are used to generate attrition models. After holistically looking at the adult student population, the review will further explore the differences between men and women in higher education. The literature review will conclude with a discussion of campus resources.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore factors that contributed to the persistence of undergraduate adult male students and their perception of their role within the campus community. Research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1.) How do adult male undergraduate students describe their ability to persist until degree completion?

2.) What factors contribute to how adult male undergraduate students are able to persist until degree completion?

3.) What types of social interaction enable adult male undergraduate students to persist to degree completion?

4.) How do adult male undergraduate students describe their relationship to the university?

Introduction

It is predicted that two-thirds of jobs in the year 2020 will require an education beyond high school (Carnevale & Smith, 2012). However in 2010, only 38.8% of working age adults (25-64) had a two or four-year postsecondary degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In addition, the United States dropped from first in the world in four-year degree attainment, among 25-34 years old, to twelfth (White House, n.d.). Acknowledging these factors, President Obama set a goal to return to having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. This would require 60% of Americans to earn a college degree by 2020. Adults participate in higher education to update work skills, for personal development, and specialized training (Kasworm, 2012). Postsecondary education is not only needed to obtain a job but also to retain it. "Lifelong learning is a necessary ingredient in retaining a position within a knowledge economy" (Stokes, 2006, p 2). These factors contribute to an increased number of adults enrolling in colleges and universities. In 2010, students over the age of 25 accounted for about 41% of the 21.5 million students enrolled in the fall at degree granting institutions and 38% of the enrollment at four- year institutions (NCES, 2011).

Although more adults are participating in higher education, the data used to track institutional success does not always capture the degree attainment of adult students. Institutional graduation rates count the students who are fulltime, have continuous enrollment at the same institution and graduate within six years. Many adults have other life responsibilities that prevent them from attending fulltime and remaining enrolled continuously. Graduation rates are used as a measure of institutional success to quantify the purpose of higher education and determine whether or not institutions are fulfilling their intended purpose. The use of this metric creates parameters that define persistence. These parameters "box in" what is considered successful progress toward earning a degree. Institutional success is commonly defined in terms of student retention and graduation rates (Bailey & Xu, 2012). This inevitably leaves out those who are participating in higher education "outside of the lines." Participating outside of the lines refers to any student who engages with the university in a way that does not fit the definition of successful progress (e.g. part-time enrollment, discontinuous enrollment, and taking longer than six years to graduate). As a result, students with these engagement styles are often considered nontraditional because they participate "outside of the lines."

Nontraditional Students

The term nontraditional is often used to identify adult students in higher education; however, it does not exclusively define adults. The age criterion, which identifies students who are 25 or older, is the most common factor used to define nontraditional students (Kim, 2002). However, research studies on nontraditional students often define this population by other background characteristics (part-time

enrollment, nonresidential status, delayed enrollment in higher education after high school, low socioeconomic status) or other at-risk behaviors (Metzner & Bean, 1987; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) considers a student nontraditional if they identify with at least one of these seven factors: (1) maintaining employment when enrolled, (2) financially independent in terms of eligibility for financial aid, (3) delays enrollment, (4) attending part time, (5) having dependents other than a spouse, (6) being a single parent, (7) having a certificate of completion or GED instead of a standard high school diploma (Choy, 2002). Students with these characteristics are considered at-risk because these factors are often associated with attrition (Kim, 2002). The number of characteristics a student identifies with determines their nontraditional status: minimal (1), moderate (2-3), or high (4 or more) (Choy, 2002). Adult students often attend part-time due to work and family responsibilities and are financially independent. As a result, the nontraditional status for many adult students would be moderate or high. In addition, only 15% of undergraduates are traditional students, so 85% of current undergraduate students identify with at least one of the seven characteristics (Aud et al., 2010). However, policymakers and higher education institutions continue to make decisions under the assumption that traditional students are the majority. If outcome measures, such as graduation rates, define student success then higher education institutions will focus resources on students who can meet those goals (Levin, 2014). Due to their nontraditional status, adult students are often overlooked in terms of policy and programming because they often take more than six years to graduate. "The categorizations are inherently institution-centric and view post-traditional learners as an aberration in the demand for higher education services" (Soars,

2013, p. 2). Labels like “nontraditional” and “at-risk” are often associated with low expectations for student success.

Higher education institutions generally do not track degree attainment and completion rates for adult students so retention efforts are focused on the 18-24 year old college student (Fong, Jarrat, & Drekmeier, 2012). Many institutions are unaware of adult enrollment patterns and degree completion rates in part because accountability measures do not include these students. Fong, Jarrat, and Drekmeier (2012) surveyed 77 institutions (52% public four year institutions, 29% private non-profit four year institutions, and 19% for-profit or two year institutions) and discovered that 43% of these institutions do not track retention and degree completion rates for nontraditional students. In addition, 77% did not know their current degree completion rate for nontraditional students and only 16% have a good understanding of the root cause of attrition for their nontraditional students.

Kasworm (2014) attributes the lack of understanding about adult student persistence and degree completion to three antiquated and problematic assumptions about higher education participation: (1) college completion statistics are based on the belief that undergraduate students should be continuously enrolled as a full-time student and graduate in four to six years, (2) increased on-campus engagement (e.g. living on campus or participating in extracurricular activities) will improved retention, (3) support structures for adults should include specialized curriculum offered on evening and weekends, childcare services, and specialized student services. The implementation of “key leverage forces” for young adults (i.e. first-year college experiences and

engagement in social activities) contributes to segregation and marginalization of adults on college campuses (Kasworm, 2014, p.70).

Participation statistics show that adult students are no longer a minority; however, institutions are largely ignoring this changing demographic because of youth-center ideologies that perpetuate in higher education (Kasworm, 2014). Measures of degree completion have not yet caught up with reality. Graduation rates track the progress of traditional students (fulltime, residential students who graduate within six years) yet most students today identify with at least one nontraditional characteristic. Enrollment statistics show that adult students are almost half of the student population in higher education degree-seeking institutions (NCES, 2011). With such a large nontraditional population it seems unnecessary to separate students by labels since the majority is changing. Levin (2014) uses the trait framework to describe how student characteristics become labels. The nontraditional label does not necessarily identify students who differ from the majority but those who differ from a historical perception of a college student. If traditional students are the norm, then students labeled as nontraditional are seen as deficient, "in academic, background, in economic status, in possessing social and cultural capital and thus less likely to meet the standards, expectations and markers of attainment…" (Levin, 2014, p. 23).

Investigating student retention and predicting degree persistence is highly complex (Tinto, 1993). Adult students have varied goals and motivations for participation in higher education which are often not aligned to the institutional goal of graduating students within six years. Current outcome measures only allow for one trajectory which is continuous fulltime enrollment until graduation. However, enrollment

patterns for adult students are often discontinuous which challenges antiquated assumptions that all students should maintain continuous enrollment until degree completion (Kasworm, 2014).

Adult Development

Development theories provide the context surrounding the adult student experience in higher education and help to explain the process of situating the student role within a mature multifaceted identity. The majority of adults returning to college are experiencing significant life changes (Taylor, 1996). Adults decide to enroll or reenroll in college for many different reasons. Some enroll for career advancement while others return to remain competitive in a demanding job market. Transitions in the personal sphere of life, such as a divorce, trigger some adults to enroll in higher education. As a result, adult students are often dealing with the consequences of a major life change in addition to managing multiple life roles (Hardin, 2008). The life events prospective provides an understanding of how students contend with the challenge of change. Knowles' (1980) andragogy contributes to the understanding of adult students by providing a set of assumptions about how adults learn.

Life Events Perspective

"Development involves change over time" but understanding these changes and how they relate to learning can be interpreted through multiple lenses (Clark & Caffarella, 1999, p. 4). The psychological perspective focuses on internal development and can be viewed through life events and transitions (Clark & Caffarella, 1999). The life events model discusses how events or periods in a person's life influence development. Transition periods of change result from events that cause an individual to

question their life structure. Life transitions can alter roles, relationships, self-perceptions, and assumptions (Merriam, 2005). The transition of entering college typically changes the individual and can promote development, and in some cases transformation.

The Schlossberg (2011) transition model provides a framework for understanding transitions by defining three different types: anticipated, unanticipated, or nonevents. Anticipated transitions are expected life events like marrying, graduating from high school, starting a new job, and retiring. Unanticipated transitions are unexpected events that are often disruptive like illness, job loss, or a surprise promotion. Nonevents are the expected events that do not occur such as not getting married or landing a particular job (Schlossberg, 2011). To cope with transitions, Schlossberg provides four factors also known as the "4 S" system for coping with transitions: situation, self, supports, and strategies. The situation refers to other life events taking place during the transition. The presence of additional stressors can make the transition more difficult. Self is a person's inner strength. Supports are the assistance provided by others and strategies are plans to deal or cope with the transition (Schlossberg, 2011).

The strengths and weakness an individual possesses within each of the 4Ss influence how they cope with the transition. The four factors discussed by Schlossberg (2011) also play a role in adult student persistence. One of the biggest challenges for adult students is maintaining multiple life roles. The responsibilities of work and family are examples of life events that represent the situation surrounding the transition of returning to school. Motivation and self-perception are important factors that appear in all models of adult student persistence (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Bergman, 2012; Braxton,

Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Cross, 1981; Donaldson & Graham, 1999). These factors contribute to an individual's inner strength and affect their ability to persist in higher education. Support also plays a critical role in persistence. Support can come from family members and friends, as well as, the institution and its employees in the form of advising, childcare, counseling, faculty and staff interactions, etc. Plageman and Sabina (2010) found that family support helps adult female students negotiate multiple demands. Sandmann (2010) challenged institutions to establish a systematic support for adult students as a mechanism to assist them in reaching their academic goals. Strategies, the final S, are important for degree completion as adult students need a step-by-step plan that identifies the sequence of courses needed to graduate. Being able to see the steps within a process can eliminate the stress and increase motivation. Compton, Cox, and Laanan (2006) encourage institutions to provide customized educational plans for adult students. Customized educational plans allow the student to work with a faculty member to establish learning objectives, a work plan, and an evaluation procedure. This provides for flexibility, ownership, and gives the student a clear path to meeting their goal. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (2005) identified eight principles of effectiveness for serving adults: outreach, life and career planning, financing, assessment of learning outcomes, teaching-learning process, student support systems, technology, and strategic partnerships. These principles show the need to address the 4Ss when working with adult students in higher education. Many of these principles are examples of resources that institutions can provide for adults to deal with the transition of returning to school.

Andragogy

Although criticized for providing a reductionist view of the adult learner andragogy attempts to answer the question, who are adult learners (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007)? Knowles (1980) defined andragogy as, "the art and science of helping adults learn" (p. 43) and developed six assumptions that adult learners, (1) are self-directed, (2) have accumulated a rich reservoir of experience that can be used as a learning tool, (3) need learning to be related to their social roles, (4) are problem-centered and desire immediate application of knowledge, (5) are internally motivated to learn, and (6) need to know the purpose of learning a particular topic (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Levin (2014) agreed that life experiences influence learning for adult students, "Unlike traditional students, nontraditional students were motivated by their adult life experiences and the pressures and forces of work and family" (p. 73). Grounded in a humanistic view, andragogy assumes the learner is autonomous and that the purpose of learning is to become self-actualized (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Within the population of adult learners there are commonalities of needs and characteristics, however great individual difference exist. Not all adult learners identify with all six of Knowles' assumptions. Adults have various motivations for entering college. Some adults participate to improve a skill set, earn a needed credential or degree, and yet others enroll due to an enthusiasm for learning.

Kasworm (2003) identified five belief structures about teaching and learning that reveal adults are motivated to participate in higher education through multiple factors. She conducted a qualitative case study to understand how adults construct meaning from a learning experience in an undergraduate classroom. She was investigating how the

adults' past experiences and current involvements influence their learning experience, and how the learning experience relates to their life outside of the classroom. Ninety participants from six different institutions were interviewed. A purposeful sampling strategy was employed to target baccalaureate degree-seeking adults who had completed 15 credit hours and were in good academic standing. The participants were between the ages of 30-59 years old with 46 females and 44 males. Five belief structures emerged in the findings and were termed knowledge voices (entry voice, outside voice, cynical voice, straddling voice, and inclusion voice). Kasworm (2003) defines knowledge voices as, "the students' beliefs about the nature of knowledge and learning in relationship to the undergraduate classroom as well as the adult life worlds of work, family, self, and community" (p. 86).

Students who identified with the *entry voice* valued academic knowledge and viewed grades as a measure of success. Students with an *outside voice* valued knowledge and competencies that can be applied outside of the classroom in the real-world. The *cynical voice* represented students who struggle to find value in learning activities. They view participation in formal education as a necessary step to gain a credential. Students with a *straddling voice* valued both academic and real-world knowledge, and appreciated connections that link the two worlds. Students who identified with the *inclusion voice* value the academic world, the creation of knowledge, and the development of complex worldviews. These varied belief systems reflect Knowles' assumption that adult learners are self-directed, experienced-based, problem-centered, and internally motivated but show that not all adult learners identify with all six of his principles. Adult students have various perspectives on participation and represent various combinations of the

andragogy assumptions. In addition, adults encounter common barriers to degree completion.

Barriers to Degree Completion

Levin (2014) recognizes that the literature either focuses on the, "tenacity of the nontraditional student or the innumerable barriers faced by this population" (p. 74). Due to time constraints and other life responsibilities, obstacles arise that often leave the student role as the easiest to forgo. Cross (1981) identified three categories of participation barriers for adults: situational, institutional, and dispositional. Situational barriers occur as a result of an adult's life responsibilities. Situational barriers can be time management issues, family responsibilities, and time conflicts with work. Institutional barriers are policies and programs that exclude adult students from participating, such as fixed course offerings. Dispositional barriers are issues relating to the adult student's confidence and self-efficacy. Anxiety about academic performance is an example of a dispositional barrier. Hardin (2008) appended the work of Cross by adding a fourth category, educational barriers. Education barriers are academic deficiencies that occur as a result of under preparedness for college-level coursework and long break in enrollment. These barriers translate into reasons adult students discontinue enrollment. Breaks in enrollment do not necessarily equate to dropping out or leaving higher education without the intent to return (NCES, 2015). Adults often maintain discontinuous patterns of enrollment as they take breaks from enrollment or stopout to meet life demands with the intention to return.

Many studies have explored why adult students leave (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Taniguich & Kaufman, 2005). Another complex issue

associated with persistence is the student's intent when they leave. Are they transferring to another institution, dropping out, or taking a break from enrollment? The current calculation of graduation rates considers all students who leave an institution as dropping out of higher education all together. Those students who transfer to another institution or take a break and return to the same institution are not counted in any institutional graduation rate. "The label dropout is one of the most frequently misused terms in our lexicon of educational descriptors. It is used to describe the actions of all leaves regardless of the reasons or conditions which mark their leaving" (Tinto, 1993, p. 3). Discontinuous enrollment should be considered one of many possible paths to degree completion. Stopout is the term used to describe a student who leaves college and reenters to finish their degree (Tinto, 1993). "We should not underestimate the ability of people to eventually obtain their college degree. Nor should we minimize the diversity of behaviors which lead individuals to leave and eventually return to complete their college degree programs" (Tinto, 1993, p. 27). The studies discussed so far have examined the barriers and reasons students leave higher education or stopout. Few have examined the stopout adult student who eventually succeeds in obtaining their degree.

Schatzel, Callahan, Scott, and Davis (2011) investigated demographic and psychographic factors that characterize the nontraditional stopout population. Data collection from one institution is often a limitation of retention studies so Schatzel, et al., (2011) attempted to overcome this limitation by conducting phone interviews with 599 registered voters between the ages of 24-35 who had previously earned college credits but no degree in a large metropolitan area. The purpose of the study was to describe the

nontraditional stopout and dropout populations based on their intentions to return and to identify distinct segments of these populations.

A cluster analysis was used to identify five groups in total, and they found two segments with no intention of reenrolling, two segments that do intend to reenroll, and one segment with a desire to return but the likelihood of doing so was low. The dropout segments believed that earning a college degree would not help their career and cited family responsibilities as the reason they decided to drop out. The stopout segments attributed their break in enrollment to limited finances or time. This group expressed the greatest intention of returning and believed earning a college degree was important to personal success. Adults face many possible barriers to degree completion. Although leaving college may not seem like an appropriate strategy for reaching graduation, stopping out may actually facilitate degree completion for some adult students. A substantial amount of research has explored factors that contribute to the dropout of nontraditional students. It is unclear in many of these studies if the students plan to reenroll at a later date.

Models of Attrition for Nontraditional Students

Bean and Metzner (1985) developed an attrition model for nontraditional students because they argued that the external environment was more influential on the nontraditional student attrition process than social and academic integration variables. Bean and Metzner (1985) defined the nontraditional student as: older than 24, living off campus, and attending part-time. They argued that nontraditional students are primarily concerned with the academic offerings and not the social community of the institution. As a path model, the variables can have an indirect or direct influence on the outcome

variable dropout. The variables presumed to be most important were: academic outcomes, background and defining variables, intent to leave, and environmental variables.

Metzner and Bean (1987) conducted a quantitative study to estimate their model using data collected from a questionnaire distributed to 624 part-time freshmen in first-year English classes at a Midwestern urban university. The participants were part-time, commuter students with an average age of 23.8. A multiple regression model was used to determine the relationship between the following variables and dropout: background (age, enrollment status, educational goals, high school performance, ethnicity, and gender), academic (study hours, study skills, academic advising, course availability, major and job certainty, absenteeism), environmental (finances, hours of employment, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, opportunity to transfer), academic outcome (GPA), psychological outcome (utility, role satisfaction, goal commitment, stress), social integration variables (memberships, faculty contact, school friends), intent to leave.

GPA and intent to leave were the strongest predictors of dropout followed by background and hours enrolled. These findings are similar to Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005) who found that cognitive ability had a positive relationship and hours enrolled had a negative relationship with degree completion. Intent to leave represents the student's intention of leaving the present college before graduating. Intent to leave is associated with institutional commitment or the value a student attributes to being enrolled at one particular college (Bean & Metzner, 1985). The environment and background variables had an indirect effect on dropout by having a significant effect on GPA and intent to

leave. The social integration variables did not have a significant relationship with dropout. Although there were statistically significant relationships found in this study, the 26 variables only accounted for 29% of the variance in dropout. The inability of the model to explain a larger portion of the variance demonstrates the complexity of students' lives and the factors that influence persistence. It also indicates a need to further explore the experience of adult students in higher education.

Taniguich and Kaufman (2005) conducted a quantitative investigation of how part-time enrollment, age, cognitive ability, occupational background, and family characteristics influence completion in a four-year undergraduate degree program for nontraditional students. They defined nontraditional as students who enter college at the age of twenty-one or older. Data was collected from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and a discrete-time logistic event model was used to estimate the effects of nontraditional student characteristics on the probability of completing a degree. Men and Women born between January 1, 1957 and December 31, 1964 participated in the study and answered questions annually from 1979 to 1994 and biannually after 1996 relating to employment, education, and family. A unit of data was classified as a person-year resulting in a sample of 5,555 cases for 729 men and 6, 264 cases for 911 women.

The findings indicated that students enrolled part-time were less likely than fulltime students to finish. Married men and women were more likely to complete their degree than divorced men and women; however, there was no difference between married and never married individuals. Cognitive ability as measured by the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) had a significant positive relationship with degree completion. Having small children decreased the likelihood of completing a degree, but

having older children had no effect for both genders. The data used in this study is from a national survey so it is not limited by the distinctive characteristics of one institution or geographic area which is a common limitation of research studies on degree completion. However, this study does not mention the participants' age when they entered college or address how long it took these adults to finish.

Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) use a quantitative study to explore how (a) background as defined by age, level of qualifications upon leaving school, cultural level of the family, economic dependence on the family, (b) engagement styles, (c) perception of social integration and meaningfulness of the learning experience and, (d) perception of obstacles to overcome, influence attrition rates for non-traditional and traditional first-year college students at a non-residential institution. Students were defined as nontraditional in this study if they were employed at least part-time. Two hundred and twenty eight students, with a mean age of 30.63, participated in a phone interview.

Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) defined engagement in two dimensions. The first refers to student-faculty interaction or the degree to which a student attends lectures or cultural activities, utilizes learning support services, socializes online, and interacts with instructors outside of class. It is important to note there is not a compulsory attendance policy in the Italian university system so it is necessary to include attendance when discussing student engagement. The second dimension, which is less behavioral and more psychological, encompasses the student's perceived quality of the university experience determined by social integration and the meaningfulness of the learning experience.

Background variables accounted for 19% of the variance in the first block of the hierarchical stepwise logistic regression which indicates they are insufficient in predicting dropout. Metzner and Bean (1987) also did not find a direct relationship between background variables and dropout. Employment (permanent and temporary jobs) was the only predictor of attrition as employed students were more likely to drop out after the first year. Variables in the second block of the hierarchical stepwise regression explained 45% of the variance, and all of the academic variables as defined in the psychological dimension of engagement were significant. This is certainly a stronger model than the background variables in the first block. Higher values were associated with a lower probability of dropping out. Gilardi and Guglielmetti's (2011) findings indicated that nontraditional students attribute more meaning to learning, encounter more difficulties, and use university services less than traditional students. Nontraditional students who develop non-formal relationships outside of the classroom have a higher probability of continuing than those students who just attend the lecture. This is an interesting finding given that in other studies many adults do not have time to spend on campus outside of the classroom and describe the classroom as the setting for key interactions (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kasworm, 2005). In summary, adults who are enrolled part-time, employed while in school, and have dependents other than a spouse are less likely to finish. These finding support the assumption that adult students maintain multiple life roles which, at times, can serve as barriers.

In a more contemporary study, Davidson and Holbrook (2014) explored indicators of persistence from first-term academic behaviors for adult students at four-year institutions. Two hundred and eighty five first-time adult undergraduate students

(over the age of 21) participated in this quantitative study. Data was collected from Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education and analyzed using a logistical regression. This study measured persistence to the second semester, the second year and degree completion (based on a six year period). Predictor variables were divided into three categories (a) student characteristics (age, gender, race/ethnicity, number of underprepared subjects); (b) environmental variables (total grant aid, total loan aid, marital status, children, and total income; (c) leading indicators (degree seeking, number of credit hours enrolled, enrolled in one or more online classes, earned credit ratio, passing math and English grade).

The findings indicated that student characteristics and environmental variables had less predictive power than first-term academic behavior. Background and environmental variables have only had an indirect effect on persistence in other studies as well (Metzner & Bean, 1987; Taniguichi & Kaufman, 2005). The percent of students who persisted to spring semester was higher for those student enrolled in online classes. Students with the highest loan and grant aid (an environmental variable) also persisted. First term credit hour completion was a predictor of degree completion. Students who earned less than half of their attempted fall credit hours did not earn a degree. Other studies (Taniguichi & Kaufman, 2005) have indicated hours enrolled had an effect on completion but these finding are looking at the ratio of attempted to completed hours. The predictive power of these variables lessens over time so credit ratio is less likely to predict persistence for adult students with discontinuous enrollment who take longer than six years to earn a degree. Davidson and Holbrook (2014) used Tinto's (1975)

interactionalist theory as part of the conceptual framework for this study exploring adult student persistence. The next section will describe Tinto's theory in greater detail.

Interactionalist Theory

One of Kasworm's (2014) assumptions about higher education discussed the idea that increased on-campus engagement (e.g. living on campus or participating in extracurricular activities) will improved retention. A recent trend at urban commuter schools, like Rutgers University, is to use dormitories as retention tools. "These schools are using residence halls as a means of retaining students who may be underprepared and overwhelmed by college, getting them more engaged with the university and boosting academic performance" (Oguntoyinbo, 2011, para 3).

Initiatives like these are largely based on Tinto's (1975) interactionalist theory of student departure. The interactionalist theory seeks to explain how a student's interactions with individuals in the social and academic sphere of the university influence their decision to leave the university prior to degree completion. Tinto (1993) argued that students possess certain background characteristics that influence their institutional commitments and goal of graduation. Positive or "integrative" experiences further strengthens this commitment and negative experiences serve to weaken it (Tinto, 1993, p. 115). The higher the congruency between the student's attitudes and beliefs and the norms of the academic and social system at the university the more likely the student will remain enrolled until graduation. A student's intention and commitment when they enter higher education and the perceived quality of their interactions with individuals at the institution affect their ability to assimilate to the university culture which ultimately determines if they stay or leave.

Morrow and Ackermann (2012) used Tinto's interactionalist theory to explore the predictive power of motivation and connectedness to the university community on traditional-aged students' intention to persist and second-year retention. The overall regression was not significant, but perceived faculty support and peer support were the only significant predictors of intent to remain enrolled and second-year retention; however, faculty and peer support were not significant when included with motivation predictors. Students motivated by intrinsic and extrinsic goals (e.g. personal development and job opportunities) were more likely to persist than students who did not have any specific goals. These results question the importance of social integration when compared to student motivation. Although the participants in this study were traditional-aged students, student motivation may also be a stronger predictor of persistence for adults since they often do not have the extra time to interact socially at the university.

