RETURNING TO COLLEGE: AN EXPLORATION OF THE PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF ADULTS AS UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract

This study investigated the individual experiences of adult undergraduate students, defined as those 25 years of age or older, to understand their perceptions of how they succeeded in completing their bachelor’s degree programs. The sample of 15 participants was purposefully selected from a pool of Empire State College alumni who had graduated within five years of the start of the research. Among adult students in the United States, 62% do not complete their bachelor’s degree within six years of their first enrollment, and many drop out within their first year (Berker, Horn& Carroll, 2003). Persistence theory was the lens through which this problem of lack of degree completion among adult students was viewed. This study was significant because a determination of how adult undergraduate students accomplished the successful completion of their bachelor’s degree programs could help set policy in higher education which would lead to greater numbers of adult students achieving graduation. The study also expanded the existing literature of adult student persistence, which is sparse and often outdated. The qualitative methodology used to explore the primary research question of how adults who have returned to college and who have completed a bachelor’s degree, make sense of and explain their academic success was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with each participant consisting of 12 open-ended questions, which encouraged rich description of participant experiences in their own words. Significant findings which emerged during data analysis consisted of three superordinate themes: adult students experience special challenges, institutional flexibility promotes success and supportive relationships are important as the adult student re-enters the academic environment.

Keywords: adult nontraditional students, adult undergraduates, persistence, interpretative phenomenological analysis, academic flexibility, online learning, academic success in college
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Dedication

To my mom, my greatest fan—

She would have been so proud!
Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the individual experiences of adult undergraduate students to understand their perceptions of how they succeeded in completing their bachelor’s degree programs. The knowledge generated by this research has informed a greater awareness of how adult undergraduates were able to persist until graduation. This study employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to illustrate how these adult students achieved academic success.

Context and Background

The demographic of students seeking degrees on American college campuses has been substantially altered since 1970 to include increasing numbers of working age adults (Choy, 2002). A large cohort of adult nontraditional learners, often defined as those 25 years of age or older at the time of enrollment (Samuels, Beach & Palmer, 2012), now comprise 40% of undergraduates studying in colleges and universities nationwide (United States Department of Education, 2012). These adult students recognize that they need new skills and competencies, validated by academic credentials, in order to personally succeed in the ever-changing 21st century world of work, prompting a return to college (Pusser et al., 2007).

However, accompanying this growth of the adult undergraduate population is a concurrent trend toward noncompletion of the degree. In a study of full-time working adults who expressed a belief in the positive impact that attaining a degree would have on their personal and economic success, 62% had not completed their degree programs within six years of initial enrollment, and many dropped out within the first year (Berker, Horn & Carroll, 2003). In addition, the census of 2010 shows that one out of five working adults has some college, but no degree (Lumina Foundation, 2012).
Some evidence exists that adult students returning to college, as a result of the commonly experienced demands of work and family, may face special challenges in readjusting to academic life which might lead to the ultimate failure of the student to complete their degree (Lundberg, 2003). Since the academic literature which might further investigate this concern is sparse or inconsistent, focusing instead on the needs of 18-24 year-old traditional students, there is no current consensus regarding what types of support or interventions might facilitate adult student success. In the period between 1999 and 2003, only 1.2% of 3,219 articles appearing in peer-reviewed journals of higher education addressed any aspect of adult undergraduates (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). As a result of this deficiency, the existing literature leaves either completely or partially unanswered the means by which some adults successfully complete their college degrees and graduate, while others succumb to obstacles along the way which undermine their persistence.

In response to these omissions, this study was undertaken to investigate how adults, who have returned to college, and who have completed a bachelor’s degree, make sense of and explain their academic success.

**Rationale and Significance**

The rationale for conducting this study was to better understand how adult students who earned their bachelor’s degree achieved academic success, defined as persistence until graduation, with the intent to apply that knowledge to prevent the premature departure of other adult students from their degree programs. The retention of adults already enrolled in colleges and universities is as important to increasing the number of degree-holding adults in the United States as the recruitment of new adult students to participate in higher education. Once an adult student leaves a degree program, even if the intent to re-enroll is expressed at the time of
withdrawal, a return is not likely to occur, with only 13% re-enrolling within the 30 months following the time of withdrawal (Spanard, 1990; Wright & Spanard, 1988). Through learning how adult students succeed and persist until graduation, strategies, both institutional and personal, may be devised to promote the retention of these at-risk adults before they decide to withdraw from college (Kasworm, 1990).

