BENEFITS OF FACULTY-STUDENT INTERACTIONS TOWARD DEGREE COMPLETION
FOR NONTRADITIONAL-AGED STUDENTS

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis examined whether nontraditional-aged student interactions with faculty assist these students with the completion of their degree. Considerable research has revealed that when traditional-aged students (18-22 years old) interact with faculty, they gain many educational benefits, including assisting them with integrating into their academic settings, influencing their decisions to persist and leading them to the completion of their degrees. However, there is limited research on the benefits that faculty-student interactions have on the degree completion of nontraditional-aged students. Further, the existing literature explores the benefits of faculty-student interactions with nontraditional-aged students through the perspective of students rather than through the perspective of faculty. This phenomenological study is distinctive because it was conducted through interviews with faculty members to determine how faculty-student interactions assist nontraditional-aged students towards the completion of their degrees. The findings reveal that there is benefit of faculty-student interaction primarily through the utilization of learning communities and mandatory office hours.

Keywords: faculty-student interactions, nontraditional-aged students, completion, persistence, higher education, learning communities, office hours
Chapter one: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

In the first decades of the 21st century there have been vast increases in the numbers of nontraditional-aged students, and many institutions are growing concerned with the challenges that these students face completing their degrees (Jesnek, 2012; Schuetz & Slowly, 2011). Typically nontraditional-aged students are older in age, have families, are employed full-time and have many other outside responsibilities that can interfere with the completion of their education (Evelyn, 2002; Jesnek, 2012; Monroe, 2006; Munro, 2011; Schuetz & Slowly, 2011).

Research reveals that traditional-aged students persist to degree completion when they integrate into their academic setting (Delaney, 2008; Pascarella, 1989; Tinto, 1975). Bean (2001) stated that to integrate into the academic setting students must believe they are socially and academically effective. To integrate, students also need to feel that they are in charge of their own outcomes (Bean, 2001), which at many times can be difficult for nontraditional-aged students because there are external factors that can negatively interfere with their educational outcomes (Ramos, 2011). In fact, one of the main challenges that nontraditional-aged students face is the inability to integrate into their academic setting and to complete their degrees due to time constraints and external responsibilities (Munro, 2011).

Particularly for the traditional-aged student (18-22), faculty-student interactions can provide students with many positive educational outcomes such as integration, satisfaction and persistence (Endo & Harpel, 1982; Kim, 2010). There is extensive literature on the positive effects of faculty interactions with traditional aged students (Delaney, 2008; Holmes, Seay &
Wilson, 2009; Sax, Bryant & Harper, 2005; Siegel, 2011). However, there is a limited amount of literature on faculty-student interactions and its effects for nontraditional-aged students (Metz, 2004) and much of this research is explored through a student perspective (Cole, 2008; Deil-Amen, 2011; Kuh et al., 2001) rather than through the account of faculty. The main purpose of this study was to examine the benefits of faculty-student interactions with nontraditional-aged students by exploring the topic through the perspectives and interpretations of faculty rather than through interviews with students.

With steadily increasing numbers of nontraditional-aged students, college administrators (Newbold, Mehta & Forbus, 2011), faculty, and students may gain a deeper understanding of how faculty and nontraditional-aged student interactions can assist these students with completing their degrees (Jesnek, 2012; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Newbold et al., 2011).

**Significance of Research Problem**

Assisting nontraditional-aged students with degree completion is important for a number of reasons. Of central importance is that nontraditional-aged students need to meet their educational and career goals (Barnett, 2011). Degree completion of nontraditional-aged students is also important for today’s educators because there has been a steady increase in nontraditional-aged student populations (Newbold et al., 2011). It is estimated that 8 million nontraditional-aged students, about 21% of all students, have attended college and left without completing their degree (Schatzel, Callahan, Scott & Davis, 2011). It is important that institutions pay close attention to nontraditional-aged students because those students are becoming a norm. Institutions have to consider how to assist that population toward the completion of their degrees or they may not retain a large segment of those students (Whately, Bos, Kennedy, Smith &
With the importance of lifelong learning, it is essential that the environment is a supportive and successful one for nontraditional-aged students (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Shank, Winchell & Myers, 2011). Several authors have posited that it is the responsibility of the institutions to make sure all students’ experiences are enhanced to assist them with the persistence towards degree completion (Newbold et al., 2011; Siegel, 2011).

This problem is also noteworthy because there are many beneficial outcomes associated with degree completion. Labor force participation and earnings are higher for those who complete their degree (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). Graduates are more likely to become employed because employers seek a more educated workforce (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). At the same time society is at a greater loss when students do not complete their degree. For example, in 2002 students who began college but did not complete their degrees forfeited $3.8 billion as lost income; and the US lost $730 in income taxes, as a result. (Schneider & Yin, 2011). Students also face a substantial burden without the completion of their degrees when they subsequently address their loan debt (Belfield, 2013). Without degrees, students suffer not only financial loss of potential income, but they must pay back any debt they incurred (Schneider & Yin, 2012).

Considerable research has revealed that when traditional-aged students (18-22 years old) interact with faculty, they gain many educational benefits, including assisting with integrating into their academic settings, influencing their decisions to persist and leading them to the completion of their degrees. However, there is limited research on the benefits that faculty-student interactions have on the degree completion of nontraditional-aged students. This thesis explored non-traditional student interaction with faculty through the lens of the faculty to examine if interactions with this demographic could lead to increased degree completion.
Chapter two: Theoretical Framework

One early student attrition theorist is John Bean, who developed the Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition. Bean (1981) synthesized theoretical models of Boshier (1973), Price (1977), Rootman (1972) Sewell and Haiser (1972), Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975) to develop his own theoretical casual model of undergraduate student attrition. Bean’s (1981) theoretical model of student attrition was designed to understand the background variables of each student and to predict whether or not these variables would directly or indirectly affect the way that they interacted with members of the institution and the institution itself. Bean (1981) theorized that students’ interactions with their collegiate environment affect their attachment to the institution and that this attachment either helps or hinders the completion of their degrees. The variables that Bean (1981) measured led to other indicators of students’ ability to interact with their environment and these variables have direct effects on students’ commitments to their institutions and/or their decisions to drop out (Bean, 1981).

The most specific aspects of Bean’s (1981) model that are pertinent to this research are the variables that he measured, which directly relate to nontraditional-aged student characteristics. Some of Bean’s (1981) variables exactly match nontraditional-aged student characteristics and represent challenges for these students to integrate into their academic setting (Metz, 2004). The variables include family responsibilities, employment, memberships in student organizations and financing one’s education, all of which have been found to bring
challenges for nontraditional-aged students hoping to complete their degrees (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Newbold et al., 2010).

In subsequent research, Bean and Metzner (1987) collected data from 624 nontraditional students and conducted a quantitative study to apply their model to explore nontraditional-aged student persistence. They found many external factors, such as family responsibilities, to be important predictors of student persistence (Barnett, 2011).

FIG. 1. A conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition. Graphic model p. 491
Chapter 3: Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to explore the connection between non-traditional students and faculty interaction. The overarching question guiding the research and the literature review was: How do faculty interactions with nontraditional-aged students in a large urban university assist these students with the completion of their degree?

This literature review provides an overview of the nontraditional-aged student population and their typical characteristics, and it provides information on how these characteristics can affect students’ ability to complete their degrees. This review also explores the literature on the benefits of faculty-student interactions with traditional-aged students and a review of the limited research on non-traditional student interactions with faculty and the beneficial student outcomes that can assist these students with the completion of their degrees.

Section A discusses the increases in the number of nontraditional-aged students in the academic setting. Section B defines the nontraditional-aged student and discusses their defined characteristics. Section C of this review discusses the challenges that nontraditional-aged students face completing their degree. Sections D and E discuss the many found benefits of faculty-student interactions and how these interactions assist all students and, more specifically, nontraditional-aged students.
Increases in Nontraditional-AGED Student Populations

Over the past 50 years there have been vast changes in the student population of higher education in the US. The once typical student, the 18 to 22-year-old, is no longer typical (White, 2012). According to data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) prior to the 1950s, the traditional college student was a Caucasian male between the ages of 18-22; male students outnumbered female students 2:1 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). By 1960, only a decade later, the number of female students enrolled had doubled (NCES, 2010). By 1980 the diversity in US student populations had steadily increased. In addition, for the first time in US history there were more women enrolled in college than men (NCES, 2010). At the start of the new millennium, female students still outnumbered male students, and the number of minority students enrolled increased by 200% from 1960-2010 (NCES, 2010). From 1976-2010 the number of Hispanic students increased by 10%, the number of African American students increased by 9% (NCES, 2010), and women were 56% of the total population of students, while men were 42% (Choy, 2002).

As diverse populations of students entered the college environment the white Caucasian male student was no longer the norm (Newbold, Mehta & Forbus, 2009). The most noticeable increase was in the growth of nontraditional-aged students, who today make up nearly half of the student population (Jesnek, 2012; Shank et al., 2001). Students who are termed nontraditional-aged (Choy, 2002) encompass very different characteristics from the former typical college student of the 1950s and 1960s: they are older in age, self-sufficient and working to care for themselves and often times their families (Munro, 2011; White, 2012).

From 1996-2006 the percentage of nontraditional-aged students increased from 30% to 50% of the college student population in the U.S. (Bye, Parker & Conway, 2007). From 2010 to
2020 the percentage is expected to again rise significantly (Snyder & Dillow, 2011). There are a few reasons for the increases in nontraditional-aged students, such as high national unemployment rates, the increasing need for a technological prepared workforce, and the recent US economic crisis of 2008 (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Many nontraditional-aged students are returning to be able to update their resumes and skills to better solidify employment security (Jesnek, 2012).