Schieferecke and Card (2013) explored male students' perception of mattering and marginalization at a college where the majority of students enrolled were women. They define mattering as "a person's perception that they are important, significant, and of concern to another individual, an organization or the world" (Schieferecke & Card, 2013, p. 88). Marginalization is the feeling that one does not belong or is not significant to others or an organization (Schieferecke & Card, 2013). They conducted a phenomenological study at a comprehensive public university with 18-24 year old male students. Themes of both mattering and marginalization emerged as an interaction or activity can make some students feel significant while others on the outside feel marginalized. The participants discussed relationships with faculty and increasing leadership responsibilities within organizations. The male students' perceptions of

mattering is based on their relationship with faculty. If the students felt as if the faculty member valued them and was interested in their academic success the students experienced a sense of mattering. If they were in large classes with limited one on one interaction they felt marginalized. As a result, they asked fewer questions and participated minimally. In addition, if the students integrated into the campus community through membership in groups and organization they had a sense of mattering. However, marginalization can also occur for those students who do not participate and experience rejection in the social setting. One aspect of social integration relates to the students' perception of being valued and significant within the larger community. The question is can a student feel as if they matter without socially integrating.

Kelly et al. (2012) also found that currently enrolled traditional-aged students perceived a positive relationship with faculty as a social factor that encouraged persistence. The respondents agreed that family support (95%), a positive course experience (86%), recreation facilities (83%), and a desired social status among other colleagues (82%) were factors that positively influenced student persistence. There was less agreement among respondents when asked to identify factors that would discourage persistence. Burn-out (57%) was the number one factor to discourage persistence.

Asking currently enrolled students about what might prevent them from finishing is less informative then asking students who actually left the university. The authors' conclusion that the findings support Tinto's interactionalist theory is debatable. Tinto (1993) argued that the meaning students attribute to interactions with members of the university community affects their commitment to the institution. Kelly et al. (2012) found that students minimally agreed that negative experiences with other students

(50%), negative experiences with staff members (38%) and negative experience with professors (14%) would discourage student persistence. Respondents moderately agreed that burn out (57%), lack of time management (52%), and inability to handle stress (52%) would discourage persistence. These findings seem to contradict Tinto's theory given that the majority of students reported factors not related to social interaction as having a greater influence on persistence.

The Interactionalist Theory and Adult Students

One issue raised by this contradiction is the lack of concise definition of social integration. "The very construct of social integration is ambiguous…" (Gilardi & Gugliemetti, 2011, p. 35). According to Tinto (1993) social integration occurs when there is match between the needs, interests, and preferences of the student and the institution. The question is where does this take place? In the case of the previously discussed studies, does faculty support and peer support manifest in the classroom or through additional interactions outside of class? Kelly et al. (2012) recommends that institutions support the development of social relationships by providing opportunities for extra-curricular activities and other social events. This implies that social integration takes place outside of the classroom. The respondents assumedly have different interpretations of peer and faculty support so without a clear definition is it difficult to understand the influence of social integration on student persistence. Tinto's model relies heavily on social integration yet it is difficult for adult students to engage in social integration due to responsibilities outside of the classroom. The external environment and other commitments outside of the university can affect student persistence (Metzner & Bean, 1987; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). In addition, most colleges develop an identity

or mission that has a youth-centered focus which creates a culture that allows traditional-aged students to assimilate by engaging in campus life and leaves adults on the margin. "The voice and image of adult students are not integrated into the ethos of the campus" (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001, p. 20). Adult students' values and dispositions often differ from the mainstream culture on campus, and adults maintain multiple life roles which make them subject to external demands (Tinto, 1993). There is a need to know more about how adults who reach degree completion describe their relationship with the university culture.

Tinto's (1993) original theory did not address the influence of external factors on student persistence although he later acknowledged that adults maintain multiple life roles and are subject to external demands. Adult students' values and dispositions often differ from the mainstream culture on campus, and they do not have additional time outside of class to interact with faculty and students. That is why Donaldson and Graham (1999) included the "connecting classroom" as one of the six key factors in their model of college outcomes for adults. The classroom is the central location for social interaction with faculty and peers. Their model also accounted for five additional variables: prior experience, psychosocial and value orientation, adult cognition, the life-world environment, and outcomes. Personal biographies and real world experiences influence motivation and self-confidence. These psychosocial features in turn influence outcomes. In addition to interactions on campus, adults are managing responsibilities of work and family that fall outside of the student role. Prior experience, combined with learning that takes place in the classroom (connecting classroom) and outside (life-world

environment) serve as the foundation for adult cognition or the creation of knowledge structures. Last, outcomes measure both student and institutional achievement.

Bergman (2012) collapsed similar variables into three categories that predict student persistence. The theory of adult learner persistence explored the influence of student background characteristics (gender, age, ethnicity, parent education, previous college credit, educational goals, children, marital status, income/SES, motivation), the external environment (finances, family influence, work influence, significant life events, community influences, hours of employment), and the internal campus environment (enrollment status, cumulative GPA, institutional GPA, institutional support, academic advising, faculty support, financial aid, cost, flexible course offerings, active learning, and prior learning assessment) on persistence and non-persistence. This model is based on Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon's (2004) theory of student departure in commuter institutions. The theory of student departure examines the effect of students' entry characteristics, the external environment, and the internal campus environment on initial and subsequent institutional commitment and persistence. It assumes that commuter students have limited time to spend on campus outside of class and have many off-campus commitments. These commitments can translate into barriers which are overcome by motivation and high self-efficacy.

These models addressed factors affecting all adult students. The next section will explore the adult female student experience in higher education. Some of the literature on adult female students discussed the influence of family on participation decisions (Plageman & Sabina, 2010; Taniguichi & Kaufman, 2007; White, 2008). It is important

to understand the goals and motivations of female students in an effort to understand the male experience in higher education and how it might differ.

Adult Women in Higher Education

Since 1980, women have been enrolling in higher education and graduating at higher rates than males (Ross et al., 2012). In fall 2012, female undergraduate students accounted for 56% of the total enrollment at degree-granting postsecondary institutions. Fifty nine percent of the first-time full-time undergraduate students who enrolled in 2006 graduated within six years from the same institution. Within this population of degree completers, degree attainment was also higher for females (61%) than males (56%) (Kena et al., 2014). Many qualitative studies on adult student persistence focus on the experience of female students (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Plageman & Sabina, 2010; Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1996; Vaccaro & Lowell, 2010).

Taniguchi and Kaufman (2007) explored the influence of economic and family factors on nontraditional student enrollment for women and men. The purpose of their study was to investigate how employment-related variables (cumulative work experience and experience of teenage employment) and family-related variables (marital status, number of children, and family income) influenced nontraditional participation differently according to gender. Data was used from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979-2002. The participants' demographic information was noted earlier in the Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005) study. The findings indicated having little work experience facilitated enrollment for men more than women. Conversely, divorce influenced enrollment for women almost exclusively, and divorced women were more

likely than married women to become nontraditional students. Having young children negatively affected pursuit of a college education for both genders. Mothers of older children are more likely to enter college than men but this enrollment is limited to 2-year institutions. Changes in family arrangements influenced women's decision to enter college.

Family serves as a motivation, a support system, and a constraint in women's pursuit of higher education (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Plageman & Sabina, 2010; Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1996; Vaccaro & Lowell, 2010). Women's decision to enroll in school is greatly influenced by family arrangements and support. Plageman and Sabina (2010) investigated how adult women perceive family support and its impact on their persistence in higher education. A questionnaire was distributed electronically to 278 women over the age of 25 attending a small public college to measure support of family members and attitudes of family members and their relationship to perceived support and GPA. Fifty-four individuals responded to the survey. The women provided the following reasons as motivation for returning to school: 51% career-related goals, 41% personal goals, 2% to set an example for their children. Forty-one percent attended fulltime and worked more than 40 hours a week. The average age of the respondents was 37 and the average GPA was 3.47. Social economic status (SES) and background variables were related to the support of the family of origin and was less influential on current family support. SES and parent education are often considered indicators of college success, but this study suggests they are better indicators for traditional-aged students. It is important to note the small sample size as a limitation of the study. The high average GPA could indicate that the highly motivated students

were more likely to respond. The findings revealed that family was a source of support to these women. All family members were rated at least somewhat supportive with the most support coming from other women in their lives, such as mothers and sisters. Family support was not significantly related to GPA. This implies that family support may help women negotiate multiple demands but is unrelated to academic performance.

Deutsch and Schmertz (2011) investigated what motivated women to return to school, what barriers they faced, and what type of support they received. The purpose of the qualitative study was to examine how social and personal forces influence the experiences of adult women and their position in society and institutions of higher education. Eleven women, ranging in age from nineteen to sixty, participated in the focus groups held at two Northeastern all-female institutions. Both institutions had less than 2,000 students but the location differed as one was situated in an urban community and the other rural. The participants enrolled in a specialized program for adult students and received tuition scholarships. Ten of the women had children and half of them were returning after raising their family. Career advancement and job opportunities served as a motivation for returning to school.

Scott, Burns, and Cooney (1996) investigated why women discontinue enrollment before completing a degree and how role multiplicity influenced their decision. They explored how parental status, family life cycle stage, and socioeconomic status influenced persistence. A questionnaire was distributed to 118 women who were recently enrolled at one of three Australian universities and then discontinued enrollment. The participants were between the age of 34 and 60 and reported having between one and nine children. The individual responses were analyzed, and a cluster analysis was used

due to the number of reasons and related variables. The number one reason reported for discontinuing enrollment was the weight of family responsibilities followed by work and practical difficulties. The results of the individual analysis of predictor variables with reasons for leaving indicated a strong socioeconomic influence on attrition. The authors noted that the women's reasons for leaving (lack of family support, money, weight of domestic responsibility, and lack of knowledge and skill expected at the university) were indicative of their social class. Due to the large number of potential reasons for leaving in the individual analysis, a quick cluster procedure was used to analyze the reasons given for discontinuation. The four accepted clusters differed significantly by age. The cluster analysis suggested the family life cycle explanation was the main reason for attrition. Younger students had younger children at home so childcare, lack of money, and weight of family responsibility were reported as reasons for leaving. The second cluster had a higher average age and presented lack of support by university staff and demands of study as the reasons for leaving. The women in the course dissatisfaction cluster did not leave due to family demands, but stated they were not satisfied with their course of study. Women in the role overload cluster left because of a combination of family and work demands.

Another research study found that women decided to enroll when the timing was right for their family (White, 2008). White interviewed pre-service teachers in New Zealand who were completing student teaching and were also mothers. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the extent to which these women experienced different problems then their traditional-aged counterparts, and if their role as a mother changed after taking on the new role as a student teacher. Six mothers, ranging in age

from 22-49, who were pre-service teachers at the New Zealand College of Education, were interviewed for this study. They had between one and four children ranging in age from 2-23. Two were married, one lived with a partner, and three were single parents. Five of the women maintained part-time employment. Despite waiting until the time was right for families, the women indicated their decision to reenroll added stress to the family situation. They experienced anxiety and guilt from not fulfilling their previous responsibilities at home as they attempted to negotiate the dual roles. Some women experience support from their partners while others reported their partners resented their decision to return to school. The women received support from a network of family and friends that extended beyond their immediate families.

The constraint of family responsibilities and other life priorities are the reasons many women are unable to remain continuously enrolled. Women often decide to enroll when the timing is right for their family, and chose to participate to set an example for their children (Duetsch & Schmertz, 2011; White, 2008). As a result, family can be a positive motivation to return to school for women. The perceived support for each role determined how successful the women were in meeting competing demands. If they felt their role was valued, they were better equipped to negotiate conflicting roles, dedicate time to coursework, and persist to degree completion (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Vaccaro & Lowell, 2010). These roles create multifaceted identities for both men and women so adult identity development is related to the experience of adult students in higher education.

Identity Development

Identity is associated with how we view ourselves and how we are perceived by others. Identity can be defined as an, "integration of the self" (Deaux, 2001, p. 1). Since identity is considered a holistic view of the many roles and attributes that make an individual who they are, many perspectives on identity development exist. Erikson's (1963) eight stages of psychosocial development pairs opposite traits, such as trust and mistrust that result in an identity crisis. Depending on the resolution of the crisis, a person adopts a new characteristic which could be positive or negative. These conflicts are dealt with over a life span with stages six through eight taking place during adulthood. In young adulthood, stage six is intimacy versus isolation. Successful completion of this stage will result in the positive outcome or basic virtue of love. The positive resolution of stage seven, generativity versus stagnation, results in the ability to care for others, and wisdom is the result of stage eight, ego integrity versus despair. This model suggests linear movement from one stage to the next; however, adults can revisit an earlier stage and resolve the crisis with a different outcome. Erikson's (1963) psychosocial development explores how an individual internally processes life experiences.

Deaux (1993) explores the relationship between personal identity development described by Erikson and social identity. Social identity looks beyond the internal process of development to explore how society and group membership influences identity. Social identity is the "aspects of a person that are defined in terms of his or her group memberships" (Deaux, 2001, p. 1). Personal identity "refers to those traits and behaviors that the person finds self-descriptive, characteristics that are typically linked to one or

more of the identity categories" (Deaux, 1993, p. 6). However personal identity is not completely missing from the concept of social identity. Deaux uses hierarchical classification to show how personal and social identities are interrelated. When exploring questions like "who am I" people often list roles which pinpoint membership in larger groups: mother, Christian, African-American, sister, wife, student, musician, etc. After self-identifying group membership, Deaux (1993) asked participants to assign personal meaning to these roles by listing features that define them. The final step of this analysis was to rate the influence of each feature on the various identities. This resulted in a map of clustered identities and corresponding features.

The roles people chose to define themselves are central to their identity. Less salient roles do not contribute as much to one's self definition. This multifaceted view implies that identity is not singular but a composition of multiple identities with corresponding behaviors, emotions, and beliefs. "There is no single identity category that satisfactorily describes how we respond to our social environment or are responded to by others" (Shields, 2008, p. 304). Identity is then the relationship or interaction among these various identities. Role salience and the connection of an individual to others in the same social category influence the idiosyncratic processes of identity formation. As a result, identity is multidimensional, dynamic yet "experienced as stable" over time, and influenced by social culture (Shields, 2008, p. 304).

Intersectionality is the lens that provides an understanding for how multiple identities and the centrality of various roles influence personal experience since shared identities are not experienced in the same way by all people. Gender is a social category that forms groups with shared experiences. Women, for example, may have similar

interests and experiences as an oppressed group but other social categories such as class, race, and sexual orientation influence a woman's individual experience and how others perceive her. The intersectionality framework grew out of African American feminist scholarship in response to the singular representation of women which was based on middle-class, educated, white women (Shields, 2008). Intersectionality is "an analysis claiming that systems of race, economic class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization" (Collins, 1998, p. 278). It is assumed that (1) social categories are experienced in relationship to and informed by other categories, (2) privilege and oppression can be experience simultaneously, (3) identity is comprised of individual attributes but is located within group power relations, (4) individuals experience the intersectional positions differently (Collins, 1998; Shields, 2008). Due to the relationship among categories and the salience assigned to each category by the individual, there is great diversity in how individuals experience membership within groups and institutional structures. Collins (1998) points out this does not eradicate group identity but "deepens the understanding of how the actual mechanism of institutional power can change dramatically even while they reproduce long-standing inequalities of race, class, and gender" (p. 206).

Masculine Identity

One singular concept of masculinity does not exist. Although intersectionality came out of feminist scholarship it is an important framework to consider when exploring the experiences of males as well. "Men are often homogenized as a group, posing them in a battle of the sexes and ignoring the complex ways that masculinity intersects with other social differences, including age, class, ethnicity, race and sexuality" (Burke, 2013, p.

109). Connell (1995) supports this argument by locating masculinity within a social structure and not in isolation. Masculinities are "a configuration of practice structured by gender relations" (Connell, 1995, p. 44). These practices interact with other social categories and generate varied masculinities and human experience. When considering gender relations, there is a hierarchy within and among social groups and one form of masculinity is "culturally exalted" (Connell, 1995, p. 77). Hegemonic masculinity is the gender practices that are currently exalted which guarantees the dominant position of men and subordination of women (Connell, 1995). There is not a fixed character type of hegemonic masculinity but it exists when there is a link between the cultural ideal and institutional power. Maintaining the dominate position does not always happen in relationship to women. Issues of race, class, and sexuality among men influence privilege and marginalization. Homosexual masculinities are in a subordinate position at the bottom of the hierarchy among men (Connell, 1995).

The influence of social categories, presence of oppression and domination, and multiple masculinities suggests the intersectionality framework works well to explain the experiences of men. Depending on these various configurations of masculinity, men can experience opportunity and oppression. The founding purpose of higher education institutions was to educate white males and for decades this population was outperforming other groups (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Scholars often explore inequalities and try to answer the question of why certain disparities exist. As a result, research on the persistence of female students, particularly adults, and African American males abound. However studies exploring men in higher education often discuss social norms associated with hegemonic masculinities. As described by Burke (2013) men are often

viewed as a homogenous group. As a result, behaviors that are congruent with stereotypical gender norms (e.g. reluctance to join a club or organization) are identified as the reason men are underperforming in higher education compared to women (Harris III & Harper, 2008; Kahn, Brett, & Holmes, 2011; Archer, Pratt, & Phillips, 2001). This singular view of masculinity is limiting the understanding of the male experience in higher education.

Men in Higher Education

Since 2000, females have achieved more at each educational level than males (Kena, et al., 2015). Although female students are outperforming their male counterparts, the disparity is even larger for African Americans. The number of undergraduate degrees earned by African American females (66%) was twice that of African American males (34%) in 2012 (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). "African American men represent less than 5% of all undergraduates in the nation indeed the exact same proportion as in 1976" (Strayhorn, 2010, p. 310). Many studies explore why black men are underrepresented among college students.

Strayhorn (2010) explored the influence of background traits, academic preparation for college, and sociocultural capital on academic achievement as measured by grade point average for African American and Latino men. Data was gathered from the NCES National Education Longitudinal Study. The findings show there is a relationship between social and cultural capital and academic success. African American males from higher SES backgrounds had higher grades. "African American males from higher SES families may be advantaged by the stock in their social and cultural capital reservoirs while Black males from lower SES families are at-risk of failure…"

(Strayhorn, 2010, p. 320). In addition, Strayhorn (2010) found that involvement in college activities, pre-college outreach programs, and having college discussion with parents had positive relationship with academic achievement. The findings of this study illustrated that not all men have the same experience in higher education and the intersection of race, class, and gender influences academic success.

As with adult students, Black male students are often described as at-risk which can perpetuate lower expectations for success by faculty, staff, and students. Bonner and Bailey (2006) found that traditional-aged African American males believed faculty and white students viewed them negatively. Bonner and Bailey (2006) discussed five factors that can improve the academic climate for African American men: peer group influence, family influence and support, faculty relationships, identity development and self-perceptions, and institutional environment. Having family, friends, or faculty validate the student role and provide support is a critical resource that contributes to student success. "The need for belonging is often addressed in the African American peer enclave…" (Bonner & Bailey, 2006). Faculty mentoring can provide the needed support, give students the feeling that someone cares about their academic success, and help them overcome negative perceptions (Bonner & Bailey, 2006). Brown (2006) argued that higher education institutions have an opportunity to retain African American male students through removing barriers in the campus environment. Activities that take place outside of class that help Black males feel as if they belong can encourage involvement and academic success. The students in the study identified five organizations (student government, intramural athletics and recreation, the student union, mentoring, and peer relationships) that made the campus environment more receptive and comfortable for

them. Bonner and Bailey's (2006) argument about the influence of peer and faculty relationships on student success and the need to integrate students into the campus environment through participation in student organizations is aligned with Tinto's interactionalist theory. Tinto (1975) argued that students who interacted with members of the campus community and integrated into the social sphere of the campus are more likely to persist until degree completion. In discussing social integration, one question is how does the relationship between social integration and student persistence change as the students' age increases? The current study explored the adult male students' social experiences at the university.

Bonner and Bailey (2006) discussed identity development and self-perceptions as factors that can improved the academic climate for African American males. Identity development and self-esteem connects to the discussion on masculinity. Some African American males use cool behaviors as a coping mechanism if they sense their manhood is being questioned (Majors & Billson, 1992 as cited in Bonner & Bailey, 2006). Cool behaviors are associated with an attitude that conveys strength and gives the males a sense of control particularly in environments such as the classroom "where they are perceived by most to be powerless" (Bonner & Bailey, 2006, p. 34). Cool behaviors are similar to behaviors associated with dominant masculinities such as control and strength. Previous research on traditional students has stated these behaviors and attitudes are negatively related to academic motivation and success (Harris III & Harper, 2008; Kahn, Brett, & Holmes, 2011; Archer, Pratt, & Phillips, 2001).

Last, Bonner and Bailey (2006) discussed the link between self-esteem and academic performance. African American males are more susceptible to low self-esteem

and have to overcome the negative stereotypes and perceptions (Bonner & Bailey, 2006). Harper (2012) encouraged scholars to move beyond a deficit framework when exploring the experience of Black males in college. Instead he presented an anti-deficit achievement framework to better understand the success of African American males in college. Exploring academic resiliency is a way to overcome the deficit framework. "Resiliency is the capacity of an individual to overcome difficult and challenging life circumstances and risk factors" (Bryan, 2005, p. 220). Educational resiliency relates specifically to students' ability to succeed academically despite risk factors (Bryan, 2005). The resiliency framework has been used in studies to explore how groups of students who are defined as at-risk overcame difficulty and reached degree attainment. Adults are another group of students often categorized as at-risk (Levin, 2014). They also face institutional, situational, dispositional, and educational barriers to academic success. What is unknown is how age influences the experience of males in higher education. Do adult African American students experience the same feeling of marginalization on college campuses? Do other adult male students share these feelings? The current study investigated adult male students who demonstrated academic resiliency by persisting to degree completion.

Although the participation rate by males in higher education has decreased, Weaver-Hightower (2010) discussed how men have more options after high school that do not require postsecondary education such as entering manufacturing, manual labor and service jobs. More men than women are employed in these types of jobs which can contribute to the discrepancies in degree completion. Other possible trajectories after high school for males include the armed forces and unfortunately prison. "The Army

alone recruits roughly 64,000 more college-age high school graduate men than women per year…" (Weaver-Hightower, 2010, p. 32). In 2008, 219,000 more men between the ages of 18 and 24 were incarcerated compared to women of the same age (Weaver-Hightower, 2010). Despite other options after high school for males, this shift in gender disparities in postsecondary achievement have many scholars now exploring the higher education experience of male undergraduate students and attributing their struggle in this environment to gender role conflict (Harris III & Harper, 2008; Kahn, Brett, & Holmes, 2011; Archer, Pratt, & Phillips, 2001). The experience of traditional-aged males and norms associated with dominant masculinity seem to command the literature. Primarily these studies are exploring the incongruence between behaviors that promote success in higher education and behaviors associated with dominant masculinities.

Harris III and Harper (2008) argued that children learn gender roles from their parents and "masculinities are associated with duties that represent physical rigor, strength, and power" (p. 27). Gender roles are set of behaviors and beliefs ascribed to a certain biological sex. The gender role described by Harris III and Harper (2008) relates to the hegemonic or dominant description of masculinity that promotes competition and aggression. Harris III and Harper (2008) argue college men are more reluctant to engage in campus activities, organizations, and developing meaningful friendships because these types of activities conflict with society's masculine identity. "For boys learning and studying are equated with femininity" (Harris III and Harper, 2008, p. 28). As a result, boys socialized to believe these types of activities are inherently feminine are less likely to participate.

Kahn, Brett, and Holmes (2011) explored the relationship between conforming to masculinity norms and academic motivation. They hypothesized that conformity to masculine norms weaken male college students' motivation to learn. "Being a man" is often associated with behaviors that emphasize competiveness, aggression, privilege, power over women, and a rejection of femininity (Kahn, Brett, & Holmes, 2011). The 164 participants identified as male with an average age of 20.3 and attended a small liberal arts college. The majority of participants were White (84%) students and included African American (5%), Latino-American (4%), Asian-American (1%), Native American (less than 1%) and bi/multiracial (5%) students. The findings indicate that dominant masculinity can be maladaptive when it comes to educational success because it inhibits students from developing significant relationships that can promote success in higher education. Internal motivation decreased for men who conformed to masculine norms. The authors described a masculine identity associated with opposite behaviors such as expressing emotion, openness to experiences and diversity as an "adaptive form of masculinity in a college setting" (Kahn, Brett, & Holmes, 2011, p. 77). Motivation increased for men who rejected principles of dominant masculinity such as emotional control, self-reliance, disdain for homosexuality, and winning. This dichotomy does not provide a holistic view of masculine identity and college success. Competiveness associated with dominant masculinity could drive a student to be successful in academia. In addition, fraternities and sports teams are examples of organizations populated by college men who do not display the reluctance to join clubs described by Harris III and Harper (2008). Other factors associated with culture and socialization can influence masculine identity and success in higher education. The intersectionality framework

provides a more comprehensive view of masculinity as it recognizes the influence of sociocultural factors and acknowledges difference based on how individuals experience memberships within these groups. Kahn, Brett, and Holmes (2011) acknowledged the complexity of identity development and suggest that future research explore the contributions of factors like race, socioeconomic status, and age. "This data set was weighted with younger students and exploring age as a factor would make sense since it is possible that students develop and negotiate masculinities and motivation differently at different stages of their college career" (Kahn, Brett, & Holmes, 2011, p. 78). The current study explored the experience of adult male students over the age of 25.

