FILLING A GAP IN THE LITERATURE: ADULT LEARNERS AND INTERNSHIPS

A thesis presented by

Debra Gelinas

to

The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

In the field of

Education

College of Professional Studies

Northeastern University

Boston, Massachusetts

August 2014
Abstract

Adult learners, ages 25 and older, are enrolling at United States colleges and universities in record numbers. At the same time, internships have become an increasingly popular and legitimized method for teaching and learning. Many colleges and universities are encouraging, and sometimes requiring, students to participate in internships. Significant literature exists on adult learners and internships as individual topics, but there is little scholarly work in which the two areas intersect. Adult learners often have commitments outside of school, such as full-time employment and family obligations, which may prevent them from taking on a typically structured internship. This study explored the benefits of internships for adult learners, while taking an in-depth look at how the study’s participants made sense of their experience. Through IPA, a qualitative research approach, participants were asked to interpret and describe their experience with internships. Results demonstrated that participants gained confidence, learned new skills, made professional contacts, discovered the realities of their new career field, and one participant even secured a job as a result of his internship. All believed that they took their internships more seriously than their traditional-aged peers. This group was able to engage in flexibly scheduled internships, making it possible for them to participate in this type of learning opportunity. It is recommended that colleges and universities encourage adult students to engage in internships, particularly with an emphasis on allowing for flexible internship work schedules.

Key Words: Adult learner(s), non-traditional student(s), internship(s), experiential learning, experiential education, lifelong learning.
Acknowledgements

There are many people who have supported me through this process. This includes the people listed below, as well as a number of other wonderful friends and colleagues. I am very fortunate to have you in my life.

Most especially to my husband Brian Berg, who made sacrifices and helped out with many things so that I could find time to get this done. Thanks for always believing that I could make this dream a reality.

To my daughter Celia, who was born during the thesis-writing years: you are my greatest inspiration. Everything I do is for you.

Thanks to my parents, Robert and Janet Gelinas, for always taking an interest in the things that mattered to me and for encouraging me to do my best with whatever I tried to accomplish.

Special thanks to my advisor, Dr. Leslie Hitch, for reading countless drafts and answering an equally significant number of questions. Thanks also to the other members of my defense team, Dr. Carolyn Bair and Dr. Anita Todd. I have learned a great deal from the three of you.

And finally, to my Friday writing companion, Niles the cat. The purring and drooling slowed me down a bit, but your constant companionship made all the hours of work so much more enjoyable.
# Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Statement of Problem and Significance .................................................. 6
  Introduction .............................................................................................................. 6
  Significance of Research Problem ........................................................................... 8
  Problem of Practice, Definitions, and Research Questions ..................................... 10
    Problem of Practice ................................................................................................ 11
    Definitions ........................................................................................................... 11
    Research Questions .............................................................................................. 12
  Theoretical Framework ........................................................................................... 12
  Research Design ..................................................................................................... 15
  Preliminary Limitations ........................................................................................... 18
  Thesis Overview ...................................................................................................... 19

Chapter 2: Literature Review ....................................................................................... 21
  Adult Learners ......................................................................................................... 21
    Definition of Adult Learners ................................................................................. 22
    History of Adult Learners at Colleges and Universities ....................................... 23
    Challenges ............................................................................................................ 23
    Characteristics ...................................................................................................... 24
    Learning Preferences and Theories ....................................................................... 25
    Lifelong Learning .................................................................................................. 27
    Meeting the Needs of Adult Learners on Campus ................................................. 28
  Internships .............................................................................................................. 29
    Internship Structure ............................................................................................. 30
    Benefits of Internships ......................................................................................... 31
    Employment .......................................................................................................... 33
    Increase in Programs ............................................................................................. 34
  Internships and Adult Learners .............................................................................. 35
    Gap in the Literature ............................................................................................. 36
    Adult Learner Experiences .................................................................................... 36
    Internship Challenges for Adult Learners ............................................................ 37
    Program Structure ................................................................................................. 38
  Summary .................................................................................................................. 40

Chapter 3: Research Design ......................................................................................... 41
  Methodology and Design ........................................................................................ 41
  Research Tradition .................................................................................................. 42
  Institutional Review Board Approval ....................................................................... 43
  Site and Participants ................................................................................................. 44
  Data Collection ....................................................................................................... 47
  Data Storage ............................................................................................................ 50
  Trustworthiness and Associated Limitations .......................................................... 51
    Personal Experience .............................................................................................. 51
Chapter 4: Data Findings and Analysis ......................................................... 54
  Data Analysis .......................................................................................... 55
  Ethical Considerations ........................................................................... 56
  Sample Demographics ........................................................................... 57
  Participant Stories .................................................................................. 58
     Colin ....................................................................................................... 58
     Kevin .................................................................................................... 61
     Jane ....................................................................................................... 65
     David ..................................................................................................... 69
  Summary .................................................................................................. 73

Chapter 5: Findings and Implications ......................................................... 74
  Themes and Connections to the Literature .............................................. 74
     College as Transformative Experience ................................................ 75
     Taking the internship seriously ............................................................. 76
     Internship benefits ............................................................................. 78
     Strong Mentors are Important .............................................................. 83
     Flexible Internships for Adults ............................................................. 85
  Summary .................................................................................................. 86
  Study Limitations ................................................................................... 87
  Suggestions for Future Research ............................................................. 88
  Implications .............................................................................................. 90
     Experiential Learning Requirement ..................................................... 91
     Flexibility is Critical ........................................................................... 92
     Advising Students and Employers ....................................................... 93
  Conclusion ............................................................................................... 94

References .................................................................................................. 97

Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire .................................................. 115
Appendix B: Interview Questions .............................................................. 118
Appendix C: IRB Documents .................................................................... 119
Chapter 1: Statement of Problem and Significance

Introduction

According to a report released by the United States Department of Education (2006), everyone in the United States needs at least some postsecondary education to ensure economic security and employment. In 2009, President Obama announced that every American should commit to a minimum of one year of college (Klein-Collins, 2010). As other countries are sprinting ahead of the United States in educational achievement, the Department of Education states that higher education is the only way for our country to keep up and for individuals to be assured economic security (Klein-Collins, 2010; United States Department of Education, 2006). The Chronicle of Higher Education (2012) analyzed United States Census Bureau data and found that 86% of first year college students in 2010 reported that they were attending college to assist them in job development; yet, many believe that our higher education system generally does not prepare students well for modern careers (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2012; Gonzalez, 2012; United States Department of Education, 2006).

Some groups are recommending that career development be integrated more closely into liberal arts curricula (Brooks, 2009). Internships are a form of experiential education that allows students to apply what they learn in the classroom in a professional setting (Sweitzer & King, 2004). The benefits of internships, including skill development and employment opportunities, have been well documented (Casella & Brougham, 1995; Taylor, 1988). Internship proponents assert that an internship experience can assist a student in developing the skills employers are looking for while gaining entry into the job market through contact with members of the industry.
in which they wish to be employed (Benton, 2009; College Employment Research Institute, 2014; NACE, 2003). Colleges are recognizing this and are therefore often making experiential educational central to their curriculum. Many are beginning to require internships in their undergraduate programs (Grasgreen, 2012; Ruiz, 2014). It is estimated that approximately 1.5 million people now participate in internships in the United States each year (Howe, 2014).

At the same time, adult learners are attending college in record numbers (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). As internships become increasingly popular and college populations become more non-traditional, it follows that larger numbers of adult learners will participate in internships, sometimes by choice and sometimes to fulfill a graduation requirement. However, adult students frequently have other responsibilities, such as working full-time, raising children, or caring for aging parents, that make internships challenging or impossible (Klein-Collins, 2010). Internships are often unpaid and are sometimes far away from home, delivering economic hardship to adult learners who are often supporting themselves and their families financially (Yagoda, 2008).

Are internships beneficial for this population who often already have years of professional work experience? If not, should adult learners be allowed to opt out of required internships, or does that put them at a disadvantage when looking for a job in their field of academic study? This qualitative study takes an in-depth look at the experiences of four former adult interns. The insight gained from their reported experiences leads to recommendations for practical internship policy recommendations for colleges and universities, as well as recommendations for future research.
Significance of Research Problem

Research demonstrates that United States graduates are now less prepared to compete in a global economy than ever before (Jackson, 2010; Vance, 2007). In a study conducted for the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) in 2007 by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., 301 employers were interviewed to determine whether college graduates are prepared for the workforce. Results showed that one-third of business executives interviewed believe that a large number of college graduates lack skills necessary for success at even entry-level positions at their companies (Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 2008). Even fewer executives believe that these graduates possess the types of skills that will be necessary to eventually advance in their careers.

Workers are often proficient in roles that no longer exist and do not have the skills necessary for today’s workplace (Gonzalez, 2012; Hilton, 2008). In many cases, technology is replacing human workers altogether, meaning that more labor-intensive types of jobs will be eliminated (Friedman, 2012). For example, manufacturing jobs historically staffed by individuals with high school degrees (and sometimes less) are now more complex and therefore employers are hiring only those with college degrees (Friedman, 2012; Selingo, 2011). It is projected that 62% of jobs will require workers to have completed some higher education by 2018 (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). According to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2003), “Fifty years ago, factory and office workers worked on a single machine, performing the same task day after day. Technology has simplified and, in some cases, eliminated such routine tasks, which means there are increasingly fewer positions available to workers with minimal skills” (p. 6). People who were likely to work in those types of jobs will find that eventually
many of these work opportunities will no longer exist (Reardon, 2000). For example, DuPont Corporation once hired assembly line operators without high school diplomas, but now requires employees in those positions to have secondary degrees (Koc, 2011).

The United States workforce is rapidly aging, leaving a large knowledge and skills gap as people retire (Jackson, 2010). Older workers who remain, due to delayed retirement or otherwise, often have not been able to develop new skills that are now necessary to function in a global and technologically based workforce (CAEL, 2012; Reardon et al, 2000). Years ago, an individual would work at one company for the duration of their career (CAEL, 2012). Organizations often took the time and invested financial resources to train their workers on new technology needed to do their jobs. As people move rapidly between companies today, organizations are less inclined to invest in educating their workers and are relying more on higher education to train people. This puts the onus on workers to take the initiative to find their own training outside of the company (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2003). Therefore, higher education must be a key player in teaching Americans the skills they will need to succeed in our new global economy. There is an increasing focus on the idea of lifelong learning for the modern career (Koc, 2007; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2003). Elimination of positions through new technology, layoffs, or outsourcing to other countries has left a huge number of people unemployed and seeking new skills (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Davidson, 2012). Therefore, we are seeing a huge influx of adults from a variety of different life stages attend college (Donaldson & Towsend, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

One method of career development that is becoming increasingly common in college curriculums, and in many cases is now required for graduation, are internships (Grasgreen, 2012;
Ruiz, 2014). External commitments often make it very difficult for adult learners to be able to participate in traditional experiential learning opportunities, such as internships (Lumina Foundation, 2004). Colleges and universities often employ rigid models for internship programs that make it challenging for adult students to participate in these opportunities when they have other commitments outside of school. For example, it would be nearly impossible for a full-time worker in a traditional administrative 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. job to be able to participate in an internship outside of her current workplace that could help her develop new skills to increase her chances for higher-level employment (Lumina Foundation, 2004).

Almost no scholarly research has been published on adult learners and their experiences with internships. This qualitative study asked adult learners to share stories of their internship experiences with the researcher in order to gain an understanding of each subject’s interpretation of their internship experience. While the research sought to understand the benefits adults derived from their internships, the researcher ultimately aimed to reflect upon the levels of significance that the participants placed on their internships to help determine whether these experiences are valuable for adult learners. Policy and curricular recommendations for colleges and universities are provided in Chapter 5.

**Problem of Practice, Definitions, and Research Questions**

A college degree allows an adult learner to advance or change careers (Koffel, 1994). A degree on its own can be limiting due to a skills gap between what a student learns in school and what the workplace requires of them (Andrews & Wooten, 2005; Baskett & Marsick, 1992; Coplin, 2003; Koffel, 1994, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2003). Professional experience, combined with higher education, has become a demonstrated path to success in this country.
It is well documented in the literature that internships, a type of education that allows students to apply what they have learned in the classroom in the workplace, are a valuable way for students to gain skills (Sweitzer & King, 2004). However, little is known specifically about adult learners and their experiences with internships, as the literature either does not specify or tends to refer to traditional-aged students beginning careers for the first time. Are internships valuable for this population, which may already possess many of the skills that internships help students develop, especially if adult students have already worked professionally for a number of years prior to attending college?

**Problem of Practice**

Many adult learners have full-time jobs or other commitments, making it challenging to find time for an internship that will likely conflict with these commitments (Koffel, 1994). Internships are often unpaid\(^1\) or in a new city, making it even more challenging for adults to participate (Tahmincioglu, 2010). It is important to determine whether internships are valuable for this population, particularly if it is challenging for many to find a way to participate. If adult interns report that internships are not helpful, then colleges and universities may want to consider other methods to help aid this population in their career development.

**Definitions**

- For the purpose of this study, an adult learner is any college student that is age 25 or older.

---

\(^1\) Although the practice of unpaid internships has become controversial and elicited lawsuits in recent years, whether the internship is paid or unpaid has no bearing on this particular research study (Bottner, 2010; Lurie, 2013; Tahmincioglu, 2010).
An internship is defined as “a practical learning experience for beginners in an occupation or profession that lasts a limited amount of time (Howe, 2014, para. 2)” For the purpose of this study, the term internship will be used as an overarching term used to refer to all similar types of experiential learning opportunities, including traditional internships, cooperative education, and practicum.

Research Questions
Through a qualitative approach, the guiding research question was: “Are internships beneficial for adult learners with prior work experience?” A deeper level of reflection on the meaning this population attached to their college experiences and internships became critical to understanding the benefits of internships for the group, and therefore a more appropriate question may have been, “How do adult learners make sense of their internship experience?”

Theoretical Framework
David Kolb is an American educational theorist who developed a well-known and respected experiential learning cycle model. Modern day experiential education programs, as well as conversations about adult and lifelong learning, frequently reference Kolb’s 1984 theory (Hickcox, 2002; Reggy-Mamo, 2008; Suopis, 2009). Peter Jarvis (2006), who developed his own learning theory with research based on Kolb’s work, states that Kolb’s learning cycle “is probably as well known a diagram in educational writing as Maslow’s triangular hierarchy of needs” (Jarvis, 2006, p. 188). Kolb referenced the work of theorists such as John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, William James, Carl Jung, Paulo Freire, and Carl Rogers when creating his experiential learning model (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).
Kolb (1984) coined the term experiential learning to define a type of learning that occurs through the process of gaining knowledge by engaging in hands-on experience (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). In other words, people learn by doing and by reflecting on that experience. As we experience things, we transform and reshape our ideas about the world. Through experience, one’s ideas are reshaped over time. Learning is never static; it occurs constantly. According to Kolb, “no two thoughts are ever the same since experience always intervenes” (Kolb, 1984, p. 26).

Learning is a process and not just an outcome. Ideas about things can be changed and reshaped through experience. Adult learning is rooted in gaining new experiences, therefore we continue to learn and grow intellectually throughout our lives. This process must occur between the learner and the environment in which the learner is immersed. It must be active and self-directed and cannot occur primarily in a classroom environment through reading, lecture, or even interacting with other students during group work. Multisensory in nature, learning involves complete interaction with one’s environment (Baskett & Marsick, 1992; Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

With Kolb’s theory, experiential learning occurs through a four-stage cyclical model that includes concrete experience, observation married with reflection, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Atherton, 2010; Kolb, 1984). When an individual encounters something new or repeats something they have done in the past, they are part of the concrete experience stage. During this time they observe and reflect upon that which is occurring. They look for consistency or inconsistency between what they believe and what is actually happening. The abstract conceptualization stage involves taking one’s observations and reflections from the experience and creating new ideas. From there, the learner takes the new ideas and tests them
out through active experimentation. All of this happens in a circular fashion as we continually go through the process of learning through experience (Kolb, 1984). As one moves through the cycle, thinking becomes more profound and learning deepens. We cycle through this process throughout our lives, sometimes with great focus and sometimes without deliberate intention.