The increase in nontraditional-aged student populations is not only occurring in the US but also globally (Taylor & House, 2010). Australia has seen changes in the traditional students, where in the past the majority of students had recently graduated from high school, were younger in age and enrolled full time and now many students are older in age and attending school on a part time basis (Munro, 2011). It has been stated that the UK has experienced increases in nontraditional-aged students and that less than 60% of the students entering college are traditional students (Taylor & House, 2010).

Nontraditional-aged student characteristics

Nontraditional-aged students are commonly thought of as students who are 24 years of age or older, employed, and responsible for dependents (Evelyn, 2002; Jesnek, 2012; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Monroe, 2006; Munro, 2011; Newbold, Mehta & Forbus, 2010). However, Munro (2011) stated that nontraditional-aged students also tend to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, are the first in their family to attend college, are from diverse populations, are minorities, may be disabled, and typically are part-time students and/or commute into school. Many times nontraditional-aged students do not spend the same amount of time on campus as do traditional students (Compton, Cox & Leenan, 2006; Evelyn, 2002; Jesnek, 2012; Munro, 2011; Newbold et al., 2010). An extensive body of literature discusses the
financial burdens that nontraditional-aged students face due to being older in age and typically having their own family responsibilities (Munro, 2011; Newbold, et al., 2010). Nontraditional-aged students are usually employed and provide for themselves financially (Munro, 2011; Newbold, et al., 2010), and they more often than not receive financial aid to fund their own educations (Berker, Horn & Carroll, 2003).

Not only do nontraditional-aged students differ characteristically from many traditional age students, these characteristics lead to certain behaviors in the educational setting (Newbold et al., 2010). Nontraditional-aged students are frequently more experienced with life; therefore, they have better time management skills than traditional students have (Newbold et al., 2010). It is believed that older students frequently receive superior grades, compared to younger students and also set better learning goals (Hoyert & Dell, 2009). Strage (2008) found that nontraditional-aged students expect different educational experiences from college than traditional students expect. Nontraditional-aged students typically have very specific goals and expectations (Bailey & Marsh, 2010). Many traditional students desire that college be an extension of high-school, fun and exciting, while nontraditional-aged students expect to be prepared for their careers and life after college (Strage, 2008).

There are a number of beneficial qualities that nontraditional-aged students have, such as good relationships with faculty. They can be very mature and focused on their goals (Bailey & Marsh, 2010; Newbold et al. 2011). For example, Bailey and Marsh (2010) found that nontraditional-aged students in their first year seminar requested that they have a specific faculty member with whom they would connect for support (Bailey & Marsh, 2010).

**Challenges nontraditional-aged students face completing their degree**
One of the greatest challenges nontraditional-aged students face is susceptibility for high attrition (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). It is more common for nontraditional-aged students to leave higher education without a degree and as many as 50% of nontraditional-aged students do not receive their degree at all (Choy, 2002). It is estimated that 8 million 25-34 year olds have dropped out of college without a degree (Schatzel, Callahan, Scott & Davis, 2010; US Census Bureau, 2007). Students with traditional enrollment patterns have a higher chance of completing their degree than those with nontraditional-aged enrollment patterns, and students who come from middle/high income have a better chance than those who come from a lower socioeconomic group (Feliciano & Ashtiani, 2012). Bradburn & Carroll (2002) stated that nontraditional-aged student demographics, such as being a minority or coming from a low socio-economic background, are associated with high attrition (Bradburn & Carroll, 2002).

With all of the challenges that nontraditional-aged students encounter they may have feelings of isolation, which can prevent their program completion (Holmes, Seay & Wilson, 2009). Nontraditional-aged students’ characteristics can lead them to be less involved and less integrated within their institution (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Newbold et al., 2010). For example, in a quantitative study, 80% of traditional students were “active” in their college environment while only 46.8% of nontraditional-aged students were similarly involved (Gilardi & Gugliemetti, 2011).

Family responsibilities, employment responsibilities and other outside factors can absolutely impede nontraditional-aged students’ ability to complete their degrees (Wheeles, Witt, Maresh, Bryand & Schrod, 2011). Nontraditional-aged students’ varying responsibilities can lead them to deal with a great amount of stress (Ramos, 2011; Whately et al., 2002). Nontraditional-aged students have many demands from their external responsibilities and have to
consistently juggle to create a work, school and life balance (Giancola, Grawitch & Borchert, 2009). Finding the balance between their education and their personal commitments and responsibilities has been suggested as the nontraditional-aged student’s greatest challenge (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Findings for a study that examined nontraditional-aged ‘stop-outs’ suggests that most of those who left had no plans to return, due to a lack of time and ability to manage a balance between school and their personal life and responsibilities (Schatzel et al., 2011). Students with complex lives are at risk for abandoning their studies (White, 2012). Additionally, Jesnek (2012) discussed challenges that nontraditional-aged students can face being less knowledgeable with the use of technology (Jesnek, 2012).

Researchers have looked at the relationship of student demographics and its effect on integration into the academic environment by examining nontraditional-aged students’ seeming inability to complete their degrees (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Newbold et al., 2010; Ramos, 2011). The challenge remains that even when institutions have supportive programs and services to better integrate nontraditional-aged students into their academic setting, the challenges that nontraditional-aged students face can hinder or prevent them from being able to take advantage of those opportunities (Keith, 2007).

The institution plays an important role in addressing the needs of nontraditional-aged students (Bailey & Marsh, 2011; Jesnek, 2012; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). To better assist nontraditional-aged students, institutions may have to abandon their former policies and structures (Bailey & Marsh, 2011; Jesnek, 2012; Newbold et al., 2010). Newbold et al. (2010) explain that when institutions are not properly prepared or equipped to address the needs of nontraditional-aged students, those students can be inconvenienced and/or greatly disadvantaged. Kenner and Weinerman (2011) agree that the best way for nontraditional-aged students to
integrate into their academic setting is for the institution to be able to recognize how they are different and to provide them with the necessary tools to integrate and succeed (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Institutions need to create educational environments that meet the needs of nontraditional-aged students and assist with their integration into the academic setting (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Mehta, Newbold & Forbus, 2010). Nontraditional-aged students may be more successful if institutions create similar supportive programs and services that are available to them (Whatley, Bos, Kennedy, Smith & Woods, 2003).

**Faculty-student interactions with traditional students**

As there is scant research on the benefits of faculty-student interaction with nontraditional age students it is worth a short review of a number of studies that have found benefits of faculty-student interactions with traditional aged undergraduate students (Cole, 2008; Komarraju et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2010; Tinto, 1990). While these are outside of the scope of this thesis, they are nevertheless important to mention as they inform this study.

Sax, Bryant and Harper (2005) explore outcomes of faculty and traditional aged student interactions and found significant outcomes for both male and female traditional aged students. These include scholarly self-confidence, leadership ability, degree aspirations and retention (Sax, Bryant & Harper, 2005). Komarraju et al. (2010) found that traditional students who interacted with faculty expressed having more confidence in their academic skills, were more motivated and found the learning process to be more enjoyable and stimulating (Komarraju, et al., 2010). Cotton & Wilson (2006) found that when traditional age students interacted with faculty it motivated them to learn and that the personal connection created a desire for them to do well and to please their instructor (Cotton & Wilson, 2006).
Kuh et al., (2001) found that traditional age students who had substantial contact with faculty increased their satisfaction and views of their college experience. Cole (2008) and Kim (2010) examined the role of faculty-student interactions on specific minority groups of traditional aged students’ and found that faculty support and encouragement are positively correlated with defined educational gains and outcome variables (Cole, 2008). Delaney (2008) explored faculty-student interactions on student outcomes and found that traditional aged students that interacted with faculty in their first year were more satisfied and academically adjusted (Delaney, 2008).

**Faculty-student interactions for nontraditional-aged students**

The research to date on faculty-student interactions for nontraditional-aged students is limited, and many of the studies focus on students in a community college setting or students who attend school on a part time basis (Barnett, 2011; Deil-Amen, 2011). The details of recent studies that examine faculty and nontraditional-aged student interactions are discussed below.

Barnett (2011) explored faculty validation, which is a form of faculty-student interaction (Tinto, 1993) as an influence on community college students’ persistence. Community college students are often nontraditional-aged students, in that they are typically older than 24 years old, are employed, and have families which present many challenges for them in terms of their ability to persist to the completion of their degrees. Barnett (2011) used Rendón’s (1994, 2002) validation construct in which faculty-student interactions can predict their integration and persistence, to examine the extent to which faculty could assist a student with integrating into their academic setting and completing their degree. In a quantitative study with 293 community college students where the mean age of the subjects was 25 years old, Barnett (2011) found that faculty validation was a strong predictor for academic integration and increased student intent to
persist. Barnett (2011) also found that faculty and nontraditional-aged student interactions are important, since this may be these students only ability to interact with others at the institution due to their personal responsibilities (Barnett, 2011).

Deil-Amen (2011) conducted a qualitative study to explore nontraditional-aged student integration into the two-year college environment. The purpose of that study was to determine whether or not the same variables that assist traditional-aged students with integration into 4-year institutions also assist non-traditional students with integration into their 2-year institution. Students who attend two year colleges have many non-traditional characteristics that provide challenges to their integration into the academic setting and the completion of their degree (Deil-Amen, 2011). Students’ perceptions were that agents of the college, such as instructors/faculty, guided them to integrate. Students also expressed that they were guided by faculty to integrate through their interactions with faculty not only outside the classroom but also inside the classroom (Deil-Amen, 2011). Faculty-student interactions are dominant mechanisms of socio-academic integration, and interactions outside of the classroom led to academic support particularly for nontraditional-aged students (Deil-Amen, 2011).

Nontraditional students need to be validated, recognized and respected and that these feelings can assist with integration into their academic setting (Saggio & Rendón, 2004). Saggio and Rendón (2004) performed a qualitative study with 29 (46.7%) AI & AN students at a Bible college and found that nontraditional students were mostly influenced to continue because of family, spirituality and interpersonal validation from faculty.