Archer, Pratt, and Phillip (2001) explored the impact of gender, race, and class on working-class males' attitude toward participation or non-participation in higher education. This was a qualitative study that was part of the University of North London's social class and widening participation project in higher education. Sixty four working-class men age 16-30 participated in focus groups. Each race represented a third of the participants: African Caribbean, White, and Asian. As with Kahn, Brett, and Holmes (2011) the findings indicated a disconnection between educational pursuits and masculinity norms. Archer, Pratt, and Phillips (2001) found these risks are unequally distributed among classes, and working-class men stand to lose more than middle class men. Some men expressed interest in participating to earn more money, but class still put them at a disadvantaged position in participation. The men recognized the economic and social barriers and how they differed from other groups. The men did not view postsecondary education as useful or relevant and participation did not ensure success in

life. Opportunity costs played a significant role in their decision not to participate as being a student eliminated the possibility of immediate work and income.

Male students are often overlooked in qualitative research about adult and nontraditional students with exception of Smith (2006) and Widoff (1999). Smith (2006) identified the need to explore the "nontraditional student as a meaningful construct" instead of focusing "solely on the effects of gender" (p. 265). This study explored the intersection of gender and human development and how it influenced the transition to a nursing program. The participants were over the age of 20 and enrolled at a 2-year private college in the northeast United States. The participants discussed the public perception of nursing and their experience as men in a field that is historically female. Despite stereotypical gender norms which identify females as more nurturing than males, the male nursing students believed they were perceived as capable of providing care. They did not feel that being a minority hindered opportunities, but experienced a lack of male representation in the field (e.g. an all-female faculty, lack of locker facilities, and exclusive use of women in textbooks). This mixed method study found that the greatest challenge for the participants was balancing family responsibilities, work, and meeting academic demands. When adult students are faced with balancing employment, family obligations and academic endeavors, school is often the only commitment that is optional which makes it the easiest to eliminate. The male adult nursing students in Smith's (2006) study experienced the pressure associated with role multiplicity.

Negotiating multiple life roles and responsibilities was also a challenge for the male participants in Widoff's (1999) study. This was a mixed methods study that used a demographic survey, focus groups, and individual interviews to investigate sources of

support and motivation for adult male students, as well as, potential obstacles and concerns. The participants were male undergraduate students age 25 or older. No information was provided on the participants' ethnicity or race. The survey was mailed to 395 currently enrolled students. Thirteen students participated in the focus group and six students agreed to be interviewed. Of the thirteen male students, six were married, six were single, and one was divorced. Employment status consisted of nine part-time workers, one fulltime worker, and the remaining three were unemployed.

The findings indicated that career aspirations were the prominent reason the participants enrolled in an undergraduate degree program. Although balancing life roles was challenging, 85% of the participants said they were able to successfully integrate the student role into their multifaceted identity. The participants identified peers and family members as sources of support. However, they also struggled to maintain relationships and attend family functions while fulfilling their student responsibilities of attending class and studying. Their perception of the institution was based on their relationship with faculty and staff. While some participants felt faculty were responsive to their needs, others viewed institutional policies as roadblocks and the faculty and staff as unaccommodating. Reasons adult students enroll in degree programs and the challenges they face are similar across gender. Women are also motivated by career aspirations to enroll in undergraduate degree programs, (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011), receive support from family and peers (Plageman & Sabina, 2010) and strive to manage multiple life roles (Vaccaro & Lowell, 2010). To extend what is known about adult male students, the current study explored recent graduates' perception of the campus community and factors that helped them persist.

Exploring how men negotiate multiple roles in their effort to persist in higher education will help to fill the gap in the literature. It is also important to understand how higher education institutions can support the needs of adult students (Fincher, 2010; McGivney, 2004; Sandmann, 2010; Spellman, 2007; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). "Four year institutions are challenged to replace outmoded pedagogy, policies, and practices with systemic supports for adult students (Sandmann, 2010, p. 228). The next section will discuss support services for adult students.

Campus Environment

Tinto (1993) questioned how far should an institution should go in seeking to reduce attrition. He concluded there are a certain number of students who will decide after attending college that academia is not a match for them and dropout. He suggested targeting a specific group of students for which evidence supports that existing structures are unjustly preventing these students from completing their degree. Given the unique degree completion barriers faced by adult students and the antiquated assumptions about the higher education student population, it is valuable to explore adult student engagement and the types of institutional resources that support persistence.

Engagement

Astin (1984) generated a student development theory based on involvement. He defined involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1984, p. 518). The theory states that the achievement of developmental goals is directly related to the time and effort a student devotes to academic and/or social activities. Student development is directly related to the quality and quantity of student involvement. Through his research on student

persistence, Astin also concluded, “factors that contribute to student’s remaining in college suggested involvement” (p. 523). These activities include studying, spending time on campus, participating in student organizations, and interacting frequently with faculty and students (Astin, 1984). The theory of student involvement does not account for the affective domain. It only considers behavior or the extent to which a student participates in these types of the activities.

Astin did acknowledge that a student’s time is limited. Additional life responsibilities can reduce the amount of time a student has to devote to educational activities. It is assumed that adult students do not have time to spend on campus outside of class because of their commitment to work, family, and other responsibilities (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Kasworm, 2014; Tinto, 1993). For this reason, Price and Baker (2012) explored whether the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is an appropriate measure of adult student engagement.

The NSSE collects information from first-year and senior students attending four-year institutions about their participation in institutional activities. This measure assesses student engagement that is associated with desired outcomes of college. Currently, the NSSE has ten engagement indicators organized into four themes (academic challenge, learning with peers, and experiences with faculty, campus environment) and reports on six high impact practices (learning community, service learning, research with faculty, internship or field experience, study abroad, and culminating senior experience). Student engagement as defined by NSSE accounts for the amount of time and effort a student devotes to educational activities, as in Astin’s theory, but also includes institutional resources that are designed to support students.

The participants of Price and Baker's (2012) study consisted of 125 adult students (over the age of 23 when they entered college) and 69 traditional-aged students from a private four year institution. The findings indicated that adults scored lowered than traditional-aged students on 20 core survey items particularly those addressing activities that take place outside of the classroom. Price and Baker suggested that engagement might look differently for adult students and it is more likely to occur inside the classroom. They argued that more research is needed to explore how nontraditional students engage in the college experience, and evaluate the appropriateness of tools that measure student engagement. Their finding provided preliminary evidence that these measures are based on traditional student engagement and may display some bias toward adult students.

Institutional Resources

Given that adult students are balancing multiple life roles, many research studies discussed the need for the institution to provide a supportive campus environment. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) designed eight principles to serve as a framework for assessing institutional commitment to meeting the needs of adult learners. Providing student support services was identified as one of those principles, "the institution assists adult learners using comprehensive academic and student support systems in order to enhance students' capacities to become self-directed lifelong learners" (CAEL, 2005, p. 5). The CAEL determined that higher education institutions should provide resources that can assist adult students in meeting their goals. McGivney (2004) also agreed that student support services such as "timetabling that takes account of their outside commitments, good childcare facilities, advice on a range of personal and

learning matters, and social and study spaces specifically for adults" (p.43) can make a difference in adult student persistence. These services should include one-stop enrollment and electronic methods of communicating with students (Brown, 2002). Adult students often delay enrollment, return after a break, and are underprepared for college-level work (Hardin, 2008). Fincher (2010) argued that university-provided tutoring services can contribute to retention efforts as some nontraditional students previously dropped out due to an academic deficiency that was never improved.

Developing supportive relationships on campus with other students, staff and faculty can also contribute to adult student development and persistence. Wyatt (2011) found, "successful interactions with staff and faculty most often resulted in a successful transition to college life for the nontraditional student" (p. 17). Brown (2002) argues that universities need to develop, "nontraditional/adult student cultural perspective and nontraditional/adult communities on campus" (p. 72). The findings of these studies suggest campus support services can be a retention tool for adult students. Other research studies indicated that social integration is not possible for adult students given their limited time on campus. In these studies, the classroom is the epicenter of key interactions for adult students (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Kasworm, 2003). As a result, there is a need to explore the adult male student's perception of the campus community and how social interactions influence persistence.

Student support services encompass a variety of programs offered by a university to assist students in reaching degree completion. These services include but are not limited to academic advising, career and mental health counseling, financial aid assistance, tutoring, mentoring, and student success workshops. Services offered vary by

institution as does the research on how these services affect persistence. Grant-Vallone, Reid, Umali, and Pohlert (2003) found that student engagement with the campus community increased the likelihood of a successful transition to university life for traditional aged students. Nichols (2010) examined student perception of support services and found that students attributed success in distance education to their motivation and determination not to the support services they received. Alternatively students who withdrew cited extrinsic reasons. He concluded, "This is not to dispute the value of the academic support but that for students support is considered an expected and not an additional service" (p. 106). When so many studies conclude with recommendations for practice that include increased support for adults it is important to understand if adults utilize these services and if the assistance provided ultimately breaks down barriers for adult students.

Summary

More students over the age of 25 are enrolling in bachelor degree programs to meet workforce demands and to fulfill a desire for lifelong learning. However, higher education institutions are slow in replacing outdated assumptions about the undergraduate student population. Adult students differ from their traditional-aged counterparts because they maintain multiple life roles and face situational, institutional, psychological, and educational barriers (Hardin, 2008). As a result, adult students enroll part time, engage in episodic enrollment, and often take longer than six years to earn a degree. Studies show that part time enrollment, intent to leave, and GPA are predictors of dropout (Bean & Metzner, 1985, Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Tinto's interactionalist theory states that students who integrate into the campus culture are more likely to persist until degree completion. Many researchers question the role of social integration on adult student

persistence given the number of external factors that prevent them from engaging in campus life (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Kasworm, 2014). However, many research finding indicate that building relationships with faculty and staff can create a support system for adults and given them the sense that someone cares about their academic progress (Brown, 2002; Fincher, 2010; McGivney, 2004; Sandmann, 2010; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005, Wyatt, 2011). There is need for research to explore the role of the campus community on adult student persistence to clarify how higher education institutions can provide support to adult students.

The qualitative research on adult students primarily focuses on women. More needs to be known about how adult male students persist within the university system to reach degree completion. The current study explored factors that contribute to persistence for adult male students. Their stories may contribute to the understanding of how university services and campus interactions support persistence for adult male students.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The methodology section will begin with a review of the purpose and research questions. It is followed by a justification for using qualitative research specifically a theory building case study. Next, I will discuss the theoretical framework which includes an introduction of the campus membership model. This will be followed by the criteria for participant selection and recruitment. The chapter concludes with the process for data collection and analysis.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore factors that contributed to the persistence of undergraduate adult male students and their perception of their role within the campus community. Research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1.) How do adult male undergraduate students describe their ability to persist until degree completion?

2.) What factors contribute to how adult male undergraduate students are able to persist until degree completion?

3.) What types of social interaction enable adult male undergraduate students to persist to degree completion?

4.) How do adult male undergraduate students describe their relationship to the university?

Rationale for Using Qualitative Research

Quantitative research describes "what is" by testing theories and presenting findings in numerical form (Merriam, 2009). Alternatively, qualitative research describes "how" or "why" by exploring how people attribute meaning to their experiences. This study sought to answer the "how" question often associated with qualitative research. How do adult males describe their ability to persist until degree completion? Qualitative research is exploratory in nature, seeks to develop theories, and the findings are presented in narrative form (Merriam, 2009). This study explored the meaning assigned by adult males to their experience as undergraduate students. It sought to uncover the students' frame of reference regarding their place in the university community and what factors contributed to their ability to persist until graduation. Qualitative research is an appropriate approach to address these research questions as they focused on achieving an understanding of how humans make sense of their lives, attribute meaning, and interpret their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Quantitative research can generate the number of adult students who graduate, but using a qualitative approach to explore persistence factors for adult male students will answer the question, "How do they reach degree completion?"

Qualitative research assumes the nature of reality or ontology is shaped by the existence of multiple realities (Creswell, 2013). This study acknowledged the existence of multiple realities as each participant attributed meaning and interpreted experiences differently. The epistemological assumption of qualitative research is that "knowledge is

known through the subjective experiences of individuals" (Creswell, 2013, p. 20). Understanding subjective experiences was foundational to this study. Qualitative research focuses on meaning in context (Merriam, 2009). Investigating context requires an understanding of the social norms of the culture. Historically, higher education has "embraced fulltime residential youth" (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001, p. 18). As a result, adult students are a marginalized group because policy and programming at higher education institutions focus on traditional-aged students who attend fulltime (Levin, 2014; Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001). Qualitative inquiry often gives voice to ignored or marginalized populations (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). A qualitative approach allowed adult male students to share their stories and provide insight into the contextual details surrounding their experiences at the university.

Theoretical Framework

As most students enter college with the goal to earn a degree it is also the goal of higher education institutions to graduate students. Researchers have explored student retention and persistence for decades so it is important to consider what theories and models have developed as a result. The most commonly cited is Tinto's (1975) interactionalist theory which explains how a student's interaction with individuals in the social and academic sphere of the university influence their decision to leave the university prior to degree completion. Tinto (1993) argued that students possess certain background characteristics that influence their institutional commitments and goal of graduation. Positive or "integrative" experiences further strengthen this commitment and negative experiences serve to weaken it (Tinto, 1993, p. 115). The higher the congruency between the student's attitudes and beliefs and the norms of the academic and social

system at the university the more likely the student will remain enrolled until graduation. A student's intention and commitment when they enter higher education and the perceived quality of their interactions with individuals at the institution affect their ability to assimilate to the university culture which ultimately determines if they stay or leave.

Often there is a lack of congruency between adult students' values and the mainstream youth-centric culture on campus which can limit their ability to integrate socially (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001). Also, adults often lack the additional time to participate in campus activities that take place outside of class. Efforts by higher education institutions are also limited in their influence over external factors and prior learning experiences and can only indirectly affect self-efficacy and motivation. Although these factors are known to influence persistence, manipulating their impact is out of the reach of higher education institutions. This is why many studies suggest modifications or improvements to the campus environment as a means to improve student retention. One common suggestion found in research studies is to develop appropriate support systems that meet the needs of adult students and help them overcome barriers and challenges (Bergman et al., 2014; Davidson & Holbrook, 2014; Deggs, 2011; McGivney, 2004; Miller-Brown, 2002; Sandman, 2010). Bergman, et al. (2014) found that the "campus environment accounted for more of the variation in adult student persistence than student entry characteristics or external factors" (p. 98). The research on adult students in higher education seems to say they do not have time to integrate socially yet providing a supporting environment can improve persistence. More needs to be known about the factors that influence adult male student persistence and how they describe their interactions with the campus environment.

The models previously discussed in chapter two illustrate a holistic view of all possible factors that influence an adult's decision to remain enrolled in college. Due to institutional efforts to increase retention focusing on the campus environment, this study developed a model that isolates the campus environment to explore how students perceived their place within the university community. Tinto's (1975) interactionalist model, explains that perceived quality of interactions and a supportive environment strengthen the students' commitment. Cross argues that participation, "is not a single act but the result of a chain of responses, each based on the evaluation of the position of the individual in his or her environment" (Cross, 1981, p. 125). There is value in understanding how students apply meaning to interactions and position themselves within the university community. This study explored the adult male student perception of their place within the university community and generated a model that discussed campus membership for adult male students.

Assumptions

There were five variables present in all the models discussed in chapter two: prior experiences and attitudes toward education, external forces, motivation, self-efficacy, and university environment. These key factors translate into assumptions for the campus membership model. The campus membership model assumes that students use prior experiences and attitudes toward education to evaluate their current college experience. Adult students have a multitude of responsibilities and interact in many different environments outside of the college campus. These responsibilities can serve as barriers that prevent adults from persisting in college or as opportunities that motivate adults to continue. In either situation, external forces certainly impact an adult's decision to enroll and persist in higher education. Affective factors such as motivation and goal setting also

assist adult students in overcoming barriers. In a similar way, self-efficacy influences persistence as the stronger a student's belief that they can achieve degree completion the more likely they will continue. The campus community is not only the physical space but also includes institutional resources and interactions with faculty and staff. It is also assumed that adult students who have taken the step to enroll in a degree program at a university possess some degree of self-efficacy and motivation.

Campus Membership Model for Adult Male Students

Although uncommon in grounded theory research, identifying a priori variables can be valuable if they prove important because they are supported by other empirical findings (Eisenhardt, 1989). Eisenhardt (1989) suggested that researchers specify variables from the literature, but refrain from thinking about the relationship between the variables before collecting data to avoid limiting the findings due to bias. The campus membership model for adult male students is perception-based and focused on interpreting and creating meaning. The model was created by words that attempt to capture how students describe their membership and degree of participation within the university culture. The researcher identified five words (interact, engage, identify, belong, and position) that could describe how an adult student was involved in the university community. *Interact* is basic contact that is needed to function as a university student such as applying for admission, registering for classes, interacting with faculty and staff, planning transportation and parking, etc. *Engage* is purposeful actions that extend beyond required interactions to function as a student. This movement is similar to differentiating between a want and a need. Students interact as needed but engagement is fulfilling a want that is not required to be a student. Engaged students seek out services

and campus resources. Examples of engagement include participating in class, helping other students, seeking academic help, and developing a relationship with faculty. *Identify* represents students who identify with their student role and see themselves as students. *Belong* encompasses students who feel as if they fit in to the campus community in some capacity. Students could experience a sense of belonging because they have a group of friends from class to talk with, eat with on a classroom break, walk to the parking lot with after class, etc. Belonging is a feeling that could result from a myriad of experiences so it is likely different for every student. *Position* represents a point when students are able to position themselves in a meaningful way within the hierarchy of higher education. The five factors of the campus membership model represent both basic and more complex views of a student's place within the university community.

Theory Building Case Study

This study used a theory building case study to investigate the adult male experience in higher education. "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evidenced" (Yin, 2009, p. 18). There is some debate among researchers regarding the purpose of a case study. Some do not consider this approach to be a qualitative methodology and believe that case studies should only be used in the exploratory stage of research. However, others recognize the case study as a comprehensive research strategy (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). For the purpose of this research study, the case study is considered a viable qualitative methodology and was selected based on the criteria identified by Yin

(2009). The case study method is appropriate when (1) there is need to understand a complex social phenomenon, (2) the research asks "how" and "why" questions, (3) relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated by the researcher, (4) and the focus is on contemporary events (Yin, 2009). These four conditions were present in this study exploring adult male persistence. The ability to persist until degree completion is a complex current issue, context is critical in understanding the topic, the researcher has no control over the setting or relevant behaviors, and the research question is asking "how" adult male students describe their ability to persist.

This study was an instrumental collective case study. An instrumental case study explores a specific research question to gain a general understanding about a given topic and selects cases that will inform the research (Creswell, 2013). Collective or multi-case studies explore one topic or issue but use multiple cases to complete the investigation. In this study the unit of analysis was the adult male student. In case study research, it is appropriate for the case or unit of analysis to be an individual (Yin, 2009). The research questions guided the research and set the boundaries for the life experiences that were explored. Although the participants, attended the same urban university the institution is not the bounded system or case. The individual students were the cases because the purpose of the study focused on the lived experiences of the individuals not the institution.

A case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system. Since the defining characteristic of a case study is the unit of analysis it can be combined with other types of studies such as grounded theory (Merriam, 2009). Grounded theory "generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, an action, or an interaction…"

(Creswell, 2013). Since emergent theory is the outcome of the grounded theory approach, a priori theoretical constructs and research questions are not a defining feature. This is one of several differences between case studies and grounded theory. In addition, grounded theory moves beyond the rich description of a case study outcome to provide an explanation or develop a theory. Last, the case study approach does not include a customary process for data analysis like the constant comparative method used in grounded theory (Halaweh, 2012).

These differences highlight challenges that arise from selecting one approach over the other. However, by combing them and using a case study to generate theory the methodology becomes stronger. "The marriage is achieved to improve the weaker aspects of the other" (Halaweh, 2012, p. 38). The two approaches are integrated by using the defining features of case study that take place before the data collection (defining the bounded system, reviewing the literature to identify constructs, generating a case study protocol and developing research questions) and features of the grounded theory that occur during data collection and analysis (theoretical sampling, constant comparative analysis, and data saturation). This study used a case study approach with a grounded theory methodology. The adult male students were the cases of the collective case study and the researcher used a constant comparative data analysis technique to develop an explanation about how adult male undergraduate students described their place within the university community.

Halaweh (2012) and Eisenhardt (1989) designed similar processes for developing theory from case studies. By using both models as a guide, the methodology can be separated into three phases. In phase one, the researcher reviewed the literature,

generates focused research questions and constructs for a proposed model. In phase two, the researcher selected cases through theoretical sampling and generated a case study protocol. In phase three, the researcher entered the field to collect data. In the constant comparative method, data collection and analysis overlap. As themes emerge data collection stops with saturation. The methodology for this study included all the steps in each phase described above.

Sampling

Theoretical sampling was used in this study. Purposeful sampling is used frequently in case study research but the methodology in this study combined case study and grounded theory research. Theoretical sampling is recommended when conducting a case study with the purpose of generating theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Halaweh, 2012). Merriam (2009) describes theoretical sampling as a type of purposive sampling but the total sample is not selected before the data is collected. Theoretical sampling is used in grounded theory research and is defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as "the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges" (p. 45). Theoretical sampling occurs throughout the data analysis as the researcher cannot predetermine groups that will inform all themes in an emerging theory. As theoretical themes emerge, comparison groups or cases must be selected. "Theoretical sampling uses many different comparison groups such that differences within groups are eventually minimized and differences between groups are eventually maximized to develop theories to the widest scope" (Covan, 2007, p.64). Similarly, in case study research, Yin (2009) suggested using a replication design for

multiple cases. Researchers select cases for either a "literal replication" which predicts the same results or a "theoretical replication" which predicts alternative results based on a priori constructs (Yin, 2009).

Validity and Reliability

In scientific research, validity refers to "how well a scientific test or piece of research actually measures what it sets out to or how well it reflects the reality it claims to represent" (Validity, 2015). Qualitative research recognizes the existence of multiple realities, and the purpose is to understand the perspective of the individual(s) who experienced the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Given that multiple interpretations of reality exist, qualitative research can never fully match reality, but there are methods to increase the internal validity or credibility of the study. A strategy used to improved internal validity is "adequate engagement in data collection" (Merriam, 2009, p. 219). Collecting data to the point of saturation will guarantee adequate engagement in data collection. In this study, data were collected and analyzed until it reached saturation and no new information emerged. External validity refers to the degree of transferability of the findings or the likelihood that the finding can apply to other situation. "Generalizability in the statistical sense cannot occur in qualitative research" (Merriam, 2009, p. 224). Alternatively researchers need to provide a rich description to make transferability possible. With a thick description readers will be fully informed about the study and will know how it varies in comparison to their site (Merriam, 2009). The findings in chapter four present a rich description of the adult male undergraduate student experience.

Reliability in scientific research is the "repeatability of a particular set of research findings that is how accurately they would be replicated in a second research study" (Reliability, 2015). Since qualitative research assumes no single reality exists, repeating a study would not result in duplicate findings due to the infinite possibilities of interpretation. As a result, reliability in qualitative research ensures the results are consistent with the collected data. Reliability in qualitative research is also referred to as consistency or dependability (Merriam, 2009). To ensure the findings are consistent and dependable in this study, I maintained a journal throughout the study. The journal provided a tool for critical reflection on my ideas about the topic and kept track of memos during data analysis. As the researcher, I recorded the process of the study, how decisions were made, and how the findings were derived from the data. This audit trail provided a detailed account of how the study was conducted and increased the consistency or reliability of the study. Maintaining an audit trail throughout the study, allowed me to examine my assumptions relating to the study.

Researcher as Instrument

Another assumption of qualitative research is that the researcher is part of study. The acknowledgement of multiple realties in qualitative research includes the researcher. The researcher brings their perceptions, beliefs, and bias into the study. "The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis" (Merriam, 2009, p. 15). Qualitative research takes place in the natural setting, and researchers attempt to get as close as possible to the phenomenon being studied. As a result, qualitative researchers have to position themselves within the study by identifying their bias and how it might affect data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013).

As an academic advisor at the urban university which serves as the research setting for this study, I work with adult undergraduate students on a daily basis. I provide programmatic information and advice about navigating the university system. The stories shared in my office illustrate the struggles adult students face when attempting to finish a degree and manage multiple life responsibilities. I was a traditional undergraduate student at a residential university. My college experience differed greatly from the adult students I advise. I am interested in learning more about their perceptions of the university culture and the factors that influence their ability to persist until degree completion.

In ten years of employment at the university, I have observed a change in the university culture as the traditional residential student population continues to grow. Previously the university primarily served commuter students, but recent university initiatives shifted efforts to recruiting and retaining a traditional student population. Building new dormitories and purchasing software to support intrusive advising practices are two examples of initiatives that best support a traditional student population. With an increased focus on traditional students, adult students' needs are not a priority. I feel as if the university has, in some respect, abandoned its mission as an urban university. I want to investigate if adult students experience the effects of this shift in the university culture. In addition, the literature discussed the need for a supportive campus environment to help adults reach degree completion, and at the same time it is known that adult students do not have additional time to take advantage of campus resources. I want to learn more about adult male undergraduate students engage with campus community and utilize resources.