Kolb (1984, 1999) also looks closely at different learning styles. He identifies four types: convergent, divergent, assimilation, and accommodation. While learning style itself is not the focus of this study, it is important to note that all four styles identified by Kolb connect strongly with some piece of his experiential learning model. For example, the divergent learner finds his or her strength in learning through concrete experience and reflective observation (Kolb, 1984). Different learning styles may mean that a certain type of work or field is more suited to one type of learner than another, but all adults can benefit from experiential education such as internships. Thus, experiential education is an effective type of learning in one way or another for anyone, regardless of learning style.

As with most theorists who study adult learners, Kolb stressed the importance of lifelong learning. An adult may have identified a career and an understanding of one’s beliefs only to question them at midlife or midcareer. Kolb indicates that, “the approach of the middle years brings with it a questioning of one’s purposes and aspirations, a reassessment of life structure and direction” (Kolb, 1984, p. 212). Education, in general, can be an effective way to help an adult redefine identity. Experiential learning in particular is thought to be an effective method for adults to enter into new careers. This explains, in part, why we see droves of people now
attending college throughout their adult years (Donaldson & Towsend, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). They are attempting to redefine or improve their lives and careers.

Many adults report that they enroll in college courses to gain new skills to help further their careers (Berker & Horn, 2004; Koffel, 1994). The experiential learning cycle created by Kolb sets the stage for understanding how experiential learning theory leads us to practice and understanding. The focus on adult learning helps us understand why experiential programs, such as internships, may be an effective way for adults to gain new workplace skills. The model is an ideal fit for this study due to the theory’s focus on both experiential and adult learning. Its focus on lifelong and self-directed learning perfectly ties the needs of adult learners to internships. Experiential learning theory provides a framework for this study by providing a basis for understanding this type of learning. Reflective observation of experience is at the heart of the model, which is what the research participants were asked to do when describing their internship experience during this study.

Research Design

The goal of this study is to take an in depth look at the way that adult learners experience internships. In an attempt to understand the value adults place on their internship experiences, a qualitative research approach was used for this study. The specific method used in this study, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), demands a deep level of reflection and interpretation (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). First, the participant must process their experience and articulate it to the researcher. From there, the researcher must process and
interpret the participant’s reflections, and then analyze the information while being careful to stay true to the experience as defined by the participant (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

IPA calls for a small number of participants, therefore four former interns were included in this study. Parameters required that the participants were age 25 or older at the time of their internships. They must have been enrolled as undergraduates at a United States College or University, but have since graduated. Their internships needed to be at least a semester in length and they needed to have worked professionally at some point prior to participating in internships. Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study in March 2014. The research was conducted during the month of April 2014.

Participants were asked to submit a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A), to participate in a one-hour phone interview, and to review the written interview transcripts for accuracy. As prescribed by IPA tradition, the interviews were semi-structured in nature, allowing the participants to focus on issues that they found most significant about their internship experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). An interview schedule with established questions was created (see Appendix B) and utilized during the interviews, but the researcher allowed for the interviews to veer off course from time to time, in order to allow the participants to feel comfortable with the researcher and to allow for deeper understanding of the motivation and experience of the participants.

The research pool was cultivated through several methods, as approved by Northeastern University’s IRB. A virtual recruitment flyer (see Appendix C) was posted on college and university alumni social media pages, such as Facebook and LinkedIn. The virtual flyer was also
emailed to members of the Internship.net listserv. Members of the listserv are college and university internship professionals. They were asked to forward the flyer to alumni and friends who may be interested in participating in the study. This is how all four participants were identified. They self-selected to participate and then reached out to the researcher directly to enroll in the study. Snowball Sampling, or Chain Referral Sampling, was also used as a way to attempt to recruit participants. This involves asking the initially identified participants to help identify other possible study candidates (Patton, 1980). That method did not yield any participants. Several individuals who did not meet the study parameters offered to take part in the research, but in the end an appropriate research pool was selected.

Five qualified participants were identified. One dropped out of the study because he did not have time to be interviewed. Of the remaining four, three participants were male and one was female. Two graduated from a Pacific coast university and the others were from two different East coast universities. They were all science-related majors, between the ages of 37 and 49 at the time of their internships.

As outlined by Northeastern University’s IRB, protection of human subjects is critical. Ensuring participant confidentiality was of particular importance with this study (Northeastern, n.d.). As such, all names were changed in this report, including the names of the students, their universities, and their internship sites. Participants were provided with an IRB-approved Informed Consent form. They were not required to sign the document, but were asked during the recorded phone interview to agree to the Informed Consent terms. Interviews were recorded on the researcher’s cellular phone using an application called TapeACall. All participants knew and understood that they were being recorded. The interviews were transcribed through an online
service called TranscriptionHub. All documents associated with the study are secured on the researcher’s password-protected personal computer and will not be shared with anyone else.

**Preliminary Limitations**

IPA requires purposeful selection of a small group of participants (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Therefore, this qualitative study only examined a small, in-depth sample of adult learners. The results may or may not be transferable to a larger population. The participant pool consisted entirely of science-related majors, an interesting coincidence that was not intentionally part of the research design. Though the participants interned in a variety of different settings, only two of the sites were research based; all of the participants were interested in the natural environment in some capacity. Adult learners employed in other career fields, with different professional interests, may not have had the same experiences with internships as those who participated in science-oriented internships.

Avoiding researcher bias was a very important part of this study. As the former Director of Experiential Learning/Chair of Internship Programs at Berklee College of Music, the researcher advised many adult learners who participated in internships. Many were enrolled in majors that required an internship for graduation. These students often expressed frustration when trying to secure an internship, and again during their internship. They were at times turned down for certain opportunities because they were labeled as overqualified. One internship supervisor would not hire older students with prior work experience because they felt the student would be bored and they could not occupy them with projects that would advance their skills. In fact, once on site at certain organizations, the adult learners frequently felt that they were not
challenged by the tasks assigned to them. They often had several years more work experience than their supervisors. At times, the intern had to leave a paying full-time job to take an unpaid internship that would fulfill the graduation requirement, a luxury that was not an option for many other students. Yet, the researcher embarked on the study with a strong belief in the value of internships. Therefore, bias was acknowledged throughout the study, both in terms of witnessing challenges adult learners faced with internships and the value of internships in general. It was important to work diligently to put aside these biases while conducting the research with the goal of remaining as objective and neutral as possible.

Thesis Overview

There is a vast amount of data and literature, both scholarly and anecdotal, about the value of internships (Koffel, 1994; Moore, 2010; NACE, 2011b; Sweitzer & King, 2004), but little published that specifically looks at adult learners and their experiences with internships. Internships and other forms of experiential learning are becoming a much more widely accepted form of education at United States colleges and universities. As the adult undergraduate population increases and internships become more popular, institutions of higher learning will need to determine how best to serve that student population in respect to experiential learning programs. This five-chapter thesis examines the topic in detail.

Chapter 1 examines the significance of the research problem and provides an overview of the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of the existing literature on adult learners, internships, and the two topics combined. Chapter 3 outlines the design of the study. Chapter 4 includes the study findings, based on the research data collected. And finally, Chapter 5 summarizes the
findings and provides recommendations for both future research and practice within the field of higher education.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Considerable literature exists on adult learners (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Ogren, 2003; Richardson & King, 1998) and on internships (Koffel, 1994; Moore, 2010; NACE, 2011b; Sweitzer & King, 2004) separately, but very little has been published about adult learners completing internships. The literature review will first look at research on adult learners and then internships, followed by a brief look at the work that merges the two topics. This study focuses on adult learners’ experiences with their internships. The results are applicable to the field of professional practice in higher education. This study also helps to fill a gap in the scholarly literature on adult learners and internships.

Adult Learners

We tend to think of college as a time for young people to get a broad educational experience that allows them to live away from home for the first time, take the time to explore new ideas, and learn more about who they are and who they want to become. That college experience is not the norm for a huge percentage of the population attending college in the United States today. As far back as four decades ago, 28% of enrolled students were 25 or older (Choy, 2002). Citing societal changes, such as the need for job training and the end of the Vietnam War, Glass and Harshberger (1974) predicted a future increase in adults attending college. That prediction became true. As of 1999, 39% of undergraduates were over the age of 25 and that number continues to increase (Choy, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). In 2000, 43% of United States college students were over the age of 24 (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). By 2005, 12 million students enrolled in colleges and universities were over the age of 25
Eighty-five percent of all undergraduates today are considered non-traditional in some way (Boenig, 2013). In fact, what we still consider the “non-traditional” student is now the norm on college campuses (Jenkins, 2012; Selingo, 2012a).

It is likely that we will continue to see increases in the number of adults attending college in the coming years. The National Center for Education Statistics projects that overall enrollment will increase by 13% between 2009 and 2020 at degree-granting institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). They estimate that only 9% of that increase will be students ages 18 to 24, while 21% will be students ages 25 to 34, and 16% will be 35 and older (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Additionally, the unemployment rate for veterans is nearly double the national average (Davidson, 2012). Without jobs, colleges and universities will likely see an influx of new veterans enrolling at their institutions. The new GI Bill allows veterans to transfer unused education benefits to a spouse or dependent, also encouraging greater enrollment (Peter, 2011).

**Definition of Adult Learners**

Some literature defines non-traditional students by their age, usually 25 and older (Stewart & Rue, 1983), but other bodies of work define non-traditional students much more broadly. For example, Bean and Metzner (1985) begin by creating a definition for traditional students and then categorize non-traditional students as those who do not fit that model. Their work considers a traditional student one who lives on campus, is between the ages of 18 and 24, and is enrolled full-time (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Others have built on the work of Bean and Metzner (1985). The United States Department of Education’s Office of Educational Research and Improvement adds to the traditional student definition by including those who enroll immediately after graduating from high school and those who are dependent on their parents for
financial support (Choy, 2002). Since there are many different ways to define a student as “non-traditional”, for the purposes of this study, we will look specifically at students aged 25 and older and identify them as “adult learners”. While adult learners may also have other characteristics that fit into a broader non-traditional definition, the focus of this thesis will be specifically on the age of the student.

**History of Adult Learners at Colleges and Universities**

Adults have been attending college for centuries, but are often still viewed as a recent phenomenon by colleges in the media and in scholarly literature. Ogren (2003) argues that we can trace the history of adult learners on campus back to the late 1800s, when non-traditional students attended “state normal schools” to become teachers (p. 658). Catering to non-traditional students was central to the mission of the teacher colleges of the time, but as these institutions became the colleges and universities we know today, their operations changed to serve the type of population we now consider traditional (Ogren, 2003). Over the course of several decades, political and economic, as well as societal, technological, and institutional changes, have led to growing numbers of adults attending colleges and universities in the United States (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Richardson & King, 1998). For example, the original GI Bill, passed in 1944, led to a surge in individuals attending college after returning from war (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

**Challenges**

College attendance can be uniquely challenging for adult learners due to a number of factors, including difficulty funding their education, full-time employment, lack of support from family and friends, and family responsibilities such as caring for children or elderly relatives (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Berker & Horn, 2004; Dill and Henley, 1998; Jenkins, 2012; Richardson & King, 1998). Energy and resources cannot be fully focused on their education, as
with traditional students. These students may have difficulty securing childcare or registering for classes that meet at times when they can attend. Often adults have been away from education for a number of years and do not feel prepared academically to manage the work expected of them, or are unfamiliar with the technology now used in classrooms across the country (Choy, 2002; Jenkins, 2012).

While college is becoming increasingly important, rising costs and lack of funding opportunities make it challenging for some to attend (Chaloux, 2008). In the decade from 1995 to 2005, tuition and fees rose by 51% at public colleges and 36% at private institutions, adjusting for inflation (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Access can be difficult. More students, especially adults, are attending college on a part-time basis (Chaloux, 2008; Schmidt, 1998). Federal financial aid options are limited for those enrolled part-time (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Perkins and Stafford Loan programs do not offer loan options for any student registered at less than half-time status (Chaloux, 2008).

**Characteristics**

While adult learners come to college with diverse needs and expectations, they are usually quite focused. Their primary objective is often to pursue a degree or certificate, usually to gain work-related skills (Berker & Horn, 2004; Herr & Cramer, 1992; Richardson & King, 1998). Studies have found that adults tend to think of themselves as workers first and students second (Berker & Horn, 2004; Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006). Although many adults report that they attend college to obtain a degree or certificate, persistence is a challenge and many non-traditional students do not graduate (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Klein-Collins & Hain, 2009). As of 2010, less than one-third of adults ages 25 to 29 had obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher (Motoko, 2011). The adult student population is less likely to earn a degree within five
years, or even at all (Berker & Horn, 2004; Choy, 2002). Non-traditional students are more than twice as likely to drop out during their first year versus their traditional counterparts (Jenkins, 2012). Those who report that they consider themselves students first and workers second are more likely to persist to completion (Berker & Horn, 2004).

**Learning Preferences and Theories**

Adults often prefer self-directed learning outside of traditional educational environments (Baskett & Marsick, 1992). Malcolm Knowles (1984) developed a model for adult learning based on the notion that adults view learning differently than their younger counterparts. The approach is practical and assumes that students are responsible for their own learning, which is both transformational and transferable. The adult can learn in the classroom and transfer their knowledge to the outside world (Knowles, 1984). Koffel (1994) believes that adults approach learning differently than younger learners, from a practical instead of theoretical perspective, seeking new credentials or skills that will help them succeed professionally or personally. This notion is reinforced throughout the literature (Berker & Horn, 2004; Boenig, 2013; Noel-Levitz, 2011). Adult learners gain the most from courses that relate to their professional goals (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006) through self-directed learning (Brookfield, 1985; Knowles, 1978; Richardson & Prickett, 1994).

Kegan (1994) looks at self-directed learning from a slightly different perspective. His review of the literature on adult learners found that while this population of students is expected to take a self-directed approach to their education, many adults are not capable of doing so. He suggests that the goal of colleges and universities is to not presume that students are self-directed when they enroll, but to actually educate students to become self-directed learners. This is an approach to education that is transformative in the traditional sense of higher education’s mission.
for personal growth, but also in many ways meets the needs of adult learners for practical education. Kegan believes that this type of adult development, what his theory labels as a move from “third order” to “fourth order” thinking, can be so transformative that it has the power to change the student profoundly, both academically and personally. They can apply this new way of thinking not only to their studies, but also to their jobs and personal lives.

With the unique needs of adult learners in mind, Peter Jarvis (2009) developed a model focused on lifelong learning processes based on Kolb’s theory. Jarvis believes that learning is sensory – in other words, it occurs through the use of at least one of the five senses, making learning an experience. Learning occurs in many ways and throughout one’s lifetime. Like Kolb, Jarvis believes that reflection is an important part of learning. As such, Jarvis (1995) believes that practical experience, through experiential learning methods including internships, is an effective way to put classroom learning into practice (p. 75). Reflective assignments are incorporated into modern day experiential learning courses throughout the country (Chaker, 2006; Koffel, 1994).