Although limited, the literature on faculty-student interactions with nontraditional-aged students consistently indicates that faculty-student interactions assist these students with academic integration and with the completion of their degrees (Barnett, 2011; Deil-Amen, 2011).
Nontraditional-aged students face many challenges, and one necessary way to assist them with integrating into their academic setting is through mentorship or faculty-student interactions (Austin, 2006). Lundberg (2004) found that nontraditional-aged students have strong relationships with administration and that their partaking in faculty-student interactions is meaningful. Nontraditional-aged students’ relationships with faculty and other members of the college/university community can have an influential outcome on their educational experience (Glardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

**Degree completion**

Faculty-student interactions assist nontraditional-aged students with success in the completion of their degrees (Barnett, 2011; Opp, 2002). For example, nontraditional-aged students felt less incongruence when they connected with faculty and their interactions with faculty enhanced the possibility for students to seek ways to remain enrolled and be academically successful (Deil-Amen, 2011). As Rendón (2004) has stated, nontraditional-aged students need to be in a supportive environment where faculty members reach out to interact and assist them giving them the confidence and ability to complete their degree (Rendón, 2004).

The role of faculty in nontraditional-aged student’s decisions to persist has not been examined fully (Barnett, 2011). In particular, more studies are needed that examine nontraditional-students and their interactions with faculty from the perspectives of faculty.

**Conclusion**

There is a large and growing nontraditional-aged student population in US higher education (Jesnek, 2012; Newbold et al., 2010). Due to their characteristics and responsibilities nontraditional-aged students may have very different needs than their younger counterparts and face many challenges while completing their degree. To better meet the needs of nontraditional-
aged students and better assist those students with the completion of their degrees, institutions may need to better understand how to provide them with support and services (Bailey & Marsh, 2011; Jesnek, 2012; Newbold et al., 2010). Much of the research on nontraditional-aged students suggests that an important way to address the varying needs of these students is by abandoning former structures and policies and creating educational environments that better support their integration (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Mehta, Newbold & Forbus, 2010). Integration is crucial to student persistence and degree completion, and when students are unable to integrate they are more likely to depart (Bean, 1982; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1975). Research has found that a beneficial way for traditional aged students to integrate into the academic setting is through faculty-student interactions (Cole, 2008; Deil-Amen, 2011; Kim, 2010; Opp, 2002). However there is not an extensive amount of literature on the benefits of faculty-student interactions with nontraditional-aged students toward the completion of their degrees. The limited existing literature does nevertheless consistently state that faculty-student interactions do assist nontraditional-aged students with integrating into their academic setting and towards the completion of their degrees (Barnett, 2011; Endo & Harpel, 1982; Kim, 2010; Newbold et al., 2010; Rendon, 2004). A lacking component of these studies is that they approach this topic only through the viewpoints of students (Barnett, 2011; Munro, 2011; Newbold et al., 2010; Rendon, 2004; Schatzel et al., 2011; Taylor & House, 2010), missing the account of the other party involved, which is the faculty. Since faculty play such an integral role in the academic setting it is important to explore how they can assist nontraditional-aged students towards their degrees (Siegel, 2011). There is still much to be studied about the viewpoints of faculty on the benefits of their interactions with nontraditional-aged students.
Chapter 4: Research Design

The purpose of this study was to examine how faculty members think their interactions with nontraditional-aged students assist these students with the successful completion of their degrees. The research question was purposefully open-ended so the responses could provide detailed accounts of faculty experience in order to look for discernible patterns.

The following was the primary research question explored in this study.

*How do faculty interactions with nontraditional-aged students in a large urban university assist these students with the completion of their degrees?*

Research Design:

A qualitative research design was used in this study. The use of qualitative methods allowed for the researcher to focus on the experiences of faculty members’ interactions with nontraditional-aged students. Qualitative research methods are descriptive and narrative. They allow for a true exploration of the participants’ lived experiences (Trochim, 2006), which will then allow for a deeper understanding of how faculty-student interactions with nontraditional-aged students can assist these students. The qualitative method this study used is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). IPA allows for a descriptive analysis of each participant’s distinctive experience, which then allows for a deeper understanding, as well as an exploration of the faculty-student interactions as a general subject. This results in common themes that are shared in all of the experiences to emerge.

Research Tradition:

IPA entails a combination of phenomenological (exploration of experience) and hermeneutic (interpretation of personal experience) approaches (Smith et al., 2009). In IPA the researcher uses phenomenological inquiry by suspending his or her own preconceived theories,
ideas, biases or judgments to explore the personal interpretation others have about their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). This study explored the personal experiences faculty members have had interacting with nontraditional-aged students, as well as their interpretations of how those interactions have helped students to complete their degrees.

In IPA the researcher examines the participant’s interpretations, resulting in a double interpretation. This double interpretation is what has led many IPA theorists to discuss a two-stage or a double hermeneutic approach that occurs when the researcher and the participant are making sense of the phenomenon at the same time (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2003). These double interpretations will serve to discover the true essence of faculty-student interactions with nontraditional-aged students (Moustakas, 1994).

IPA involves a combination of divergent and convergent information (Smith et al., 2009). It is involved with exploring the distinctiveness of one person’s experience and also seeing how it fits into the phenomenon of that same experience (Smith et al., 2009). To diverge and converge information, this study explored the personal account of each faculty member by understanding ways in which they have each interacted with nontraditional-aged students. Each faculty member varies in terms of how they interact with students, so each experience had its own personal aspects. At the same time this study captured the general aspects by finding the common themes in all of the faculty members’ analyses of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

Husserl (1931) was one of the founding theorists of phenomenological inquiry, and his theories were highly relevant to this study. Husserl (1931) indicated that in order to be phenomenological we have to revisit our experiences to obtain deeper meanings and explanations. Phenomenology requires us to reflect on our conscious and direct experience. To do this Husserl (1931) suggested that we ask participants to disengage from their daily activities.
in order to reflect and in order to truly be phenomenological (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl theorized that due to our busy lives we many times take for granted our experiences and do not properly reflect to gain deeper meanings and understandings (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl’s (1931) view can be applied to this study because, although faculty members may be encouraged to interact with students, they are not necessarily encouraged to reflect on those interactions for a deeper meaning. This study encouraged the faculty to reflect on their interactions in a phenomenological manner and to gain a deeper understanding of whether or not interactions have assisted students in the completion of their degrees. Another component of Husserl’s (1931) theory also holds that phenomenological inquiry gets at the core or the essence of the experience or the ‘eidetic reduction’. ‘Eidetic reduction’ is a process designed at obtaining the properties that lie under the subjective perception of the person (Smith et al., 2009). Rather than relying on their perceptions of what they think interactions meant, the faculty participants took the time to reflect and find deeper meanings about their interactions with nontraditional-aged students.

Another phenomenological theorist that guided this study is Sartre (1948). Sartre (1948) theorized that we are constantly in development and constantly working on ourselves. A famous quote of Sartre, ‘existence comes before essence,’ means that we are an ongoing project that we are continuously working on and figuring out (Smith et al., 2009).

Sartre also discussed developing the purpose in personal and social relationships in order to conceive our experiences (Smith et al., 2009). This study was designed to examine the personal and academic relationships between faculty and nontraditional-aged students and how these relationships affect the experiences of the students. This point is relevant to this study
because it was designed to examine how faculty and nontraditional-aged students relate to each other and how their interaction assists students with their educational experience.

**Participants:**

The participants for this study were faculty members at a large public urban university in Massachusetts who have experience interacting with nontraditional-aged students as the university has a significant population of non-traditional students. IPA studies tend to examine closely-defined groups of people because the research and the questions are themselves so defined (Smith & Olson, 2003). The study used a purposeful sample, which is a specific selection of participants who understand and have experience with the phenomenon being explored (Creswell, 2012). It is easier to examine the divergence and convergence of the topic when a homogenous group is used (Smith et al., 2009). The study was conducted with a population of 4-6 participants. IPA studies typically use small populations due to the deep exploration of detailed personal experiences (Smith & Olson, 2003).

The participating faculty had to have at least two years of teaching experience with undergraduates at any higher education institution and had to have interacted with two or more nontraditional-aged students at one time or more per week for the most recent year of their teaching experience. The participants were further refined by drawing from faculty members who had interacted with nontraditional-aged undergraduate students in their junior year. This refinement was to give greater assurance that faculty had a better chance of knowing whether or not their interactions with the students did or did not assist with the completion their degrees. It was efficient to use faculty who interact with students in their junior year because the students were in their professional courses (majors), which allowed for the potential of deeper interactions. This study did not consider the demographic of the participating faculty. The
The purpose of this study was to examine the general experiences of faculty and non-traditional-aged students. The only constant requirement for faculty participants was their amount of experience with non-traditional students. Adequate experience was a requirement to participate.

**Recruitment and access:**

To conduct this study the researcher worked with co-investigator at the research site. The co-investigator for this project works in the Student Affairs department and had experience not only with research but also knew a number of faculty who met participant requirements. Therefore, this study used a snowballing method of recruitment, where the participants were found through referrals by the co-investigator and her colleagues. Once the participants were referred to the researcher by the co-investigator, the researcher emailed potential participants a description of the study and an official Invitation to Participate (Appendix A) to request their participation. The participant parameters were clearly stated so that the only respondents were potential participants who thought they met the criteria. No faculty members were obligated to participate.

This study received IRB approval from the Institutional Review Board at Northeastern University and from the large public university where the study was conducted. Upon solicitation the IRB approval was provided to the university where the study took place. To ensure the faculty consent to participating each participant signed a consent form and was provided with detailed information regarding the purpose of the study. To ensure that the participants understood their role and what they would be asked, each was provided with the interview schedule so they saw that the questions are ethical and that they were comfortable participating. To ensure confidentiality the participants were given a personal identification number in order to maintain privacy and anonymity.
Data collection:

To collect the data for this study two in depth interviews were conducted with each of the participants (Creswell, 2012; Smith et al., 2009). With the exception of the final participant, the first interview was in person and began with a review of the details of the study, the role the participant would play and the review and signing of the informed consents. The fourth participant was sent all of the documentation by email and was able to fill it out prior to the first interview. Following the introduction and review of the study the interview questions were asked. Between the first and the second interview the interviewer contacted each of the participants to conduct a member check. The member checks were completed by email and allowed the participant the chance to review the transcriptions from the first interview ensures all the materials were accurate (Creswell, 2012). The second interview was in person and began with follow up questions that were based on themes from the first interview in order to capture a deeper understanding of the experiences that the participants were sharing.