My position helped me gain access to potential participants, but it could have also limited the participants' level of comfort to speak freely about their student experience. It is a possibility that they perceived me as a representative of the university and did not feel comfortable sharing negative experiences. To overcome this bias, I discussed my role as an academic advisor with the participants and my intentions as a researcher to further understand the adult student experience. I attempted to bracket my bias by recording my assumptions in the audit trail. I encouraged the participants to select the location of the interview to ensure it was a comfortable and convenient location as opposed to asking them to meet in my campus office. By doing so I hoped to reduce my association as an employee with the university.

I displayed respect for the participants by bracketing my opinions and seeking to understand their perspective without judgment or bias. I clearly expressed my intent regarding this research with the participants, avoided debate if their perspective differed from mine, asked open-ended questions that allowed the participants to use their own words to describe their experience, and was an active listener to demonstrate respect for what they said and a desire to understand their intent.

This is particularly important when interviewing participants with different cultural or social identities. Marshall and Rossman (2011) propose that some researchers believe that interviewing across gender is not effective, so women should interview women. The risk in interviewing people with shared social identities is that the researcher will assume a degree of understanding. In this study, as a female and the sole interviewer, I was talking to all male participants. Josselson (2013) proposes that women as the interviewer have an easier time because both men and women are more

comfortable speaking openly to women. “Women are more likely to be chosen as confidants-by both men and women” (p 56). There are issues of power and position that play out in all interviews, but when a female is interviewing males there are issues of gender dynamics. “Women researchers may have to work to persist in their authority when interviewing men and may need to resist a tendency to defer to gendered power arrangements” (Josselson, 2013, p.56).

Protection of Human Subjects

The participants signed an informed consent indicating their willingness to participate in the study. This form included a statement ensuring their confidentiality and the security of their information. Any publication of this research will use pseudonyms. All of the data was handled in coded form so the participants' names and information was removed. The transcripts and recorded interviews will be stored in a locked file cabinet on campus and will be destroyed after the designated timeframe determined by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Data Collection

Research Setting

The research setting is an urban public four-year institution located in the downtown area of a midsized urban city in the Midwest. There are 24 four-year institutions within a 40 mile radius of this area. Undergraduate enrollment at this institution is approximately 12,000 students. The student population is 61% White, 20% African American, and 3.9% Hispanic. The graduation rate of this university is 38%. More information about the research setting is discussed in chapter four.

Participant Selection

Participants were recruited through two methods. After seeking IRB approval, email addresses for all students who graduated with a bachelor's degree within the last five years were obtained from the university registrar's office. An email (Appendix A) was sent that included a link to the survey and an invitation to participate in the study. The invitation included an explanation of the purpose and an introduction of the researcher. The last question on the survey asked participants about their willingness to be interviewed. Those who were interested included additional contact information so the researcher could follow-up by phone to set up an interview. The survey responses were designed to select participants that represent maximum variation within: ethnic background, age, and number of institutions attended. In addition to contacting possible participants directly, I asked staff members for participant recommendations. I acquired three cases through this technique called snowball sampling.

The theoretical framework of the study determined the criteria that guided the selection of initial cases. The following criteria was used to select participants: male, age 25 or older at the point of graduation, and a baccalaureate degree earned within the last five years. In addition, an attempt was made to select a set of participants with different backgrounds, including ethnicity and age range.

The survey was sent via email to 8,629 students who earned a bachelor's degree within the last five years from one urban institution (Appendix B). Given that university culture is so dynamic, selecting recent graduates was important so their perception reflected the current environment. The email invitation did not include a deadline for the survey. Potential participants could access the survey at any time after receiving the

email, so responses came in over a four week period with the majority arriving within two weeks. One hundred and twenty-nine individuals took the survey and 31% (37) identified as male. The race of all survey participants was: 83.9% Caucasian, 12.7% Black or African American, 2.54% American Indian or Native Alaskan, and .85% Asian.

When using a theoretical sampling technique the number of participants is typically not determined before the data collection begins. However, with the time and financial constraints associated with research it is not "uncommon for researchers to plan the number of cases in advance" (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 45). There is not a standard number of participants needed in qualitative research, but "a number between 4 and 10 cases usually works well" (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 45). For this study, 9 participants were interviewed. Fourteen males fit the selection criteria and agreed to be interviewed in the survey; however, only five scheduled the interview. I talked to a colleague who recommended five additional graduates who met the criteria. Two of the five agreed to be interviewed. The first seven interviews took place over two weeks. As I was collecting and analyzing the data, I reached out to another colleague to find additional cases to inform the emerging themes. I sent the invitation email to four more potential participants and two agreed to be interviewed. Again, there were nine participants ranging in age from 26-52. Eight participants identified as Caucasian and one as African American.

Demographic Survey

A link to a brief, electronic demographic survey (Appendix B) was sent to students who graduated within the last five years from the one urban university. The survey requested background information relating to gender, age, and ethnicity. The

remaining questions addressed the following topics: graduation trajectory, financial assistance, and institutional support. The purpose of the survey was to select participants whose experience in higher education would inform the study, and gather background information pertinent to the constructs being explored in this study before the interviews. The survey was administered through Survey Monkey.

Interview Method

When using interviews in qualitative research, the research questions guide the conversation and identify the sought after information. Interviews are used to gather information that cannot be observed, and allow entry into another person's perspective (Patton, 2002). The purpose of qualitative research is to explore the meaning individuals ascribe to their experiences so interviews are commonly used to collect data. "We interview to find out what is in and on someone else's mind, to gather their stories" (Patton, 2002, p. 341). For the purpose of this study, in-depth interviews were used as the primary source of data collection to explore the adult male undergraduate experience in higher education.

Semi-structured interview were used for data collection. Semi-structured interviews allow for less structured questions and flexibility in probing, and often include an interview guide to collect specific data from all participants. "Interviewing is the best technique to use when conducting intensive case studies with a few select individuals" (Merriam, 2009, p. 88). Eisenhardt (1989) and Halaweh (2012) concur that interviews are the primary data collection method when integrating grounded theory and case study research. The use of open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews allows participants "to take whatever direction and use whatever words they want to express

what they have to say" (Patton, 2002, p. 354). Semi-structured interviews were appropriate for this study because they allowed the participants to select words that described their experience as undergraduate students. Since there are many factors that can influence a student's experience, it was important to allow the participants to tell their story in their own words. Although interviewing is described as a conversation it is more than just talking. Conducting effective interviews requires purposeful action, a demonstration of respect, and a developing skill set. I demonstrated respect for the participants and attempted to validate their perspective without bias.

Interview Process

Patton (2002) suggested an interview guide when using a semi-structured interview approach. The interview guide or protocol is a list of questions or topics that will be asked during the interview (Merriam, 2009). The interview protocol for this study can be found in Appendix C. The participants described their experience on campus, specifically interactions with institutional agents and other students, and their perception of their place within the university community. At the end of the interview, I showed the participants the five words on index cards and asked them to select one or more cards that described their relationship to the university community. Participants had the option not to select any cards if they felt these words did not represent their experience; however, all participants selected at least one card and no one generated their own word. The researcher explored, through follow up questions, how participants arrived at their decision.

Interviews were scheduled for 60-90 minutes although most interviews were less than an hour. Creswell (2013) suggested selecting a place to conduct the interviews that

is quiet and free from distractions. The interviews took place in various locations in the neighborhoods surrounding the university and three took place on campus. All sites were selected by the participants.

The informed consent document (Appendix D) was presented at the beginning of the interview. I shared the purpose of the research and discussed the interview procedure (e.g. length of time, types of question, how the data was used). I asked permission from the participants to record the interview and all agreed. I encouraged the participants to ask questions at any point throughout the interview and reminded them they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Before the interview, I engaged in casual conversation with the participants. Creswell (2013) suggested it is more important to be a good listener than a frequent speaker. I demonstrated good listening skills by focusing on how the interview was going and how the participant was responding to the questions. At times, I paraphrased a response to ensure I was interpreting the data as the participant intended and asked for further clarification and meaning when needed. This technique is often referred as probing which is a "follow up question used to go deeper into the interviewer's responses" (Patton, 2002, p. 372). During the interviews, I took notes that captured body language and physical responses, words used by the participants, and responses to questions. In a separate section of the field notes, I also recorded my thoughts and impressions by asking "What am I learning?" and "How does this case differ from the last" (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 539). I transcribed the recorded interviews using SoundScriber software. I reviewed the transcript by listening to the recording while reading the transcription.

Data Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were the main source of data collection for this study. I used the constant comparative method to analyze the interview data. Halaweh (2012) suggested using constant comparative analysis with a theory building case study approach. This includes a process of open and axial coding. During the open coding process, I highlighted significant concepts that addressed the topics embedded in the research questions: ability to persist, factors that influence persistence, significant interactions, and relationship to the university community. I also recorded codes in the margins of the paper transcript. I created an Excel spreadsheet to record key words from the highlighted text and the assigned code for each participant. This allowed me to maintain the list of codes from each transcript, compare across cases, and generate a master list of codes. Data was analyzed for new themes and also compared to data in the current themes.

I then collapsed the open codes by grouping similar codes together in the axial coding process. These codes generated six themes. In comparing the properties of the themes, it became clear they could be further integrated. This reduced the list to five themes (with subthemes): Grit (hard work, goal-orientation, and purpose), Resources (life-world and institutional), Interactions (structured and unstructured), Position (belong, indifferent, excluded), and Validation of Status (contribution and application).

The first two themes addressed research questions one and two which investigated how adult male students were able to persist and the factors that contributed to their persistence. Grit is a non-cognitive factor associated with success. *Grit*, as a theme within this study, implied that degree completion is not based strictly on intellectual talent but

"perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007, p. 1087). Grit was a concept pulled from the literature because "hard work" and "establishing goals" were key phrases that emerged from the interview data. I selected *resources* to define the second theme because the participants discussed receiving support from individuals within the institution and their life-world environment.

The remaining three themes addressed research questions three and four which investigated the adult male students' perception of the campus community. The participants mentioned key *interactions* that supported their persistence. A distinction emerged among the interactions described by the participants based on the degree of institutional intervention or engagement. Interactions that rely on the infrastructure provided by the university are structured. Unstructured interactions occur without the support of the university infrastructure. The university infrastructure includes organizational structures, physical space, and institutional representatives. The participants described their *position* in relation to the boundaries of the campus communities. Two of the subthemes (belong and excluded) were words used by the participants. I selected the subtheme *indifference* because it portrayed some of the participants' feelings about membership within the campus community. The *validation of status* theme explained actions that connected the participants to the campus community despite how they described their position. These actions are the two subthemes (contribution and application) which emerged from the words of the participants. Contributing to the campus community and applying knowledge gained as a student to the life-world environment validated the participants' role as a student. I further explored

these themes to reduce the elements and identify the relationship between them. Through this process the campus membership model for adult male students emerged. Chapter four contains a more detailed discussion of the findings.

Summary

This chapter described the theoretical framework that guided the study and how the nine participants were recruited. It provided a description of how data was collected through the demographic survey and semi-structured interviews. It discussed the stages of data analysis and how decisions were made throughout the process. Chapter four will present the findings of the study.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore factors that contributed to the persistence of undergraduate adult male students and their perception of their role within the campus community. Research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1.) How do adult male undergraduate students describe their ability to persist until degree completion?
2.) What factors contribute to how adult male undergraduate students are able to persist until degree completion?
3.) What types of social interaction enable adult male undergraduate students to persist to degree completion?
4.) How do adult male undergraduate students describe their relationship to the university?

This research study addressed how adult male undergraduate students persist until degree completion and how they described their relationship to the university community. Given that adult students are managing multiple life roles, they encounter many

roadblocks on the path to degree completion. Donaldson and Graham (1999) developed the Model of College Outcomes for Adults which explained the relationship among six elements: prior experiences, psychosocial and value orientations, the connecting classroom, adult cognition, life-world environment, and college outcomes for adults. In addition, many research studies suggest that institutions should provide a supporting environment for adult students to help them overcome possible barriers (Bergman et al., 2014; Davidson & Holbrook, 2014; McGivney, 2004; Miller-Brown, 2002; Sandman, 2010). This study sought to isolate the campus environment to explore how adult male undergraduate students perceived their place within the university community and its role in supporting persistence.

This chapter will present the findings of the study. Data was collected from nine participants who attended a public four-year institution located in the downtown area of a midsized urban city in the Midwest. First, I will provide background information on the institution and participants. The background information will describe the context surrounding the participants' experience at the institution and illustrate their unique degree completion trajectories. None of the participants shared the same path as the number of institutions attended, breaks in enrollment, work responsibilities, and motivation all differed. This will be followed by a discussion of the themes that emerged in the data analysis. Last, the relationship among these themes will be discussed as the campus membership model for adult male students is presented.

Background

Institution

All of the participants attended a public four-year institution located in the downtown area of a midsized urban city the Midwest. One of the research questions explored the adult male undergraduate student perspective of their role within the campus community. Community can refer to a geographical space or the relational notion of shared interests or human relationships (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This study utilizes both of these elements to define campus community. It is the physical space that makes up the campus and all that is offered by the institution: student life (student organizations, fraternities and sororities, events on campus), resources and services (disability services, women's center, veteran student services, career services, LGBTQ student services, commuter student services, writing center, and international student services), health and wellness services (health and wellness center, counseling center, student food bank, and recreation center), academic advising, and a one-stop student services office for administrative business relating to financial aid, admissions, treasury services, and the registrar's office. It also encompasses the relational space of human interactions on campus with people who work in these offices, students, and faculty.

The institution has recently undergone many changes in its physical space through a multimillion dollar makeover of the campus. Administrators suggest these changes are contributing to the revitalization of the surrounding city. Several buildings have been torn down and rebuilt, and new construction has taken place including two new residence halls. Many of the participants mentioned how the campus has changed. John said, "They have built it up a lot since I've been there." Larry added, "It's growing, it's

blossoming…I like how it's expanding. All the apartments and all the different places that are sprouting up. The institution is not the institution of 10 years ago."

These physical changes were accompanied by an increase in the freshman class and many retention efforts to increase the institutional graduation rate which is based on first-year fulltime students who graduate within six years. Traditional students are being recruited to increase the freshman class and occupy the new residence halls. A local newspaper article said the institution was going through an identity crisis oscillating between a residential and commuter institution. The participants also noticed this shift as Mike explained:

> I read from time to time stuff that's going on and how they talk about changing from the commuter college to the residential college. I think that is interesting and a rather unique perspective of what they are trying to do. But by being where they are they need to have a strong nontraditional program. You are in the middle of downtown.

The mission of the institution is to provide contemporary and accessible education. Some have observed a shift from a commuter to a residential population and recent changes have attracted a larger traditional student population.

Participants

The nine participants for this study were selected because they were over the age of 25 when they graduated with their baccalaureate degree. Based on the NCES definition of nontraditional status, all of the participants are also considered moderately nontraditional because they identify with at least two of the seven nontraditional characteristics. This section will introduce the participants in chronological order by age

at the time of graduation. Before the interviews, data was collected from the participants through an online survey and their responses are displayed in Table I.

I will give a brief sketch of each participant's journey toward attaining their bachelor's degree. Each vignette portrays the pattern of enrollment, motivation for entering, external responsibilities, and current employment situation for each participant. It also includes their enrollment status and a brief description of their experience as a student at the degree-granting institution. The information in Table I and the following stories illustrate the uniqueness of their educational journeys. As Mike said during the interview, "everyone's journey there is going to be different."

Larry. Larry, now a 55-year-old African American male, entered a four year institution at the age of 18. He attended for a year and half before stopping out because he was going to be a father. He worked fulltime at a bank and worked in the evenings at a restaurant. He took courses at a community college before joining the Navy. He continued to take college courses while in the Navy and after being honorably discharged he returned to work. He decided to reenter a community college at age 47, and earned his associate degree within one year. He enrolled in the degree-granting institution to major in special education and graduated in two and half years. During the last phase of his college career, he was enrolled fulltime and worked part-time. He described his fellow classmates as diverse in terms of age. He felt that he can belong to any community. He choose to be part of the campus community because he is a people person who can fit in anywhere. He described the younger students as having an advantage because they were able to continue their education immediately following high school and they understood

Table I Participants

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Veteran	Age (first enrolled in college)	Age (at graduation)	Number of institutions attended prior to degree-	Degree earned prior to attending degree-granting	Employment while enrolled	Number of Dependents (children & parents)	Student Enrollment
Larry	African American	yes	18	52	2	Associate	Part-time	0	Fulltime
Mike	Caucasian	no	18	50	3	None	Fulltime	3	Part-time
Jerry	Caucasian	no	33	38	2	Associate	Part-time	0	Part-time
Steve	Caucasian	no	18	29	2	Baccalaureate	Part-time	2	Fulltime
Brian	Caucasian	yes	23	27	0	None	None	0	Fulltime
Brad	Caucasian	no	18	27	1	Associate	Part-time	0	Fulltime
Rob	Caucasian	no	17	26	0	None	Part-time	0	Fulltime
Dave	Caucasian	no	17	26	1	None	Part-time	0	Fulltime
John	Caucasian	no	18	26	3	None	Part-time	0	Fulltime

the educational process. He is currently not working but recently enrolled in graduate school.

Mike. Mike, now a 52-year-old Caucasian male, first enrolled at the institution at age 18, stopped out several times, and attended four other institutions before returning to finish his degree 33 years later. He was 50 when he graduated with a liberal arts degree. He worked fulltime and attended school part-time. He got married and had two children while intermittently enrolling in college courses. The first time he enrolled in college he was not ready for the experience, and as a result, was dismissed from the institution. He then enrolled in broadcasting school and reentered the work world with no intention of returning to college. Shortly after he starting taking classes at a community college and then returned to the original institution as a fulltime student while working part-time. He was laid off from the part-time position so he stopped out and went back to work fulltime. He moved out of state for work and attended part-time at a community college there. He moved back to his home state and starting taking classes again at the community college he previously attended and finished a certificate program. The company he was working for collapsed, and after job hunting for two years he started his own company.

He wanted to earn his degree to be an example for his children. His wife has several degrees, and he did not want his children to question why he never finished his degree. He explored adult degree completion programs but decided to reenroll in a traditional undergraduate degree program at the first institution he attended. He attended the degree-granting institution at age 18, in his mid-20s, and late-40s. He encountered many roadblocks upon returning in his 40s. His father passed away. Shortly after, his

mother was diagnosed with cancer and he became her primary caregiver. He was aware of his nontraditional status and felt like the institution did not care about him as a student. He did not feel included in the campus community. He felt like the system was working against him, and the institution did not provide the support he needed. He continues to work at the company he started before returning to get his degree.

Jerry. Jerry, now a 39-year-old Caucasian male, delayed enrolling in college until he was 25. His parents did not encourage him to go to college, and they passed when he was 19 years old. He had to wait six years to get federal financial aid. He has dual citizenship in the United States and Ireland. He first enrolled in a technology school and graduated after two years. He worked in the construction business until the housing market crashed. He took classes at a community college for two years and earned his associate degree before transferring to the degree-granting institution. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in international business after four years. He attended fulltime until he got an internship position with the government and had to reduce his course load to part-time. He credits this internship with launching his federal career because he was recruited for fulltime government position at the end of the semester. He had to take time off school to fulfill his work responsibilities but was promised a fulltime job after graduation. He also worked at a coffee shop for additional income while in college. He felt excluded from the campus community as an adult student but overcame feelings of marginalization by focusing on his career. He felt as if he belonged to the campus community more after graduation because he was invited to speak at several campus events. He still works for the government today.

Steve. Steve, now a 34-year-old Caucasian male, enrolled at the institution to earn his second bachelor's degree in the field of nursing. He is the only participant who was pursuing a second baccalaureate degree. He earned his first degree after four years at a residential college. He described himself as immature when he first went to college. He spent a significant amount of time partying and did not take his coursework seriously. As a result, he did not find a rewarding and prosperous job after graduation.

He worked several different jobs during a six year break from school, and spent a significant amount of time thinking about what he wanted to do career-wise, discussed it with his wife, and explored his life purpose through his faith. He returned to school with a renewed purpose, a long-term goal, and a plan to achieve it. He took prerequisite courses at a community college, enrolled in an accelerated nursing program, and graduated at age 29 with his second bachelor's degree. He was a fulltime student for four semesters. He worked part-time at a local hospital and received a tuition benefit. He had a wife and daughter, and adopted a son while he was enrolled in the program. He spent no additional time on campus due to family and work responsibilities. It was recommended by the faculty in his program to use the writing center to ensure his papers were written in the correct format. This was the only campus resource he used besides the library. He attributes his success to external support from his family and internal motivation. He went on to earn a master's degree and currently works as a nurse practitioner for the same hospital system where he started as a nursing assistant.

Brian. Brian, now a 31-year-old Caucasian male, enrolled in college for the first time at age 23. Immediately after high school Brian joined the Marines, and then started college in the same year he was discharged from the military. He was a fulltime student

with a major in computer science and graduated in four years at the age of 27. As a student he lived at home and did not work. He attended one institution and graduated within a traditional timeframe of six years or less; however, he delayed entering college until after completing his military service. He viewed the university as a place to learn and a resource to improve himself, not a place for social interaction. He had a personal goal and needed the institution to accomplish it. He attributes his success in navigating the university system and earning a degree to himself. He was able to transfer skills he learned from his military experience to the collegiate setting. These skills helped him interact with different types of people and handle difficult situations. He currently works in the computer science field.

Brad. Brad, now a 31-year-old Caucasian male, attended a community college immediately after high school. He worked while going to school and graduated with an associate degree in four years. When his position at a law firm was eliminated due to the economic recession, he decided to enroll in a baccalaureate degree program. He attended fulltime as a communications management major, worked part-time, and graduated with honors in two years at the age of 27. He was nominated for valedictorian. Upon graduating, he returned to the law firm in a higher ranking position. He worked in the downtown area while he was a student so he was able to walk from work to campus throughout the day for class. He felt connected to the campus community despite not participating in extracurricular activities. He described the faculty as supportive because they were genuinely interested in helping students succeed. Encountering roadblocks actually encouraged him to work harder which helped him get through college. He currently works at the same law firm.

Rob. Rob, now a 28-year-old Caucasian male, first enrolled in college immediately following high school. He attended one institution and stopped out twice before graduating. It took him eight years. He started as a psychology major and then changed to chemistry. He also earned his license to teach high school science. He described his relationship with formal education as adversarial. His original plan following high school was to go into the military, as most of his family members did, but a genetic disabling condition prevented him from enlisting. He attended for several semesters as a fulltime student before he was informed from someone outside of the university that the Office of Disability Services could help him receive accommodations. His academic performance improved significantly after registering with Disability Services. He worked while he was a student so he could pay tuition, and he also received governmental assistance. He worked on campus in the latter part of his college career which helped him learn about the different offices and resources at the university. He did not feel marginalized as an adult student mostly because he is comfortable in all environments. He currently works as a high school science teacher.

Dave. Dave, now a 27-year-old Caucasian male, attended a residential college immediately after high school and lived on campus. He stopped out and worked for one year before returning to the same institution for two additional years as an engineering major. He stopped out again and worked in a warehouse for a year before enrolling at the degree-granting institution. He was 26 when he graduated with a degree in physics and a license to teach high school science. His work experience motivated him to earn a college degree because he did not want to continue working at a warehouse or other physically challenging jobs. He was a fulltime student, working part-time, and he graduated in nine

years. While attending the degree-granting institution he lived at home. He worked as a tutor on campus and felt like he belonged to the campus community. He described himself as "young looking" so he felt that he was perceived by others as a traditional student. In comparing his residential and commuter student experience, his level of participation in campus activities remained the same. Seeking independence was his motivation to finish college. He currently works as a high school science teacher.

John. John, now a 30-year-old, Caucasian male did not think he was ready for college when he attended an out-of-state four-year institution immediately following high school. He was enrolled for two weeks before withdrawing because he was not prepared for the coursework and navigating the financial aid system. He moved back to his home state and transferred to a community college. He felt safe within the community college environment. He transferred to a four-year institution to major in business and then shortly after changed his major to architecture. After taking a few classes he did not think being an architect was his calling in life. He enjoyed science classes and was interested in teaching. He transferred to the degree-granting institution after deciding he wanted to be a teacher. He maintained continuous enrollment despite transferring and graduated in eight years at the age of 26. He referred to changing institutions and majors multiple times as soul searching. He wanted to find a career that allowed him to help others and make a difference in the world. He attributed this humility to his faith. He worked part-time and lived at home while finishing his degree. He identified as a student but not necessarily as an adult student. He received a lot of support on campus and felt like he belonged to the community. He went on to earn a Master's degree in education and currently works as a high school science teacher.

Themes

During data analysis five major themes emerged: grit, resources, interactions, position, and validation of status. Table II displays the five major themes (with subthemes) and how each theme addresses the four research questions. The data analysis section in chapter three explained how each theme was developed from the coding process and the literature. In this section, I will examine each research question by defining the theme that addresses the question and providing data in the form of participants' quotes that illustrate how the theme emerged.