Reggy-Mamo (2008), a faculty member at Beulah Heights University in Atlanta, surveyed her students (mostly adults with jobs and families) to understand their preferred learning style. She found that the majority of the adult learners preferred an experiential approach. Since so many of her students had prior work experience, she found that they were more likely to be successful in classes “that validate their work-based prior learning and competencies” (p. 111). Similarly, Hickcox (2002) found that experiential education tends to work more effectively with adult learners than traditional-aged students. Bailey and Marsh
(2010) found that adult learners desire curriculum modification that takes their real-life experience into consideration.

**Lifelong Learning**

The concept of lifelong learning emerges from the adult development literature. According to Levinson (1986), individuals experience periods of change throughout their lives. Many adults change careers because their needs and desires change constantly. Levinson found that we spend nearly half of our time as adults in “developmental transitions” and that “no life structure is permanent” (p. 7). Often, these life transitions, such as divorce, loss of a spouse, a child leaving for college, or one’s desire for career change, are what drive adults back to school (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Kegan, 1994). In fact, lifelong learning is becoming increasingly critical, according to a report from the United States Department of Education (2006), which estimates that up to 90% of jobs in the future will require workers to have obtained at least some college education (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). College education is an important indicator of financial security. Over the course of their careers, individuals with bachelor’s degrees earn twice as much as their peers who have not obtained a degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Particularly interesting is the change of perspective in a generation, both in the literature and culturally, on adult career and educational stability. Gottfredson (1977) found that as people age, their careers becomes more stable. At that time, only 10% to 14% of workers changed careers (Gottfredson, 1977). Twenty years later, Truluck and Courtney (1999) looked at the learning styles of individuals aged 65 and older. They found that as people live and work longer, there is more focus on lifelong learning. This debunks the old notion that adulthood is a stable
period of life and that education is not necessary for an aging population (Truluck & Courtney, 1999).

**Meeting the Needs of Adult Learners on Campus**

As the number of adult learners in higher education continues to grow, colleges and universities are looking for more ways to cater to these students (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Some claim that this student population is not being served well by colleges and universities, and that schools are not preparing this population adequately for current workplace demands (Selingo, 2011). Adult learners often feel devalued on college campuses as most universities continue to cater more to the traditional student than the non-traditional, even as we see a flip to the non-traditional student becoming the norm (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has a tool that institutions can use to evaluate how well they are serving enrolled adults (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006). They recommend that institutions develop teaching and learning methods that fit the needs of adult learners (often experiential-based methods) while assisting with life and career planning (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006). Methods such as flexible class schedules, online learning, and accelerated degree programs are all being implemented in colleges and universities nationwide (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Bok, 2003; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Selingo, 2012a; Tate, Klein-Collins, & Steinberg, 2011).

Klein-Collins & Hain (2009) recommend that colleges increase support services for adult learners, including increasing financial aid for this population. These students benefit from a unique advocate on campus, such as a Dean who understands their needs (Bailey & Marsh, 2010). A study conducted by the Center for Community College Student Engagement at the University of Texas (2012) found that students with responsibilities outside the classroom are
more likely to succeed if colleges find ways to help students plan their classes around outside commitments while simultaneously teaching adults learners skills that help them manage their limited time. Graham and Gisi (2000) found that non-traditional students who can devote more time to participating in course-related learning activities and activities involving college organizations improve their learning outcomes. Yet, the Lumina Foundation, an organization committed to expanding access to higher education, found that since adult students need to work to pay for college, they are left with limited time to participate in college-related activities outside of class (Lumina Foundation, 2004). Jenkins (2012) recommends that colleges do as much as possible to help adult learners connect classroom learning with their lives outside of school. Since education can be challenging for this population, he suggests that adult learners need to perceive that the time and money invested is worthwhile (Jenkins, 2012).

Non-traditional students must not be ignored, as their attendance at colleges and universities is critical for maintaining enrollment levels and income at United States higher education institutions (Bidwell, 2013; Chaloux, 2008; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). Effectively educating this group will also continue to make the United States competitive worldwide (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

**Internships**

Howe (2014) defines an internship as “a practical learning experience for beginners in an occupation or profession that lasts a limited amount of time (para. 2)”. However, the term internship seems to have originated in the 19th century when European medical students came to the United States to study. Those who lived on campus were called interns and those who lived away from campus were considered externs (Schuttenberg & Poppenhagen, 1980). The actual
practice of experiential education dates back hundreds of years to trade apprenticeships in Europe (Andrews, 1980). Medical schools, law schools, and teaching schools began including hands-on learning as far back as the late 19th century (Sweitzer & King, 2004). Cooperative Education in the United States began in 1906 at the University of Cincinnati (Ohio) to support the training and career development of engineering students (Haddara & Skanes, 2007; Moore, 2010). It can be argued that these educational experiences formed the foundation for the types of internship programs that exist today. Internship programs as we know them came to be during the 20th century, based on student-centered lifelong learning theories developed by the likes of Dewey and Kolb (Hickox, 2002; Moore, 2010).

Internships are just one form of experiential learning in practice in today’s colleges and universities. Other forms include service-learning, cooperative education, field work, practicum, and even laboratory research (Sweitzer & King, 2004). For the purpose of this study, we will use the overarching term “internship” with the understanding that in some cases that may include other work-based learning situations, including cooperative education and practicum.

**Internship Structure**

An internship allows a student to spend time in the workplace, applying knowledge learned in the classroom (AACU, 2007; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012; NACE, 2011b). Internships are highly structured, short-term experiences that last anywhere from a few weeks to a few months (Macala, 1986; Westerberg & Wickersham, 2011). They are a three-way partnership between the student, college, and internship site. This partnership is strengthened when the internship carries academic credit, requiring reflective academic assignments as part of a structured internship course (Chaker, 2006; Koffel, 1994). Institutions frequently acknowledge the academic nature of internships through granting credit
toward graduation, assigning elective credits, or providing transcript notation (NCCE, n.d.). On-site mentors help students learn more about possible future careers, while often allowing the company to evaluate the intern as a possible candidate for hire (NACE, 2011a).

**Benefits of Internships**

Ideally, internships support both the student’s career and academic goals, aiding in personal and professional development (Giordani, 2010; Moore, 2010; True, 2011). Students report that internships help them gain confidence, learn about their future career field, and make professional connections (True, 2011; Vogt, 2009). They may help a student confirm a career direction or rule it out (Taylor, 1988; Westerberg & Wickersham, 2011). Some students benefit through an introduction to the workplace while they are still students, decreasing the challenges of transitioning from college to career post-graduation (Taylor, 1988). A recent study found that having participated in an internship may even help job applicants avoid feeling like they need to accept a position that is below their skill or experience level, something referred to as underemployment (OANOW, 2014). It has been reported that students who participate in cooperative education programs tend to secure post-college jobs that demand more responsibility and have higher starting salaries (Haddara & Skanes, 2007).

According to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2003), educational institutions must be able to connect learning with life and careers. The group, one of the most prominent in the field, suggests that schools connect with employers as partners in educational programming (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2003). Academic literature reinforces this, demonstrating that internships can help fill the gap that exists between what students learn in the classroom and what they must know to succeed in the workplace (Carson & Bill, 2003; Koffel, 1994; Selingo, 2012b; Wolf, 1980). In a study conducted by Freudenberg, Brimble, Cameron, and English
(2011), the researchers found that students who participated in experiential learning as part of their degree program achieved greater skill development than those who did not have a practical experience imbedded in their education. The study also found that the students not only gained new skills, but were better able to articulate that they possessed those skills after having participated in an internship (Freudenberg et al, 2011). The 2008 National Internship and Co-op Study, funded by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), surveyed nearly 10,000 students about their internship and co-op experiences. Over 90% of the respondents reported that the opportunity to learn new skills is one of the most valuable takeaways from internships (Bottner, 2010). The subjects in Kessler et al (2009) found their internship experiences so worthwhile that they recommended that all of their accounting student peers participate in an internship experience.

Including experiential education in the curriculum helps students build transferable skills (Farrar, 2012). Cord and Clements (2010) studied the internship program at their Australian college campus and found that students reported gaining “soft-skills”, such as people skills and communication skills while gaining “personal insights”, including “self-awareness”, “self-improvement”, and “self-assurance” (p. 303). The authors have found that these skills are in demand from employers who now have a greater focus on college’s graduating students who are prepared to work in a changing workforce that focuses on lifelong learning and increased international competition brought about through globalization (Cord & Clements, 2010).

Contrary to studies that found internships help students develop new skills, Jackson (2010) states that while work experience is critical for skill development, it is still unclear how valuable internships specifically are in developing the competencies needed to be successful in
the workplace. The particular skills acquired may or may not lead to jobs or be the specific skills necessary to be successful in those jobs (Jackson, 2010).

**Employment**

A college degree has become a requirement for most jobs, so while the degree alone used to allow applicants to stand out in the job market, this is no longer the case (Green, 2013; Taylor, 1988). Internships often now fill that role, helping students get their foot in the door for full-time employment (Green, 2013; Taylor, 1988). Many have concluded that internships have taken over as the new entry-level job (True, 2011; Zax, 2012). Taylor (1988) determined that students who completed internships had access to better employment opportunities upon graduating than those who did not. Employers surveyed in the same study also were more interested in the resumes of students who had completed internships than the resumes of students who had not interned. In a study of employers conducted in 2011 by the NACE’s research division, 76.6% of employers reported that they “prefer to hire candidates with relevant work experience”, including internships (National Association of College’s and Employers, 2011, p.26). Many employers report that they use their internship program as an effective recruitment method (NACE, 2003). A study conducted in 2007 by Peter D. Hart Research Associates on behalf of the Association of American Colleges and Universities surveyed 301 employers and found that 73% reported that internships are one of the most critical things that colleges should offer to their students (Westerberg & Wickersham, 2011). Recent figures estimate that between 60% and 85% of internships lead to jobs, either at the company where the student interned or elsewhere (CNBC, 2011; Vogt, 2009). Northwestern Mutual’s McTigue Financial Group in Chicago reportedly hires 25% of their interns after they graduate from college (Hering, 2010). NACE’s 2014
Internship and Co-op Survey revealed that employers offered jobs to 64.8% of their interns during this past year (NACE, 2014).

**Increase in Programs**

Colleges have taken note of the demand for internships and developed many more opportunities for student participation. From 1970 to 1983, the number of colleges with internship programs increased from 200 to 1,000 (CNBC, 2011). In the 1970’s, one out of every 36 undergraduates participated in an internship, but in 1995 the number had increased to one out of five (Sweitzer & King, 2004). By 2012, 55% of graduating students participated in an internship during their college years (Matthews, 2013). The NACE’s “2012 Internship and Co-op Survey” revealed that employers planned on hiring 8.5% more interns that year than the year before, proving that internships are continuing to grow in popularity. It is estimated that 1.5 million people participate in internships in the United States each year (Howe, 2014).

Experiential education methods challenge the traditional views of education. Some faculty and administrators believe that they are not a legitimate method of learning for students (Haddara & Skanes, 2007; Hickcox, 2002; Moore, 2010; Witucke, 1986). Haddara and Skanes (2007) reviewed prior literature on the benefits of internships and cooperative education for students and found contradicting reports on the value of this type of learning. They believe it is because there are many variables involved that may impact the student’s experience. For example, students tend to have better outcomes when their supervisor is highly involved with their learning experience, when they feel challenged by the work they are assigned, and when they feel that they are truly contributing to the work being done on site. Some academics believe that more research is needed in the area of experiential education to help legitimize the method throughout higher education (Finn, 1997; Linn, Howard, and Miller, 2004).
While an anti-experiential education sentiment still exists in some circles, the notion of internships becoming critical for modern education is gaining traction. According to Farrar (2012), a contributor to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation website, “the old dichotomy between ‘vocational’ and ‘academic’ is outdated” (para. 5). At a time when the value of higher education is being questioned, the tangible results that come from experiences like internships help add value to a student’s education (Kuh, 2010). More and more colleges are beginning to require internships for all students, even those in liberal arts majors. For example, The College of St. Rose (Albany, New York) began requiring internships for their English majors in 2012 (Grasgreen, 2012).

**Internships and Adult Learners**

People opt to change careers at any age and for many reasons. In fact, career change is one of the primary reasons adults enroll in higher education (Mosenson & Mosenson, 2012). For students looking to change careers, earning a degree is often not enough. While external commitments make internships challenging for adult learners, some believe that internships are the most important tool for making that leap to a new career (Preston, 2011). In fact, according to Collamer (2014), a growing number of Baby Boomers in their 50s and 60s are now participating in internships due to career changes. According to a 2010 survey conducted by CareerBuilder.com, 23% of employers reported receiving internship applications from “experienced” (10 years or more work experience) or “mature workers” (50 and older). Internships are becoming increasingly more common for older students as they work to gain new skills and find jobs (CNBC, 2011; Lowman, 2013). Some states are even making subsidized internships available for older workers looking to re-enter the workforce (CAEL, 2012).
**Gap in the Literature**

Studies have been published that compare traditional and non-traditional students on a variety of factors, such as career decision making (Luzzo, 1993), identity and needs (Senter & Senter, 1998), college stress (Dill & Henley, 1998), and predictors of success (Spitzer, 2000). These articles provide good definitions for non-traditional students and demonstrate that there are differences in this population. However, almost no research has been published that examines adult learners and their experiences with internships. Most of what has been published on the topic includes anecdotal reports by individuals discussing the internships they completed as adults (Barbor, 2013; Petz, 2009; Preston, n.d.). While they help deliver insight into the ways that adult learners experience internships, these reports are generally not scholarly peer-reviewed research articles and examine the experience of only one individual at a time. Much of the existing academic literature on adults completing internships was published decades ago (Gordon, 1978; McCaffery, 1975; Rubin, 1986; Varty, 1994). There is a significant need for current research on this topic.

**Adult Learner Experiences**

The small number of published reports from adults who participated in internships exhibit a wide variety of opinions about their experiences. These stories provide some insight into the experiences adults have with internships, but are anecdotal and explore only individual experiences on a case-by-case basis.

Preston (n.d.) graduated with a Bachelor’s in English. Her goal was to make a career change, which she reports was challenging without having participated in an internship. She believes that adult learners may have a lot to balance, including careers and family, but that it is
critical that they find a way to participate in an internship if they are attending college
to change careers (Preston, n.d.).

On the other hand, Petz (2009) was enrolled as a graduate student while working full-
time and raising four children. After she took on an internship, in addition to her other
responsibilities, she ended up spread so thin that she ran off the road in her car while suffering
from extreme fatigue.

Barbor (2013) tells a more positive tale of interning as an adult. She had worked in the
magazine industry for over 20 years when she decided to change careers. Two unpaid
internships in radio led to a paying job in the field. She discusses the challenges she faced as an
older intern, which include feeling intimidated by traditional-aged college interns who
understood technology and pop culture more easily than she. Barbor embraced her situation,
opting to ask the younger interns to teach her about technology. She felt that her years of
professional experience put her at an advantage because she knew how to handle stress and
pressure, critical when working in a live radio talk show environment (Barbor, 2013).

**Internship Challenges for Adult Learners**

Much of the academic literature on internships illustrates that adults working full-time
generally cannot commit to the hours and time frame necessary to complete a traditional
academic internship outside of their current work environment (Gordon, 1978; Koffel, 1994;
Rubin, 1986; Varty, 1994). Mosenson and Mosenson (2012) found that internships required
students to give up their current jobs and therefore lose income and healthcare coverage. Some
older studies explore the idea of flexible internship and cooperative education programs for adult
learners, allowing these students the opportunity to fit this type of learning into their busy
schedules (Gordon, 1978; McCaffery, 1975). Most of these studies focused on work-based cooperative education training programs, an uncommon practice in the modern economic climate.