Interview schedules were provided for both interviews (Appendix A). Interview schedules (Appendix A) are considered to be important for first time IPA researchers to rely on (Smith, et al., 2009). There are many purposes for using interview schedules, such as providing open and expansive interviews with questions that allow the participants to speak freely and to create comfortable interactions with participants.

The interviews were semi-structured and were 45-90 minutes in length (Smith, et al., 2009). All interviews were conducted in a quiet uninterruptable setting chosen by the participant. To follow the large public university’s IRB policies, all participants were given the option to erase the recordings following the interview if they wished to withdraw their participation.
The first interview that was conducted was transcribed prior to beginning the other interviews because this helped to assess whether or not the interview schedule and techniques were effective (Smith et al., 2009). Prior to interviewing participants the researcher conducted a pilot interview with another selected faculty member. This interview was not included in the overall data analysis.

The interviewer is a key instrument in an IPA study. The role of the interviewer is to establish an open and trusting relationship with each participant to collect data through interviews. The interviewer guided the participant to provide detailed information (Smith, et al., 2009). It was important to take time and allow the participants to take moments to pause and reflect on what they were saying (Smith, et al., 2009). It was also important for the interviewer to express to the participant that they were interested in them and their experiences in order to show the participant that there were no right or wrong answers (Smith, et al., 2009). The interviewer waited until after the interview to try and make any conclusions and to set aside her own experiences to just listen in order to focus on the participant’s experiential expertise (Smith, et al., 2009).

The interviews were recorded using an iPad with an Apple application called Rev record and an iPhone with the same recording software. This App has many capabilities such as emailing recordings, bookmarking the recording to easily move through it and the ability to transfer and read recordings on multiple devices. The iPad was password protected and the recordings were only sent to the researcher’s email which was also password protected.

**Data storage:**

All of the data were stored on multiple locked and encrypted devices; the researcher’s personal iPad, iPhone and laptop. The interviews were transferred through email but then
deleted as soon as they were transferred to one piece of the hardware. The researcher was the only one with access to the data, and confidentiality was maintained by giving each participant a reference number rather than using their name.

Data Analysis:

The analysis cycle that was used is typical to most IPA studies and has been highly recommended for the analysis of IPA studies (Creswell, 2012; Moustakes, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989).

The first step in analyzing the data was to transcribe the interviews. Each transcription was listened to multiple times to make sure the information was correct. Only the data that were of importance were transcribed (Smith et al., 2009). The transcriptions were shared with the participants to ensure validity.

Once the transcriptions were completed they were read multiple times. There are many benefits to re-reading the interviews, such as gaining deeper understanding, seeing the rhythm of the interview emerge, and seeing the transcript move from broad to general (Smith et al., 2009).

Once the transcriptions were read thoroughly the margins were used to begin to take notes regarding interesting or important things that the participants have shared. There are three different types of comments the researcher used to explore the transcript; descriptive, linguistic and conceptual (Smith et al., 2009). Descriptive comments were made to describe the content of the interview and to highlight exactly how certain sections were presented. Linguistic comments focused on the language the participant used to portray the content and meaning. Finally, conceptual comments obtained an interpretative analysis of the transcript (Smith et al., 2009).

See Exhibit E for examples of descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments.
Following note taking the next goal was to decrease the amount of data while still finding the connections and patterns (Smith et al., 2009). The other margin was used to develop and extract emerging themes (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Common phrases were developed to capture the essential quality of what was being said in the text (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The text was highlighted to see the common statements and themes (Creswell, 2012). The themes continued throughout the text and even began to repeat themselves.

The next step in the analysis was to find connections between and among the themes. An analytical and theoretical ordering of the themes was created (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Using a chart or map the researcher formed clusters or connections of themes (Smith et al., 2009). All of these techniques were used to bring the emergent themes together.

Each participant’s account was analyzed separately, which allowed for new themes to emerge from each case (Smith et al., 2009). Once all the themes for all of the cases were found, the next step was to find patterns. A master table of themes showed the connections made between and among the cases (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2007).

The final step in the analysis was to write the statements of what was found in the data (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2007). The goal was to present a clear account of what was learned from the participants while drawing on materials and using quotes from the data to support the findings (Smith et al., 2009). This is also referred to as capturing the essence of the statement which provides the feeling of understanding the participant’s experience (Creswell, 2012; Polkinghorne, 1989). One of the main goals of phenomenology is to understand what is at the essence of what all people experience about this phenomenon (Morse & Field, 1995).

**Trustworthiness:**
Although there is no formula for testing the trustworthiness and validity of IPA studies, there are a few strategies that can be used, depending on each specific study (Smith et al., 2009). These strategies include member checking and prolonged engagement.

Member checking or member validation occurs when the researcher validates all related materials with the participants to check that what they have found is accurate (Creswell, 2012). The best way to do this in an IPA study is to show the participants the transcriptions of the interviews. If the participants do not feel that the transcriptions are accurate the researcher will provide the opportunity for the participant to make changes during the member check.

Prolonged engagement is when the researcher spends considerable time learning about and understanding the culture, environment or phenomenon that they are researching (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). IPA studies, however, do not require the actual engagement of the researcher in the phenomenon but rather in the interpretation of another’s experience of the phenomenon. In this study the multiple and detailed interviews gave the researcher a clear understanding of the participant’s experiences of interacting with students. Another goal of prolonged engagement is for the researcher to develop a relationship and rapport with the subjects (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). IPA interactions tend to form a trustworthy relationship between the researcher and the participants due to the time spent together and the experience of sharing (Creswell, 2012).

**Conclusion**

This study is a qualitative IPA research study in the phenomenological research tradition that included interviews of four faculty members at a large public university in Massachusetts. This study examined the experiences of faculty participants who have had extensive interaction with nontraditional-aged students to obtain their interpretation of how their interactions assist the students with degree completion.
Chapter 5: Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents the narratives of four faculty participants who reflected on and shared their experiences interacting with nontraditional-aged students: the methods they use to interact and how these methods of interaction are valuable and increase the likelihood that the students will complete their degrees. It was through analysis of these narratives that the researcher identified common themes.

The narratives below signify the faculty participants views on their experiences interacting with nontraditional-aged students: how these methods engage these students, address the challenges that they commonly face and in turn assist the students with being successful in obtaining their degree. The following is a review of the data.

Participants’ Profiles
Participant 1 (P1). P1 serves in an administrative capacity as the Dean of the College of Mathematics/Science and has 30+ years of teaching experience. He finds great pleasure in working with many different types of students. P1 stated that he is very proud of the work he does in the classroom and the interactions he has with students, and he spent time reflecting on and sharing his experiences with teaching 1st year students in a course called a learning community. The College of Science/Mathematics (CSM) places freshman in learning communities, which are similar to a first-year seminar, so the students spend the first year interacting with each other, upperclassman and faculty, which helps them become engaged, build connections, intermingle and integrate into the program. P1 was so excited while he discussed the many ways that he interacts and the ways he inspires everyone who walks through CSM doors to interact with each other through the learning communities. He is very interested in the educational environment that he creates and has made it his mission to maintain positive, engaging and rewarding programs by providing opportunities for people to meet and interact. He feels this aspect of the learning communities is very helpful specifically for nontraditional-aged students because it provides them with the opportunity to meet others that they would not have normally met.

There’s like 1100 students that become enrolled, so other students tell other students to join so they become quite pervasive. They do their connections and I meet all kinds of students that I never would’ve met and I hear about all types of students that I never otherwise would’ve heard of. For example I just heard about a new group of students a minute ago.
P1 reflected on his success with the use of interactions in his learning community and how these interactions are most helpful because they assist his students with being engaged and connected these things are completely necessary for successful degree completion.

I feel that being engaged and connected and feeling like you are a part of this place and engaged with others is absolutely significant in terms of your ability to complete the program. It makes a huge difference. I think that feeling engaged and connected and feeling like you are part of this place and engaged with others here is absolutely significant in terms of your ability to complete your program. It makes a huge difference. I see it every day.

P1 shared how these learning communities are advantageous as students’ progress into their second year because the opportunities for them to interact are still frequent as they can serve as upper-class mentors in the communities and/or they can join the student membership clubs/associations.

The way you could say this is that the community is primarily academic. It's for student success. There's things we're doing and there's a lot of academic. I really expect the students to build high standards, work for improvement, and work in teams; there are many things that at the same time we're trying to build social capital. That means professionalism, engagement, feelings of commitment to their education, resourcefulness, and many aspects of that. I try to do both. The fraternity is for students who dominated in their freshman communities but not one specific community so it becomes this vertical relationship within the communities; many students that never had the opportunity to be
in a community are now with students that have been in communities, and it helps them to get connected into that group and ethos.

When asked about his interactions specifically with nontraditional-aged students P1 described the method he uses, which is to help the students interact with each other and bond over commonalities rather than over differences. In his learning community he connects the nontraditional-aged and traditional aged students by helping them focus on their similar educational and professional goals. He believes building these connections creates stronger learning opportunities and is empowering for everyone. He also thinks these interactions help nontraditional-aged students to be supported and to overcome the challenges they face with feeling alienated.

Mostly they’re students, and their major concern is much more similar than different; and when people come to see that, it’s very powerful and aspiring. I mean, we may look different but our goals are so compatible and we need each other so badly to be our best and what we are trying to strive for is so similar and like these superficial differences, which are significant but are fairly at surface level actually are strengthening the diversity that we can learn even more than we thought we could. So that kind of approach turns out to be very empowering to everyone.