Table II

Themes

Themes	Subthemes	Research Question
Grit	Hard work	One
	Goal-orientation	
	Purpose	
Resources	Life-World	Two
	Institutional	
Interactions	Structured	Three
	Unstructured	
Position	Belong	Four
	Indifferent	
	Excluded	
Validation of Status	Contribution	Four
	Application	

Research Question One

The first research question was how do adult male undergraduate students describe their ability to persist until degree completion? The main theme was grit with subthemes of hard work, goal-orientation, and purpose. In this next section, I will discuss the findings for this question.

Grit

The theme of grit defines how the participants described their ability to persist and addresses research question one. Grit is "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007, p. 1087). Within this study, it implies that degree completion is not based strictly on intellectual talent but determination and commitment to a goal is also an important factor. The definition of grit includes: (1) strenuous effort and (2) consistency of long-term goals (Duckworth et al., 2007). Maintaining interest in long-term goals is supported by discovering and following a passion. All of the participants attributed their success to unrelenting determination despite roadblocks and challenging circumstances, and often used the term "hard work" to describe their effort. For over half of the participants, pursuing a major they were passionate about increased their commitment to earning a degree. As a result, three subthemes emerged within the theme of grit: hard work, goal-orientation, and purpose.

Hard work

The participants used the following words and phrases to define this phenomenon: persistence, hard work, toughness, and powering through. John shared how he was taught from a young age "if you want something you have to go get it." Steve was taught a similar value growing up. "One of the things my dad stressed quite a bit was a good work ethic." A good work ethic also helped John reach success. "So pretty much from a young

age I knew anything I wanted I could get it through hard work. So a lot of my success came from that idea of work ethic and being able to take care of whatever life puts in front of you." Part of "taking care of whatever life puts in front of you" includes viewing roadblocks as challenges to overcome not something to halt progress. Rob, Dave, and Brian also were not overcome by obstacles. They shared John's philosophy about handling difficult situations. Rob described how he was able to persist:

> Just sort of solider on and keep going. That's what I found because you are going to be hit with difficulties no matter what. Life is hard…and you have to be tough in order to survive. It means you have to keep going you can't give up.

Dave also talked about being able to handle difficult situations. "I probably would have just dealt with it. I can handle things." Brian explained that his military background taught him not to back down from difficult situations. "You need that experience first…you are going to have to deal with difficult people and you can't just shut down. Like I had this tough professor and I'm just going to shut down and not do anything? You've got to work through it."

The participants were able to continue working toward the goal of degree completion despite encountering significant obstacles such as the death of a parent, family illness, adopting an infant child, dealing with a disabling genetic condition, receiving inaccurate program information, and failing a course offered once a year in the semester before graduation. Some of these obstacles caused the participants to stop out from attending college. Yet, even though they stopped one or more times, they still completed their goal of attaining a baccalaureate degree. When confronted with these types of obstacles the participants did not give up. Actually, many of them worked even harder. When Brad was confronted with challenging course material it motivated him to

commit more time to studying. He explained, “If I couldn’t get something I would just work harder at it.” Larry shared this approach to learning. “I think personally I am just a hard worker. You might catch it in two hours and I might be in the library six hours doing the same thing you did in two hours.” Duckworth described individuals who have no limit to how much they want to learn as gritty (Perkins-Gough, 2013). Brad and Larry’s commitment to learning demonstrated they are not limited by some threshold of achievement and they did not give up when faced with a difficult situation. They were not just trying to get by with average grades. They dedicated the time that was needed to master the content.

The participants used different phrases to define hard work and commitment. Rob said “solider on”, Mike said he had to “power through”, and Jerry said he was “thick skinned”. Rob added, “Goddamn I am tough to be honest. Too tough for my own good often.” Jerry said, “I got bummed a whole bunch of times. It’s hard being the old guy, you know, it’s like why am I even doing this. You’ve got to be thick skinned.” Mike also was committed to pushing himself toward the goal of degree completion. “So I just kept pushing myself to do it. I knew I needed to do it. I said, hey, if I was 95 and I still got it, it doesn’t matter. I stuck it in before the grave.” Hard work and perseverance in the face of obstacles contributed to the participants’ ability to persist.

Goal-orientation

The definition of grit also includes demonstrating a consistency of interests and a commitment to long-term goals (Duckworth, et al., 2007). All of the participants had a goal to earn a bachelor’s degree, and six of them specifically discussed setting goals and developing a plan to achieve them. Mike never specifically said he set goals and devise a

plan to accomplish them, but he said if he hadn't earn his degree he would still be working on at age 95. It is understood they were all working toward the goal of degree completion. Jerry specifically mentioned the importance of staying focused on the goal:

> Basically, you are there for a reason. You are there for your education…stay focused on your work, be diligent. You are there for a goal stay on that goal. Don't get distracted with the frivol that is going around you and try not to let it get you down.

Steve set a long-term goal of becoming a nurse practitioner. He had to earn a second bachelor's degree, a master's degree, and work experience in the field before reaching this goal. He created a plan with many short-term goals and achieved it within five years. "I decided to go back to school with the expressed intent of becoming a nurse practitioner. I knew that would take a considerable amount of time."

John spent many years exploring different majors and once he selected the appropriate major and had a plan he was relaxed and focused. "It was most important to me that I felt like I finally had a vision and a goal." Having a goal helped the participants to focus and maintain the motivation needed to continue. When asked what advice would you give a returning adult student both Rob and Brad said "Have a plan." Rob continued, "Don't be afraid to explore but also stick to your plan as long as you can and don't, pardon me I'm going to stick with crudeness because it works, don't half ass it." Rob's advice combines the first two subthemes of hard work and a committing to long-term goals.

Purpose

Grit is not only demonstrating resiliency and toughness but it also encompasses committing to an interest or passion (Perkins-Gough, 2013). Five of the participants said finding their purpose or studying a topic of interest provided motivation to persist. John

started as a business major and soon realized “it was not necessarily going to be my calling.” He then transferred and changed his major to architecture but “did not find any success in that.” After following two dead-end paths, he realized he enjoyed science classes and was interested in teaching. John explained, “I think if you find something that you want to do and that you love to do there is motivation in and of itself. Your goal is something that you desire.” He spent several years exploring his interests at various institutions before finally discovering his passion.

Three additional participants also found motivation in studying a topic of interest. Brad said, “Yeah, I am not just showing up to class. No, I wanted to learn the material.” Rob started as a psychology major before rediscovering his interest in science and changing his major to chemistry. Pursuing his passion for science motivated him to continue. “I was able to continue because I had the support and I was still very interested in what I was learning.” Being invested in the content also contributed to Brian’s ability to persist. “I just really enjoyed computer science so that is what kept me going.”

Since Steve was earning his second bachelor’s degree, he was able to compare his student experience in both setting. Immediately following high school, he went to a residential institution and graduated in four years. At that time, he described partying as his priority so he did not apply himself. He had several jobs following college but did not feel rewarded even in lucrative positions. “I didn’t really have a good job out of that because I did not apply myself.” After “re-exploring” his faith he decided to return to school to become a nurse practitioner and he said this time it was “well thought out.” When he returned to school as an adult student for the second time he said, “I had a lot of focus and a lot of, okay, this is my calling. This is what I am supposed to do with my

life." As result, he valued going to class. "I actually cared about learning the stuff that was being put out in front of me." Discovering his passion was the reason these two experiences were so different. The second time he had a purpose.

The participants attributed their success to hard work, perseverance, and toughness and as a result grit emerged as the core theme. Grit is a characteristic that includes a passion for long-term goals (Duckworth, et al., 2007). Many of the participants said discovering their interests and determining goals was critical to their success. The participants described their ability to persist in terms of demonstrating grit.

Research Question Two

The second research question was what factors contribute to how adult male undergraduate students are able to persist until degree completion? The main theme was resources with subthemes of life-world and institutional. In this next section, I will discuss the findings for this question.

Resources

The second research question narrows the focus and asks about the specific factors that contribute to persistence. Per my analysis, I found that receiving support from various resources was the most important factor. The subthemes emerged based on where the resources originated: institutional or life-world environment. The life-world environment includes the adult students' life outside of the university which includes work and family (Donaldson and Graham, 1999). Individuals display grittiness when they persevere despite encountering roadblocks on the path to reaching their goals (Duckworth, et al., 2007); however, it does not have to be a solitary effort. Steve attributed his success to both personal characteristics and external resources. He described how this relationship supported his ability to persist:

> I felt like I had a lot of support and I had a lot of internal drive to say, okay, if I set my mind to something I tend to achieve that. It took a lot of hard work. I had a lot of the external supports I needed and the internal motivation to do it. I wanted to do it.

The participants had the grit needed to reach degree completion; however their efforts were supported by institutional and life-world resources. Rob said he was able to continue because of, "a good honest support structure." All nine participants discussed receiving support from resources within the institution and/or their life-world environment. Family members and religious faith served as resources in the life-world environment. Within the university community, the participants received support from faculty, staff, and other students.

Life-World

Seven of the participants discussed the significant role family members played in their educational journey. The family members who provided the support varied for each participant but most commonly it was a spouse or parent. The resources they provided differed based on the needs of the participants. Generally, family members provided encouragement, financial support, and help in managing life responsibilities. Brad, Mike, John, and Rob received encouragement from their family to continue to degree completion. Brad and Mike described the encouragement they received from family members as "harping" and "prodding." Being laid off was the impetus for Brad returning to school. His mother saw this setback as an opportunity for him. Brad explained:

> My mom harped on me harped, harped, and harped you got to go to school…My mother was a huge influence, my girlfriend at the time, now my wife, she was harping on me pretty good. I would say family had a lot to do with it.

Mike described his experience in college as frustrating, because he was unable to utilize resources offered by the institution. He attributed his success to his stubbornness and the

support of his family. “Number two was the support of my family. Without that it doesn’t matter what you do. You are not going to have a good success rate.” His wife urged him to continue when he felt like quitting. “I was probably that far from giving up on several occasions but you know my wife luckily kept prodding me.”

Rob and John mentioned their families were unable to support them financially but they did provide encouragement. Rob and John also did not talk about one specific family member but their family as a collective group. Rob said, “For the most part they pushed me. They drove me. They motivated me. We don’t have money. I got their support and they got their own problems but it is great because that’s sort of how we work as a family.” John described a similar situation, “They encouraged me to do what I wanted. I didn’t have any financial support from my family but I did have a place to live. I was staying with my mom during some of my early college years.”

Although John did not view living at home as a financial support, Brain and Dave did. Brian and Dave largely attributed their success to their individual effort. However, they both mentioned that they lived at home with their mothers while in college which was perceived as a resource that reduced their financial obligations. “I lived at home with my mom so it made it a lot easier.” Dave described his mother as supportive for two reasons: providing encouragement and allowing him to live at home while in school. He explained:

> My mom has helped me out through most of it. She has let me live at home and I didn’t have to pay rent or anything like that. She has always pushed me. She wanted me to get this. I am the last one to get my degree. My little sister got it before me. My brother and sister both graduated. Yeah she was definitely motivating. Family support also included sharing responsibilities.

Before Steve decided to embark on the journey of becoming a nurse practitioner he discussed it with his wife. After making the decision to return to school, they worked together to fulfill their responsibilities at home as new parents. Steve explained, "My wife was helpful. We had a one year old when I started and it was very helpful to have some of her support and figure out how were going to do this together." Additional help from his extended family would have made things easier for Steve when he was a student. He said, "As far as support goes I wish my parents were not snow birds so they could have helped out a little bit more. That would have been helpful."

Larry and Jerry were the two participants who did not mention the support of family as a resource. Larry's daughter was an adult when he returned to school so he did not have to juggle the responsibility of her care and schoolwork. He said, "Well my daughter was grown at that time so it was not a problem, the family, at all." While Jerry was in high school his parents did not encourage him to go to college, and they unfortunately passed away when he was nineteen. He described:

> When I was a young man coming out of high school my parents didn't promote college. My father was an entrepreneur and electrician by trade and all I would hear is you guys with college degrees work for me. So they passed when I was about 19 and I had to wait until I was 25 to get federal aid. So at that point I started at school.

The family structure for Larry and Jerry was not one that could provide support so they referenced institutional resources as their support.

In addition to family support, faith was the only other life-world resource discussed by the participants. Steve and John talked about how their faith gave them direction and motivation to continue. Steve credits his success not only to family but his "religious background and faith in God." He described re-exploring his faith and saying "Okay God you are pretty awesome and I had this all wrong. Let me get my relationship

with you fixed and everything else just falls into order." John also said his faith played a significant role in his ability to persist.

> You know I'll be honest I had the opportunity to come into my faith. My faith played a big part of, you know, just this journey. Realizing this life is less about me than it is about helping other people and encouraging other people in some of their struggles. Knowing I can use some of the struggles I've gone through to help other people. That is another big factor that kept me grounded throughout the process.

For John and Steve rediscovering their faith helped them find their purpose and provided motivation to continue. For seven of the nine participants support received from family members in the life-world environment contributed to their ability to persist.

Institutional

The institution offered many resources to help students: academic tutoring, student life, student services, health and wellness services, and academic advising. Institutional resources are both the services, programs, and facilities as well as the people who work in these spaces, other students on campus, and the faculty. The online survey listed ten campus departments that provided support services and asked the participants to select all the services they used as a student. On average the participants used two campus services. The participants discussed both using the physical resources and receiving help from various people on campus. McMillan and Chavis (1986) discussed the physical and relational space in their definition of a community. The campus community provided support in each of these dimensions.

Seven of the participants talked about the importance of having a support network on campus. Most of these networks were temporary and bounded by the physical space of campus and their time as a student. Networks were used to accomplish a goal of degree completion and were not sustained after graduation. For example, Dave was only the

participant who maintains contact with some of his classmates. He said, "Yeah, I still text them." Most of the participants had a similar experience to Jerry who said, "I went through most of my four years and I didn't make friend. There was nobody I could call that I knew from there." Rob explains how the temporary support network functioned:

> It is all networking. We are just people knowing each other. We form different hierarchies but they are artificial. They can be temporary. They can be structured so they hold there but they are always temporary. Having that means you are more likely to build a strong portfolio of people to contact and have stronger resources that you can pull from. Doing that makes it a lot easier.

Once the participants were able to establish a support network, navigating the university was easier because they knew where to find the answers they needed. However, that was not always the case. When they first started at the institution they had to search for information. It was available but not easy to access. Rob felt that a "lack of communication seemed to be a real issue. Like no information was out there for people to get." He was unaware of the services offered by the institution. "When I was here I had nobody informing me or telling me anything about opportunities or who I could talk to. I didn't know we had disability services here until later." Larry talked about the importance of getting direct answers. "It is important to get to know the campus. It's one thing to say call this number. Then you go from that person to the next to the next. That can be frustrating. So it's better to go directly." Larry's statement implies a student needed to know where to find the information to avoid being shuffled from one office to the next. Rob had a similar feeling about the website. Students needed to know the department that housed the information to find it. He jokingly said, "The website is not always helpful. Which division does that fall under?" Precursory knowledge was needed to find information but the participants' had not yet developed it.

The characteristics that participants used to describe how they were able to persist such as hard work and perseverance also were needed to navigate the university system. When John was inquiring about transferring, he met with an academic advisor who told him it would take six years to finish the program. He was then advised by a faculty member to make an appointment with another advisor who told him it would only be three years. He mentioned having to "cross reference" the information from different advisors. The help was available but it required persistence to find it. Jerry said "Yeah I did get it when I needed support. It was able to be found." Jerry needed help in a statistics class but was unable to find an effective tutor through the tutoring center but he did not give up. He continued to talk to the director until he was referred to a student who did not officially work for the center. He explained, "You have to be diligent. Immediately everyone directs you to tutoring and it was a dead-end. That was easy. But getting in there and probing around and being a pest eventually they were like go call this guy." When asked about giving advice to other adult students Rob said, "Try to ask questions and see people frequently." Information and help was available but the participants had to find the answers. Rendon (1994) described the role of institutions in providing support as passive because they simply offer the services and students are expected to pursue them on their own. This was true for the participants in this study. They received institutional support because they were persistent in finding answers and services.

Once the participants made a connection on campus, they knew where to go for information. After getting an on-campus job, Rob learned more about university resources. "I got to learn the ins and outs and certain parts of the structure. And where there are benefits and different places you can go to find things. Because people would

ask me and I would look it up. But that is about the only way that I knew that stuff. Only from working here." Once he understood the university system and developed a network, the support he received was instrumental in his success.

Advisor's role. Rob attributed his success to "A good honest support structure. I got to say my advisor. She was phenomenal. She was honest, do this, follow this, this will help. Having someone there who actually guides you and wants to see you succeed." Others shared the same experience. Once they found a person to help them, they continued to use that person as a resource. When asked who helped him through college Larry said, "actually this department" referring to the college advising office. "I think the biggest components for me was utilizing the resources that are available and one of the resources available was advising."

After John's initial advising experience when he received inaccurate information, he learned it was important to find a knowledgeable advisor and visit them often. "One thing that I learned early was go see your counselor often which was something that helped a lot." Dave described his advisor as "great." He said, "I went to her a couple times early on. She set up my whole schedule and that was it." When talking about his advisor Jerry said, "I don't know if I would have made it without her." He also said the Associate Dean was a "big help" who "did so much to support me." These participants perceived their advising experience as a key to their success in graduating.

Faculty roles. Faculty members were also a source of support. Brad said, "What helped me along the way? Definitely the professors and the instructors." Faculty members were viewed as supportive when they were willing to make adjustments to deadlines and accommodate other life demands. Brad's mother was diagnosed with

cancer while he was enrolled in school and his instructors were very supportive. Brad explains:

> They were sympathetic about it. If you need extra time just let me know ahead of time. If you can't take a test right away just give me a heads up ahead of time. They offered advice on how to manage the school life balance. I think that really helped me drive to complete the degree.

Mike also received accommodations from his instructors when his father passed away. "The day of the final exam my phone rings my father died. Needless to say the instructors were very nice. They allowed me to push off the final and take it the following week." Steve described how a faculty member's expectations and interest in student learning served as a source of encouragement:

> You are not just here to teach me this stuff and grab a paycheck. But you are interested in more than that and actually developing each and everyone one of us as a nurse by building up our shortcomings and encouraging our strengths at the same time.

Faculty members who took an interest in helping the participants succeed and were willing to make accommodations were viewed as supportive.

Students' role. Five participants also mentioned receiving support and encouragement from other students on campus. "Steve said, "There was a decent amount of support from the other students and encouragement like this stuff is hard but we can do it." The participants developed a connection through the shared experience of being a student and the desire to be successful. Brad said, "It seemed like we (the students) were all together. You know, we are all trying to get through this, and get good grades, and help each other out."

Independent effort. Two of the participants did not establish a support network. Brian did not have a need to use campus resources, and Mike was unable to make a connection on campus. When asked directly about the resources he used Brian said "I

didn’t really use any campus resources. I pretty much did it on my own.” He later discussed an interaction with a faculty member, and he met with an advisor who he described as “good.” He did interact with institutional agents, but he did not view these individuals as supporting and contributing to his success as student.

Mike was unable to learn the university system and create a network of support because he ‘had no clue where to turn.” He explained, “I had a program advisor but there was no real sense of anywhere that I could turn.” Unlike the other participants, he did not persist in finding the answers he needed because he didn’t have time. “Again in my situation, the only time I had to go down there was very minimal because I was trying to juggle all of this other stuff. I don’t have time to go down there. I needed someone to communicate electronically with me. And it was just so big I could never figure out where to go.” He recognized that answers may have been available but he did not have time pursue the answers. He worked fulltime and had three dependents. “At times I feel like the institution worked against me as opposed to with me. Part of that I think is my fault for not going and demanding some answers. Somebody direct me but I didn't have time.”

Eight of the participants received support from members of the university community such as faculty, advisors, and students. When talking about the university faculty and staff Rob said, “There were a lot of people who were willing to go out of their way to help.” However it was apparent that the participants had to be diligent in finding those people and resources to help. It was a learning experience and Mike who was unable to search for the information had a frustrating experience. As Rob said, having a support network on campus made it easier to navigate the university system.

Physical resources. Resources are not just individual people. The participants described resources that are part of the physical space of campus as well. During the interviews all the participants discussed their activity on campus and seven of them mentioned using the library frequently. Dave said, "I'd go to the gym or go to the library. Just kind of do homework so I spent time in the library if I had an hour or two off." Brian said, "The library is great a lot of areas to work so that was really nice. That's pretty much all I used the campus for is just, you know, finding a quiet place to work." Larry, the oldest participant, said "I utilized the sports. I loved swimming. I played a little basketball. I've been to a couple of events."

Campus activities. Jerry and John were the only two participants who were members of a student group or organization. John joined a group of 40 or 50 students twice a week for a bible study on campus. "There were some things I got involved with. Actually this group that met in the corridor in the Science building and they just kind of did a group bible study." Jerry joined the Native American society on campus. "The only one I was part of was the Native American society which actually completely dispersed like the year before I left. I think I was the only one left. Everyone else had gone." Based on this experience he was asked to be the chairman of the advisory group for Native Americans at his current place of employment.

Mike and Steve only came to campus to take classes. Mike said "I went to class and left…I didn't have the time." Mike would have liked to participate in an organization for nontraditional students.

> I didn't feel that there was a real sense of nontraditional students. A lot of what I saw and what I interacted with were, you know, all the traditional students in here. I didn't see a whole a lot of options for nontraditional students. You know it would have been phenomenal if I had known of a

> support group for older students. For what I was going through I didn't know of anything because I didn't (pause sigh) it wasn't … it may have been available but it wasn't advertised. No one came to me and said, Hey Mike we have identified that you are in your late forties and we want you to know, hey, here some services that might help you.

Mike did not have the extra time on campus to find resources so he was in the dark about services offered by the university. He wanted an institutional agent to reach out to him. Steve also did not spend additional time on campus but he did not express the same disappointment as Mike about not participating. Steve said "Gosh, on campus next to none. With having a wife, a daughter, we adopted a son in the middle of the program, and the rigor of an accelerated fast paced program I did not really have a life."

When the participants discussed the various factors that contributed to persistence they all mentioned institutional and life-world resources. They acknowledged family and faith, as sources of support outside of the university. They also mentioned receiving support from faculty, advisors, and students at the university however they had to be persistent in finding resources.

Research Question Three

The third research question was what types of social interactions enable adult male undergraduate students to persist to degree completion? The main theme was interactions with subthemes of structured and unstructured. In this next section, I will discuss the findings for this question.

Interactions

The third research question investigated social interactions that enabled adult male undergraduate students to persist. Interaction with faculty and staff that students perceive as positive can encourage persistence and help students transition to college (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Tinto, 1993, Wyatt, 2011). The research findings define

the type of interactions that helped these adult male students persist, and present three binary classifications that describe the dynamics of the interaction: (1) structured or unstructured, (2) student-initiated or university-initiated, (3) formal or informal.

First, I examined the degree of institutional engagement by coding the interaction as structured or unstructured. Interactions that rely on the infrastructure provided by the university are structured. Conversely, unstructured interactions occur without the support of the university infrastructure. The university infrastructure includes organizational structures, physical space, and institutional representatives. Next, I identified who initiated the interaction. Student-initiated interactions occurred because the student reached out to an institutional agent who represents the university. Communications initiated by institutional agents are considered university-initiated. Last, I examined the subject matter to determine if the interaction was formal or informal. Formal interactions addressed a program plan, course curriculum, institutional policies, or career/internship opportunities. Interactions that dealt with topics outside of a program plan, course curriculum, or institutional policies are considered informal. These factors are important to consider because they help to define the type of interactions that support persistence for adult male undergraduate students.

Eight of the nine participants recalled specific interactions that reinforced their commitment to earning a bachelor's degree. Although the interactions had unique outcomes specific to the individual circumstances, they encouraged persistence by providing support in the following four areas: (1) academic performance, (2) negotiating institutional policy, (3) career development, and (4) student development. Table III displays the type of interactions described by the eight participants. Mike was the only

participant who could not recall any meaningful interactions with other students or institutional agents. During the interview, he mentioned a professor he described as accommodating who let him miss class on his 50th birthday. Otherwise he said, "Being the nontraditional student there was never an interaction that made me feel like there was any kind of campus life that I was invited to be part of."

In the following section, I will explain the results of each interaction and how it supported persistence, define the type of interaction based on the three binary classifications, and describe the exchange with participants' quotes. Four participants described multiple interactions so their name appears in more than one category representing different interactions.

Structured Interactions: Student-Initiated

Structured student-initiated interactions required institutional engagement or intervention but occur because a student reached out to an institutional agent. Five participants described a structured student-initiated interaction and only one was considered informal. The results of these interactions encouraged persistence by supporting student development and academic performance and negotiating university policy.

Brian

Result. The result of Brian's structured student-initiated interaction provided a substitution in his program plan for a course he failed the previous semester. This substitution allowed him to continue progressing toward degree completion. His graduation would have been postponed a year if he was required to wait until the course he failed was offered again. This interaction encouraged persistence by providing support

Table III

Interactions that Supported Persistence

	Structured Student-Initiated	Structured University-Initiated	Unstructured Student-Initiated	Unstructured University-Initiated
Formal	Brian Jerry Larry Rob	Jerry John Rob	Brian Dave Jerry Steve	
Informal	Brad	Steve		
Total Participants	5	4	4	0

in negotiating university policy. The course substitution was an exception to the university curriculum which would not have occurred if Brian did reach out to the Department Chair.