**Program Structure**

Gordon (1978) stresses that it is important for colleges and universities to consider the needs of adult learners when structuring cooperative education programs. The author states that “co-op has been largely premised on the idea that students are young, with little work experience” and that the needs of adult students are largely ignored (p. 98). In lieu of traditional cooperative education, the author suggests that colleges and universities allow adult learners to earn credit for prior work and life experience, a practice known today as PLA, or “prior learning assessment”. Other suggestions include allowing students to earn credit for performance improvement at their current job, taking steps toward promotion at a current job, and taking on a new “field” project at the student’s current place of employment in order to learn new skills.

McCaffery (1975) examined a cooperative education program for adults at the University of New Hampshire. These students took on new responsibilities at their full-time job sites and the University counted that work for academic credit. They found that this alternative approach to cooperative education worked well for adult learners. It allowed them the opportunity to benefit from cooperative education while being able to maintain full-time work. The author concluded that traditional cooperative education at a unique work site is most effective for younger students without full-time jobs, but that it did not make sense for adults with professional backgrounds. McCaffery (1975) found that there were strong benefits for both student and employer when combining new experiences with current employment for adult learners.
Rubin (1986) outlines the unique needs of adult learners seeking to gain new skills to enhance their careers. The article discusses a number of cooperative education programs facilitated by universities that combine classroom learning and training programs at the job site, a way for companies to invest in their employees through teaching them new skills. While the article states that not all companies are willing to “run comprehensive retraining programs”, the author gives a number of examples of organizations that were running such programs (p. 46).

Similarly, Varty (1994) also considers the opportunity for collaboration between industry and universities. He believes that the traditional cooperative education model is not a good fit for adult learners, both due to personal and professional responsibilities, but also because this population likely already has developed “generic work habits and skills that traditional co-op students gain from their initial [co-op] experience” (p. 58). As such, he believes that universities should work with companies to create an education model that allows for classroom learning in conjunction with on-site training for current employees. The prior work experience means that adult interns encounter a shorter learning curve and pick up new skills quickly, so there is room for growth and development.

These training opportunities at companies are rare today because employees move between organizations so rapidly now, putting much more of the burden on colleges and universities to train students for current and future careers (CAEL, 2012; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2003). Scholarly articles on adult learners and internships disappear from the literature in conjunction with these changes in society. The most current study on adult learners and internships identified in the literature was published in 2004. Pevoto (2004) surveyed 215 of
her students at Texas State University. The population consisted of non-traditional students aged 25 and older. The author found that the participants considered their internship experiences to be worthwhile, high-quality endeavors that led to strong professional growth. This is consistent with the overall body of internship literature that focuses on a more traditional population (Bottner, 2010; Giordani, 2010; Moore, 2010; True, 2011).

**Summary**

A significant gap exists in literature published on adult learners and internships. Most articles are either anecdotal stories reported by adults who participated in internships (Barbor, 2013; Petz, 2009; Preston, n.d.) or scholarly literature from several decades ago (Gordon, 1978; McCaffery, 1975; Rubin, 1986). Still, a great deal of literature exists on the topic of internships in general, particularly surrounding benefits for students (Giordani, 2010; Sweitzer & King, 2004; Taylor, 1998; True, 2011). Internship literature either does not specify the age of study participants or focuses on traditional student populations. There is also a large body of literature published on adult learning theory, characteristics of adult learners, and the history of adult student enrollment at United States colleges and universities (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Jarvis, 2006; Ogren, 2003). Chapter 5 compares the results of this study on adult learners to the existing body of internship literature.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Methodology and Design

As established through the literature review, considerable work has been published surrounding internships (Koffel, 1994; Moore, 2010; NACE, 2011b; Sweitzer & King, 2004) and adult learners (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Ogren, 2003; Richardson & King, 1998) as individual topics. Yet, little has been done to explore the connection between adult undergraduates and their internship experiences. As experiential education courses become more prevalent on college campuses, it is critical to determine whether internships are an effective learning tool for a growing adult student population. The purpose of this study was to examine how adult learners make meaning of their internship experiences. The results of this study have the potential to guide institutional and curricular policy decisions regarding internships for non-traditional students. Therefore, the principal research question for this study was: “Are internships beneficial for adult learners with prior work experience?”

A qualitative research approach was selected due to the author’s interest in understanding the experience as articulated by the participant. A qualitative approach allows the participants to share their perceptions and attitudes on a topic, all while honoring the individuality of their unique experience in a way that quantitative studies do not (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Maxwell, 1996). It allows the researcher to develop a deep understanding of the experiences of a small group of people, rather than a larger and often more superficial sample used in quantitative study. By telling the subject’s story in a way that is authentic to their understanding of the experience,
we gain insight into the meaning they have attached to the internship and develop an understanding of what they may or may not have gained.

More specifically, the study took an IPA approach. As the goal of this study is to understand how the subject interprets their internship experience, IPA is an ideal research method for this study. The goal of IPA is exactly that: to examine how individuals make sense of their own experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In this study, the internship is the significant experience that the subject will be asked to reflect upon. While each individual participant interned at a different place and approached the experience from a unique background, the common thread is that they completed an internship as an adult undergraduate.

**Research Tradition**

IPA has roots in the field of psychology dating back to 1996, but is becoming more popular in other fields, such as education (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This type of research approach may be fairly new, but it is based on older qualitative methods and is becoming increasingly recognized worldwide. Traditional Phenomenology and IPA are closely related, though with traditional phenomenological approaches the author provides the interpretation (Creswell, 2009; Giorgi, 2009). With IPA the subjects themselves interpret their experience and the author makes every effort to clearly share the reported experience with the reader, while making connections that may lead to practical policy development within the given field of study. As such, IPA involves two levels of interpretation and analysis. The first layer involves the subject’s ability to make meaning of their experience and from there, the researcher then has to make meaning of the subject’s description of their experience. The theory of interpretation, called hermeneutics, is deeply imbedded in IPA due to the significant emphasis on
the subject’s ability to interpret their own experience and the researcher’s ability to carefully relay the subject’s interpretation (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA is both experiential and reflective in nature, connecting it to Kolb’s theory of experiential learning, which is the theoretical lens for this research.

**Institutional Review Board Approval**

The researcher applied for Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct this research study. Approval was granted on March 24, 2014. Several documents (see Appendix C) were approved for use in this study, including an email to communicate details of the research to possible participants, an electronic recruitment flyer, and an unsigned Informed Consent form. The email template and electronic flyer were both used in participant recruitment, which is explained in greater detail in the next section. All participants were emailed the Informed Consent Form and asked to read it prior to completing a Demographic Questionnaire and the phone interview. The participants were not required to sign the form, but were asked during the phone interview to state whether they agreed to the Informed Consent terms. All approved and agreed to participate.

As outlined by Northeastern University’s IRB, protection of human subjects is critical. It was important that the participants understood that they were welcome to drop out of the study at any time, for any reason. Ensuring participant confidentiality was also key to protecting those involved (Northeastern, n.d.). As such, all names were changed in this thesis, including the names of the students, their universities, and their internship sites. Descriptions of the internship sites, including details of work assignments completed, is included to aid in describing the students experiences.
Site and Participants

IPA studies generally involve a small number of participants, between three and six, in order to explore the depth of experience of each individual (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). According to Ambert et al (1995), the purpose of qualitative research is to develop an understanding of why people behave the way they do through in-depth analysis of a small group rather than try to develop a large-scale understanding of what people do. Therefore, this study involved interviewing four participants in order to explore the similarities and differences of each experience.

The sample was relatively homogenous to aid in comparison of similarities and differences between experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In this study, the participants had different backgrounds, but the shared phenomenon is that they all interned as adult undergraduates. Coincidentally, all four participants majored in an academic field related to science. They also all were enrolled in college to aid in beginning a new career in a field that differed from that in which they had been employed prior to attending college. According to Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009), the term experience “invokes a lived process, an unfurling of perspectives and meanings, which are unique to the person’s embodied and situated relationship to the world” (p. 21). Therefore, each participant will internalize and interpret their experience differently, regardless of similarities and differences within the interview pool. It is our job as researchers to interpret the participant’s interpretation of their experience.

Parameters for participant selection included: participants must have graduated from an undergraduate program at a United States college or university, been age 25 or older at the time of the internship, have completed an internship that was at least a semester in duration, and have
work experience prior to having interned. Gender or race is not relevant to the study, but the gender was documented as a data point to aid in writing the thesis.

IPA demands purposeful selection of participants, in lieu of random selection. Often, these participants are identified through others, such as professional contacts or other participants (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). A listserv called Internship.net, which is used by members of college and university internship advisors, as well as many employers who hire interns, was utilized as the primary resource in identifying participants. On February 13, 2012, the researcher emailed members of the Internship.net listserv asking for help identifying colleges and universities with internship programs for adult learners. The email request generated a response from 10 colleagues who work with internship programs at diverse institutions scattered throughout the United States. This provided a helpful springboard for future participant recruitment, especially when posting digital flyers to university alumni social media pages.

Participants were officially recruited in the spring of 2014 and several recruitment methods were employed. The first method involved utilizing social media sites, including Facebook and LinkedIn. An electronic flyer was posted to various college alumni pages; approximately 20 schools were targeted, including the schools identified via the Internship.net listserv participants two years earlier. Facebook was easier to use than LinkedIn. In most cases, LinkedIn alumni groups were closed to the public and, when open, did not allow enough characters on posts to be able to display the entire electronic flyer text. This yielded virtually no results, with the exception of one possible participant who interned as a graduate student and therefore was not qualified for the study.
Another recruitment method used to identify participants was Snowball Sampling, or Chain Referral Sampling. This method involves having research participants identify other possible research participants (Explorable, n.d., Patton, 1980). The researcher attempted to utilize this method by asking the first two chosen participants via email if they knew of other potential participants. In both cases, the participants did not reply. It is assumed that their lack of reply meant that they did not know of other possible participants. As with the attempt to utilize social media, Snowball Sampling was not an effective recruitment method for this study.

Participant recruitment for this study would have been nearly impossible had the researcher not worked as a member of the professional internship community for over a decade prior to completing this study. The only effective way to gain access to participants was through relationships with others in the field of higher education. The electronic recruitment flyer was posted to the Internship.net listserv and requested that internship professionals at colleges and universities informally pass along the flyer to anyone they knew who may qualify or be interested. This yielded a number of potential participants, all of whom contacted the researcher directly stating that they were interested in being involved with the study.

Research was conducted in April 2014. Several possible participants were about to graduate in May or June 2014, but did not yet qualify for the study because they were still students at the time of the research, so they were discarded from the pool. In retrospect, summer would have been a good time to conduct this research. It would have yielded a much larger pool of recent graduates who would have qualified for the study, most of whom would easily be able to recall the details of their internships since they were recently completed. Two other potential
participants contacted me with interest in the study, but they did not qualify because they had interned while enrolled in Master’s degree programs. Finally, one other candidate contacted me offering to help, but she is a direct colleague in higher education who works with an internship program at a university. She felt that it would only be appropriate to participate if there was difficulty identifying other qualified participants. It would have been interesting to hear about her experience, but in the end, five qualified participants emerged for the study. One of the five ended up being unavailable for a phone interview, eliminating him from the research.

In the end, four qualified research candidates were identified for the study. The pool consisted of three male participants and one female participant. Two were alumni of a Pacific coast university and the remaining two were graduates of separate East coast universities.

The researcher confirmed via email that all four candidates met the qualifications for the study (age at time of internship, prior work experience, internship of at least three months, and graduated from undergraduate degree program). The date and time of interview was confirmed over email. The Informed Consent form was distributed to the participants via email, along with a Demographic Questionnaire. Participants were asked to review the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix C), which did not require a signature, but was reviewed during the interviews and verbal consent was then collected.

**Data Collection**

The study utilized three methods to collect data from the participants: a demographic questionnaire, an in-depth interview, and review of the interview transcript for accuracy.

Participants were asked to complete the Demographic Questionnaire (see Appendix A) and return it via email before the interview. The purpose of the questionnaire was to collect
supplemental information to be used as data points to aid in the reporting and understanding of each participant’s unique story.

Interview questions were developed (see Appendix B) to provide structure and consistency between interview subjects and to focus the interviews on the research question. However, with IPA it is important to allow conversation to flow freely without strict limitations on how the subject articulates their experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The interviews were approached in a somewhat informal manner to help participants feel more comfortable (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). According to LeCompte and Preissle (1993), more conversational interviews tend to “elicit the trust, confidence, and ease among respondents necessary for yielding elaborate, subtle, and valid data (p. 79)”.

The researcher asked all participants the same open-ended questions during each interview (see Appendix B). Creswell (2007) suggests that open-ended questioning allows themes to emerge from the interviews. Each participant was given the opportunity to speak in as much or as little detail as they wished about each question, but follow-up questions were often asked to help draw out stories from their experience as an intern (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

In lieu of a pilot study, the researcher reviewed the interview questions with two colleagues in the field of internships and/or adult learning. One is a published author in the field of internships, facilitates an online listserv for university internship professionals, and is the Director of the Internship Center at a private liberal arts college in Pennsylvania. The second colleague works with many adult interns as the Director of Career Management Services at a public university in Florida. Feedback from the two professionals was collected and assessed.
Many of their recommendations were included and the interview questions were revised accordingly. Their perspective was quite valuable.

All interviews were conducted over the telephone. Participants were informed ahead of time that the interview would be recorded and asked to say at the beginning of the interview that they acknowledged that they were being recorded (Ferderick, 2013). The phone interviews were recorded using the researcher’s cell phone via an application called TapeACall. TapeACall was tested twice before the interviews took place and worked very well. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Although the interviews were conducted by telephone, which may seem impersonal, the participants seemed comfortable and were able to provide a great deal of reflective details and personal information during the conversations.

Participants were interviewed only once, but were asked to review the written transcript of their interview to confirm that what they said is what they meant. They were offered the opportunity to provide feedback on the transcript via email or over the phone, essentially allowing for a conversational second interview to take place with each participant if warranted. While some ongoing email correspondence did take place after the interviews, no participants asked that any additions or changes be made upon review of the transcripts.

Study participants were not put at any direct or indirect risk. The purpose of the research was to learn about the experiences that adult learners had with internships. The goals of the study were explained in the Informed Consent form (see Appendix C), the terms of which all participants verbally acknowledged during the phone interview. Participant names, the names of their universities, as well as the names of the companies in which the internships took place, have been changed to protect the privacy of all parties involved. Participation was voluntary and
participants were informed that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason. No remuneration was offered to the participants, therefore there was no benefit to them directly, other than knowing that their participation may influence academic internship programs in the future.

**Data Storage**

Northeastern University’s IRB has approved this study. Effort to protect human subjects has been strictly enforced. Confidentiality is of great importance, as was informed consent from the study participants.

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed by an online service called Transcription Hub. Transcription Hub allowed for the submission of the interview audio files directly from the TapeACall application. The company publishes a strict privacy policy on their website, which outlines that the data will remain private; only the person who submitted the file has access to the transcript online. All audio files are destroyed after the transcription is completed and the transcriptions are only available on the password-protected site for one year. The site also claims that all employees sign a nondisclosure/confidentiality agreement, which protects the privacy of the interview participants (Transcription Hub, n.d.).

Demographic questionnaires, original interview audio, and transcripts are saved to the researcher’s password-protected personal computer. The audio was deleted from the initial recording device once the data was transcribed. Participant names, college/university names, and internship site names are stored on the personal computer, but confidentially will be assured in print, as all names have been changed. The researcher is the sole owner of the questionnaires, audio, and transcripts.
Trustworthiness and Associated Limitations

Personal Experience
As former Director of Experiential Learning/Chair of Internship Programs at Berklee College of Music (Berklee), I worked with both traditional and non-traditional college students embarking on internship experiences for over a decade. Having witnessed internships transform educational and professional careers, I believe that experiential learning is an effective method of teaching and learning. I have also seen challenges that adult learners have faced when embarking on internships. Additionally, I have completed a number of internship experiences myself, including a year-long graduate practicum, which led to my employment at Berklee. It is critical to acknowledge that those factors lend themselves to inherit bias based on my own experiences, as it would be impossible to not have it impact my perspective as a researcher; yet, it was critical to not let this cloud my analysis of the research. I was very careful to remain neutral when conducting the interviews and when conducting the analysis, and in fact, some of the results surprised me.