P1 expressed his enthusiasm about another method of interacting that he uses with his students and that was requiring students to go to mandatory office hours.

I made a huge deal about students coming to office hours, and I still make a huge deal about that. It is one of the most underutilized resources that is available to students regularly. In the beginning of the year I would make a big deal about it and by the end I
would have huge storms of students, like 60-70 students. So many that we would have to arrange a room for it. One thing I did to force them to do it was that I refused to give back their exams with remarks. If you wanted your exam you would have to come to my office to pick it up and I would then be able to talk to you about it. I would have lines of students and I would go over their marks. I would interact with each student one on one and I liked doing that and the students did too because it was so important for them because it was inspiring and energizing to everyone and it just created a great environment.

P1 views his role as a paternal one to his students and he feels very responsible for their success. Like a father he discussed how he aims to prepare his students to be not only successful in his program but he tries his best to challenge them, influence them to challenge themselves, instill discipline and professionalism so they will be successful in their careers. He is very supportive of his students and feels that this support is crucial for assisting them with integrating into the academic setting and with degree completion.

We have very good retention. You're not going to have every single person, but this level of retention we're having is so far up. That's because the students are supported and feel like they can handle the demands. The many reasons why has to do with providing them academic support, but we certainly are providing a lot of social support. It certainly shouldn’t include only a bunch of class work, you should have to do other things to take advantage of the other things the university should offer to be able to reach your true goals. It's for students' success. There are things we're doing and there's a lot of academic. I really expect the students to build high standards, work for improvement, and work in teams; there are many things that at the same time we're trying to build social capital.
That means professionalism, engagement, feelings of commitment to their education, resourcefulness, and many aspects of that. I try to do both.

P1 discussed the flexibility he uses as he grades and has found greater student success results from not putting the direct focus on grades but more so on the improvement of the work students do to help them understand that learning, improving and progression is what is most important to him.

I'm not going to say that it doesn’t count but if you can show me the level of work that I know that you are capable of doing then I will take that into consideration when I assign the final course grade. I let them know there is plenty of time. I just want to see really that we're improving. I really only care where we are at the end of the semester or the end of the year. If this isn't good enough, we have to fix it and do better. Don't worry about it. Again, given that the grades are off the table, their whole concept is how do I get the best grade? A lot of students get the idea of what I'm saying that ... this community, I would say we have more than our share, more than I like of students who say ... They're not thinking or don't grasp easily, seemingly, the concept of, we're using this as a training ground for improvement and growth so that we can be at our best in the rest of the curriculum. They see it as, at the end, I have to get a grade.

P1 discussed another very flexible and generous approach that he uses while grading in which he tells all of his students that they begin with an A and it is up to them to keep their A.

In this class, everybody has got an A. Then you have to lose marks to get something less than an A. It's not like you have to gain marks to build yourself up to an A. You'll all
have an A. You can lose that if you don't show up or you don't participate or you show no interest in improving or other things of that nature. You'd have to lose those marks.

P1 is comfortable and confident in the collegiate environment and when asked how long he has been in higher education his response was his entire life which shows it is his life’s work. He is interested in the retention of nontraditional-aged students in his programs and continuously conducts research examining the relationship between the learning communities that he teaches and how these learning communities provide nontraditional-aged students with purposeful interactions that lead to their success in his program. He discussed how the use of learning communities increases the ability to retain students. He is very proud of his department and continually assesses the programs and methods they use to help students to be successful.

**Participant 2 (P2).** P2 is a Professor in the College of Psychology and she is a Clinical Psychologist with 25+ years teaching and interacting with nontraditional-aged students. P2 credits her very open and friendly approach of dealing with her students to her background in clinical psychology. P2 reflected on her experiences teaching and interacting with nontraditional-aged students. She clearly enjoys getting to know her students on very personal levels. She finds satisfaction in interacting with her students and more specifically her nontraditional-aged students because she is very interested in knowing their “stories”.

I am somebody who, from the beginning, was very interested in the stories of these students. I was very happy because the students didn't treat me like a clinical psychologist. Even though they knew and I knew that some of the things I understood about their struggles educationally were informed by my appreciating some of their psychological dilemmas. That group was very varied. You have women who had their
children young. You have working class guys who had worked at or retired from the post office, some veterans. There are a whole lot of reasons why people pick up and come back to school. I had a group of students that as a clinical psychologist, I could identify right away in my classroom, who were in recovery from mental health. A series of mental health incidents and who are in school to get their lives back on track. There was definitely a socio-economic and a subset of students with these mental health issues and in recovery.

P2 has a great desire to understand who her nontraditional-aged students are on a personal level in hopes to better understand what challenges they may be having so that she may be able to assist them more efficiently. She discussed the pleasure she has interacting with them and getting to know their stories, which helps her to better understand why they are pursuing their degrees. As a clinical psychologist, she is seasoned in identifying students who suffer from mental health illnesses, and she knows that being aware of the challenges her students face would assist her with teaching them.

My approach is very student-centered and individualized in that, there's a lot of ways to show me that you learned too. I disclose a lot about my own educational experiences and history. Because I'm interested in how students overcome hardship, and how I learned. We do a fair amount of sharing of personal experiences. Particularly for students who come from groups targeted by discrimination or are first generation college graduates. Some of the students have mental health issues. They confront things within their academic experience. With the right kind of support, they can do very well. I'm always trying to figure that out.
P2 discussed a successful experience that she had interacting with nontraditional-aged students through a summer preparation learning community program at the University. The specific learning community that P2 discussed was with nontraditional-aged students who were identified as underprepared for college and who needed an extra intensive orientation into the University. She found that this summer preparation program was of use to nontraditional-aged students as it created a sense of community, which helped to increase a sense of belonging for these students. P2 believes that it is important for nontraditional-aged students to feel a sense of belonging, and she thinks that because these students were provided a sense of belonging with their learning community, they were successful in the completion of their degree. She believed that it was the interactions that took place in these learning communities and programs that assisted them towards completion of their degree.

Those students who were academically under-prepared and went in for the summer preparation ended up with higher graduation rates because they really worked on an orientation to the college. A sense of belonging. Creating a sense of community, and all of those things are so important.

P2 has an understanding of the challenges nontraditional-aged students face and is concerned with the mental health of her students and the challenges students can face if they suffer from mental health issues. Since she understands, she is flexible in her approach to assignments, and it seems her ultimate goal is for her students to make it through the program. She adjusts her curriculum and assignments to assist students if they need extra support, but she will not just give a good grade to a student if they are not cooperating with her. P2 feels it is beneficial to interact with her nontraditional-aged students to find out what it is that matters to them. She wants to know what they are struggling with and what their issues are so that she can
adjust her teaching to assist them with their studies. She uses a flexible approach to learning and gives students various opportunities to show her how they are learning.

I don't want to pry, I don't want to be nosy, but I do want to hear from students “what matters to you.” If I know a student is working with material and they're having ... they're struggling with issues, I will give students alternative assignments. If they have to be absent, I give them a lot of opportunities to show me their learning.

P2 emphatically enjoys interacting with her students and feels the closer she becomes to them the better she can assist them with social and academic integration and with being successful at the University. She discussed one of the best ways to assist her nontraditional-aged students with integration is by encouraging them to be present in their educational environment by rewarding them for participating in activities and school events.

We have very active social connections within the school and so there's a lot of clubs, a lot of pizza parties, a lot of pumpkin decorating. If we see them, we drag them into it and we always try to make sure the nontraditional-aged students can come and stuff like that.

P2 discussed the challenges that she has experienced nontraditional-aged students to have interacting specifically when it comes to the use of office hours. Her thoughts were that nontraditional-aged students underutilize office hours due to time constraints that they face. Although there are challenges, she discussed that some students will still come to her office hours and this is a useful way to interact.

Students underutilize office hours. They struggle with their time required for significant assignments. But all of us could look for ways to connect to the students. I find that the students who are most focused on their learning appreciate what a faculty member can do
for them and use. I've had one student who comes to office hours weekly, and just chats about every-other classes, or what he's doing in my class, or many things. There are some students who always see me and some who need to see me and do not come.

P2 spent a little time sharing her own childhood and family experiences as well as her personal relationships with teachers and role models. Through her own experiences she has learned that many go towards education as a way to not only escape their surroundings but to uplift themselves to higher levels in life. She didn’t seem to have suffered in her personal life, because her reflections were very happy and positive, but she did seem to be very inspired by education and from her relationships with her teachers. She discussed one teacher she had who personally worked with her to assist her on levels that were not required and how that relationship impacted her view on teaching, learning and relationships. As a clinical psychologist she is no stranger to the weight that poor mental health can have on a student’s life, and this is why her approach is what it is when working with her students.

**Participant 3 (P3).** Serves as the Dean of College of Environmental Science and has 25 + years teaching and interacting with nontraditional-aged students. She reflected on her experiences interacting with nontraditional-aged students and really enjoys working with this student demographic most. She discussed her lead by example model, and this is how she sets the high standard for her faculty to have similar interactive relationships with all their students.

P3 shared that in her department that the students are grouped into communities as freshman based on how they scored academically on tests. These learning communities are used to provide the students with opportunities to interact and connect with others to have an increased sense of belonging. They use the Freshman Success Communities to have
nontraditional-aged students bond with others, form an identity and integrate into the program successfully.

Typically what happens is you come to college, you're undeclared, and you find us some time in your late freshman year or in your sophomore year. We don't want them to just find us and then get thrown into the bin with all the other students. We want to make sure that every year, we celebrate the fact that you have joined the group, you're on board with us, and that this is the community with people, your fellow students, and us, that you are here to make sure that you graduate in your four years, and that we'll do everything we can to make sure that every opportunity that comes by you have a chance to participate in.