Interaction Type. This was a structured student-initiated formal interaction. It was structured because it required university intervention which was facilitated by a department chair. Brian contacted the Department Chair so it is a student-initiated interaction. It is formal because it was related to the Brian's academic program plan.

Description. Brian's progress toward graduation was thwarted when he failed a course in his second to last semester. Since the course was only offered once a year waiting to retake it would have postponed his graduation. Instead of accepting this set-back, Brian reached out the Department Chair to explore alternative options as he did not want to defer his graduation. Brian described the outcome of his interaction, "he was able to let me take a course to substitute for that my last semester so I could graduate."

Jerry

Result. The result of Jerry's structured student-initiated interaction provided him with six credit hours for an internship he completed. He was originally told by an institutional agent he would not be awarded the credit because he did not follow the correct procedure to receive academic credit for an internship. This interaction encouraged persistence by providing support in negotiating university policy. His academic advisor was able to grant him an exception to the policy and award the six credits. If he did not earn the academic credit, his progress would have been disrupted. He would have been six credit hours behind, and the internship would have been perceived as wasted time.

Type of Interaction. This was a structured student-initiated formal interaction. It was structured because it required university intervention which was facilitated by an academic advisor. After Jerry was told he would not receive credit for the internship, he reached out to an academic advisor for help so it was student-initiated. It is considered formal because it had to do with an internship opportunity and his academic program plan.

Description. Jerry was not going to be awarded academic credit for an internship because he did not apply through the institution. He reached out to his advisor and she was able to resolve the issue for him. He explained how this interaction motivated him to continue in the program:

> My advisor backed me up and got me the credit. She got them to accept everything like they normally would. Without her I wouldn't have gotten the credit for it. Because that was six months and if I didn't get the credit for that what a loss, you know. That was really instrumental in keeping me going.

Larry

Result. The result of Larry's interaction provided him with a manageable course load that allowed him to successfully complete his courses each semester and continue progressing toward degree completion. This interaction encouraged persistence by providing academic support. The academic advisor's advice helped him to be successful and not overwhelmed which could have resulted in course withdraws.

Type of Interaction. This was a structured student-initiated formal interaction. It was structured because it required university intervention which was facilitated by an academic advisor. It is considered student-initiated because Larry asked his academic advisor to provide advice about the workload in each of his classes. Due to varying abilities, this is not standard advice given to all students. It is formal because it was related to the Larry's academic program plan.

Description. In the process of scheduling courses with his academic advisor, Larry asked her for advice on what classes to avoid taking concurrently. The advisors made recommendations for rearranging his schedule. He said, "It was not good to take her [the professor] and this other class because of her demands. And that was good advice for me because I wouldn't have been able to keep up with both."

Rob

Result. Rob's academic performance significantly improved as a result of a structured student-initiated interaction. He went from earning average grades to regularly appearing on the Dean's list. This interaction encouraged persistence by providing academic support.

Type of Interaction. This was a structured student-initiated formal interaction. It was structured because it relied on the university infrastructure specifically the accommodations offered by the Office of Disability Services. It is student-initiated because Rob was informed about the Office of Disability Services by an agency outside of the university. He then found the office on campus and asked for help. It is formal because the outcome of these interactions provided accommodations in his classes.

Description. Rob was informed about the accommodations provided by the Office of Disability Services by an agency outside of the university. This interaction significantly improved his academic performance. "So I found out when I finally got over to the Rehabilitation Services Commission. Somebody there said they should have somebody at your university. I got registered and my grades improved. I went from being a 'C' student battling depression and blindness to being on the Dean's list every semester and working."

Rob

Results. As a result of Rob's structured student-initiated interaction he was awarded a non-credit bearing internship at a government agency. This allowed him to apply knowledge gained in the classroom to a practical setting. This interaction encouraged persistence by providing support for career development. It gave him insight into his field of study and reinforced his commitment to his major and reaching degree completion.

Interaction Type. This was a structured student-initiated formal interaction. It was structured because it required university intervention which was facilitated by an academic advisor. It is student-initiated because Rob initiated the exchange by asking his

advisor if she could help him find an internship at this particular government agency. It is formal because it was an internship opportunity that allowed him to gain practical experience in the field.

Description. Rob was interested in an internship at a government agency and asked his academic advisor during a regular advising meeting if she could help him get an internship position. She happened to know people at that agency from a previous work engagement. Rob's advisor was able to use her resources to help him get an internship. He said, "She got me in because she is awesome. I said I'd like to do this and she said we can do that. Awesome! That's all it takes. Yeah we can do that. I know someone." This internship provided a practical application of the course content which supplemented his learning experience. Based on this experience he advised other students to initiate interactions on campus:

> I've advised students to just send an email to somebody if you are really interested in a particular branch of study or something you are interested in. Do it. Because only 3% of the world ever bothers to try. Really. Take the risk you never know the reward could be awesome.

Rob's philosophy about taking a risk and reaching out to someone demonstrates his determination and grit. In his quest to find answers, he initiated interactions with members of the campus community.

Brad

Result. The structured student-initiated interaction resulted in Brad making a connection with a member of the campus community. Brad found this faculty member to be approachable, and quickly learned that they had similar interests. Brad believed the program faculty within his major were willing to help students and wanted them to succeed. He said, "That was a good eye opener of how much the faculty here wanted to

see you succeed." This interaction encouraged persistence by supporting student development.

Type of Interaction. This was a structured student-initiated informal interaction. It was structured because it relied on the university infrastructure, specifically an institutional agent and the physical space of faculty offices. It is student-initiated because Brad opened the communication by going to the faculty member's office. It is informal because the topics of conversation were often about music, finances, and life circumstances. Brad did mention they would talk about class material, but it seemed to be embedded in an informal exchange about a topics outside of course curriculum or university policy.

Description. Brad described this faculty member as "one of us." He often provided advice on life. Brad explained:

> He didn't feel like a professor in a good way. His door was always open so you could stop by if you had a question about the material or if you just wanted to chat about life. So I would say mentor as well. He'd prepare me for the real world, you know, about budgeting or financing, you know, when you get that big bonus check save it. Yeah he had great advice for the class, the material we were learning, and also life in general.

The "open door" illustration is an invitation for informal conversation. Brad said "He liked the same music. We could talk to him about that." As a follow-up to this story, I asked Brad if these interactions made him feel more connected to the university campus and he said "Yeah I would say so. You know I think what really shaped that was the instructors…back to the professors."

Structured Interactions: University-Initiated

Structured university-initiated interactions required institutional engagement or intervention and were initiated by an institutional agent. Four participants described a

structured university-initiated interaction and again only one informal interaction. The results of these interactions encouraged persistence by providing support in the area of career development.

Jerry

Results. As a result of Jerry's structured university-initiated formal interaction he obtain an internship at a government agency. During the internship he was recruited by another government office. He was able to work there part-time while in school and was promised a job upon graduation. This interaction encouraged persistence by providing support in career development. The guaranteed job upon graduation, helped him to remain focused and strengthened his commitment to the goal of earning his bachelor's degree.

Interaction Type. This was a structured university-initiated formal interaction. It was structured because Jerry was notified of the open position via email from an institutional agent in his college. It is university-initiated because a representative of the university sent out the email. It is formal because the topic of the interaction was related to internship and career opportunities.

Description. Jerry was informed about an internship opportunity through an email sent by a staff member in his academic college. Despite not meeting the minimum requirement he was awarded the internship. He credits his academic advisor in helping get the position. He said, "That was probably the best thing that happened to me. That launched my federal career."

John

Results. John found his first job as a high school science teacher as a result of a structured university-initiated formal interaction. This interaction did not necessarily support persistence because John was already at the end of his program. However, it is significant because he was able to find his first job as result of a connection he made as a student with a faculty member. This interaction provided support in the area of career development.

Interaction Type. This interaction was a structured university-initiated formal interaction. It was structured because it required university intervention which was facilitated by a faculty member. The faculty member reached out to John so it was university-initiated. It is formal because it provided a career opportunity.

Description. A faculty member reached out to John after he was contacted by a local principal about a job opening. "A professor helped me to find my first job when I was coming out of the program. I couldn't find a job right away and he had information from a principal who was looking for a science teacher and he pointed me to my first job. So there was a lot of support there."

Rob

Results. As a result of Rob's structured university-initiated interaction with a faculty member he found a major that he was passionate about and suited to his strengths. This gave him focus and put him on a clear path to degree completion. This interaction encouraged persistence by providing support in the area of student development. Rob needed the support of an institutional agent to help him explore his strengths and

interests. Finding the right major changed Rob's trajectory because he was no longer struggling in coursework without a goal or plan.

Interaction Type. This was a structured university-initiated formal interaction. It was structured because it required university intervention which was facilitated by a faculty member. It was university-initiated because the faculty member initiated the exchange. It is formal because major exploration is directly related to Rob's program plan at the university.

Description. Rob described how a faculty member he had for a science class helped me discover the right major.

> Here's what really made the change-when I took college chemistry with a particular faculty member. I've been here for a while. So, he really fostered a sort of appreciation for it and reminded me, oh yeah, I really like physics and chemistry. I really liked that stuff. He reminded me that I liked that stuff and that I can do it. I can be real scientist. I joke. I say a real scientist but yes that's it. I can do that. I can study chemistry and physics why not? I am that capable. With the support that I started receiving my grades improved.

Steve

Results. Steve's uncertainty and fear about being a male nurse in a female-dominated field was reduced as a result of a structured university-initiated informal interaction. This interaction encouraged persistence by supporting Steve's career development. It provided an opportunity for Steve to discussion workplace stereotypes with other nursing students, both male and female. He realized his instructor and classmates could help him make the transition from student to nurse.

Interaction Type. This interaction was a structured university-initiated informal interaction. It was structured because it took place in the classroom and was facilitated by a university instructor so it relied on university infrastructure. The instructor introduced

the topic for discussion so it was university-initiated. It is informal because it was not directly related to course curriculum.

Description. Steve described how a faculty member facilitated a classroom discussion about workplace stereotypes, something he had experienced as a male nurse. He described the classroom discussion:

> We were talking about stereotyping and it was awesome to be able to bring that up in class and discuss it and realize that the other guys felt the same way and how many of the girls were unaware we would feel something like that. The teacher the professor led the discussion well and we all took something away from it and a greater appreciation for the different struggles we all face.

Unstructured Interactions: Student-Initiated

Unstructured student-initiated interactions did not require institutional engagement or intervention and were initiated by the students. Four participants described an unstructured student-initiated formal interaction. There were no informal unstructured student-initiated interactions. The results of these interactions encouraged persistence by supporting academic performance.

Brian, Dave, Jerry, Steve

Result. Brian, Dave, Jerry, and Steve all discussed unstructured student-initiated interactions with other students that resulted in a better understanding of the course content, and in some cases, improved academic performance. These interaction encouraged persistence by providing academic support. Achieving passing course grades allowed these participant to advance in their degree plans.

Interaction Type. These were unstructured student-initiated formal interactions. They were unstructured because they did not required university intervention or infrastructure as many of these interactions took place off campus. There were no

institutional agents involved so these interactions were all student-initiated. They were formal because they were discussing the course curriculum.

Description. Four of the participants described unstructured formal interactions with other students that involved studying together and working on class assignments. Dave was able to build relationships with his fellow classmates because they were following the same course sequence. “We had a couple of classes. We go sit afterwards. We talk. We do homework and work on problems together. It helped with that.” Jerry received tutoring from other students that was not associated with the university tutoring center that helped him successfully complete coursework. He previously failed a statistics course and was able to pass it on the second attempt because of the support from these students. “We actually had some visiting students from Russia who were exceptional statisticians. I actually spend many hours sitting at a coffee shop with a few of them and they got me through. They got me through, yeah.” Brian and Steve also periodically worked on class assignments with other students. Steve said, “I occasionally spent some time with fellow students studying…” Brian had a similar experience, “Occasionally you know some classes were more difficult so some of us would get together and work on stuff.”

Summary

Defining the type of interactions that supported persistence for these adult male students highlighted four important considerations. First, the lack of unstructured university-initiated interactions is not surprising. It is unlikely that the university would initiate an exchange that is not supported by its infrastructure. An example of an unstructured university-initiated interaction would be an email sent by an institutional

agent advertising an external event such as a job fair. However, none of the participants in this study discussed this type of interaction.

Second, there were very few, in fact only two, informal interactions mentioned. Most of the interactions that supported persistence had to do with academic program plans, university policy, career opportunities, or course curriculum. The literature says that adult do not engage in interactions outside of the classroom due to time constraints (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Kasworm, 2014; Tinto, 1993). While the findings of this research study showed that these adult male students did not engage in informal interactions, it is not about where the interaction took place as much as the subject matter of the exchange. Many of these interactions did occur outside of the classroom but very few interactions that the participants viewed as contributing to their persistence had to do with informal topics.

Third, the type of interaction yielded a specific type of support. Structured student-initiated interactions provided a larger range of support in the areas of student development, academic performance, and negotiating university policy. Structured university-initiated interactions provided career development support. Unstructured student-initiated interactions provided academic support. This information can be useful in identifying areas where institutions can initiate communications with students in an effort to provide a specific type of support.

Last, the majority of interactions were student-initiated. In the previous discussion about the resources theme the participants talked about the need to be persistent in finding answers. They demonstrated determination and characteristics

associated with grit, in not only persisting until degree completion, but also in finding answers and using university resources.

Research Question Four

The fourth research question was how do adult male undergraduate students describe their relationship to the university? Two themes address this question. The first theme is position with subthemes of belong, indifferent, excluded. The second theme is validation of status with subthemes of contribution and application. In this next section, I will discuss the findings for this question.

Position

The position theme depicts how the participants described their relationship to the campus community. The subthemes that emerged were: belong, indifferent, and excluded. All the participants used campus resources and interacted with individuals on campus, but these connections did not foster a sense of belonging to the campus community. The data that supports this theme are the participants' responses to questions about how they position themselves in relation to the campus community. Their perceptions can be situated on a continuum which is displayed in Figure 1. At one end is John who felt that he belonged to the campus community and at the opposite end are Mike and Jerry who felt excluded. Five participants are situated in the middle because they were indifferent about their position within the campus community. Dave and Brad are positioned on the continuum between belong and indifferent. This accurately describes Dave's position because he felt like he "fit in" but membership within the campus community was not important to him. Brad is also located between belong and indifferent because he felt connected, but did not see himself as a member of the campus community.

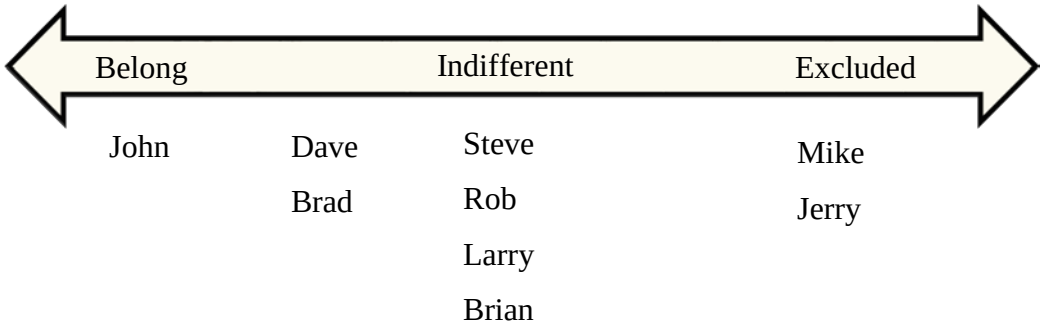

Figure 1. Campus Membership Continuum

Belong

One participant felt as if he fit in and belonged to the campus community. John, age 26 when he graduated, shared, "I mean I don't think I ever felt like I didn't fit in…as an adult I felt comfortable. I didn't feel out of my element." Two participants, Brad and Dave, were positioned between belong and indifferent. Brad who was also in his late twenties when he graduated said, "I definitely felt connected." Although Brad expressed a sense of connectedness it did not develop from participating in activities on campus. "I didn't really do any of the, what do you call it, extra-curricular activities but I still felt like a part of the school."

Dave's sense of belonging stemmed from not encountering the opposite, marginalization. "I felt like I belonged. I never felt like I was ostracized or anything." He mentioned "belonging" in this instance but he also expressed some indifference. "I am not a big like community type. That's not something that super sways me either one way or the other." Although Dave said he felt as if he belonged, being part of the campus community was not a priority, and his relationships to the community did not influence his experience as a student. He said, "Yeah I was just kind of there." The three men,

John, Brad, and Dave, who expressed a feeling of connectedness or belonging to the campus community were also the three of the youngest participants in the study.

Indifferent

Four participants did not have a sense of their place within the university community. For Brian and Steve, the relative importance they placed on membership within the campus community was low. Brian was unable to describe his place within the community because he perceived the campus as a tool, not a place for social interaction. He said:

> Really to me the campus was just a place I go to learn and get a degree. That was really it for me. I need to learn. I need to develop my skills in computer science so it's like I looked at campus as resource to improve myself.

Steve also expressed indifference when describing his place within the campus community. He did not see himself as part of the community but he also did not feel excluded. Given his life-world responsibilities he could not participate. He explained:

> So campus community was a good phrase to highlight my perception of my undergraduate business degree. I was very engaged in the campus community but as an adult learner, going back to school, that was just not something that I really put much priority on or paid much attention to. Between trying to work and raise two small children I did not have the opportunity to do that.

Belonging to the campus community was also not a priority for Larry and Rob because they felt comfortable in any environment. Larry said, "I am a people person. I blend in pretty good. There's some people who don't. I think I belong to anything that I want to be part of." Rob shared the same sentiment. "Belong, not so much, just because, it's I belong in my shoes. I'm comfortable where ever I am. That's me as a person. I am at home in my skin. I don't mind." They shared the perspective of belonging wherever they are and feeling they can be a part of any community.

Brian, Steve, Larry, and Rob were indifferent about their role within the campus community for various reasons. As a student Brian, approached going to class like a job. He did not view campus as a place for social interaction. Steve did not have the extra time to spend on campus outside of class because of work and family responsibilities. Larry and Rob felt comfortable associating with different groups of people in any social environment.

Excluded

Mike and Jerry, two of the oldest participants, felt excluded from the campus community as adult students. Mike described, “I absolutely do not feel like I belonged.” Jerry added, “I felt excluded a lot.” Jerry was exploring the possibility of joining various student groups on campus. He received information about these organizations by email which stirred his curiosity, but upon further investigation he discovered there was an age limit for the members. “Yeah some of the different professional fraternities or other groups they all have maximum age limits so that makes you feel excluded.” Jerry was one participant who interacted on campus, mentioned feeling more connected to the university community after graduation, but felt excluded as a student. Jerry described several institutional agents as instrumental in his success and he belonged to a student organization, but he still felt excluded from the campus community.

Mike’s feelings of exclusion stemmed from his perspective that the institution did not care about nontraditional students. With working fulltime and raising a family, Mike struggled to get to class on time, and was also frustrated by the lack of online classes. There was minimal activity on campus in the evenings and weekends when Mike was

there for class. The limited class offerings and campus activity were two major reasons he felt the institution did not care about nontraditional students. He said:

> You go down there on Saturday and there wasn't campus life. There was nothing. Everything is closed so you are like okay well great. There were no Sunday classes. I'm literally leaving work rushing to get down there and having to figure out how my kids are going to get taken care of. So there was no time before class to interact with anyone.

Even at graduation he felt excluded. He explained:

> Even at the graduation ceremony I felt so flippin' alone. I was a number. Go stand over there. Okay. Because here I am this nontraditional student surrounded by kids in their twenties that are graduating. You have this group of kids over here and they all knew each other. Oh you were in this group. Oh we took these classes together. I looked around and I was very excited that I was here. But wow I looked around and I realized yeah I never got that.

University policies and operations made Jerry and Mike feel excluded from the campus community. Jerry was unable to join certain student groups because he was considered too old. Mike was unable to utilize some university resources because they were closed when he was on campus.

Role of Generational Status

Two of the older participants discussed feeling excluded from the university community which negatively influenced their experience as a student but did not prevent them from continuing. Three of the younger participants said they did feel connected to the campus community, but one of them also experienced indifference about the need to be part of the larger campus community. The two ends of the continuum reflect the participants' age gap. Those who were closer in age to the traditional students on campus felt included.

Students in higher education are considered adult students if they are age 25 or older (Kim, 2002). Although all the participants were considered adult students, their

experiences differed depending on age and non-traditional status. NCES determines nontraditional status based on the following characteristics: (1) maintaining employment when enrolled, (2) financially independent in terms of eligibility for financial aid, (3) delays enrollment, (4) attending part time, (5) having dependents other than a spouse, (6) being a single parent, (7) having a certificate of completion or GED instead of a standard high school diploma (Choy, 2002). The participants who were younger adult students, in their twenties, had more in common with traditional students. Many of them were fulltime students, lived at home, worked part-time or less, and did not have any dependents. They felt comfortable on campus and saw themselves as part of the university community. Brian and Rob expressed indifference about their membership in the university community. They did not have a need to belong. Although they were considered adult students they were members of the same Millennium generation as traditional students.

The older participants, over the age of 30, were financially independent, worked fulltime, and had dependents, either children or parents, for whom they were the primary caregiver. They did not share generational characteristics with current traditional college students. They were members of the Gen X and Baby Boomer generations. Larry did not socialize on campus but also did not feel excluded because he was a self-described "people person who blends in well." Steve said he spent no time on campus because he worked and had a family with young children to support. He described being in a "different place in his life" that did not allow him to participate in the campus community. Jerry interacted with students and staff on campus but felt excluded socially. He felt more connected after graduation because he was invited back to campus to

participate in various panel discussions. He felt like he is now able to contribute to the campus community. Mike had minimal interaction in the campus community and felt excluded as an adult student. He felt like the institution did not care for their nontraditional students. Mike was the only participant who said he never felt connected to the campus community. Even as an alumnus he did not have a sense of belonging to the institution. “I get homecoming notices and you never gave me a sense of belonging to the community when I was there. Why are you inviting me now?”

The Millennial participants shared experiences that differed from the older participants. Their degree completion trajectories were more direct with fewer breaks in enrollment and for smaller amounts of time. They either felt included or indifferent about membership within the campus community. The two oldest participants, Larry and Mike, attended several institutions and took longer enrollment breaks. Although the discussion of themes showed there were shared experiences across generations, certain distinctions emerged based on age and non-traditional status. Mainly, the younger students felt less excluded from the campus community.

Summary

Increased participation on campus (e.g. student organizations extracurricular activities, or resources used) did not influence the participants’ sense of belonging. According to the online survey results, Larry used the most resources on campus but he felt indifferent about his membership within the campus community. Three of the youngest participants felt like they belonged or were at least connected to the campus community. Alternatively, two of the oldest participants felt marginalized because of university policies and operations that excluded them from participating. Age, the value that the participants placed on their membership within the campus community, and

university policies influenced how they described their place within the campus community.

Validation of Status

The second theme that addressed research question four was validation of status. Validation of status is assigning value to the student role. “It is a process that affirms, supports, enables, and reinforces their capacity to fully develop themselves as students and as individuals” (Rendon, 1994, p.45). The concept of validation of status emerged through the participants’ stories about how contributing to the campus community and applying knowledge learned within the institution to the life-world environment made them feel connected to the campus community. As a result, the two subthemes are contribution and application.

The position theme described the participants’ perception of their place within the campus community. Despite variations, their position did not influence persistence. All of the men were able to graduate regardless of their feelings of belonging, indifference, or exclusion. In addition, traditional examples of belonging to a college campus include engaging in interactions with other students, faculty, and staff, using resources, and joining clubs and organizations. The participants did at least one or more of these activities but that did not foster a sense of belonging to the campus community. Their position and campus engagement did not connect them to the campus community. When they spoke about being connected to the campus community it was embedded in stories about helping another students or participating in a panel discussion. They felt connected to the college campus when they were able to make a contribution. Furthermore, being

able to make a contribution validated their status as a student because they mattered to the larger group. It was a confirmation that what they bring to the community was valued.

The concept of mattering is twofold. It is not only cultivated by contribution, but also the application of the knowledge gained as a student to the outside world. Since adult students do not fully integrate into the campus community and maintain membership in the life-world environment, seeing the application of their coursework outside of the classroom also served to validate their status as a student. For example, if a course assignment can be used at their place of employment, then it is worth expending the time and energy required to complete that assignment. Simply said, the knowledge gained from doing that assignment matters because it can be used in the real world.

Campus membership for adult male students is about validation of status. Validation of status is assigning value to their student role. It gives meaning and purpose to their work. Having purpose, as discussed in the first theme, served to reinforce the grit mindset which contributed to their ability to persist.

Contribution

A sense of belonging did not derive from participation in student organizations or campus events and activities. The participants felt connected to the larger community if they were able to make a contribution. Five participants mentioned contributing or having something to share with the campus community as a rewarding experience. Brad said he felt connected but not because he participated in extra-curricular activities. “I was contributing in any way I could. Maybe it was a good a paper that they wanted to save for the next year or whatever.” He felt connected because he was able to make a contribution to the larger community.