Participant Selection
Hand-picking participants is consistent with the research tradition established through IPA, but it creates a limitation that does not exist when using a random sample (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). While the results of the study may not be consistent with the general population, as with a random sample, the point of this study is to understand the stories told by the participants selected. A qualitative study can be difficult to replicate, therefore reliability cannot be considered absolute (Creswell, 1994; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Yet, validity can be measured in qualitative research through descriptions, explanations, and interpretations of the data (Maxwell, 1996). Participants were asked to review the transcript of their interview to
confirm that the conversation was authentic to their interpretation of their experience. None opted to amend or add anything after having reviewed the material. Even after reviewing the transcripts, the researcher must still interpret what the participants contributed and be able to grasp the meaning of the participant’s words to avoid incorrectly interpreting the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants were informed that they may be contacted after the interview and transcript review to verify points and interpretations to assist with validity.

**Transferability**

There are limitations to this type of study because we are examining the reported experiences of a few individuals. The experiences of a few will not necessarily reflect that of an entire population of adult learners. Instead, this study focuses on the perceived experiences of only four unique individuals, therefore policy recommendations will be offered with caution based on the small sample size. According to Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009), the author may “think in terms of theoretical transferability rather than empirical generalizability” (p. 51).

**Participant Recall**

As this is the story of each participant, which is the purpose of qualitative research, there is an inherent risk that the participant will have difficulty recalling reliable information. However, IPA is about the participants’ views, therefore they are asked to make their own meaning of the experience, which inherently cannot be wrong because it is their own story (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). One participant had completed internships several years ago, but he still was able to carefully describe the details of his experience. Most importantly, he had thoroughly taken the time to reflect on those internships and was able to describe what he gained from the opportunities in rich detail.
Quality of Internship Site

Finally, the quality of the internship placement is a variable itself that cannot be controlled. The participants interned at these sites in the past and the researcher had no control over each placement. Some participants may have learned more than others based on the environment in which the experience took place. In some cases, the learning environment may have been richer or poorer, which would impact how likely the intern was to gain certain skills (depending on what they were assigned, how they were expected to interact with others, the size of the organization, etc.). Additionally, some students may have participated in internship courses that require reflective assignments, etc., which may help the students gain more from the experience. Some had internships that were required and others enrolled in internships as an elective. Three participants were paid for their work and one was not. Each student will have approached the internship from a different perspective with different goals.
Chapter 4: Data Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents findings from the research study by relaying the stories of each participant. While keeping the central research question, literature, and theoretical lens at the forefront of the analysis, the data was carefully reviewed and sorted into themes. Several emerged from the interviews. Most supported the current internship literature, but since little exists on adult learners completing internships, the results of this study offer a new understanding of this population’s experience with internships that helps to fill a gap in the literature. The overall themes generated from this study demonstrate that:

- college was a transformative experience for this group, with all participants attending college to change careers;
- adult participants believe that they took their internship more seriously than their traditional-aged peers;
- internships provide benefits for adult learners, which include skill development, confidence building, networking and employment, and exposure to career realities;
- those who had strong internship mentors had more positive internship outcomes;
- the study participants all had flexibly scheduled internships.

Some of these themes lead to more questions that could be addressed in future research. The themes and their relationship to the current literature, suggestions for future research, as well as suggestions for practical policy and curricular development at colleges and universities will be presented in Chapter 5.
While the focus of this study is on the adult learner’s experience with internships, the objective of IPA as a research style is to understand the way the participant views their experience. Therefore, it seemed important to learn as much as possible about the participant’s motivation to attend college as an adult. This ended up being significant, as there seems to be a clear link between the meaning that the participants placed on their college enrollment and the seriousness in which they approached their internships. That understanding was an underlying factor in all themes that will be described in Chapter 5.

Again, the central research question used to guide this study is: “Are internships beneficial for adult learners with prior work experience?”

**Data Analysis**

The author reviewed the transcripts and listened to audio from the interview recordings several times to develop an in-depth understanding of the participants’ views of their experiences. Marshall and Rossman (1999) emphasize that it is critical to read and reread the transcribed interviews several times to help make sense of them. The participants also reviewed the transcripts for accuracy and to confirm that what was said was what they intended. They were given the opportunity to amend any statement made and also to ask that certain parts of the interview be removed from the transcript prior to analysis. None of the participants asked to make any changes or additions to their initial reports.

The purpose of this study is to make meaning of each participant’s understanding of their internship experience. After the interviews were transcribed, the researcher organized the data to generate categories or themes of information through coding, based on the interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The purpose of qualitative research is not to test a hypothesis or
prove/disprove a theory, but to interpret and make meaning of the data for future research and policy implications. Therefore, certain patterns were established to help develop an analysis of similarities and differences between participants. Themes quickly emerged from the data.

Data analysis was based on steps recommended by Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009). They include reading (and re-reading) the interview transcripts, which led to data interpretation through emergent themes. In describing the interviews and emergent themes, it was important to connect them back to the theoretical lens and the literature. It was also critical to focus on staying true to the subject’s perspective of their experience. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009) recommend beginning the analysis by simply taking notes along with each transcript to see which themes immediately begin to emerge. As IPA utilizes a small sample size, coding software was not necessary when analyzing the data.

As those themes began to emerge, the researcher utilized a method recommended by Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009) called abstraction, creating sub-categories under the broader themes to help organize and make meaning of the data. That also helped to look for contradictions across transcripts, a process called polarization (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). From there, specific participant stories were shared independently but also placed into the contextual framework of each theme (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). After coding was complete, the researcher created a chart outlining related themes to use as a resource for data organization, but it was only used as a tool for the researcher and not included in the final thesis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Ethical Considerations
To ensure the privacy of the participants, all names have been changed. Whenever necessary, this includes the name of the participant, the name of their college or university, and the name of the internship site.

**Sample Demographics**

Table 1 below provides demographic information on the participants. This includes college enrollment status (full-time versus part-time), professional work status at the time of internship, whether or not the internship was required, and personal factors such as marital status and dependents. The participants were asked to provide information that was current at the time of the internship; some of these factors may have changed since that time (such as age and marital status).

Table 1

*Participant Demographic Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>College Enrollment Status</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Dependants</th>
<th>Work Status</th>
<th>Internship Enrollment Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colin</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Elective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>37–42</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Elective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Required</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant Stories

Colin

Colin graduated from a public Pacific coast United States university in 2013 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Analytical Chemistry and Agroecology. Conservation and science were always a “passion” of Colin’s, but he went to work for his family business as a young man so that he could support his family. Finally able to realize his dream of a college degree in science, Colin enrolled at the same time as his children. At the time of his internship, Colin was 49 years old, married with two dependent children.

Colin is very interested in the intersection between science and culture, so he longed for the chance to bring what he learned in the classroom to the local community. The internship was an elective, but he pursued the opportunity in order to get “hands-on experience with some of the technical practices that were studied in the classroom” and “to bridge traditional and local knowledge with academia”. He looked for an internship that involved a “social component to the natural sciences”. The internship demanded a great deal of Colin’s time, but he felt that it was a critical part of his “academic journey”.

The internship was research-based, with a focus on the local environment and local Culture – a combination of his two interests. The lab was based in the community on the ocean shore – essentially a “lab within a lab”. This presented a unique opportunity to work directly with the natural environment in a controlled setting. Focusing on coastal resilience, the study looked at a specific plant that was vital to the ecosystem, but that was also used as part of the local culture as a ceremonial food source. The plant was in danger of dying out, so the study
aimed to find a way to grow it in a controlled environment. If the plant species disappeared, it would profoundly impact local cultural traditions.

Colin collected samples at the lab and interviewed members of the community who used the natural resource as part of their local customs. Involved with the study’s design and evaluation, Colin had the opportunity to suggest ideas about the setup and structure of the research. This involved a lot of academic research and writing, things that Colin could do on his own time from home. He was mentored as part of the internship, but also given a lot of responsibility to provide input and consult about the work being done. This included designing scientific trials, creating the lab setup, and determining data collection methods.

Colin was somewhat disappointed with his internship experience. He felt that the research was not conducted in the way that he had hoped. He wanted to be able to publish the results of the study and for the results to be applied to the local community, but neither of those things happened. With an interest in contributing to the greater good of the local environment and people, he had hoped that his work could benefit those around him in a practical way. Colin realized that the study was funded by a commercial entity, which he felt was motivated by profit and not what he believed to be the greater good of the native ecosystem and community. Colin’s supervisor advised him that environmental sustainability only works when it is economically sustainable. This was difficult for Colin. He felt that the internship was a wake-up call for him about the reality of scientific research, and that he was naïve when he embarked on the experience. In the end, he “just completely walked away from it”, harming some of the relationships he had developed during the internship. He found that he was more interested in the “intrinsic values” of the research and that he was disenchanted by the “economic part of it”.
Most interestingly is the way that Colin was able to process the experience and describe being able to take what initially seemed like a negative experience and make it a positive. “That was an awakening for me and I guess that was something that was, you know I looked at it at that time as negative, but really, it was the positive thing to meet the realities of what is scholastics. Usage and grants and the dynamics of it isn’t just, you know, intuitive to what we think it is all about; there is more to it.” He feels that he was able to learn from mistakes made at his internship and foresee what possible methods could “mitigate future mistakes with experimental design”.

He also seems disappointed in the way that he responded to the situation, feeling like he will be more careful in the future to cultivate and maintain positive professional relationships. As a non-traditional student with years of experience, including having owned a business, Colin felt that he approached the internship with the understanding of the importance of developing relationships with people he worked with and employing time management skills. Still, he feels that because the internship did not go as he expected, that he damaged the relationship with his mentor on site. Since he felt confident in his ability to manage a professional environment upon embarking on the internship, Colin found the experience to be unsettling. He is completing a Master’s degree in another city now, but plans to go back to his hometown and work in the local science community. The internship taught him to develop an emotional separation from his work and he is planning to be “much wiser” with “future [professional] relationships”.

This internship was obviously significant to Colin. He twice refers to the internship as an “awakening” experience. He talks about how “theoretically in articles and journals” the work in the scientific and social community “all make sense,” but that he found through the internship
that, in practice, it does not always work that easily. In addition to the big picture lessons learned, Colin also said that he gained a better understanding of research methods and experimental design through the internship experience. He believes internships help people develop critical thinking skills, as well as the ability to think more broadly about working as part of a collaborative endeavor, from a less “ethnocentric point of view”.

When asked if he considers the internship a success, Colin says “no”. Then he backtracks a bit and goes on to say that it was a personal success, but not a success in the larger context. He seems tied to the fact that he felt the study failed to achieve what he had expected, reinforcing that he was very much invested in the experience. When asked if he could do it all over again, would he participate in the same internship, Colin replies “oh, yes”. The internship inspired him to want to find a way to “bridge cultures and science” and he has brought that with him to graduate school.

Colin believes that his tangible work experiences prior to attending college gave him the ability to create a context in which he could connect abstract academic concepts with real life, making it easier for him to get more out of the internship experience. He feels that younger students go into their studies for financial gain or for passion, but that he approached his studies from the perspective of wanting to better his local community and the environment. He was very focused, with a solid understanding of what he hoped to gain from both his college experience and his internship. Even though he felt the study he worked on during the internship was a failure, the experience itself reinforced Colin’s interest in working in the field and helped inspire him to attend graduate school for the same discipline.

Kevin
Kevin is a graduate of the same public Pacific coast United States university as Colin. Also interested in science, Kevin majored in Agriculture, graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in 2007 after completing six different internships. At the time of the internships, Kevin was between the ages of 37 and 42 years old, single with no dependents. He was enrolled as a full-time student and did not work simultaneously. Kevin paid for college with scholarships, grants, and financial aid. A self-described “addict”, Kevin attended a rehabilitation program and then began looking for a way to better his life. College gave him direction and helped him establish a successful career.

Earning academic credit for his internships, Kevin was also paid for his work. The internships were electives, not required for graduation. Kevin participated in an internship program at his university that secured the internships for the students. In other words, he was placed at specific internship sites based on his interests by an advisor from his university. Although the internships took up a lot of his time, Kevin considered them an extension of his academic experience. Considering himself a student first and foremost, he said during the interview that his “focus was on school” ahead of anything else, therefore he did not work professionally while he was enrolled at the university. He still found himself busy with school and felt that flexibly scheduled internships were helpful for him, allowing him the opportunity to go to the lab or out into the field to collect samples during his free time.

While Kevin completed six internships, three were with one public agency that focuses on the environment. All three internships were scientific projects focused specifically on invasive plant species. They needed to first determine how the plants spread. This included looking at the plants in the natural environment, but also buying plants from local stores to
determine whether invasive species grew from other non-invasive plants. They purchased products from stores and transferred them to a lab environment to see how they grew in a controlled space. Then subsequent internships looked at how to manage the plants to make sure they did not take over the natural environment. The third piece involved looking at invasive plant species and how they impacted the local water supply, a project that took place over a two and a half year time frame.

The internship projects involved a great deal of research leading up to the experiments, working in the field and in the lab conducting experiments, and then writing up the findings from the field work. He had to write project proposals that included the objective and methods for the experiment. “The whole shah-bang”, according to Kevin. He was given a lot of responsibility.

Kevin had a “real strict” supervisor during his first internship. He would submit a written report to her and she would return it to him, marked with “a sea of red” ink, asking him to make many changes. He had only been in college for a year and a half and felt that scientific writing skills were not his “forte”. Kevin believes that a traditional-aged student might have been discouraged by the criticism from his supervisor, but that he had the maturity to know not to give up, to keep working until he got her approval. They now have a relationship based on mutual respect, and a professional friendship as colleagues in the scientific field. That particular internship ended up having a significant impact on the local community. It became the basis of a state-wide science program that helps control invasive plant species. Kevin is very proud to have been such an integral part of creating that program.

In addition to improved writing skills, Kevin believes that the internship helped him gain “a big deal of confidence”. He said that he became more comfortable approaching people in
high-level positions. He is also more confident about his abilities, something Kevin described as becoming more “independent”. In other words, he felt that the internships made him more confident in his ability to make professional decisions on his own or take the lead on a project. “Independently, I can make an educated guess about what’s going to happen if I do a certain method.” At times he now feels like the expert in a professional situation and he credits much of that to his internship experiences. Had he not completed the internships, he says that he is not sure that he would have gone into science, but now he considers himself a scientist. Kevin has since gone on to earn a Master’s degree in Plant and Soil Science, an accomplishment that he credits to the internships helping him discover his true career path.

His understanding of scientific research expanded exponentially. The internships helped him learn how to develop, set up, and run an experiment or scientific trial. Kevin applied the scientific knowledge he learned in the internship to his horticulture classes back on campus, allowing him to feel more confident in his academic performance. It enabled him to apply the practical application of what he learned back to his academic studies.