The significance of this study can be demonstrated on several levels of concern involving diverse stakeholders. The impact of the lack of degree attainment among adult students in the United States cuts across both the public and private realms. A determination of how adult undergraduate students accomplish the successful completion of their bachelor’s degree programs may help set policy in higher education which will lead to the development of even greater numbers of adult students achieving graduation. This study was designed to discover the experiences of adult college students as they successfully attained their bachelor’s degrees. The data gained will contribute to the body of knowledge which will ultimately assist in the creation of strategies to better facilitate adult student persistence.

Finding the means to prevent the attrition of adults from bachelor’s degree programs at colleges and universities in the United States becomes particularly urgent when viewed from the standpoint of maintaining the competitiveness and effectiveness of American workers within the context of the knowledge-driven global economy (Lumina, 2009). In addition, for the adults who may already be sitting on the lowest positions on the socioeconomic ladder, the failure to obtain a bachelor’s degree and acquire the learning skills essential to rise above their current status could predispose them to lives of societal dependence and underachievement. The public impact of their condition would be the eventual straining of the social service resources in their communities as governments would be called upon to provide for their support (Grubb &
Lazerson, 2005). The dynamic of discontent created as the result of this loss of human capital, personal possibilities and lifetime earning potential (Elman & O’Rand, 2004) might eventually destabilize communities as the underemployed and unemployed, lacking alternatives and deprived of opportunities, challenge the assumptions of the economic and social system.

The significance of this study of how adult undergraduate students successfully complete bachelor’s degree programs can be seen in the lives of individual students as well as within the context of communities and the social structure. Personal economic well-being increases with degree attainment. During the course of an average work life, graduates who hold a bachelor’s degree will earn approximately 2.1 million. Members of the labor force who started college but did not complete their degrees will earn an estimated one-third less. High school diploma holders with no postsecondary attendance will see their lifetime earnings be about half of what the bachelor’s degree graduate receives (Lumina, 2009; Ryan, 2012). In addition, the college graduate also has greater opportunities for career advancement, further increasing earnings potential and job satisfaction (Samuels et al., 2012).

The audiences that would benefit from this study of how adult undergraduate students achieve academic success through earning their bachelor’s degree are the stakeholders that, in their own roles, share in that process of success facilitation. The administrators of colleges and universities would be a primary audience that could apply new research that would potentially avert student attrition, preserving tuition income, graduation rates, and the institutional reputation which would suffer from having large numbers of dropouts. The communities in which students live and study are also an audience that would benefit from this research, since college graduates can contribute more to the community economically because of higher incomes than those of college dropouts or high school graduates. Successful adult students are also less likely to strain
social safety nets as a result of the increased stability often gained through the realization of greater lifetime earnings and, as a result of access to more financial assets, avoid reliance on community resources for survival (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005; Samuels et al., 2012).

A unique audience to benefit from this study is the research community involved in the investigation of adult student persistence in higher education. The use of IPA as the methodology which guided the inquiry gives researchers access to the voices of adult students as they share the lived experiences of the successful completion of their bachelor’s degree programs. The in-depth interview process associated with IPA enables the interpretation of individual perceptions of the challenges impacting adult undergraduate persistence. These interview results complement the studies of attrition which typically rely on methodologies that study larger numbers of students in the aggregate. Personal stories have emerged from this study which add depth and nuance to the more traditionally acquired data. Policymakers interested in facilitating the success of adult undergraduates have an additional resource to use in the attainment of the goal of increased rates of degree completion.

However, the most significant audience to benefit from this investigation is the adult undergraduate student returning to college who has a better chance of successfully graduating with a bachelor’s degree as a result of support and services provided by the other stakeholders, the partners in their success (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). The benefits to the individual will continue even after graduation as the skills and attitudes of mind needed to complete the degree carry over into the daily life of graduates, giving them the mental resources and self-confidence to be resilient when confronted by the multiple challenges that often exist within families, institutions and communities. An additional benefit is the greater sense of personal satisfaction and purpose that can result from the successful accomplishment of educational goals (Samuels et
al., 2012; Tuijnman, 1990).