P3 further discussed her opinion of the valuable use of learning communities, especially with nontraditional-aged students. She thinks that these educational communities provide nontraditional-aged students with deeper interactions and learning environments and they benefit from these environments because they will use their similar life experiences to bond and build relationships with others. P3 feels that learning communities mainly help nontraditional-aged students by assisting them in overcoming the challenge or feelings of isolation because they are able to meet others who have similar experiences.

Let's find these non-traditional students that are coming in and get them together and give them a community because it's all a learning community. They actually have members in the learning community that have similar life experiences so that's a little bit easy to build.
P3 discussed how when nontraditional-aged students interact in her learning communities they are able to integrate socially by meeting other students who are interested in similar things which helps them build stronger connections and assists them with integrating socially.

I think that's what I've seen most, is making the connections. You probably don't want to hang out with me. You don't want to spend a whole lot of time with me, but I know someone whose interests resonate with yours who might be a good match for you guys to either socialize with, or maybe a club that you want to join.

P3 also uses a very personal approach to connect with her nontraditional-aged students. She discussed how when she interacts with students she shares personal information about herself to show them that she is similar to them in hopes to show them that they are not alone and that there are more people with similar experiences and even responsibilities in higher education.

I think you have to be a faculty member who's very open about who you are and very comfortable about who you are. I think students sense that, that you're comfortable in your own skin, you have a story to tell that you're willing to share. I think that resonates with every student, whether they're nontraditional or traditional. For the nontraditional students, because you're closer in age, they're like, "Oh, yeah. I have a four-year-old, too." I think I'm very blessed with a faculty in the School for the Environment that are all very diverse and very interesting life experiences that they're very comfortable with sharing.

P3 discussed how she is flexible in her definition and approach to student success. She thinks the University could be more open in the way that they approach student success as well.
I think the way we define success is too heavy on ... This is someone who graduated 2.9 ... It's too heavy on the academic. You have to fill this many credits and be in this box. I think when we look at a nontraditional student, for me, a lot of the nontraditional students, they can't take a full load. There's no way. Even if they wanted to, they can't, nor, because of their life, should they. I think sometimes we do a disservice to them saying, you know what? You need to take 15 credits. How are they going to do that with four kids and two jobs? Why would you set them up for failure?

P3 believes that institutions need to be flexible with their approach to student success for nontraditional-aged students due to their external responsibilities and stressors. She feels that institutions make it harder on these students by forcing them to follow the same guidelines as traditional-aged students and asking all students to fit into the same box is like setting students up for failure. P3 reflected on how flexible she can be as she supports her nontraditional-aged students on levels deeper than academics. Many times her students have financial and other limitations that can prevent them from participating and instead of asking for help they will just say that they can’t participate.

We require every student to have a laptop. This student came in, and they said, "You know, I've got this laptop from high school." I looked at him. I'm like, "You must have been in high school 20 years ago." He goes, "Exactly." I said, "That's not going to get you through school." He says "But I can't do this class if I don't have a laptop." I was like, "Hang on a second." I went and got a laptop out of the closet. I said, "Here's a laptop. Next question?" He said, "Honestly, I can't even afford my books." I said, "What classes are you in?" He told me. I said, "Hang on a second. Here's all these desk copies. Help
yourself." I'm like, "Next problem." I'm not going to let our students be held back because of financial ... I just will not allow it. (P3, personal communication, 2014)

Since P3 is aware that nontraditional-aged students face many challenges she rewards her nontraditional-aged students for being engaged and involved in their academic environment. “I actually give students extra credit for attending campus events, educational events, arts events, also community events, because so many of them just don't have the time for these things.” (P3)

P3 discussed the challenges that nontraditional-aged students face but she also discussed her experiences with their use of office hours as a very useful way to interact. She feels that nontraditional-aged students are more likely to attend office hours and she encourages her faculty to help them feel comfortable so they will visit them in their offices frequently.

It’s interesting, non-traditional students are typically more likely to go to office hours than a traditional student. The traditional students are still pretty sure they know everything…Because they are traditional they can go ask for advice elsewhere. Whereas non-traditional students, provided that we can get them comfortable enough to ask, they are in the offices all the time.

P3 is supportive to her students and her faculty and she creates a team-like environment to learn in. She supports peer interactions as well and shared that at times when her students are having trouble she will team them up with upperclassman and she thinks this is a good supportive approach to learning. P3 discussed one example of a nontraditional-aged student who she noticed was struggling with the set course load, so she was flexible in her approach to assisting him and thought that peer learning would be beneficial for him. She decided he would
benefit with a different approach to his learning and instead of making him stick to the traditional order of things provided a flexible approach that was very successful for him.

All right, why don't you come work in my lab? You'll work with one of my grad students, and they'll train you in some of the techniques that you're going to have to know if you want to do what you're doing. He said, "I haven't taken any major classes." I said, that's okay. You'll figure it out.

As P3 discussed, her goal in using a learning community was to provide nontraditional-aged students with a sense of community, helpful peer relationships, and the tools they will need to complete their degree.

We want to make sure that every year, we celebrate the fact that you have joined the group, you're on board with us, and that this is the community with people, your fellow students, and us, that you are here to make sure that you graduate in their four years, and that we'll do everything we can to make sure that every opportunity that comes by you have a chance to participate in.

P3 provided another example of how she allows the interactions and learning opportunities to just flow between herself and her students and how this is a very successful method of educating.

I had a student who was a veteran. Happened that I had his father as a student too. His dad was military and he was a recruiter. This young man, when he first enrolled was recently out of Iraq, and very high levels of PTSD. He was having trouble completing the course. I gave him an oral exam instead. He actually ended up in my research space talking about what he learned in the class. One of my advanced students came in, an
undergraduate. We ended up having a three-way conversation, and it ended up being a great experience for him. A little confidence-builder. I now have him in my Adolescence class which is great, because he's about to graduate to become a teacher. He's in great shape. It was just really special to be able to see that. See him find his footing and recover from this very harsh experience.

P3 shared a story of when she met the parents of one of the nontraditional-aged students she had interacted with and described how the parents felt that her interactions with this student truly did assist him with degree completion.

It took him an extra year to finish his degree, but he graduated last May. I knew that it meant a lot to [Michael] to finish, but it wasn't until I met his parents and that they, in particular his mother, said to me, "You've got to understand the things that he has gone through in his life. The fact that you took care of him is the only reason that this kid graduated." (p. 3). I thought, that's why I do what I do, that is it. I saw a spark in him, and I thought, you know, I can't save everybody, but I know what you're interested in, and I know how to give you the experiences that are going to empower you.

P3 shared a personal aspect of her own life, which she also shares with her students, and that is that she too was a nontraditional-aged student. She feels that having had this experience has made her more understanding of the challenges that they face as well as more motivated to interact with and assist them. She uses a flexible in her approach to working with nontraditional-aged students or any students who are struggling and described a few situations that she had in which she knew a student faced issues doing well and she adjusted her approach and assisted them with overcoming these challenges and being successful.
Participant 4 (P4): Is a Professor in the College of Latina Studies, with 15 + years interacting with nontraditional-aged students. Although she is seemingly the younger with the least experience interacting and teaching she shared the same enthusiasm as the other participants while reflecting on her experiences. She is very easy to talk to and is very down to earth. This approach makes interacting with her less intimidating and could be very helpful for her communications with students. She finds interactions to be of great importance, especially early on in the student’s career. “I think that's critical, those interactions. In your first semester, what type of person was there for you, that really supported you? Because I find that that's a make or break type of thing.” (P4)

P4 is understanding of the challenges that nontraditional-aged students face and is supportive in her role as their professor. Since she is aware that nontraditional-aged students face time challenges. She requires that her students meet with her twice during the semester, but she also encourages them to come meet with her more often than that. Although she knew it could be intimidating to force them to come meet with her, she thought that these interactions are very important; so a requirement is necessary. She reflected deeply on how important these interactions were for her students.

That was like, you know, a little intimidating, but I made it to be part of the assignment. I had to do an outline with them. They didn't have to get the outline approved, but that was my backup reason, it was academic, but it was also really just to get to know them. I think that's critical, those interactions. In your first semester, what type of person was there for you, that really supported you?
P4 discussed how she finds these required meetings to be such a helpful way to interact and to also assist them with avoiding any future problems that could occur if the communication had not been open. “Then hopefully if you try to catch some problems there. Sometimes it's encouraging them to withdraw from the class so they don't get an F.” (P4)

P4 is very personable with her students and as she interacts with them she shares aspects of her own life and experiences in hopes that it helps them with opening up as well. She allows her students to use text messaging to communicate with her and although at times that can be a very challenging way of communicating she thinks it is very helpful to allow them to interact any way they feel comfortable in doing so. “I always give out my cell. It's the only phone I have. But they text me first. I don't know. Like sometimes they text me I'm on the bus and I'll be there in fifteen!” (P4)

It is very important to P4 that her students do well. She discussed how she used interactions to personally assist her students with social and academic integration by connecting them to other members/departments in the University.

You know, I'm really trying to help students. They don't know sometimes that there's financial aid or there's that kind of support on campus. Hey, you can get free counseling. Did you know that? Why don't you walk over to the wellness center and you can get an appointment? I wouldn't just send them. Okay, just go over to the one stop and wait there for four hours. No, they don't have time! Okay, pick up the phone, make a call, will you see this person? Like, okay, at 1:30? Clear. Can you stick around until then? I try to deal with it like. There's a name now. You can follow up now. You have a contact. There's a
person. You’re not blocked on a website. I have to establish a relationship with them. Somebody in every one of those offices is there: the disability office and the registrar.

P4 is particularly interested in the success of nontraditional-aged students since she feels that the completion of their degree can assist them with upward mobility in their lives and to earn the respect they deserve as people.