When asked what Kevin believes is the best thing that came from his internship experience, he says that it was the opportunity to “network” with others in the field. He considers the people that he worked with friends and he feels that he can use them as professional references. One of the people he worked with on an internship helped him secure his current position. Since Kevin wanted to stay local, he felt that completing the internships gave him the opportunity to become part of that local scientific community. Many from the region are forced to move away from the area to advance in their careers, but the internships helped him continue to work and contribute to his local community, which is important to Kevin.
Jane

Jane attended a private East coast United States Catholic college. She earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Environmental Science, graduating in December 2013. At the time of her internship, Jane was 44 years old, married with no dependents. She had over 20 years of professional experience prior to completing her five-month internship. The internship was unpaid, but credit-bearing and a requirement for graduation. Jane attended college as a full-time student. She worked part-time occasionally at a friend’s coffee shop while attending school, mostly “just to get out of the house”. Jane’s husband is retired from a career in the military. The current version of the GI Bill allows veterans to allocate some of their education benefit to a spouse or child, so Jane was able to use some of her husband’s GI Bill benefits to pay for her education. The Bill also provides a housing stipend for those attending college, so Jane was practically being paid to enroll.

Jane first began college many years ago in California when her husband was stationed at a military base in the state, but she chose to sacrifice her education to move with her husband and support his military career. Instead, she worked at various dental offices for 20 years. “Even though I earned a really good salary, I was never really passionate about it and I didn't really want to go on to become a dental hygienist or a dentist, so I've always been interested in the environment and science. So it's always been a dream of mine to get a degree in environmental science.” Jane first earned an Associate’s degree and then went on to complete a Bachelor’s degree.

While searching for an internship, Jane reached out to several members of the local community for help securing something. When speaking with one particular contact, instead of
providing her with other people in which to connect, he offered her an internship on the spot. The internship was at a nonpartisan website that deals with environmental and social issues impacting the local community. The prospective supervisor said that others had interned with him in the past and that he could provide her an opportunity to research and write articles for the website. She expected to sit in on board meetings, meet with her supervisor to help him out with other various projects, and be introduced to others in the community so that she could network professionally. He was the sole person at the company, so he would be Jane’s only supervisor and colleague. The internship was virtual, meaning she did the work from home instead of going into an office. She was drawn to this internship because of its flexible scheduling. At the time she was caring for an aging pet that needed her constant attention.

Jane selected the internship because of the writing component. She felt insecure about her ability to write professionally and told herself that writing is “painful to do but you should do something that you’re not good at so you can get better at it”. When she told her supervisor that her objective was to improve her writing skills, she says that he promised to help her edit and improve her articles.

Jane ended up being extremely disappointed with her internship. She wanted supervision and guidance to help ease her into a new career, but felt that her supervisor basically ignored her during her internship. There was a lack of communication between the two and she felt that she was given little to no work to complete. At one point, Jane asked her supervisor for something to do and he emailed her back to tell her that he was on vacation and could not help her. He had not let her know ahead of time that he would be away. She was particularly frustrated that her main objective to improve her writing skills was not fulfilled. “It would have been great if
someone could have taken one of my articles and basically ripped it apart for me and basically told me you need to stop doing this. I know that happens when you write papers in class and things like that but this is a different type of writing. I'm not writing a lab report or taking journal articles and writing you know, a literature review project or anything along those lines”.

The unstructured nature of the internship, combined with the lack of direction from her supervisor, left her feeling unsettled. Much of Jane’s time ended up being spent researching other articles online that could then be re-posted on the website. Jane ended up writing two articles for the site, but her supervisor did not take the time to edit them or provide feedback. “I just felt like I was spinning my wheels and really wasn't in good faith doing anything.” She says that she felt that she was her supervisor’s last priority because she was not being paid for her work.

A lack of productive work made it nearly impossible to complete the internship course requirements, forcing Jane to extend the unpaid experience in order to complete all the required hours and assignments. After approaching her supervisor with her concerns, he introduced her to Fred at the town Planning and Zoning department. Fred ended up being a great connection for Jane. He pulled together reports, summaries, findings, and meeting minutes and had them delivered to her home. He also met with Jane on multiple occasions to discuss a development project being completed in the local community that could impact a watershed area and therefore contaminate the water supply. Fred answered all of her questions and assisted her with writing her final internship paper based on the research she ended up completing in collaboration with him and his department. This fulfilled her requirement, but also helped her understand more
about how the local government was managing issues that were important to her, such as environmental sustainability during a period of rapid growth in her community.

Jane is not sure if she would have chosen to complete an internship if it had not been required. She had the option of doing a research project, independent study, or a professional internship and went with the internship because her advisor suggested that it would give her professional exposure and possibly help her get a job. She feels that those goals were not met and that the experience did not meet her expectations. She describes herself as still feeling “angry” about the experience and that she had to “unfriend” her initial supervisor on Facebook because seeing the posts from his website were “eating me up inside”. “I think I overestimated my supervisor. I thought he was more professional than what it turned out. I overestimated his professionalism and so that, you know, I think that was a letdown”. She wanted the internship to help launch her into a career that she is very passionate about and since it did not go as she had hoped, she reports being very “emotional” about the situation.

Still, Jane feels that she learned from the negative experience. The internship was not a total loss, as Jane was able to make a valuable connection and learn more about the local community and environment. When reflecting on her experience with her supervisor, Jane wishes that she had been more assertive and “held his feet to the fire more”. She feels that she did not express that she was unhappy with the internship at the time and wishes she had. If Jane were advising future students on selecting internships, she would suggest that they look for companies or organizations that are more established than the one in which she interned, which had only been online for a year when she took the internship. She also recommends that students take the time to really research the company before accepting an internship. Jane did not begin
utilizing her college’s career center until she was already interning, but she thinks they may have been a helpful resource for her beforehand if she had thought to seek out their assistance. Jane said that she wanted to participate in this study to tell her story and hopefully prevent others from experiencing a similar situation. She would like to someday supervise interns herself, to provide others with the kind of guidance that she wishes she had gotten from her own internship supervisor. She is currently looking for a job in her new field.

David

David graduated in 2013 with a Bachelor’s degree in Health Promotion from a public liberal arts university in the Southeastern United States. It took David 11 years of part-time study to complete his degree, which included two years away from college while going through a divorce. After taking the two-year break, David was able to go back to school and make the Dean’s List, an accomplishment that he is very proud of. Much of the time he was enrolled in college he was working full-time while attending classes part-time. He has one child and was 45 years old at the time of his internship.

Immediately after being medically discharged from the military, David attended “truck driving school just to get my head on straight”. After working as a driver for some time, David said that he “started growing up and I realized, you know, I have nothing under my belt. Nothing, so I have to go back to school to get something to better myself so that I can in turn provide a better life [for his wife and son]”. David was able to persist and finish his degree over such a long time frame because he felt that he had “learned the importance of a college education prior to enrolling in college”.

David’s desire to better his life led him to investigate tuition benefits provided by the United States government through the GI Bill. The GI Bill requires that you complete your
education within 10 years of leaving the military, but David misunderstood and thought that he had to simply begin college within the 10-year period. He ran out of benefits quickly, but even with funding his education almost completely on his own, he persisted. He felt that his peers were more accomplished and believed that he was being left behind without a college education. “I saw people that had gone to college from my high school and where they were in their life and the things that they had achieved, and I think that was part of my motivation was I've always felt that I was behind where I needed to be relative to my age. And so, now that I've completed my Bachelor's degree and I'm looking at a Master's program and I've secured a career, not just a job, and I've purchased my own home all by myself”.

David’s four-month internship was paid and a graduation requirement. He was interested in participating in an internship because “it was a unique opportunity to use the tools that I was given in the degree program in a work setting”. David worked part-time on campus in the Environmental Health and Safety department at the time of his internship. Since the internship was a graduation requirement and he was trying to balance paid employment and school, finding time for an internship was going to be a challenge for David. He approached his supervisor about completing his internship requirement in the department where he worked as a student employee. His supervisor was “intrigued” but skeptical. David’s major was Health Promotion and his supervisor did not initially see the fit with Environmental Health and Safety. They were able to think creatively and come up with a project for David to oversee and implement, which was separate from his other work duties. David was able to maintain his student employee status in the department while fulfilling his internship requirement.
The college’s Marine Science department was required to implement the use of a respirator in certain parts of their program. This was a new regulation, so David’s supervisor asked him to research the equipment to determine what the college should use. He then ordered and tested all of the equipment to determine what would work best for the college’s program. Once David determined which equipment was best to use, he was asked to write a report on his findings. From there, he created the guidelines for use and implementation. The department was “on guidance from nowhere”, so they relied completely on David’s work and recommendation.

To make this happen, David needed to coordinate with other departments on campus and off-campus, including setting up an off-campus training program for faculty and staff that would use the respirator. The students would be required to complete a medical questionnaire that David created and then see David to be fit for a respirator before they could use it as part of the marine studies program.

David was so successful in developing and implementing the new program during his internship, that he was hired full-time to continue running the program he created. “I had made a favorable impression; they offered me a position and I accepted”. David’s supervisor was so impressed with him that he has now been charged with creating another new program that he will again implement and oversee. David is now responsible for monitoring and maintaining healthy indoor air quality for all buildings on campus. Interestingly, this work perfectly combines his major in Health Promotion and the mission of the Environmental Health and Safety department. David was able to create a niche for himself in an area that once seemed like an unlikely fit. When he determined that his internship could be a fit for both his academic major and his then student employment job, David says that he was “fascinated”.
It was a totally different side of a career path that I had never even considered before – and the more I was exposed to it, the more interested in it I became. And then the internship opportunity came up and I was able to utilize the tools that were taught to me to develop that program and implement it. And then I realized that there are correlations between health promotion and environmental health and safety; you just have to think outside of the box a little bit in order to mesh those disciplines together. So it became a very valid career path for me and I'm quite pleased with it, actually.

His internship experience redirected his career path a bit, opened him up to other options, and helped him “solidify long-term life goals”. David reported that the internship was more significant for his career decision making than his major itself. Though, he believes that the internship allowed him to “utilize the tools that were taught to me to develop that program and implement it”. Therefore, David’s coursework prepared him to succeed at his internship, but the internship itself helped him connect two fields and develop a career.

As an adult student, David reported often feeling like an “outsider” in his classes. He “didn’t integrate with the students well” and “didn’t really identify with their struggles”. Since he had commitments in his life that most traditional students did not, he felt that he could not relate to their lives. It was not easy for David to manage an internship, work and take classes, all while raising a child. He compared it to “spinning a lot of plates”.

David had nothing critical to say about his internship. He did feel that the internship course itself required too much academic work, which he considered to be the greatest “sacrifice” he made during the experience. A “massive professional portfolio” was required. Yet, David is glad that the internship was a requirement because he said that he may not have participated in
one if it had not been. David believes that an internship “separates the wheat from the chaff”. In other words, it “separates the people that are serious about their professional development from those that aren't”.

Summary

This qualitative study explored the experiences of four adult interns, which specifically utilized IPA to understand the meaning these individuals attached to their internships. This group approached college and internships from varying perspectives and with varying life experiences. Their stories were all different, but the common phenomenon shared by the group and examined through IPA was the internship. Several themes emerged from the participant stories. Chapter 5 explores these themes, compares the findings from this study with the literature, and outlines implications for practice and future research.
Chapter 5: Findings and Implications

Through a qualitative approach, the guiding research question for this study was: “Are internships beneficial for adult learners with prior work experience?” While the data revealed that this group clearly benefitted from their internships, a deeper level of reflection was critical to understanding the actual benefits of internships for these participants. The result of this analysis was the emergence of a more pertinent research question: “How do adult learners make sense of their internship experience?” The data was then examined through the lens of both questions, and several key themes surrounding adult learners and internships emerged from the study.

This chapter explores those themes and their connection to the literature. Study limitations are identified, as well as suggestions for future research on this topic. Recommendations for colleges and universities related to internship programs for adult learners are also provided.

Themes and Connections to the Literature

While there is a significant amount of literature published on internships and adult learners as separate topics, there is a chasm in the literature published on adult learners participating in internships. As such, it is important to compare the emergent themes to the published literature on internships, which generally does not define the age of the population being studied or assumes that they are traditional-aged students embarking on first-time careers. It was interesting to find that many of the themes that emerged from this study did indeed mirror the current literature (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Compton, Cox, & Lannan, 2006; Koffel, 1994;
but new themes also presented themselves from the data. The themes include the following:

- college was a transformative experience for this group, with all participants attending college to change careers;
- adult participants believe that they took their internship more seriously than their traditional-aged peers;
- internships provide benefits for adult learners, which include skill development, confidence building, networking and employment, and exposure to career realities;
- those who had strong internship mentors had more positive internship outcomes;
- the study participants all had flexibly scheduled internships.

College as Transformative Experience.

It became apparent through the interview process that it would be impossible to understand the value that each participant placed on their internship experience without understanding why they were attending college at this stage in their lives.

Everyone reported that they wanted to attend college as an adult to transform their life in some way. Colin worked in the family business for years to help support his family. When his children went to college, so did Colin. Jane worked for years as a medical assistant, moving throughout the country with her husband for over 20 years in support of his military career. When he retired, she used his GI Bill benefits to finally realize her dream of attending college for environmental science. Kevin was a self-described “addict” who enrolled in college after attending a recovery treatment program. College helped him stay on track with his sobriety and he has “never looked back”, earning a Master’s degree in 2012. David is a military veteran who
tired of seeing his peers advance in their lives more quickly than he believed he was, so he enrolled in college with the hope that it would help him create a better life for himself.

In each case, college has in fact changed the participant’s life. For most of them, the internship was also life altering. Colin and Kevin used their internships as a path to attending graduate school. David’s internship led him to a full-time job. While Jane’s internship was not particularly productive, it did help her develop a relationship with someone who works for a local government office who is helping her pursue job opportunities.

**Career changes.** The most consistent area of transformation noted by all four participants was career change. As predicted from the literature review, participants in this study were all attending college to better their lives and embark on new careers (Berker & Horn, 2004; Herr & Cramer, 1992; Richardson & King, 1998). Career change is one of the primary reasons adults enroll in higher education (Mosenson & Mosenson, 2012). The youngest participant was 37 at the time of his first internship. Though they all had many years of work experience prior to interning, they reported that the internships helped them transition to a new career in some way. Even Jane, who was extremely unhappy with her internship experience, acknowledges that she made a professional connection at the Planning and Zoning office. He is helping her with her career development by sending her job opportunities and introducing her to others who work in the field. This study clearly demonstrated that internships were beneficial for this particular group of adult learners who were all enrolled in college with the primary objective being to change careers.

**Taking the internship seriously.**

Since college attendance and career transition were considered meaningful for all participants, it follows that they considered their internships very important to their development.
Most reported that they felt that they took the internship experience more seriously than their traditional-aged peers. The group felt that younger students may be attending college with less deliberate intentions, perhaps because they feel that college is the next logical step in their lives and they are not yet sure what they want to do with their careers; they may not approach their internships with as much direction as the adult learners in this study.

Colin felt that traditional-aged students approach their studies and internships with passion or for money, but that his life experience helped him approach the experience with an interest in making things better for the future, almost from a spiritual perspective. He knew that science was his true passion and the opportunity to apply what he learned in class to a real scientific study was “a dream come true” for Colin. Similarly, Kevin believes that younger, more traditional students, are less mature and would not necessarily take the internship seriously or approach the opportunity responsibly. He felt that his maturity helped him succeed in the internship. He knew to not “take himself too seriously”, but to be serious about the internship itself.

David considered the internship a “work project”, since he was employed already in the same location as his internship placement. He observed that the traditional-aged students were “scrambling” to get their required internships completed. That it was “just another hoop they had to crawl through”, and that they did not approach the internship “with the seriousness that I did”. The faculty member who supervised David’s internship commented that his work was some of the best they had seen, which he considered proof that he approached the internship with a greater sense of responsibility than his more traditional-aged peers.
Jane compared herself now with the way that she would have approached the internship earlier in her life. She took the opportunity very seriously and would probably not have been so upset about her internship experience at a younger age because it would not have been as important to her development at that point. Jane went into the internship with very specific objectives. She understood her strengths and weaknesses and knew the skills she wanted to gain. When those objectives were not met, she was more disappointed than she would have been as a traditional-aged student. “I think I was taking it much more seriously than if I were 18, 19 years old.”