**Research Problem and Research Question**

During the first years of the 21st century the number of undergraduate college students 25 years of age or older has increased to 40% of total enrollment (United States Department of Education, 2012) in response to the changing demands of the global workforce and individual goals of upward social mobility through degree attainment. This percentage of adult students in the total undergraduate population is projected to remain stable or continue to increase through 2018 (NCES, 2009; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Yet the trend toward degree completion among these adult students has not kept pace with the rising enrollment numbers. Among this population, 62% have not graduated within six years of initial enrollment with a bachelor’s degree, and many dropped out during the first year (Berker et al., 2003). This discrepancy between intent to earn the degree and actual completion in practice was the research problem which was answered by the question which guided this investigation of how adult students persisted in their bachelor’s degree programs until graduation.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the experience of returning to college as lived by adult nontraditional undergraduate students in bachelor’s degree programs at a public university in New York State and apply the findings to the problem of practice of adult student attrition as identified in the noncompletion rate among the adult population.

The central research question that the study answered was:

How do adults, who have returned to college, and who have completed a bachelor’s degree, make sense of and explain their academic success?
Key Terminology

Adult nontraditional student: An adult student is a student 25 years of age or older. Age is not the sole factor which determines nontraditional status. Multiple characteristics may define a nontraditional student, such as part-time or delayed enrollment in college after high school graduation, working full-time, living off campus, financial independence from parents, having dependents or single parenthood, to name a few. The nontraditional student is a heterogeneous composite of one or more of the defining characteristics, and no single model can be considered typical (Choy, 2002; Metzner & Bean, 1987). For this reason, the adult nontraditional student may be best defined through a comparison to the model considered to be the opposite. The traditional-age college student is 18-24 years old, residing on campus, and attending classes full-time. An undergraduate must lack one or more of these defining characteristics of the traditional student to be considered nontraditional (Metzner & Bean, 1987).

Theoretical Framework

In this study of how adult nontraditional undergraduate students successfully completed bachelor’s degree programs, the theory that most closely satisfied the requirements for the construction of a pertinent framework and answered the central research question most completely was persistence theory, built upon a foundation of the qualitative tradition of inquiry. The use of IPA as the qualitative methodology facilitated the investigation of the lived experiences of adult students who graduated from bachelor’s degree programs to discover their perceptions of how they achieved success, providing the information needed to respond to the research question.

Background, context and significance of persistence theory

Persistence theory, in its most basic iteration, offers interpretations of data which may
explain how students who enroll in colleges and universities do not graduate. Discussions of persistence may be clouded by differing definitions of the concept held by various practitioners. Some view persistence as remaining continuously enrolled at the same institution regardless of immediate graduation prospects (institutional completion). Others may view attendance at several institutions which may eventually result in graduation from one of them as persistence (system completion) (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). However, for the purpose of this study, persistence was defined as graduation from a bachelor’s degree program at a four-year institution where the student began their enrollment.

Statistical evidence underscores the significance of research to better understand student persistence. As reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) in 2005, graduation rates for students who first enrolled in a four-year institution remained at slightly greater than 50 percent during the preceding two decades, as well as “…roughly 6 of every 10 students who began college did not complete either a 2- or 4-year degree within 6 years of entry (NCES, 2003)” indicating the gravity of the problem, which “despite years of effort and a good deal of research on student persistence, have not changed appreciably in the past 20 years…” (Tinto & Pusser, 2006, p.2). Research on the problem of student persistence drove the development of persistence theory with the intent to discover a more profound conceptualization of the phenomenon of the widespread lack of completion of college degrees.

**Tinto and the development of persistence theory**

One of the first scholars to formulate a detailed theory of persistence was Vincent Tinto, who, in 1975, proposed the student departure theory. The conceptual impetus behind departure theory was partly derived from the work of Dutch anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep who explored the use of rituals and ceremonies in diverse cultures to create rites of passage which
eased the individual from an old stage of life into a new condition or environment. The process was described as separation, transition, and, finally, incorporation. In Tinto’s view, the separation of the student from the values and norms of prior experience was necessary to enable a transition from high school ways to incorporation into the collegiate world (Elkins, Braxton & James, 1998; Metz, 2002; Tierney, 1992).

Tinto recognized that the degree of integration of the student into the college environment affected student outcomes such as graduation rates (Metz, 2002). A successful rite of passage leading to a strong sense of student identification with the new institution would tend to minimize the likelihood of a premature leaving. The student departure theory and the results of additional research done to validate the initial findings became a theoretical framework defining future studies on persistence, known as Tinto’s Student Integration Model (Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1993; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

Student integration became the antidote to departure. The Student Integration Model also was influenced by the theories of sociologist Emile Durkheim, who described four types of suicide that occurred within society, one of which was called egotistical suicide. Durkheim’s definition of egotistical suicide was the failure of an individual to become integrated into a community, resulting in a sense of isolation, withdrawal and ultimate separation from the group, an egotistical suicide or departure. In Durkheim’s model, the separation was permanent. In Tinto’s model of student integration, the successful completion of the rites of passage as derived from Van Gennep would bind the student to the institution and prevent the egotistical suicide that would result in a leave-taking from academic life (Elkins et al., 1998; Metz, 2002).