An instructor invited Steve to share his work experience in class to supplement the lesson. He appreciated the cooperative learning environment that allowed him to contribute to the class content. He said being able to talk about what he learned in the field, "was really confidence building." While a nursing student, Steve also worked as a nurse's aide at a local hospital. During clinical rotations for class, a particular instructor encouraged Steve to share his knowledge. He explained:

> She [the professor] was also great in saying, okay Steve, you have these clinical skills. Great. How can we encourage and build those further? When we did clinicals on one of the floors I was a nurse's aide on, it was great. She was like, okay Steve, you work here. What can you add to the discussion? She would incorporate what I knew from working as an aide, about the monitors and equipment and things of that nature. She gave a great environment for everyone to teach each other as opposed to a top down approach.

Making a contribution to the class empowered Steve and connected him to the larger community.

The classroom also provided an environment for Larry to make a contribution by sharing his life experiences during classroom discussions. He explained:

> I'm an older student a lot of people look up to that identity in the classroom. Wow you came back to school and you are 48 and 50 years old, and you are trying to get a degree, and you are trying to do this and everything. So I was able to share I went to the military, I went to 23 countries, I've done this, and I have my own identity and that is very important.

Larry is talking about how diversity within a college classroom contributes to richer discussions and additional learning opportunities. As an adult student, he was able to contribute to the classroom discussions from a different perspective than his traditional-aged counterparts.

Rob contributed to the community by, "helping people, making jokes, and trying to do what I do." He provided assistance to younger students by proofreading and providing advice on course assignments. He described:

> In fact I had a kid who he kept contacting even after we weren't in classes together. It was really funny. I helped him write his papers. He'd give me a paper and I read over it. I would say this is a bit better argument. It was all his own work. I was just advising him.

Helping others also resonated with John. He talked about the importance of contributing in any setting, "Really try to be a motivator. That piece was a very big contributor to helping me focus, not only my own goals, but realizing I was going to have a larger impact than just myself in the end." John changed majors several times because he was looking for a career that he found rewarding. His personal fulfillment was grounded in making a contribution.

Jerry had an interesting experience because he felt excluded when he was a student but as an alumnus he felt connected to the campus community. After graduation he was asked to participate in various panel discussions on campus. He said, "I think I actually feel like I belonged more post-graduation then when I was there especially with the way I was celebrated for being a successful graduate. I feel like I have more to contribute."

Traditionally, connecting students to the campus community is thought of in terms of increased participation. Through joining a student organization an individual will meet other students and feel part of the larger community. The literature on adult students often indicates that adults do not have extra time to spend on campus interacting in the traditional sense (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Kasworm, 2014; Tinto, 1993). The findings of this study show adult males do interact on campus and are engaged; however,

that does foster a sense of connectedness. Most of the participants did not see themselves as are part of the campus community, but they felt connected when they were able to make a contribution. The participants desired a reciprocal relationship with the campus community. They were not just looking for what they could gain but also how they could give back. As Tinto (1993) said, they were looking to reshape their environment no matter how small the impact.

Application

The participants also discussed engagement in the context of applying course content to their life-world environment. Their life outside of the university which includes work and family can be viewed as another community in which they maintain membership. Connecting the two communities validated their role within the campus community because their work within the classroom had purpose in their life-world environment. This is aligned to Knowles' (1980) assumptions that adult learners need learning to be related to their social roles and desire immediate application of knowledge.

Mike, Steve, Larry, and Jerry described situations where applying classroom content to their life-environment gave purpose to what they were learning and supported their work or personal development. Mike talked about a faculty member who allowed him to do a presentation on nonprofit entities which helped him in his career. "She allowed me to do a presentation on turning my company into a nonprofit which for me helped immensely. I am still using that research in trying to determine if I am going to turn it into a nonprofit or not."

Steve talked about the nursing skill labs that provided practical experience on campus. "The skill labs where we got to actually practice skills, we would learn on

manikins, were very helpful. It was great to do that on campus before going and doing those skills on a patient." Larry discussed how a group project on the Jewish community that required off-campus work helped to break down barriers and allowed him to learn about another culture. He explained:

> I was in a group and we had to study the Jewish community. We took pictures. We met at the library. Learned about the different things and none of us in the group were Jewish. That was engaged learning about another culture and they accepted me and I was the only Black guy there.

Jerry also talked about how he was able to apply what he learned in class to the real world. He explained:

> A lot of the senior project stuff was utilized in the field or could be so you have to be very engaged to get those types projects accomplished. It's not like you are going to read a book and answer some questions. No. You're like the marketing campaigns. You are actively working.

Unlike the experience of traditional age students, belonging is not a full integration into the campus community by way of leaving the life-world environment. Tinto (1993) discussed how traditional-age students disassociated themselves from their previous community, which included their high school and parents, before transitioning to college and adopting the norms of the college community. Not all students go through this separation as most adult students do not disassociate with their life-world environment. So engagement in the campus community served to validate their status as a student when their learning was applicable to the life-world environment.

Summary

When asked to describe their position within the campus community, the participants described the boundaries of the community and whether they were inside, outside, or did not care. Their position did not influence persistence. The participants did feel connected to the campus community when they were able to make a contribution or

apply course content to the life-world environment. Contribution and application served to validate their status as a student by providing purpose and meaning to their work as a student.

Campus Membership

This next section focuses on interaction and engagement from the participant's perspective. A sense of contributing to the campus community and applying course content to the life world environment along with validation of status are three important strands. The grounded theory methodology was used to generate a model that could explain how the relationship between these three elements accompanied by support describes campus membership for adult male undergraduate students.

Description of Student Involvement

As stated in chapter three, the final interview question included word cards that could describe involvement in the university community. The words were interact, engage, belong, identify, and position. I showed the participants each word printed on an index card and provided a definition. Table IV displays which words each participant selected to describe their involvement in the campus community. All nine participants selected *interact* and five participants selected *engage*. Before further exploring how the participants interacted and engaged in the campus community, I will discuss the three words (belong, identify, and position) that were infrequently selected and provide a brief rationale for why these words were less salient in defining the participants' involvement in the campus community.

Eliminated words. Only three participants selected *belong* and *identify*, and none of the participants selected *position*.

Table IV

Description of Student Involvement

Words	Participants
Interact	Brad, Brian, Dave, Jerry, John, Larry, Mike, Rob, Steve
Engage	Brad, Dave, Jerry, Larry, Mike, Rob
Belong	Dave, John
Identify	Jerry, John
Position	

Dave and John selected the word *belong*. Belong was defined as the feeling of fitting into the campus community. These two participants were situated on the right side of the campus membership continuum and said they felt like they fit into the campus community. Given that the majority of the participants felt indifferent or excluded from the campus community, it is not surprising that only Dave and John selected the word *belong* to describe their campus involvement. John explained why he selected it:

> I did really feel like I belonged to the university. I always felt like the institution had good things to offer and it was a really good quality university. I never had any bad experiences and you know I always appreciated that. I'll recommend the institution for people, even I guess, if they are young or old. It was definitely was accommodating.

Dave said he selected belong because he never felt excluded. He said "I felt like I belonged." Brad was the only other participant who mentioned feeling connected to the campus community during the interview but did not select *belong* to describe his participation. All of the other participants felt indifferent or excluded.

Jerry and John were the only two participants who selected *identify*. Identify was defined as identification with the student role when an individual sees themselves as a student. Given that it took John eight years to earn his bachelor's degree, he identified as a student because earning his degree was his main focus for many years. He explained:

> I think for so long because eight years of my life were spent being student, for those years, it was most important to me. I identified more with being a student than anything else. If anybody asked me what was going on it was mostly based on my education and what I was doing as a student. So I could really identify with being a student for a long time. That was my identity and it's just weird because even now I have a different identity.

Jerry also selected *identify* to describe his student experience. His internship significantly influenced his student experience and it also contributed to developing his identity as a student. Similarly to John, the length of time it took him to earn his degree also contributed to seeing himself as a student. He explained:

> Did I think of myself as a student, yeah absolutely. I absolutely did. Even with being at the government position that's how it is classified as well. You were a student trainee so that's definitely what I was. I was a student and considered myself one for many years.

Given that adults maintain multiple life roles, it is likely that the other participants did not select identify because the student role was not prominent in their multi-dimensional identities. Other salient life roles contributed to their self-definition. Also, many participants expressed indifference about their position within the campus community. This feeling of indifference could also influence their perception of themselves as a student. *Position* was eliminated from the model because it was not selected by any of the participants. Most of the participants asked me to repeat the definition of position. It appeared they did not understand the definition in this context and as a result did not select it.

Selected words. When asked to select an appropriate word that described their involvement with the university community all nine participants selected *interact*. *Interact* was defined as the basic interactions needed to be a college student such as registering for classes, finding transportation, going or logging in to class, etc. Brian explained why he selected interact:

> You do need resources like parking and everything. You need counselors to make sure you are in the right courses and stuff. So that was the main thing. So getting to campus and making sure I took the right classes are the main things I needed from CSU.

Mike also interacted on campus to complete tasks required of all student. He said, "When you first said interact absolutely. That was what I did. I get down there. I'd get it done. I'd do what I have to. That's it." Interact also accurately described Steve's campus involvement. He said:

> I like interact. That clearly encapsulates my interaction with the campus. Did I go to Viking Basketball games-no. Did I participate in different events on campus- no. Not that I didn't want to but that wasn't the place I was at in my life. I didn't have that option.

Six participants also selected the *engage* card which was defined as purposeful actions that extend beyond required interactions to function as a student. Brad described his reason for selecting *engage*. "Engage. I would say I think it kind of goes with interact. Right. Again engage in your classes, participate, and contribute for sure." Larry also thought interact and engage worked well in tandem. Larry explained:

> For me because I have a lot of work experience the combination of interaction and engage comes through the classroom setting. Also a lot of the teachers really do practical exercises in the classroom. Group activities cause you to be engaged which causes you to interact with people which cause you break down barriers. You know what I'm saying, that might be older, younger, Black, White, Hispanic or Asian.

Jerry also selected *engage* because there were classroom projects that were applicable to the life-world environment. He said, “Engage. There was a lot of engagement in the class work because a lot of it, and that’s one thing I did like about it, a lot of those real world stuff.” The participants felt engaged in the campus community, not necessarily when they were participating in the campus activities, but when they were making a contribution to the community as described by Brad. Jerry also defined engagement in terms of applying class content to the life-world environment.

The words they selected to describe their involvement in the campus community supported the stories they shared throughout the interview about their student experience. Most of the participants did not identify as a student or feel as if they belonged to the campus community. All of them did interact on campus by using the available resources and conducting administrative business required of all students. The six participants who said they were engaged with the campus community described it terms of contribution and application. Brad talked about engaging in your class by contributing. Larry and Jerry defined engagement in terms of practical exercises and application of knowledge to the real world. For the majority of these adult male students their involvement in the campus community included interacting with institutional agents and students, and engaging by way of contribution and application.

Campus Membership Model for Adult Male Students

The campus membership model explains how the adult male students’ involvement in the campus community and the life-world environment validates their status as a student. Figure 2 is a visual representation of the campus membership model for adult male students. Tinto (1993) argued that adult students do not disassociate from

the life-world environment in the same way that a traditional-aged student leaves home to go away to college and integrates into the campus community. Since adult students maintain dual membership, the life-world environment influences their role within the campus community.

Rendon (1994) argued that struggling students can be transformed into successful students through the process of validation. The validation process can be initiated by institutional agents or members of the life-world environment. The participants of this study described support they received from members of both communities. They all named at least one person who took an interest in them and believed they were capable of earning a degree. This is an example of external validation that occurred because an individual believed they could accomplish their goal of earning a degree and supported their efforts. Institutional and life-world support validated their status as a student because the individual providing the support valued their role as a student. The participants received support from both communities which validated their status as a student, so in the model (Figure 2) there is an arrow pointing from each community to validation of status.

There are also two arrows pointing outward from validation of status to the life-world environment and campus community to illustrate validation also occurs when a student is able to act upon those environments. Being able to contribute to the campus community and apply class content to the life-world environment serve as internal validation. Instead of receiving support and validation as a result of someone else's actions, the participants' actions also served to validate their student role. They were not just passively receiving validation but also actively creating it. Being able to impact the

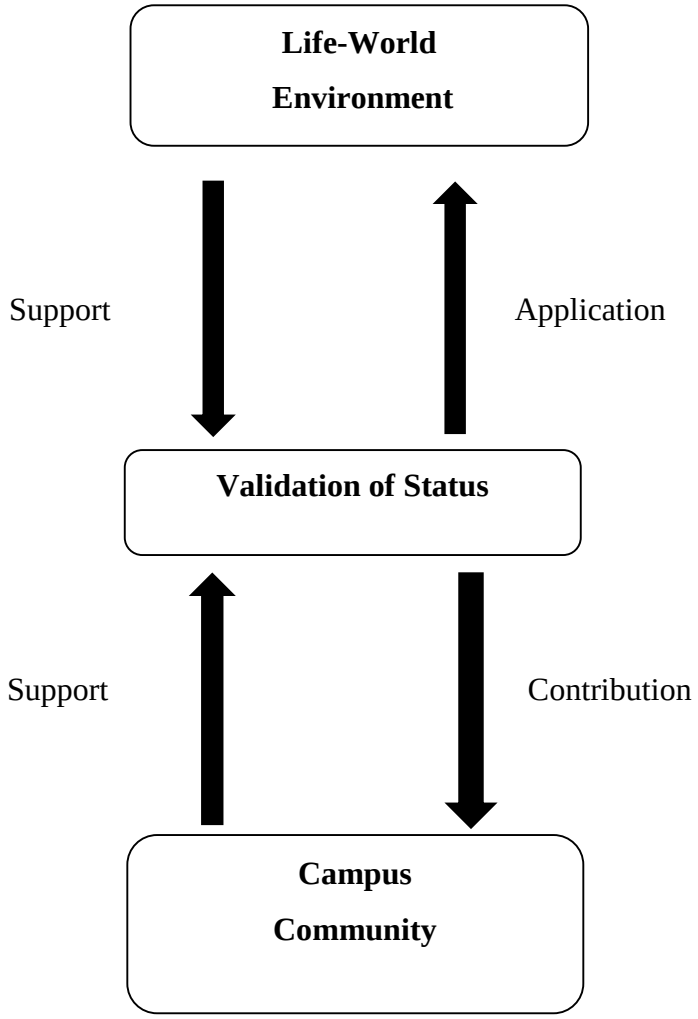

Figure 2 Campus Membership Model for Adult Male Students

campus community and life world environment gave purpose and value to the work they were doing as a student. Since the participants defined involvement terms of interaction and engagement, their role in the campus community is influenced by validation of status. Rendon (1994) said, “Involvement in college is not easy for nontraditional students. Validation may be the missing link to involvement, and may be a prerequisite for involvement to occur” (p. 37). These adult male undergraduate student described their

relationship to the campus community in terms of activities that validated their status as a student.

Summary

First this study investigated how adult male students described their ability to persist, and specifically what factors contribute to persistence. Grit defined how the participants described their ability to persist. In addition to perseverance and determination, grit includes committing to long-term goals and following personal interests. These defining features were also critical in helping adult male students persist. The participants described how establishing goals and plan to achieve them along with discovering a purpose reinforced their commitment to earning a degree.

The participants discussed resources from the campus community and life-world environment as specific factors that supported their persistence. All nine participants received support from a family member in the form of encouragement, financial support, and help in managing life responsibilities. Eight participants also mentioned support they receive from faculty, staff, and other students in the campus community. The participants described campus resources as available but not easily accessible. They often had to search for answers, but once they made a connection on campus they were able to return to that source for support. Faculty and academic advisors were most frequently mentioned as institutional resources.

The study also explored what social interactions enable persistence and how adult male undergraduate students describe their relationship to the campus community. Eight participants described interactions within the campus community that supported their persistence. These interactions encouraged persistence by providing support in the area of academic performance, student and career development, and negotiating university

policy. The majority of the interactions were student-initiated which substantiates their stories about pursuing campus resources and support. The help was available but students had to find it on their own which resulted in more student-initiated interactions. There was also very few informal interactions discussed. This is an indication that interactions that support persistence for adult male students have to with their degree plan or negotiating university policy.

Most of the participants did not perceive themselves as part of the campus community but they interacted on campus. In an effort to develop a model of campus membership for adult male students the concept of validation of status emerged. Contributing to the campus community and applying knowledge to the life-world environment validated their status as a student and gave them purpose. They also received validation from institutional and life-world resources. This in turn reinforced their grit mindset and helped them persist until degree completion.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This chapter provides a summary of the research study and a discussion of the findings. The discussion will further explore patterns of enrollment for adult male students, how the university can create an environment that supports student grit and determination, and how adult male students engage with the campus community. The discussion will be followed by limitations of the study. The chapter will conclude with recommendations for future research and implications for the study.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore factors that contributed to the persistence of undergraduate adult male students and their perception of their role within the campus community. Research questions that guided this study are as follows:

5.) How do adult male undergraduate students describe their ability to persist until degree completion?

6.) What factors contribute to how adult male undergraduate students are able to persist until degree completion?

7.) What types of social interaction enable adult male undergraduate students to persist to degree completion?

8.) How do adult male undergraduate students describe their relationship to the university?

Within the literature on adult students in higher education few studies qualitatively investigated the experience of male undergraduate students with the exception of Smith (2006) and Widoff (1999). Donaldson, Graham, Martindill, and Bradley (2000) explored factors that contributed to the success of adult undergraduate students. They recommended future research investigate the applicability of their findings across gender because 80% of their participants were female. This theory building case study explored persistence factors for adult male undergraduate students, their perception of their place within the university community, and how social interactions that occur within that space influenced persistence. This current study addressed the problem that there is limited knowledge of the adult male undergraduate student experience in higher education.

Data was collected through an initial online demographic survey to determine study eligibility and semi-structured interviews. Nine participants were interviewed. All the participants attended a public four-year institution located in the downtown area of a midsized urban city in the Midwest. Five major themes emerged during data analysis: grit, resources, interactions, position, and validation of status. The relationship between these categories helped generate three overall conclusions about the findings. The next section will present these findings and connect them to the literature on achievement and success, self-directed learning, and student retention.

Conclusions

The three overall conclusions to this study are as follows:

1.) Stopping out does not preclude degree completion for some adult male students.

2.) Student grit and determination influence how adult male students are able to access university resources and persist until degree completion.

3.) Campus community for adult male students is about what they can contribute to the university they are attending in addition to the support they need to successfully navigate the university system.

Persistence Redefined

The first conclusion of this research study is stopping out does not preclude degree completion for some adult male students. This pattern of enrollment challenges the current assumption about student persistence. Typically, student persistence is considered fulltime continued enrollment until degree completion. This is largely based on the calculation of institutional graduation rates and accountability measures like performance-based funding. The focus on performance outcomes increases the push for degree completion within an established timeframe of six years. As a result, institutional efforts and policy to improve retention focuses on students who can meet these goals. This study was designed to tell the success stories of adult male students and draw attention to their unique pathways to degree completion. Expanding the definition of persistence would allow institutional efforts to be more inclusive so that more students can benefit from a supportive campus environment.

Accountability measures. As adults are responding to workforce demands by enrolling in school, policymakers want to ensure that higher education institutions are doing their jobs to help students graduate. Performance-based funding is one example of a higher education accountability measure (Rabovsky, 2012). Initiatives like performance-based funding shift the focus to outcomes which measure institutional success. Accountability measures are often based on the graduation rates or the number of first-time, fulltime, degree-seeking students who graduate in six years (NCES, 2015). This metric does not account for all graduates and is often criticized as being highly flawed (Kasworm, 2014; Stokes, 2006). "Little space, voice, and value are given to other groups, and in particular, those who are the most different from young students: adult learners" (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001, p.18). This narrow definition of persistence is sustained by accountability measures that do not capture the success of all students.

Adult patterns of enrollment. Tinto (1993) cautioned higher education institutions from assuming all students drop out for the same reason and labeling them as failures. Many students view leaving as a means to accomplishing their goal. "Many see their actions as quite positive steps toward goal fulfillment" (Tinto, 1993, p. 3). This was certainly true for some of the adult male undergraduate students in this study. Stopping out or transferring to various institutions were incremental steps in the process of earning a degree. Life circumstances were the reason these participants stopped out, as well as, the reason they returned.

Rob, Mike, Larry, and Dave stopped out while pursuing their bachelor's degree due to financial, employment, and family reasons. Larry stopped out to start working

after learning he was going to be a parent. He returned to school when his daughter was an adult. Other participants returned to college after being laid off from work. Jerry and Brad earned an associate degree, took a break from undergraduate studies, and then returned at a later date. Steve had a similar experience but initially earned a bachelor's degree. John attended three institutions before transferring to the degree-granting institution. He said "It was mostly continuous. There wasn't really any time off. A lot of it was soul searching and trying to figure out what I wanted to do." They stopped out to respond to life circumstances and returned when the timing was right. Stopping out provided an opportunity for these participants to attend to life responsibilities and explore their passions and purpose. It allowed them to attain a degree and fulfill a long-term goal. Not all of the participants experienced episodic enrollment. Brian started college at age 23 and graduated in four years from the same institution, but he delayed enrollment immediately following high school because he enlisted in the military.

Given that many adult students attend part-time and transfer among institutions they are not included in the calculation of the institutional graduation rate. In fact, the attainment of this important degree is not captured anywhere. Stopping out can actually make it possible for some adults to reach degree completion as it was the case for many of the participants in this study. Their stories illustrate that persistence does not look the same for every student. As Mike said, "Everyone's journey there is going to be different."

Grit

The second conclusion of this study has to do with the role of student grit and determination in accessing university resources and persistence. All of the participants

demonstrated grittiness upon entering or returning to the institution. When asked to describe how they were able to continue through school and graduate all the participants used phrases like “I’m tough,” “I powered through,” “I have internal drive,” and “I pushed myself.” Nicholas (2010) also found that students participating in distance education attributed their ability to persist to intrinsic attributes. He concluded that students are aware when support services are ineffective. However when they are effective, students do not appreciate them but instead perceive them as “silent enablers of personal motivation active in the background” (p. 106). Most participants did mention that institutional resources contributed to their success, but first and foremost acknowledged their hard work and determination as the reason they were able to continue.

Grit is not only demonstrating resiliency in the face of obstacles, it is also maintaining consistent interests and achieving long-term goals (Perkins-Gough, 2013). Academic resiliency often refers to the academic achievement of at-risk students, but does not address goal-orientation. These adult male students were persistent and goal-oriented so gritty is a better descriptor than resilient. Many of the participants emphasized the importance of having a goal and sticking to it. An academic advisor acknowledged Larry’s commitment to accomplishing his goal. According to Larry, the advisor said, “Did you know that in 1979 you went to another institution to get a degree in education. You didn’t get it then but you finally got it. So it’s been something in your heart for a long time.”

Duckworth et al. (2007) conducted six studies to test the importance of grit in achievement. Grit accounted for more variance in success outcomes than intelligence.

The first two studies included a sample of 1,545 adults (73% women and 27% men) age 25 and older. The findings indicated that more educated adults scored higher in grit than less educated adults of the same age. Also, older individuals tended to be higher in grit than their younger counterparts. After controlling for educational attainment, grit increased with age. In the current study, one of the findings was that a sense of belonging to the campus community occurred on a continuum which was associated with age and non-traditional status. Two of the oldest participants felt excluded, and the youngest participants felt like they belonged to the campus community. A heightened level of grit due to a more advanced age is one explanation for how the older adult males were able to persist despite feeling excluded from the campus community. The feeling of exclusion was overcome by their commitment to the goal of earning a bachelor's degree.

If grit can increase over time, then it is not a fixed characteristic and has the potential for growth. Maturation is one possibility for increased grittiness, but experiences on campus could also increase or reinforce a gritty mindset. Dweck (2006) differentiates between a growth mindset and fixed mindset. Individuals with a fixed mindset view intelligence as fixed genetically and often do not seek challenges. Those with a growth mindset believe that intelligence can be developed, expend effort, and seek challenges. Dweck (2006) also points out that mindsets can change. Individuals with a fixed mindset can move into a growth mindset by changing how they think and confront obstacles. She gives the example of an all-star college football player who is recruited to play professional football. When faced with the pressure of making this transition, the individual with the fixed mindset would likely torture himself with defeating thoughts about how he will never live up to the expectation of his coaches and teammates. In the

growth mindset, the individual would acknowledge this transition as a big step and do what is necessary to accomplish his goals.

Dweck (2006) recommends seeking information as a method to move from a fixed to growth mindset. In this example, she recommended talking with veteran players to find out how they overcame the difficulty of transitioning to the professional league. Duckworth acknowledged the relationship between grit and the growth mindset (Perkins-Gough, 2013). She said, "One of the things that make you grittier is having a growth mindset" (Perkins-Gough, 2013, p. 19). The actions Dweck suggested to change a growth mindset then "would also be relevant to changing grit" (Perkins-Gough, 2013, p.19).