Each of these students believed that the internships were a critical step forward for their career development. They were focused on their studies and had very specific goals regarding what they wanted to gain from attending college and from their internships. According to David, by the time you participate in an internship as an adult, “you realize the importance of what you're doing more. And I think the college experience at an older age just makes you appreciate the effort that you're putting into yourself because you – you can see beyond the end of the college experience and realize what it’s going to do for you later on.” Based on their level of academic and career focus, the reflections from this group provide a strong argument for the importance of internships for adult learners.

**Internship benefits.** Internships have been shown to support student growth, both personally and professionally (Giordani, 2010; Moore, 2010; True, 2011). Students have reported that internships help them gain confidence, explore a potential future career path, make connections, learn new skills, network with others in the field, and secure full-time employment (Cord & Clements, 2010; Farrar, 2012; Green, 2013; True, 2011; Vogt, 2009). All four participants
reported developing professional connections as a result of the internship experience. The participants in this study said that their internships helped them develop new skills, build confidence, network with people already working in the field, and help secure employment. For all of the participants, internships exposed them to the realities of their newly chosen career.

**Skill development.** The participants expected that their internships would help them gain new skills and three of the four did report skill development as a positive outcome. Professional writing, critical thinking, problem solving, and time management were among the most common skills mentioned.

Kevin and Colin reported that they learned how to facilitate a scientific study, including developing a proposal, creating the research design and methods, running the trial, and reporting the results. All four participants said that their internships involved some form of research and writing. They appreciated this because they believed that professional writing often takes on a form different from academic writing, so it is not a skill that is easily learned in the classroom. In fact, Jane’s primary goal for her internship was to develop professional writing skills, but she did not feel that her internship met her expectations. Kevin felt that his writing was poor at the beginning of his internship, but his supervisor was very involved and marked his work with a “sea of red” until he submitted writing that she felt was of high professional quality. As such, he believes that internship played a critical role in helping him develop writing skills. Those skills have helped Kevin in the classroom and professionally.

**Confidence building.** All of the participants in this study attended college and participated in internships after having worked professionally beforehand. Yet, many reported that one of the greatest things they gained from their internship experience was self-confidence.
According to David, a critical part of the internship is that “it's a self confidence-boosting experience that the more you put into it, the more you are rewarded with your own effort”. Kevin had experienced many personal struggles before attending college. Thanks to his internships, he was able to develop greater confidence in himself and as a scientist. The confidence he gained from the internship helped him reframe his own definition of his personal identity – no longer an addict, but now a scientist.

It seems that the more responsibility each participant was given, the greater satisfaction and confidence they gained from the experience. David reported being assigned a large project and was told, “all right, make it happen for us”. He was able to develop a sense of ownership and pride surrounding the program that he was able to implement. Both Colin and Kevin were allowed to help develop scientific trials through suggesting study design and methods. From there they were able to run the trials and see the study through from start to finish. They wrote proposals and then reported on the results after completing the study. Even though Colin was frustrated with the end result of his scientific internship, he was still happy that he participated. He felt that he was given a lot of control over the internship environment. He was forced to anticipate problems and then given the opportunity to solve them with support from his supervisor.

The common thread between David, Colin, and Kevin’s experiences is that they were given independence and control over their work, but had supervisors who were available to answer questions and support them while they learned. This gave them room to develop confidence in a safe environment. Jane is a great example of the opposite situation. She had hoped to gain new skills from her internship, but was given a lot of freedom with no real
responsibility. She was asked to research and write articles, but no guidance was provided and she ended up leaving the internship feeling defeated and let down. She reports feeling “angry” and “deceived”. As she searches for jobs, there was no mention of feeling confident about her skills or her future career prospects as a result of her internship experience.

**Networking and employment.** All four participants reported that networking with those working professionally in their career field was a critical part of their internship experience.

Two of the participants, Colin and Jane, feel that they have “burned bridges” as a result of their internships not going as they had expected. Colin was so upset with the result of the study he was involved in that he confronted his supervisor with his concerns, which caused some problems with their relationship. He is enrolled in a graduate program in another city and hopes to go back home to work after completing the degree. He feels that he will approach professional situations more carefully in the future so that he can continue to build positive professional relationships.

Jane’s internship was for a website that was run by only one person and she felt that she was an “inconvenience” to her supervisor. Jane may have had a difficult time with her initial supervisor, but she left her internship with a solid contact in the local Planning and Zoning department. He is helping Jane with her job search and connecting her with others in the local community. Jane considers that relationship “the lemonade from the lemons”. The internship supervisor, or mentor, that the student worked with on-site really made a difference in the outcome of the internship for each participant. Jane believes that an effective supervisor should be a mentor, “somebody who is willing to, you know, take time out of their day to train somebody and – and to really take them step by step and – because to me that's what an
internship is, you know. It's almost a training session, I feel like. You're training that person for that job”.

Kevin and David both easily made many contacts through their internships that have helped them secure employment. David’s internship turned into a paid full-time job immediately following the experience. The program he created while interning was so valuable to the college that they hired David to continue facilitating that program, and to develop a new indoor air quality program. Kevin stayed so closely connected to people he worked with during his internship that he easily found a job in the local scientific community after he finished his graduate work. The people he met while interning are now his peers and he happily reports having a vast professional network. People often contact him and consider him the “expert” on many scientific issues related to the local ecosystem.

**Greater understanding of career realities.** The internships exposed each participant to the realities of the field in which they were about to embark upon in their new careers. Kevin enjoyed interning in the field so much that he participated in five more internships as an undergraduate and easily has transitioned into his new career. While David completed his internship in the same department where he worked as a student employee, the internship gave him the opportunity to interact with people in other departments throughout the university. The internship helped him understand how things operate in a college setting and is making it easier for him to implement new programs now that he works on campus full-time.

While Colin and Jane were disenchanted by their internships, they still learned some important lessons from their experiences. As students, they approached their new careers from an altruistic perspective, with a passion for the environment and wanting to make things better
for their local communities. Colin said that he was frustrated to learn that scientific research is often funded by commercial entities with their own financial interests in mind. His internship involved studying a plant that was facing extinction. While the study determined that there was a way to grow the resource in the wild more easily, the results were not published or replicated because it was not in the economic interests of the company that funded the study. Jane went into her internship believing that her supervisor “cared more about the environment and cared more about the community”, but after working for him she has determined “that he cares about himself”. While questioning the motivation of others involved with their internships, Colin and Jane’s passion for the environment were affirmed, but they move forward with a greater understanding of the reality of their career fields. Exposure to these realities has not discouraged them from pursuing their new careers, but instead will likely help them become more successful in their first full-time jobs post-college because they understand more about the fields and some of the challenges they may encounter in the future.

**Strong Mentors are Important.**

All participants in this study embarked upon their internships after having worked professionally for many years beforehand. Yet, even with years of work experience, the participants benefited strongly from internship supervisors who were invested in their professional development. These examples are threaded throughout the earlier themes, particularly in the sections on skill development, confidence building, and networking. The participants felt that their supervisors were one of the most significant factors in determining whether or not they believed their internships were successful.

The participants were all given a lot of independence at their internships. Most were expected to complete their internships on their own time, usually not in an office. However, the
participants who reported getting the most from their internships all reported having positive experiences with their internship supervisors. David’s supervisor gave him the opportunity to create and run a new program, but David said that his supervisor was always available to help or answer questions whenever necessary. He was given a project with a deadline, and told “it's up to you to manage your time and your skill set to complete that project to the best of your ability”. David’s supervisor allowed him to take ownership of the project, to take on a lot of responsibility as an intern, and therefore he developed strong time management skills. According to David, his supervisor’s “managerial style is pretty much: here’s the keys, go drive it. And, you know, if you have any questions about it then by all means, you know, he's there to answer, and to help, and to guide, but otherwise he gives you complete and total responsibility to go about doing what you need to do”.

Similarly, Kevin reported gaining the most from an internship with a supervisor who asked him to revise a written proposal several times. He had the freedom to do the work on his own, but a strong mentor was there to support and guide him. On the other hand, Jane’s supervisor gave her tremendous freedom, but no guidance. She was left completely on her own during the internship experience and feels “angry” about the experience. It was only when she met a secondary supervisor who provided her with more hands-on mentoring that Jane felt she was able to learn something from her internship experience.

This theme ties closely back to the literature on adult learning theory and the study’s theoretical lens. In the 1970’s, Gottfredson (1977) found that careers become more stable as people age. That concept would be challenged less than three decades later. In 1999, Truluck and Courtney looked at the learning styles of people ages 65 and older and found that there is an
increasing focus on lifelong learning as people live and work longer. People’s lives and careers are no longer static. Today’s education system and culture place a greater emphasis on lifelong learning, making Kolb’s theory quite practical when examining the educational needs of adult learners (1984). Kolb (and others) believe that adults learn through experience constantly throughout their lives (Jarvis, 2009; Knowles, 1984; Kolb, 1984).

Keegan (1994) found that while other adult learning theorists believe that adults learn best through self-directed learning, many adults are not capable of doing so. Adults must be taught how to become self-directed learners. The results of this study demonstrate that strong internship supervisors, or mentors, help interns do just that. By providing the opportunity to learn through hands-on experience, the supervisors who allowed their interns to take ownership of projects while offering supportive supervision, allowed the participants to engage in self-directed learning. This helped them develop professionally on a number of levels, as well as gain the benefits described earlier in this section.

Flexible Internships for Adults.

It was also expected, based on the literature, that the participants would need to make sacrifices to fit an internship into their lives (Tahmincioglu, 2010). Adult learners often have commitments outside of their studies, such as a full-time job and dependent children, which make it challenging for them to participate in a traditionally structured internship (Gordon, 1978; Koffel, 1994; Rubin, 1986; Varty, 1994). The group talked about having to juggle work, school, and outside commitments in order to find a way to complete their internships. David compared the challenge to having a “lot of spinning plates in the air”. To make an internship possible, all four participants found opportunities that involved flexible work schedules.
Colin and Kevin’s internships were electives, but they decided to get involved with these opportunities because they could complete the internship work on their own time, making their own schedule. Both Colin and Kevin’s internships were scientific. As they were research and field based, they were inherently flexible. The two could go to the lab or out into the field on their own time to collect samples and other data on-site. Both of their internships entailed a great deal of research and writing, which could be completed at any time.

David’s internship was a graduation requirement, so his supervisor at his paid job on campus created a special project for him to complete as a supplement to his other responsibilities. That project fulfilled the college’s academic internship requirement and also led to a full-time job for David upon graduation.

Finally, Jane’s internship allowed her to work from home as opposed to in an office, and create her own hours. She considered this a benefit because it enabled her to care for her terminally ill dog while completing her internship requirement. The “virtual” structure of the internship did not work for Jane. As more people work remotely, significantly more internship opportunities are being structured in this way. Jane believes that working from home would have been fine if she had been able to meet with her supervisor in-person regularly, attend meetings with other stakeholders, and network with people in the field.

It is clear from this study that flexible internship scheduling made it possible for these participants to find a way to make work, school, and an internship fit into their busy lives.

**Summary.**

The results of the study help fill a gap in the literature on adult learners who participate in internships. Since there is so little literature published on adult learners and internships, it was impossible to predict how the adults in this study would describe their experiences.
When comparing the themes from this study with the literature, there are a number of similarities, as well as some new information.

- This group attended college to embark on new careers and simultaneously improve their lives. Internships played a large part in helping them achieve their goals.

- This group believed that they took their internships much more seriously than their younger peers.

- They learned about the realities of their new career fields, gained new skills, and developed confidence in their abilities, all while making professional connections. One of the participant’s internships led directly to a full-time job.

- While the students thrived when given independent ownership of their work, they still were most successful when they had a supportive and accessible mentor available to provide guidance.

- The internships allowed the students to participate in experiential, self-directed learning. Those included in the study had worked professionally for many years prior to attending college (and subsequently participating in internships), reinforcing the notion that adulthood is not a static time in one’s life and career. This supports the literature on adult and lifelong learning theories.

- Each participant had creatively developed flexibly scheduled internships, enabling them to participate in opportunities that they may not have been otherwise able to due to external factors and commitments.

**Study Limitations**
The objective of this study was to carefully examine the experiences of a small sample of participants. It is impossible to determine whether the results of this study would be transferable to other adult learners who were involved in internships. The subjects self-selected to participate in the study, therefore it is likely that they felt more strongly about their internship experience than those who did not contact the researcher to participate. That may have skewed the results in a way that would not have occurred if a random sample had been selected. Additionally, the study relied on the participants to recall details of past internships, some of which were several years ago. This can always be an issue in terms of accuracy; however, since the study looked more at the feelings that the participants had about their experiences, the overall story mattered more than the details.

The researcher has worked in the field of internships for many years, at times with adult students. Therefore, the possibility that bias could play a role in the study was acknowledged. The participants were not guided or directed to answer the questions in any particular way. They were given the opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy and to determine that the messages they had delivered were consistent with how they felt that they actually experienced their internships.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

This study generated in-depth information regarding the experiences of four former adult undergraduate interns. Themes on adult learners and internships emerged, yielding recommendations for practice. Yet, this study also generated questions that could not be answered with the current data, revealing areas for possible future research.
The group reported that they had enrolled in college to better their lives and embark on a new career. It is important to note that none were enrolled in college to advance in a profession in which they were currently working, so it is unclear whether internships are beneficial to adult learners in that position. Future research would be helpful in understanding whether internships play a role in adults advancing in careers in which they are already employed. As skills and requirements for current jobs are constantly changing, lifelong learning strongly applies to adults who wish to remain employed or advance in their current career path.

It would be interesting to replicate this study utilizing a larger and more diverse pool of participants. The subjects in this study majored in some area of the sciences, which was merely a coincidence and not by design. It would be interesting to look at students in other fields, such as business or the arts, to see if they place the same value on internships as these participants.

While the purpose of this study was not to look at paid versus unpaid internships, the participants were asked to identify in the demographic questionnaire whether or not they were compensated for their work. Interestingly, three out of four participants reported being paid. They were all assigned meaningful projects and allowed significant opportunity to take responsibility for the work they completed. The one unpaid participant was given little to do and limited responsibility. The topic of paid versus unpaid internships applies both to traditional-aged students and adult learners. While this is not relevant to the central research question, it may be worth investigating in future research. Do students place more value on paid internships versus unpaid internships? Is the work assigned to paid interns more fruitful than work assigned to unpaid interns?
Technology is playing a huge role in the way we live and work. As such, many students are now interning away from a brick-and-mortar office environment, often completing work for their internships at home. In this study, Jane was writing for a website and expected to complete all of the work for her internship from home. There was no office and Jane rarely had the opportunity to meet with her internship supervisor in-person. She believes that she gained little from the experience and hopes that others can avoid similar situations in the future. This begs the question, are virtual internships an effective learning tool? Can students gain valuable information about working in the professional world when they are doing the work from their homes? This study clearly indicated that flexibly scheduled internships were important to this group of participants. It would be interesting to learn more about the effectiveness of flexible internship opportunities. Are they now common for adult learners and traditional-aged students, or an unusual occurrence?

Finally, it would be interesting to learn more about adult learners and internship participation from college-based internship advisors and from the perspective of the internship employers. While this study looked at experiences of the former interns themselves, we know little about the perspectives of other stakeholders on adults participating in internships.