This is how I’ve thought about it right now. One of my adult learners was a Vietnam vet. He was a Marine sergeant and he is trying to get his Master’s degree now and he's 60. He wrote this essay about why he's getting his masters, and he only wrote a paragraph, which isn't enough, but he wrote a paragraph saying that he wants respect. I was like that was the one thing that I think ties them. All they want is to be respected, you know? To feel respect.

P4 seems to interact with all of her nontraditional-aged students in a professional manner as a colleague would and provides them with the support and respect they need to encourage their success.

The faculty participant’s narratives were provided above to offer a brief summary of their reflections and shared responses regarding their experiences interacting with nontraditional-aged students. The next section will explore the emergent themes of faculty participant interaction with nontraditional-aged students that were identified.

**Emergent Themes**

Consistent themes and sub-themes emerged while examining the faculty participants’ narratives. The themes define the participants’ experiences with interacting with nontraditional-
aged students as well as how these interactions are valuable towards assisting these students with degree completion. The emergent themes include:

- **Theme #1: The use of Learning Communities by faculty to increase interactions with nontraditional-aged students**
  
a) Sub-theme #1: Interactions increase academic integration for nontraditional-aged students

b) Sub-theme #2: Interactions increase nontraditional-aged student social involvement/engagement

- **Theme #2: Faculty requiring office hours to increase interactions with nontraditional-aged students**

- **Theme #3: Faculty being flexible in their approach to educating nontraditional-aged students**
  
a) Sub-theme #1: Faculty getting to know nontraditional-aged students on a personal level (understanding their challenges mental/physical/environmental)

**Table 1**

_Emergent themes and sub-themes_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superordinate theme #1: The use of Learning Communities by faculty to</td>
<td>1.1 Interactions increase social and academic integration for</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Increase interactions with nontraditional-aged students</td>
<td>Nontraditional-aged students Student involvement/groups/peer interactions</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>1.2 Interactions increase nontraditional-aged student involvement/engagement</td>
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<td>Superordinate theme #3: Faculty being flexible in their approach to educating nontraditional-aged students</td>
<td>3.1 Faculty getting to know nontraditional-aged students on a personal level (understanding their challenges mental/physical/environmental)</td>
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**Description of Themes**

**Emergent Theme #1: The use of Learning Communities by faculty to increase interactions with nontraditional-aged students**

One of the most common themes that emerged from the faculty participants’ interpretations of successfully interacting with nontraditional-aged students was the use of learning environments for nontraditional-aged students to interact and learn in. All the faculty participants acknowledged that nontraditional-aged students face challenges of feeling alienated and alone. The faculty participants indicated that when they provide students with learning communities these students could have deep interactions and important connections, and they
could build beneficial relationships not only between themselves and faculty but also between themselves and their peers. The faculty participants shared their own experiences with using community learning environments and described the exact ways in which nontraditional-aged students build connections and relationships that would have otherwise been challenging for them. Faculty participants stated that community learning environments provide students with feelings of belonging, engagement and support, which not only addresses many of the challenges that nontraditional-aged students face, but they are also the key to student success in the academic environment. All of the participants stated that nontraditional-aged students need to experience deep interactions, connections and engagement in the academic environment in order to be successful towards the completion of their degrees, and they reflected how the learning community environments fostered this.

**Sub-theme #1: Interactions increase social and academic integration for nontraditional-aged students’ involvement/groups/peer interactions**

The faculty participants all discussed how the interactions that nontraditional-aged students have, both with themselves and with peers, provide students with many beneficial social and academic supports that assist them with further integration into the University and increases the likelihood that they would complete their degrees. The faculty participants all described the learning communities as environments that provide these interactions and foster academic and social integration for students. These opportunities are specifically helpful for nontraditional-aged students because, without having organized opportunities provided for their integration, they could face many challenges attempting to interact and integrate on their own.
Sub-theme #2: Interactions increase nontraditional-aged student social involvement/engagement

All of the faculty participants discussed how learning communities influenced nontraditional-aged students to interact more with not only with faculty but also with their peers. All of the faculty participants discussed that one of the most helpful aspects of the community learning environments was that nontraditional-aged students were influenced to become more engaged and more involved with their peers and with the University environment as whole. The faculty participants also shared that increased participation for students is an excellent and very useful way to engage students and helps these students to be more successful in their program.

Emergent theme #2: Faculty requiring office hours to increase interactions with nontraditional-aged students

The second most common theme that emerged from the faculty participants’ interpretations was the use of mandatory office hours or meetings to provide helpful interactions with nontraditional-aged students. All of the participants indicated that office hours are a great tool to use to interact one-on-one with their students, and they required that their students attend office hours visits to be certain that these interactions would occur. Most of the faculty participants stated that making visits mandatory is key to having students attend, because most participants thought that nontraditional-aged students would face challenges attending office hours due to time constraints and hesitations of interacting with others, but that they would attend if it was required.

Emergent theme #3: Faculty being flexible in their approach to educating nontraditional-aged students
All of the participants discussed how they are flexible in their approaches to interacting with and teaching nontraditional-aged students. They all discussed how they try to understand the challenges their nontraditional-aged students face and how they frequently adjust methods, content and delivery to help them understand and be successful in their studies. The participants all had success in individualizing learning approaches and all thought that the greatest importance was in seeing progress with their students rather than just focusing on grades. The faculty participants described student success as retention and degree completion, but they were not rigid in their approaches to attaining those goals.

**Sub-Theme #1: Faculty getting to know nontraditional-aged students on a personal level (understanding their challenges mental/physical/environmental)**

The faculty participants all discussed how much they enjoyed getting to know their nontraditional-aged students. They all saw importance in knowing their students so they could fully understand the challenges their nontraditional-aged students face and be flexible in their approaches to assisting them. Getting to know the students as persons helped the participants understand whether the challenges they face are mental/physical/environmental in order to assist them with the completion of their degrees.

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented the narratives of four faculty participants, each of whom reflected on their experiences interacting with nontraditional-aged students. The narratives were read multiple times and analyzed deeply to explore the faculty participants’ understandings of their interactions and to identify emergent themes of how these interactions were helpful towards degree completion.
In all of the faculty participants’ experiences educating nontraditional-aged students, they found that these students face many challenges. The faculty participants all shared their practices with using a few consistent methods of interacting in order to assist nontraditional-aged students to become engaged, feel connected, integrate both academically and socially; all saw that this could help these students with the completion of their degrees.

The next chapter will examine the meaning and purpose of the themes in comparison to the theoretical framework and relevant literature on the topic.
Chapter 6: Discussion of Research Findings

Interpretation of Findings

This chapter begins with a comparison of the superordinate interaction themes identified from the faculty participants’ accounts to the theoretical framework and relevant literature used in this study. The researcher then discusses the limitations of this study and offers suggestions for future research. The chapter concludes with discussion of recommendations for interaction with this population to assist nontraditional-aged students with the challenges they face completing their degrees.

Summary of the Problem of Practice

The purpose of this study was to examine faculty participants’ interpretations of their interactions with nontraditional-aged students in order to determine whether or not they think such interactions assist students with the completion of their degrees and why. The researcher requested that faculty participants examine their experiences interacting with nontraditional-aged students and that they interpret and describe what those interactions mean to the students and to the students’ development. This process was initiated with in-depth interviews with faculty participants from a large urban institution.

Summary of Research Results

The set of themes that emerged from the interpretations discussed three interaction methods that the faculty participants found to be successful in assisting nontraditional-aged
students towards the completion of their degrees. This chapter begins by comparing the identified themes to the theoretical framework and to the literature that was reviewed for this study.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to Theoretical Framework and Literature**

Two themes identified in the analysis of the faculty participants’ narratives that were most consistent with the theoretical framework and the literature were the use of learning communities and office hours as successful interaction methods that assisted nontraditional-aged students. The faculty participants, the literature and the theoretical framework all referenced beneficial factors of learning communities and office hours as effective methods to provide nontraditional-aged students with useful opportunities to become more engaged academically and socially assisting them towards degree completion.

Comparison of the theoretical framework to the findings of the study reveals consistency with Bean’s (1981) student attrition model. The model theorizes that a student’s ability to integrate in the academic setting can be due to various characteristics or variables that could affect their ability to interact with the environment. Bean (1981) theorized that a student’s interaction with the environment could affect their ability to remain at the institution and complete (or not complete) their degrees. All of the faculty participants’ findings revealed that they held the similar belief that a student’s interaction with the university could result in a greater or lesser ability for that student to complete their degree.

Bean’s (1981) theory was relevant to this study because it identified background variables such as family responsibilities and employment as those that would create most
challenges for nontraditional-aged students. The faculty participants in this study also discussed the same external characteristics that Bean (1981) identified and found they bring many challenges that can affect nontraditional-aged students’ abilities to progress towards degree completion.

Most appropriate to the findings of this study is the segment of Bean’s (1981) theory regarding a student’s informal contact with faculty and membership in campus organizations, which, as he theorized, could affect the students’ decisions to leave the institution or to continue. The faculty participants’ accounts continuously revealed a similar philosophy that a student’s informal contact and membership in campus organizations was extremely important to the completion of their degree. To provide an example of their belief in this theory, the faculty participants shared the success they had in using methods of informal contact and membership in organizations, specifically learning communities and mandatory office hours, to assist nontraditional-aged students with social and academic integration. In later theoretical research Bean and Eaton (2002) also discussed the use of learning communities and informal contact with faculty as a way to assist nontraditional-aged students with integration into the university and towards degree completion.

Learning Communities

One of the most common methods that the faculty participants discussed using to interact with nontraditional-aged students was learning communities. The faculty participants all reflected deeply on the learning communities they created to influence nontraditional-aged students to interact more with faculty, other students, and the University as a whole. The literature review did not specifically discuss the topic of
learning communities, but it did mention the importance of nontraditional-aged students’ relationships with faculty and other members of the university community and of the beneficial outcomes that occur when students interact with others (Glardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Because the theme of learning communities was so evident in the participants’ interpretations, further review of the literature on the topic of learning communities was necessary to the analysis. Although much of the literature that discusses learning communities does not focus on the use of learning communities with nontraditional-aged students specifically, the literature did provide a clear definition of successful learning community practices and its benefits.