Obtaining information through interactions on campus is an example of how an adult student can develop or nurture a grit mindset. For example, Larry was aware of his learning style and the time he needed to complete course assignments. He asked his academic advisor what classes to take each semester to ensure he had a manageable workload. He could have enrolled in any combination of classes and then blamed himself for not being smart or organized enough when he experienced difficulty. Instead, he asked for advice so he could make an informed choice. His hard work each semester was rewarded with passing course grades. Successfully completing a semester is a short-term goal on the road to accomplishing the long-term goal of degree completion. Each successful semester reinforced his commitment to earning a degree and rewarded his hard work.

Another component of the grit mindset is finding a purpose or pursuing a passion. In another example, Rob described an interaction with a faculty member that helped him select a major that was aligned with his interests and strengths. Rob said the faculty

member helped him realize he “liked that stuff” and that he “can do it.” He can be a “real scientist.” This interaction helped Rob discover his passion which reinforced his grit mindset. When an individual is pursuing something they are passionate about they are more likely to see it through and accomplish the goal.

Fitzgerald and Laurain-Fitzgerald (2016) discussed how educators can create an environment that fosters this type of development. They suggested that educators help students: “(1) create an abiding interest, (2) create an appetite for practice, (3) create a sense of purpose, and (4) maintain confidence in their ability to keep going” (p. 56). Institutional agents in higher education can also reinforce or increase a student’s grit by providing support, connecting students to resources, connecting students with other students who have successfully moved to the next level, helping them articulate and define their goals, and providing opportunities for them to contribute to the campus community which gives meaning and purpose to their experience.

Finding campus resources. The participants were also self-directed and demonstrated persistence in finding campus resources. The participants talked about “finding support” and “looking for direct answers.” Words like “find” and “look” indicate the information was available, but not easily accessible. Knowles (1980) characterizes adult learners as self-directed. In this context, self-directedness is a personal characteristic; however, there are also instructional models that explain how self-directed methods of learning can be used in a formal classroom setting. If learning environments within the campus community were structured in a way that encouraged self-directed learning, students could apply those skills to obtaining information in other facets of life. “In the independent pursuit of learning, educators might provide assistance to individuals

or groups of learners in locating resources…" (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, p. 107). Learning how to be self-directed could assist students in navigating the university system.

Adult male students demonstrated grit and determination in their effort to reach degree completion. Grit is not a fixed characteristic so it can be influence by the environment (Fitzgerald & Laurain-Fitzgerald, 2016). Institutional agents can support these efforts by helping students discover their passion and generate manageable goals. In addition, classroom environments that foster self-directed learning can help students develop skills that can be applied not only to learning content but finding resources.

Campus Community

The third conclusion is the campus community for adult male students is about what they can contribute to the university they are attending in addition to the support they need to successfully navigate the university system. Tinto's (1975) interactionalist theory suggested a series of positive interactions will cause a student to integrate into the campus community, and therefore likely remain enrolled until degree completion. This is often true of traditional-aged students attending residential colleges. However, the literature says that adult students are unable to fully integrate into the campus community because they do not have additional time to interact on campus (Donaldson and Graham, 1999; McGiveny, 2004). The findings of this study demonstrated that adult male students did experience positive interactions but they did not integrate into campus community as a result. However, it was not because they did not interact outside of the classroom. The participants discussed the following activities: studying at the library, meeting with an advisor, studying with other students, working on campus, joining a student organization,

talking with faculty outside of class, and completing external internships. They also described interactions on campus with faculty, staff, and other students as instrumental in their persistence. Brad described several interactions with a faculty member who "didn't feel like a professor in a good way." They often talked about music and movies along with the course curriculum. However, the participants did not integrate into the campus community as a result of interactions like the one described by Brad. The interactions were perceived as meaningful by the participants because they provided support and contributed to their ability to persist.

One possible reason for the lack of integration for adult male students is the value they assigned to being part of the campus community. Tinto (1993) said, "The mere occurrence of interactions between the individual and others within the institution will not insure that integration occurs- that depends on…the manner in which the individual comes to perceive them as rewarding or unrewarding" (p. 136). For most of the participants being a member of the campus community was perceived as either unnecessary or unrewarding. The participants used phrases like "I was just there." "Campus was a really a place to learn." "I belong in my shoes." to illustrate that being part of the community was not critical to their success. Mike was the exception. It seemed as if he wanted to be part of the campus community, but was never invited to participate. The participants did not need to be part of the campus community, but they did need campus resources to succeed.

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement could also provide an explanation for how these adult male students interacted on campus and persisted until degree completion without integrating into the campus community. This theory is based on

student behavior (i.e. involvement in campus activities) not how they think or feel about their experience. Although Astin's theory discussed traditional types of engagement (e.g. living on campus, fraternities and sororities, and athletic involvement), it does explain that the participants' campus interactions and activities could positively influence development and persistence regardless of how they felt about their position within the campus community.

Interactions on campus did not lead to integration but they contributed to the success of adult male students. Membership in the campus community is not the only outcome of interacting on campus. The participants identified institutional resources as factors that contributed to their success. Interactions with advisors, faculty, and other students provided support in the areas of academic performance, negotiating university policy, and student and career development. This supports Wyatt's (2011) findings that nontraditional students need to be able to interact with faculty, staff, and students.

Making a contribution. Even though adult male students can reach success without integrating into the campus community that does not mean higher education institutions should stop exploring ways to include and engage adult students in the campus community. Donaldson and Graham (1999) raised the question, "What conditions or experiences can compensate for lack of involvement in traditional campus activities" (Conclusion section, para. 4)? The findings of this study demonstrate that creating an environment where adult male students can feel as though they are making a contribution to the campus community could augment and perhaps replace traditional engagement. The participants felt connected to the campus community when their actions were perceived as making a contribution to the larger community. Participating in

a panel discussion, sharing their work experience in class, and helping other students are examples of ways the participants felt like they were contributing to the campus community.

Some of these activities occurred within the classroom which supports the connecting classroom element of the model of college outcomes for adults. Donaldson and Graham (1999) and Kasworm (2003) argued that the classroom is the epicenter for learning and engagement for adult students. Incorporating an experiential model of learning in the classroom allows students to connect past experiences and future applications with what they are learning in the classroom (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Learning for adults often occurs by making connections with past experiences, as well as, connecting knowledge gained in the classroom to the life-world environment (Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Kasworm, 1997). In an experiential learning setting, instructors serve as facilitators and encourage students to discuss and reflect on experiences (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Students are able to understand and apply meaning to their experiences through collaboration with other students. Experiential learning environments would create opportunities for adult male students to contribute to the campus community.

Schieferecke and Card (2013) explored males' experience of mattering and marginalization in higher education. They defined mattering as "the individual perception that they are important, significant, and of concern to another individual, an organization, or the world" (p.88). Their findings showed that traditional-aged males felt as if they mattered when they belonged to a group, organization, or team (Schieferecke & Card, 2013). In the case of adult male students in this study, they expressed perceptions of

mattering when they were making a contribution to the campus community. “Men who believe they matter to the college environment are motivated to learn, persist, and develop” (Scheiferecke & Card, 2013, p. 98). In this study mattering emerged through the theme of validation of status. Validation occurred when the participants felt that their role as a student mattered. Institutional and life world resources validated the participants’ student role by believing in their ability to succeed and providing support. The participants also received validation through contributing to the campus community and applying class content to the life world environment.

Interactions did not facilitate integration into the campus community for adult male students. Membership within the campus community was not perceived as necessary to reach degree completion. However, the campus community did provide resources that supported persistence for adult males. Helping them find campus resources could eliminate some initial frustration. Adult male students felt connected to the campus community when they were able to make a contribution. While the findings of this study supported Donaldson and Graham’s (1999) model of college outcomes for adults, the concept of “contributing to the campus community” extends what is already known about adult learning. Donaldson and Graham discussed how connecting class content to the life world environment creates a rich learning experience. However, fostering a reciprocal relationship with the campus community by providing opportunities for adult male students to contribute could also validate their status and motivate them to persist.

Limitations

This study provided a rich description of how adult undergraduate male students described their ability to persist until degree completion. While this is the outcome of

qualitative research, it also presents a common limitation that the findings are not generalizable to the larger population. All of the participants attended the same institution which was a four-year research university. The characteristics of the institution could influence the experience of adult male students and not all types of institutions were represented in this study. The sample consisted of eight Caucasian and one African American male. The small sample size and lack of diverse representation of ethnic and racial groups could further limit the study. Last, my position as an academic advisor at the university is a possible limitation. The participants could have perceived me as a representative of the university. I described the steps I took to bracket my bias and distance myself from the institution in chapter three; however, it is possible the participants were guarded in revealing negative experiences.

Implications

An important implication of this study is higher education institutions need to track degree completion for adult students, as well as, look at factors that support persistence. As more adults are enrolling in undergraduate degree programs, it is time to reconsider how persistence is defined and calculated. With a new understanding of persistence, higher education institution will be better equipped to meet the needs of adult students. This can be accomplished by defining persistence in terms of individual goals and creating an environment that fosters interactions with institutional agents and other students.

Individualized Persistence Plans

Patterns of enrollment do not look the same for all students even those who share similar characteristics such as adult students. Persistence is currently defined in terms of

continuous fulltime enrollment which encourages institutions to track the students who have the potential to meet this criteria. What if persistence was defined individually for each student in terms of their goals and abilities? Instead of defining persistence as linear, Kasworm (2010) used an airport as a metaphor for discontinuous enrollment. “This image of an airport suggests that higher education is a ‘terminal’ with individuals entering and exiting to accomplish specific educational goals on a discontinuous basis” (Kasworm, 2010, p.24). This metaphor challenges us to redefine persistence in terms of the individual needs and goals of each student. Whether they enroll to earn a bachelor’s degree, renew a credential, or develop a specific skill, institutional agents could create a persistence plan that considered their goals, timeline, work and life responsibilities, and interests. Based on this information, the student and institutional agent could define benchmarks to track progress based on the student’s timeline and goal. The benchmarks could be used to measure persistence for the individual student. This is similar to an individualized education program (IEP) that is used for students with disabilities in the K-12 educational setting. The goal of the document is to improve educational results for the child and track their individual growth and progress (Kupper, 2000). An individualized persistence plan (IPP) would accomplish the same goal of tracking individual progress. It would also include recommended institutional resources that could help the student reach their goals.

Using an IPP would encourage institutional agents to think about persistence in a different way. Academic advisors often show students a four-year degree plan that includes fulltime enrollment each semester as the suggested course of study. More often than not students are unable to complete the established degree plan and are considered

"off track." Using an IPP would encourage institutional agents to think about persistence as individualized for each student. The creation of this document would help students articulate and define their goals and connect them to institutional resources. Instead of being identified as "off track," students could see progress as they reach established benchmarks. This could help maintain their confidence and commitment to accomplishing their long-term goal. The tasks involved in creating these documents could also help develop a grit mindset based Fitzgerald & Laurain-Fitzgerald's (2016) recommendations for creating an environment that fosters grit. The IPP could help students identify an interest, create a sense of purpose, develop a goal with a plan to accomplish it, and maintain confidence in their ability to reach the long-term goal. It could also be used by an advisor to coach a student who may just decide to drop out not realizing that there are other options.

Intentional Interactions

Many of the participants mentioned struggling initially to find the resources they needed, but once they made a connection they began to understand the structure of the institution and where to go to find information. The campus membership model for adult male students illustrated the relationship between institutional resources and validation of status. The participants considered relationships with institutional agents who were invested in them as factors that contributed to their persistence. "The role of the institution in fostering validation is active- it involves faculty, counselors, coaches, and administrators actively reaching out to students or designing activities that promote active learning and interpersonal growth among students, faculty, and staff" (Rendon, 1994, p. 44). The findings of this study showed more student-initiated than university-initiated

interactions contributed to the persistence of adult male students. Rendon (1994) made a similar argument that institutional support is often passive, and students are expected to access it when needed. Institutions have two options to address this issue: be more proactive and reach out to students regarding institutional resources or teach students the skills they need to navigate the university system.

Reaching out to students. The first approach is to reach out to students which would foster structured university-initiated interactions. Adult students need assistance in making a first connection that will lead to other interactions. Approaches to student services are either specialized or integrated in the form of a one-stop office. Institutional agents as specialists are unable to assist students outside of their area of expertise, and in the integrated approach they can struggle to keep up with the ever-changing information across campus. Larry talked about being shuffled from one office to the next looking for answers which often occurs with a specialized approach to student services. One suggestion for practice is to designate an adult student services liaison.

A liaison would not necessarily provide information or advice, but direct the student to the office or individual who can help them. This person would know the university structure and be able to effectively guide students to institutional resources. This would create an environment for structured interactions to occur. Mike talked about not knowing where to find information and not having the time to pursue it. He wanted an institutional agent to reach out to him and identify services that could help him. The adult student services liaison could make this initial contact. Rob said he did not understand the university structure until he started working on-campus. John did not find accurate information or a manageable degree plan until he connected with the right

advisor. These are critical connections that an adult student liaison could make for the student and eliminate the frustration of not knowing where to find answers. Higher education institutions could designate an adult student services liaison that could reach out to adult students and serve as a point of contact when questions or concerns arise.

Academic advising. The main responsibility of the adult student liaison would be to connect adult students to campus resources. If higher education institutions are not able to support this type of position, it is likely this task would be transferred to academic advisors. When working with adult male students, it is important for academic advisors to make three important connections. First, academic advisors need to connect the adult students to an appropriate academic plan. Helping adult students articulate a goal and a manageable pathway to accomplishing that goal is imperative to their success (CAEL, 2005; Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006). McGivney (2004) agreed that advisors should provide a timetable "that takes account of their outside commitments" (p. 43). If students are unable to follow a traditional degree map that requires fulltime continuous enrollment, then a creating an individualized persistence plan would be appropriate.

Second, academic advisors need to connect adult students to campus resources. The IPP does not only account for an academic plan, but also includes campus resources. Academic advisors should identify campus resources that could assist adult students with their individual needs. As mentioned earlier, Mike wanted an institutional agent to reach out to him and say, "Hey Mike we have identified that you are in your late forties and we want you to know hey here some services that might help you." As Rendon (1994) mentioned campus support services are often passive and require students to seek out assistance. Academic advisors should be proactive in reaching out to students, engaging

in a conversion to identify their needs, and recommending appropriate services on campus.

Last, academic advisor should connect students to career planning and counseling. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (2005) identified eight principles of effectiveness for serving adults which included career planning. Many of the participants talked about the importance of establishing career goals, participating in internships, and applying course content to their current employment situation. Also, all of the structured institutional-initiated interactions discussed by the participants provided support in the area of career development. Academic advisors could connect students to career planning by helping them explore career options, referring them to a career services center if available, suggesting volunteer opportunities, and sharing information about potential career fairs or job opportunities. Also, academic advisor should be knowledgeable about the professional culture and job market associated with programs for which they advise and work collaboratively with institutional agents who manage internship opportunities and career counseling. Academic advisors can help to meet the needs of adult male students by making three important connections. They need to connect students to an academic plan, campus resources, and career planning.

Active learning. The second approach is creating active learning environments. The alternative to reaching out to students is teaching to them to be self-directed. One goal of self-directed learning is that individuals will be able to plan, implement, and assess their own learning (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Communities of Practice (CoP), used as an educational tool, create an environment where students can plan and implement their own learning. Communities of Practice combine self-directed

and collaborative learning. The CoP allows students to be self-directed, follow their interest, and contribute to a collaborative learning environment. A key characteristic that make CoPs different from the traditional learning community is their organic nature (Monaghan & Columbaro, 2009). Students can develop self-directed learning skills that can be used in other environments to acquire knowledge. These skills can certainly apply to finding resources and information on campus.

Communities of Practice allow students to apply previous experiences to the learning process and apply new knowledge to life world environment. In this collaborate learning experience, students are also able to contribute to the learning of other students (Monaghan & Columbaro, 2009). Communities of Practice can help adult students connect to the campus community by: (1) developing self-directed learning skills that can be applied to navigating the university system; (2) developing relationships with other students and faculty members who could be a source of support and information; (3) providing an opportunity for adult students to make a contribution to the campus community and apply new knowledge to the life-world environment.

Public Sphere Pedagogy (PSP) is another example of experiential learning that institutions could use with adult students. Public Sphere Pedagogy "focuses on developing student well-being through purpose-driven dialogue and democratic participation" (Swienciki, Fosen, Burton, Gonder, & Wolf, 2011, p. 45). California State University used PSP to develop a towne hall meeting in collaboration with the first-year writing course. Students formed research groups to investigate local, national, or international issues and developed approaches for turning their research into action. At the towne hall meetings, students were able to present their work and devise an

implementation plan. This activity fostered interactions and relationship building with faculty, staff, students, and administrators around a current topic of interest. Similar to the CoP, this type of educational tool provides an opportunity for adult students to contribute and apply learning to the life world environment.

Higher education institutions often provide an array of resources but some students do not know how to access them. The participants of this study were self-directed and demonstrated persistence in finding resources on campus. Higher education institutions can create learning environments that teach students how to be self-directed so they can apply these skills to navigating the university system. Alternatively, institutional agents can reach out to students directly. An adult student services liaison could be the institutional agent that makes this contact through structured university-initiated interactions.

Future Research

The findings indicated that the definition of grit included three components: hard work, goal-orientation, and purpose. I recommend that future research explore how characteristics of adult students (i.e. age, employment status, number of dependents, military status, and number of institutions attended prior to the degree-granting institution) influence the development of each grit subtheme: hard work ethic, goal-orientation, and purpose. This research would investigate how human maturation and life circumstances impact the potential for growth within the grit mindset.

Future research could also explore differences among adult male students. The majority of the participants within this study were Caucasian so a similar study investigating the perspective of minority males on persistence and campus membership

would be beneficial. Also, this study suggested that age influenced adult male students' perspective of belonging to the campus community. Future research should explore generational differences among adult male students and their perception of campus membership.

I would also propose that future research explore how the type of institution influences the adult students' perspective of their place within the campus community. This research was conducted at an urban four-year public college with a mission to provide accessible education. Would adult male students have the same perspective about the campus community at a residential institution? Finally another study could explore the criteria adult male students use to select an institution and how that contributes to persistence. Is the student who selects an institution because it meets their needs and academic interests more likely to remain enrolled than a student who selects an institution because it is conveniently located?

Last, I would recommend exploring the institutional agents' (faculty and staff) perspective of adult student persistence and campus membership. According to the findings of this study they played an important role in supporting degree completion. How do they view their role in supporting adult student persistence? What are their expectations for adult male students?

Conclusion

In this study I sought to examine factors that contributed to the persistence of adult male students. I gained insight into how these students are able to persist until degree completion, and how they view their role within the campus community. I concluded that institutional and life world resources are important factors in supporting

the persistence of adult male students. Institutional agents can provide various types of support through structured interactions. However, adult male students do not view the campus community as a place for socialization as they are focused on their learning and addressing administrative issues. As a result they do not integrate into the campus community. However, they are connected to the campus community through situations that present an opportunity to make a contribution. They desire a reciprocal relationship with the campus community that validates their role as a student.

The literature posits that adult students do not participate in activities outside of class and have limited time to interact on campus. I was surprised to learn the participants did use the library regularly, met with faculty and academic advisors outside of class, participated in field work and internships, worked on campus, and joined student organizations. Ironically, Mike was the outlier because he did not interact and engage on campus. However, this is often how adult student involvement is described in the literature. Also, it was interesting to learn that adult male students felt connect the campus community when they were able to make a contribution. The participants of this study desired a reciprocal relationship with the campus community where they could receive support as well as give back.

The findings of this study have implications for the work I do as an academic advisor. The validation of status theme really made me think about the role I play in supporting and affirming student development. As an academic advisor, obviously my goal is to support and advocate for students. However, at times my interactions with students become routine and almost scripted. This research has revitalized my work by reminding me to approach each student interaction as unique, and demonstrate to the

student that I am invested in their success. In some ways, conducting this research study has validated my status as an academic advisor by reminding me that our work matters in the lives students.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

EMAIL INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN ONLINE SURVEY

You are invited to participate in a brief online survey focusing on your experience as an undergraduate student. It should take approximately 5 minutes to complete. This survey is part of a research study conducted by doctoral student Karie Coffman from the PhD in Urban Education program at Cleveland State University under the direction of Dr. Catherine H. Monaghan, CASAL Department, Cleveland State University.

Please note the following points related to this research study.

1. Your participation is voluntary.
2. You can exit the survey at any time without penalty.
3. You are free to decline to answer any question.
4. There will be no direct benefit to you. Your responses will contribute to a better understanding of the student experience in higher education.
5. Any risks associated with this research do not exceed those of daily living.
6. Your survey answers will be stored in a password protected electronic format. Neither your email nor IP address will be recorded. Your responses will remain anonymous.
7. At the end of the survey you will be asked to participate in a 60-90 minute interview. If you chose to provide contact information your survey responses may no longer be anonymous but will remain confidential. A consent form for the interview is attached to help you better understand the terms of the interview and make an informed decision about participation.
8. You can contact the student investigator for further information at 440-225-9116 or by email at k.a.coffman@csuohio.edu. You may also contact Dr. Catherine Monaghan at 216-687-5509 or by email at c.monaghan@csuohio.edu.
9. *If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you can contact the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board at (216) 687-3630.*

Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

To express consent to participate in this research survey please click the box below titled Electronic Signature. You will be asked to agree or disagree with the following question: I have read and I understand the information provided in the email. I voluntarily consent to participate in this research survey and verify that I am at least 18 years old by clicking "Yes, I agree."

☐ Yes, I agree

☐ No, I do not agree

Electronic Signature

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT ONLINE DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

1.) What is your gender identity?

a. Female
b. Male
c. _____
d. Prefer not to answer

2.) Are you Hispanic or Latino?

a. yes
b. no
c. Prefer not to answer

3.) How would you describe yourself? Choose one or more from the following racial groups.

a. American Indian or Alaska Native
b. Asian
c. Black or African American
d. White
e. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
f. Prefer not to answer

4.) Are you a veteran?

a. yes
b. no

c. prefer not to answer

5.) How old were you at the time you first enrolled in college?

6.) How old were you when you graduated from CSU?

7.) Do you have more than one degree (at the baccalaureate level or higher)?

a. yes
b. no

8.) How many institutions did you attend prior to completing your undergraduate degree at CSU?

a. 1
b. 2
c. 3- 5
d. more than 5

9.) How did you fund your education? Please select all that apply.

a. self funded
b. employer funded
c. student loans
d. government assistance
e. a combination of sources
f. prefer not to answer

10.) The following is a list of CSU student support services and offices that provide assistance to students. Please select all the services you used as a student at CSU.

a. Academic Advising
b. Health & Wellness Services
c. Tutoring and Academic Success Center
d. All-in-One (Campus411) Student Services
e. Career Services
f. Counseling Center
g. Mary Joyce Green Women's Center
h. Writing Center
i. Veteran Student Success Center
j. None of the above

11.) Are you willing to participate in a 60-90 minute interview to share more about what factors helped you reach success?

a. yes
b. no

If yes, please include a phone number or email where you can be reached to schedule an interview.

Thank you for successfully completing the survey.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Date: _____

Time: _____

Place: _____

Interviewer: _____

Interviewee: _____Pseudonym_____

Interview Questions

1. Tell me the story of how you earned your degree. Start with the first time you enrolled in college and describe your journey to graduation.
2. What factors were most important in helping you succeed?
3. Tell me about your experience on campus outside of class.
4. What issues did you face as a student?
5. Tell me about a significant interaction you experienced.
6. Suppose it was my first day at CSU as an adult student. What advice would you give me?
7. The researcher will provide index cards with the following words: interact, engage, identify, belong, position. Participants will be asked to select the word or words, if any, that best describe how they interacted with the university. If the participant selects a card they will asked to please explain why you selected this card (or cards) and how it matches your campus experience. How did the unselected words differ from your campus experience

APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT

My name is Karie Coffman. I am a doctoral student in the Urban Education program at Cleveland State University. I am requesting your participation in a research study. This study will be conducted under the direction of Dr. Catherine H. Monaghan, CASAL department, Cleveland State University. **If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at (440) 225-9116. You may also contact Dr. Catherine Monaghan at (216) 687-5509.**

The study aims to explore factors that support degree completion for undergraduate male students. If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to discuss your experience as an undergraduate student in a 60-90 minute interview. Risks associated with participation are considered to be minimal. Such risks are largely limited to compromised confidentiality and possible discomfort answering some questions if you are recalling negative experiences. To minimize such risks, your name and any information that would reveal your identity will be removed. Also, you may decline to answer any question.

All research documents will be secured in a locked file cabinet in a CSU campus office. They will be destroyed after three years. You may withdraw from this study at any time without any consequence whatsoever. There are no direct benefits available to you as a participant in this research.

A copy of this Informed Consent will be provided to you for your records.

Please read the following: ***"I understand that if I have any questions about my rights as a research subject, I can contact the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board at (216) 687-3630."***

There are two copies of this form. After signing them, keep one copy for your records and return the other one to the researcher.

Your signature below means that you understand the contents of this document. You also are at least 18 years of age. Finally, you voluntarily consent to participate in this research study.

_____ _____

Signature Date

_____

Name (Printed)

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