As there is such a large gap in the literature on adult learners and internships, any future research that is conducted will be an important addition to the field.

**Implications**

If some of the primary objectives of internship programs include exposing students to the workplace and teaching workplace skills, one wonders if internships are relevant educational experiences for an older population who may already be equipped with workplace skills and has
worked professionally before becoming students. The literature tells us that adult students typically have commitments and financial restraints, such as full-time work and family, that could prevent them from easily completing internships (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Berker & Horn, 2004; Dill & Henley, 1998; Jenkins, 2012; Richardson & King, 1998). It is especially important to determine whether it makes sense to ask (or require) adult learners to intern if it means that they have to make major life sacrifices in order to participate. Should colleges expect this population to participate in such work-based learning programs? This brings us back to the central research question: “Are internships beneficial for adult learners with prior work experience?” The overall answer, based on how this sample articulated their experiences, is yes.

Even with many years of prior work experience, the participants expressed that they benefited in several ways from their internship experiences. The internships helped them embark on new careers by allowing them to network with people who work in their future career field, and understand the culture of the field in which they hope to be employed. One participant’s internship turned into a full-time job. Every participant reported that they expected that the internship would help them gain new skills, and for most, that was the case. A majority of the participants said that their internships helped them build confidence. The results of the study lend themselves to some practical recommendations for internship programs serving adult learners. Colleges and universities should embrace internships and other forms of experiential learning as important and relevant methods of teaching and learning for all of their students, including adult students.

**Experiential Learning Requirement**

Since there are many benefits that students may derive from internships, it makes sense that internships should be encouraged for both traditional-aged students and adult learners.
Jane’s academic program required that she participate in either an internship or a research project. In fact, many colleges have now implemented some sort of experiential learning requirement, which allows flexibility in terms of how the requirement is completed. Elon University requires their students to complete an internship, study abroad, conduct a research project, participate in a service-learning project, or take a leadership role on campus (Elon, n.d.). What matters is the hands-on experience, but the way that experience is obtained may be possible through a variety of experiential mediums. All of these forms of experiential education provide students with hands-on experience, and some may be more accessible for adult learners with busy schedules. So while a dedicated internship may not always work for an adult learner, a research project may fit their schedule while still providing the opportunity for practical experience. Both Kevin and Colin’s internships were research based, allowing them to explore the field of science outside of the classroom. They met people who work in science and learned about the realities of scientific research, all with a great amount of flexibility in terms of scheduling. Colleges and universities should think creatively about implementing different types of experiential and work-based learning opportunities for all of their students.

**Flexibility is Critical**

Internship programs with strict parameters regarding site placement may not be a good fit for this population. Regardless of whether internships are required or elective, it is important that colleges and universities allow for flexibility in selecting and scheduling internship hours. If the student can document that the internship is relevant to their academic area of study and career goals, the internship may be a good fit, even if the schedule or location is unconventional.

All four participants in this study had internships that allowed for flexible scheduling. When David first approached his supervisor to try and come up with a way to complete his
internship in the office where he worked, his supervisor was “skeptical” because he did not see how the work done in the office was relevant to David’s major. David’s supervisor was open to the idea, however, and they were able to come up with a project that would fit the needs of the department and was relevant to David’s field of study. This is a great way for students with full-time jobs to be able to learn new skills through taking on an internship project in their current place of employment, but it is important that the work assigned is different than what they do as part of their daily responsibilities. The student will likely gain the most from the experience if the internship is structured to allow them to work in a department or area that is unique from their full-time responsibilities and/or with a different supervisor.

Another option is a hybrid model where interns work some hours in the office and then spend the rest of their time working on a project at home during off-hours. In many ways, this is the best of both worlds because the student is exposed to the professional field on site, combined with the flexibility of completing some work from home. Kevin and Colin’s internships were similar in the sense that some of their work was done in the field and at the lab, while research and writing was done on their own time.

Virtual internships, where an intern works entirely (or mostly) from home, are becoming more popular; though, as we learned from Jane, these types of internships may not always prove to be effective learning opportunities. The student and college advisor should carefully vet the opportunity before a student commits to an internship that requires them to work completely from home.

**Advising Students and Employers**

It is important that academic and career services professionals assist adult learners in their selection of appropriate internship opportunities. It may be easy to believe that an adult
with prior work experience already has the necessary job search skills to select and secure an internship site, but that assumption should not be made. Different fields have different requirements or uniquely structured work environments. An adult often needs as much, if not more, support than a traditional-aged student when choosing an internship, since their goals tend to be very specific and their needs unique. Students must interview the internship mentor/supervisor carefully to fully understand what they will be doing on site. Since the adults in this study report that they took their internships seriously, they must be assigned meaningful work. They need guidance from their supervisor, along with the opportunity to take ownership of a project or assignment. The more responsibility they are given, the more successful they likely will be.

Similarly, it is important for colleges and universities to educate internship site supervisors about the needs of adult learners. Since adult learners have unique needs, employers should be encouraged to allow their interns to work flexible hours and think creatively about the types of projects assigned. Internship supervisors should also be advised that adult learners still appreciate and need guidance, even with many years of prior work experience. Adult learners often approach internships with goals that are similar to those of their traditional-aged peers, in that they need help learning new skills and about a new career path. They often lack confidence, so mentoring is important.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative IPA study was to determine whether internships are beneficial for adult learners with prior work experience. All participants in this study attended college as a mechanism to change careers. The results of the study clearly demonstrated that this
group benefitted tremendously from internships in a variety of ways. While a wide body of literature exists on the topics of internships and adult learners separately, there is a significant gap in the literature on internships for adult learners. Most literature published on the topic is several decades old. This study contributes to the current literature on adult learners and internships.

Attending college was important to this group, and transformed their lives in a number of ways. The significance that they placed on their education seemed to tie directly to the way in which they approached their internships. Since all of the participants were enrolled in college to embark on new careers, they had clear goals and expectations for their internships. Therefore, they all believed that they took the internship experience much more seriously than their traditional-aged peers may have. Internships provided very specific benefits for this group of adult learners, which included skill development, confidence building, networking and employment, and exposure to career realities. Those with strong internship mentors on site tended to have a better experience with their internships, reporting more satisfaction and greater outcomes in general.

The result of this analysis was the emergence of a more pertinent research question: “How do adult learners make sense of their internship experience?” The initial question asked whether internships were beneficial for this population. In order to truly understand whether the participants benefited from the internships, it was important to understand the meaning they made of their experiences. They all processed their individual experiences differently, but all believed that the internships played a significant role in their personal and/or professional development in some way. Through making meaning of the stories told by adult learners,
including why they attended college as adults and the value they placed on their internships, the researcher was able to develop an understanding of what they gained from participating in an internship. This study led to many suggestions for future research, including replicating the study with a larger and more diverse pool of participants.

Colleges and universities should encourage adult learners to participate in internships and/or other forms of experiential learning. This recommendation comes with some suggestions for both college internship advisors and internship employers. Colleges should structure their internship programs to allow for scheduling flexibility. Adult learners tend to have commitments outside of school, such as full-time jobs and dependent children, making a traditionally structured internship challenging to fit into their busy schedules. The participants in this study all had flexibly scheduled internships, allowing them to work from home on their own time, work on an internship project at their place of employment, or to work part-time in the field and part of the time at home.

College is transforming the lives of millions of adult learners. As they work to better themselves and embark upon new or advanced careers, many will take part in an internship. The results of this study demonstrate that the adult learners involved felt that their internships were significant experiences. As careers and workplace needs change, there will continue to be an increasing emphasis on lifelong learning. Internships have the power to play a tremendous role in the personal and professional development of students of all ages. Colleges and universities that leverage experiential learning as a valuable educational tool for their students will likely find that they are graduating alumni who are prepared to succeed in the modern workforce.
References


Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2012). *A matter of degrees: Promising practices for community college student success (A first look).* The University of Texas at Austin, Community College Leadership Program.


Learning Environments


Value/127231/?sid=at&utm_source=at&utm_medium=en


Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

Participant Information

Please complete the following information as part of this study. The information will be stored separately from the other data collected to maintain confidentiality. Your name, the name of the institution, and the name of your internship site will all be changed in the final thesis.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Debra Gelinas at 617-833-0322, Gelinas.d@husky.neu.edu or Dr. Leslie Hitch at 617-529-9557, L.Hitch@neu.edu.

Preferred Name (First Name/Nickname) ____________________________________________________

Email

address __________________________ Telephone __________________________

College/University attended ________________________________________________

Major ___________________________ Graduation year ______________
Did you attend school Full-Time or Part-Time? ____________________________

Gender _______ Age at time of internship________

Marital status at time of internship (single, married, divorced, widowed)________

Number of dependents at time of internship (children or other)________

Number of years professional work experience prior to internship________
Were you working at a job in addition to your internship simultaneously?________
If yes, were you working full-time or part-time?________
If yes, was your job at the same company as your internship?________

Name and Location of internship____________________________________________

Length of internship________________

Approx. start date of internship_________________ Approx. end date_________________

Did you earn academic credit for your internship? (Yes/No) __________
If yes, was internship an elective or required for graduation________________________
Was your internship paid or unpaid? ____________________

Please return the completed form to gelinas.d@husky.neu.edu. Thank you.
Appendix B: Interview Questions

1) How would you like to be addressed during this interview (first name/nickname, etc)?

2) What does the company do (what is their mission)?
   Follow-up questions: How many people work there? What department did you intern in?

3) Describe the type of work you did at the internship?
   Follow-up questions: What type of projects did you work on? What was the day-to-day like at your internship?

4) Why did you want to participate in an internship?
   Follow-up questions: What did you hope to gain from completing an internship? Did you have to make sacrifices in your life to be able to intern? If so, what were they (financial, personal, professional, etc)?

5) Why did you choose to attend college as an adult?
   Follow-up questions: Were you making a career change, did your life circumstances change, etc?

6) Why did you choose this particular internship (or internship site)?
   Follow-up questions: Was it hard to get this particular internship? What was the process to secure the internship?

7) Describe how you fit the internship in to your schedule?
   Follow-ups: Did you have to cut your hours at work or in the classroom to accommodate the internship? Did you intern where you were already working?
8) Did you approach the internship differently as an adult learner than you would have as a traditional-aged student? If so, how?

9) What did you gain from your internship experience, both personally and professionally?
   Follow-up questions: What new skills did you learn? Were you offered a job? Make connections?

10) What did you expect to learn from the internship? Did it meet your expectations?

11) Were you supervised in some fashion by a faculty or staff member from your campus?
   Follow-up questions: Was there an orientation on campus prior to beginning your internship? Did your campus-based supervisor provide you with insight, resources, or some other form of help? If so, what were they?

12) What was the best thing about your internship?

13) What was the worst thing about your internship?

14) What is your definition of a successful internship?

15) Describe whether you feel that your internship was a success or not? Why?

Thank you.

Appendix C: IRB Documents
NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: March 24, 2014
IRB #: CPS14-03-12

Principal Investigator(s): Leslie Hitch
Debra Gelinhas

Department: Doctor of Education Program
College of Professional Studies

Address: 20 Belvidere
Northeastern University

Title of Project: Nontraditional Undergraduates and Internships: A Qualitative Study Reflecting on the Experiences of Adult Learners

Participating Sites: N/A

DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7

Informed Consents: One (1) signed consent form

Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: MARCH 23, 2015

Investigator's Responsibilities:

1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection
College of Professional Studies, School of Education

Names of Investigators: Principal Investigator: Dr. Leslie Hitch, Student Researcher: Debra Gelinas

Title of Project: Nontraditional Undergraduates and Internships: A Qualitative Study Reflecting on the Experiences of Adult Learners

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. The purpose of this study is to learn about how adult undergraduates (aged 25 and older) experience internships. You are being asked to participate in this study because you completed an internship as an adult (aged 25 or older).

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to complete a brief questionnaire about yourself and your internship. You will then be asked to participate in a one-on-one phone interview with one of the researchers. The interview will last approximately one hour and will ask you to discuss your internship experience. The interview will later be transcribed. You will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of the interview for accuracy. The researcher may contact you to clarify statements in the transcript at a later date. The researcher will record the interview on a digital recording device. She will then transfer the recording to a password-protected computer. The recording will then be deleted from the recording device. The audio will be transcribed by a transcription service, but no identifying information will be provided to any external party.

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers involved with this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way. In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study. You will not be paid for your participation in this study and there are no foreseen costs to you. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. However, your answers may help to develop internship program recommendations for colleges and universities.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Debra Gelinas at 617-833-0322, Gelinas.d@husky.neu.edu or Dr. Leslie Hitch at 617-529-9557, l.hitch@neu.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617-373-4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

You may keep this form for yourself.

Thank you,

Dr. Leslie Hitch (Principal Investigator) and Debra Gelinas (Student Researcher)
Direct Email from Researcher to Possible Participant

Dear ___________________

My name is Debra Gelin and I am a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University with over ten years experience working with internships as a professional in the field of higher education. I am seeking participants for my doctoral thesis research study titled: “Nontraditional Undergraduates and Internships: A Qualitative Study Reflecting on the Experiences of Adult Learners”. The purpose of the study is to learn more about how adult students experience internships. The results may lead to curricular and policy recommendations for colleges and universities surrounding internship programs.

I received your name and email from __________. S/he suggested that you may qualify to participate in a research study on adult undergraduates and internships.

To qualify to participate in this study you must:

- Have completed an internship as an undergraduate when you were age 25 or older.
- Have graduated from the college you attended while interning (not a current student, therefore you hold alumni status).
- Have completed at least some professional work experience prior to interning.
- Have participated in an internship that was approximately 3 months or longer in duration (the length of a semester or more).

If you choose to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire and then participate in a phone interview that will last approximately one hour. The interview will be transcribed. You will be asked to review the transcript of the interview for accuracy. You may be contacted at a later date to ensure understanding and clarify statements made during the interview.

APPROVED

[Signature]

[Date]
Identifying information, including your name, the name of your college, and the name of your internship site will all remain confidential. Your participation is strictly voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time, for any reason.

Please let me know if you are interested in participating so we may begin the process. I can be reached at Gelinas.d@husky.neu.edu or 617-833-0322. If you have any questions about the study, please contact me directly or Dr. Leslie Hitch at L.hitch@neu.edu.

Thank you,
Debra Gelinas
Did you complete an internship when you were in college? Were you over the age of 25 at the time?

If so, you may qualify to participate in a Northeastern University doctoral thesis research study. The student researcher is a Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) candidate at Northeastern University with over a decade of professional experience working with internships as a professional in the field of higher education.

The study, titled "Nontraditional Undergraduates and Internships: A Qualitative Study Reflecting on the Experiences of Adult Learners", seeks to learn more about how adult students experience internships. The results may lead to curricular and policy recommendations for colleges and universities surrounding internship programs.

To qualify to participate in this study you must:

- Have completed an internship as an undergraduate when you were age 25 or older.
- Have graduated from the college you attended while interning (not a current student, therefore you hold alumni status).
- Have completed at least some professional work experience prior to interning.
- Have participated in an internship that was approximately 3 months or longer in duration (the length of a semester or more).

If you choose to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire and then participate in a phone interview that will last approximately one hour. The interview will be transcribed. You will be asked to review the transcript of the interview for accuracy. You may be contacted at a later date to ensure understanding and clarify statements made during the interview.

Identifying information, including your name, the name of your college, and the name of your internship site will all remain confidential. Your participation is strictly voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time, for any reason.

Please contact student researcher, Debra Oelinas, at Oelinas.d@husky.neu.edu if you are interested in participating or if you would like to recommend someone who may be interested in participating. If you have questions about the study, please contact Debra or Dr. Leslie Hitch at L.hitch@neu.edu

Thank you!