Wegner (2011) provided a useful comparative definition for successful community learning environments. As referred to in the literature, Communities of Practice (COP) is a group of individuals who meet frequently and who work, share and learn collaboratively to master a subject that they care about. Wegner and Snyder (2000) discussed the many benefits of COP’s and stated that they can drive strategy, generate new ideas, develop professional skills and solve problems. Cowan (2012) found that COP’s are successful when a group of learners work together to solve problems and share similar learning goals, and when knowledge is provided by experts in the groups as facilitators. Cowan (2012) also found that when students were in a COP and were able to work collaboratively, program completion rates were higher and students became successful educational technology leaders. All of the learning communities that the faculty participants used followed these descriptions. The participants found the greatest success in using learning communities to assemble students in communities that would meet frequently and give nontraditional-aged students the ability to interact with faculty and with other students with similar educational goals and aspirations. The participants also found that the interactions that occurred in the learning communities provided students with valuable experiences that
increased student success and helped the students face the challenges confronting them. These communities allowed students to gain more self-confidence, support, and strong ties to the university. Bean and Eaton (2002) posited that similar communities increased levels of persistence and achievement, which in turn increased academic and social integration of a student. The literature on learning communities consistently reports that one purpose is to provide members with a sense of belonging and assist them by putting them with others who share similar goals and aspirations as that they have (Cowan, 2012; Wegner, 2011).

**Social and Academic Integration**

The faculty participants shared another successful outcome of their use of learning communities which was to have nontraditional-aged students interact with upper-class students and faculty who were more knowledgeable on specific subjects. The faculty participants considered such interactions assisted nontraditional-aged students with their social and academic integration into their programs and into the University. These interactions provided nontraditional-aged students with assistance to be successful in their studies. The literature corroborated the faculty participant’s theories on this use of learning communities and described that these communities are a combination of academic and social interactions which increase academic performance and retention (Cowan, 2012; Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990; Wegner, 2011).

**Mandatory Office Hours/Informal Interactions**

The faculty participants discussed the success they had in increasing informal contact with nontraditional-aged students by requiring their students to come to office hours. The faculty participants used mandatory office hours both to increase student interactions and to
assist students with their academics where they needed assistance. The theoretical model of student attrition of Bean and Kuh (1984), suggested that outside of the classroom interactions between faculty and students increased student academic achievement and persistence. The proposition is that faculty are the key holders to many aspects of success in their disciplines, and when students interact with faculty they rewarded and socialized to the norms of the profession (Bean and Kuh, 1984).

The literature on mandatory office hours is limited but it does state that a faculty member’s invitation results in increased attendance at office hours by students (Griffin et al., 2014). Griffin et al. (2014) maintained that the best practice for increasing a student’s use of office hours is through intentional conversations and agreements on an institutional level. The faculty participants’ interpretations aligned with Griffin et al. (2014) best practice, because they repeatedly reached out to students to persuade them to not only attend the mandatory office hours but also to participate in office hours as often as they could.

Pfund, Rogan, Burnham and Norcross (2013) discussed the importance of faculty and student interactions and concluded that the office hours were a prime time to have these interactions because students could discuss more than academics, such as receive guidance, or just have a casual conversation. Most professors seemed to understand the importance of the use of office hours. However, the literature showed that one of the challenges is that students do not have good attendance with office hours (Griffin, Cohen, Bernston, Burson, Camper & Smith, 2014; Pfund et al., 2013). This was consistent with the interpretations of the faculty participants who pointed out that some students would resist coming to office hours even when it was a mandatory requirement. All of the participants still made it clear that they require mandatory
office hours for their students and tried their best to increase interactions and one-on-one informal interactions.

**Flexibility**

The literature on flexible teaching was limited in comparison to the identified themes of this study. Yoo (2009) offered Joyce and Hodges (1981) definition of teaching flexibility as an instructor’s ability to be adaptive to students’ needs. One of the problems plaguing research on instructional flexibility has been the absence of an agreed-upon definition of flexibility in teaching (Yoo, 2009, Pg. 14).

Yoo (2009) found that instructional flexibility is considered an important component of effective teaching by both students and instructors and that a flexible teacher was portrayed as someone who was responsive and attentive to the needs of individual students. Yoo’s thesis (2009) reinforces the theme that the faculty participants got to know the students on personal, individual levels and often provided a flexible teaching approach to assist the students: often faculty participants would modify course schedules or assignments in response to student’s needs. Yoo (2009) said students described flexible teachers as being patient, caring, sympathetic, supportive, understanding, accommodating, available and approachable. This terminology was used by the faculty participants to describe themselves.

Another definition of flexibility is the ability to deliver content to students in varying ways specifically with the increased use of technologies and distance learning. Collis and Moonen (2010) revisited their first examination of flexibility in higher education (2001) to examine whether flexibility was still a pertinent theme to institutions. They defined flexibility as providing choices to students and found that nine years later institutions were focusing on the
enhancement of flexibility in learning spaces with a blend of on-campus and distance learning capabilities (Collis and Moonen, 2010).

**Conclusion**

When compared, the literature, theoretical framework and the faculty participants’ interpretations were all consistent. All agreed that certain nontraditional-aged student characteristics often affect these students’ ability to interact and integrate into their academic setting. All sources used in this study were consistent in their belief that interactions between faculty and students are very beneficial for nontraditional-aged students and that these interactions are necessary for social and academic integration into the academic setting. All faculty participants discussed that two of the most beneficial interaction methods are the use of learning communities and mandatory office hours. These approaches provide opportunities for the students to become engaged, improve their academic performance, increase their sense of belonging, connect with others in the institution, and build their confidence as a student.

**Relevance**

The findings presented in this study are relevant to higher education because they have matched theory to practice on the topic of advantages of faculty interactions with nontraditional-aged students on degree completion.

With the continuous growth of this demographic these findings can serve higher education institutions in their attempts to retain nontraditional-aged students and to assist these students towards the completion of their degrees. These findings provide institutions and faculty with concrete, direct methods of interaction, such as the use of learning communities or the use
of mandatory office hours, which can be used as practices to engage and assist students with integration into the academic setting and with the completion of their degree.

There will be other audiences who will benefit from these findings. Nontraditional-aged students and their families may benefit the most. Receiving a college education is very costly and even more costly if the degree is not completed (Schneider & Yin, 2011). This study may help nontraditional-aged students understand that interacting with faculty may heighten their chances of completing their degree. Approaching this topic from a faculty perspective may assist faculty with their own interactions with nontraditional-aged students.

**Practitioner and Scholarly Significance**

Nontraditional-aged student and faculty interactions are of immediate relevance to higher education as nontraditional-aged students are a steadily increasing percentage of our student populations. It is important to recognize the challenges these students face. As the findings of this study have shown, there are ways to address these challenges. These findings show that many of these students could be retained and assisted with degree completion if they were influenced to interact with faculty and with other members of the institution.

This topic is also of importance to higher education because it shows how important faculty are to the students and to the university. These findings show that we need to develop programs to assist faculty in interacting with students toward the goal of increasing the degree completion rates for nontraditional-aged students. These interactions increased engagement, support, integration, and connections with their peers.

**Recommendations**
The findings of this study suggest recommendations for practitioners. The first recommendation is that investments be made to provide professional development for faculty on interacting with nontraditional-aged students with the intent of contributing to retention and degree completion. There were distinct methods that faculty used to successfully interact and assist students with continuation and success. It is recommended that institutions adopt these methods to reach out and connect with their nontraditional-aged student populations. Methods that are recommended, based on the findings in this research study, are the use of learning communities and office hours.

Another recommendation for practitioners is the importance of identifying the challenges that many nontraditional-aged students face. If the challenges are identified early and properly, the institution can create programs to specifically deal with their stressors. Some examples of support that can be provided to nontraditional-aged students are childcare, transportation, and educational support off campus such as distance education. All of the above support could alleviate the stress of time constraints, family burdens and feelings of disconnect that many students feel when they cannot be on campus most of the time.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study is that this University historically has been at the forefront servicing nontraditional-aged students; therefore, they are accustomed to sustaining practices that retain and assist these students. With that being said, this University is also one of the best institutions to use in a study with this topic because they are so good at what they do and can offer many others their expertise.

Suggestions for further research
Suggestions for further research on this topic would be to survey nontraditional-aged graduates on their views on how their interactions with faculty assisted them to degree completion. It would be helpful to learn exactly how they feel these interactions were helpful to them and being provided with nontraditional-aged graduates’ opinions would be informative.

Another suggestion for further research would be a deeper examination of the use of learning communities with a case study and observation of learning communities. All the faculty participants felt the learning communities were a successful way to help nontraditional-aged students become engaged, connected and supported through interactions with traditional-aged students and with faculty. The participants found that learning communities helped nontraditional-aged students address any challenges that they faced with not being integrated in the academic setting or feelings of isolation. To best test these theories it would be useful to have a deeper examination and reflection on the interactions that take place in these communities.

The final theme that emerged from this study that should be studied further would be the examination of flexible teaching approaches. As this study revealed, faculty participants believe that their flexible approaches to teaching nontraditional-aged students assisted these students by easing their stress by allowing them to each learn the way that best works for them. They found that flexible teaching approaches built better working relationships with faculty and students and that this flexibility helped the nontraditional-aged students to feel more comfortable in the learning environment.

Conclusion
Nontraditional-aged students will increasingly populate our higher educational institutions. Nontraditional-aged students have varying challenges that they face while receiving their education that can make degree completion difficult to attain. The findings of this study reveal that institutions can assist nontraditional-aged students with degree completion by helping them to interact with meaningful members of their environment. It is important to let nontraditional-aged students know that interactions with others, and specifically with faculty, can assist them with degree completion by increasing engagement, self-confidence, academic and social support.
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