Departure theory explained why students left a particular institution before graduation. The Student Integration Model attempted to explain why they stayed. Taken together, these
approaches constructed the framework of Tinto’s persistence theory

Tinto’s theory places a large amount of emphasis upon the degree of “fit”, or integration, between the student and the institution in determining whether the student continues in a particular school until graduation (Cabrera et al., 1993; Rovai, 2002). Some of the variables which influence the fitting in or integration of students into the life of the college may be categorized as external, consisting of prior educational, cultural and social experiences brought along by the student to the campus upon enrollment, and over which the institution has little control. Other variables which affect the assimilation of the student are directly under the influence of institutional policy. Support designed to draw students into the intellectual and social experiences of the institution are known as integration variables, and may include academic services and opportunities to interact with faculty and peers (Metz, 2002; Rovai, 2002).

Tinto postulated that the successful academic and social integration of the student into institutional life had the most significant impact on persistence at a particular institution. A greater sense of student belonging might engender a deeper commitment to the school and the ultimate goal of graduation. Tinto’s Model of Student Integration places the responsibility for the achievement of “institutional fit” directly in the hands of the institutions which must proactively determine how best to facilitate the sense of community which encourages persistence (Rovai, 2002; Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

One of the gaps in Tinto’s integration theory is that his initial research focused on the transition to college of traditional 18-24 year-old undergraduates who began their freshman year immediately after high school graduation, attended full-time, and primarily lived on residential campuses (Metz, 2002). Tinto recognized his own omission, stating that he had not addressed the integration of adult learners and other nontraditional students. He stated that adults returning to
college after a period of time away from higher education might experience some of the same difficulties in transitioning to college as traditional students, but manifest those problems in qualitatively different ways. The strategies required to facilitate the integration of adult undergraduates into the academic and social life of the institution might need to differ substantially in kind and in the level of innovation from the approaches applied to induce the persistence of the traditional student (Tinto, 1988).

The necessity to expand persistence theory to comprehensively include the nontraditional adult student population became apparent as adult undergraduates continued to increase in number. Current trends demonstrate that the cohorts of nontraditional adult learners in college in the United States are anticipated to grow further with a projected rate of growth of 21% from 2005 to 2016, surpassing the increase in traditional undergraduates during the same time period (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011). This numerical disparity between traditional and nontraditional adults is not historically new. Even during the years immediately following the postulation of Tinto’s departure theory in 1975, the adult nontraditional student population was burgeoning in response to the need to gain academic credentials to survive in the technology-driven global job marketplace (Metzner & Bean, 1987).

**Bean and Metzner Attrition Theory**

From the perceived need within the academic community to develop a persistence model that better addressed the adult nontraditional student population, John Bean and Barbara Metzner proposed a conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition, published in 1985, which built upon Bean’s earlier work linking student attrition to the same factors which cause employee turnover in the workplace (Cabrera et al., 1993; Metz, 2002).

Bean and Metzner (1985) started from Tinto’s Model of Student Integration to recognize
the importance of a good institutional fit between the student and the college in promoting persistence. The better the needs of the student were served on all levels, academic, social and psychological, the more likely student commitment to remain at the college until graduation would be. However, Tinto’s model did not adequately account for all of the variables which shaped adult student persistence, which tended to be more grounded in factors external to the institution than traditional age student persistence which was the focus of Tinto’s research. The traditional age student residing on campus is much more influenced by the student support services available within the residential environment than the adult student who spends relatively little time on campus and is not as deeply immersed in the daily life of the institution.

Tinto’s rite of passage necessary to achieve student integration among traditional age students involves a leave-taking of old habits, places and allegiances in order to become incorporated successfully into a new life at college. Metzner and Bean (1987) recognized that adult nontraditional students could not fit into that model because, as adults with work and family commitments, their world could not be left behind as they immersed themselves in the role of undergraduate student. Although Tinto eventually explored the influence of family and friends as an external factor that influenced even traditional-age persistence, the role of external factors was tangential to the central core of his theory that a high degree of incorporation into the institution was the best predictor of student success (Cabrera et al., 1993; Metz, 1992).

Metzner and Bean (1985, 1987) discovered that there were numerous external factors that would affect adult undergraduate persistence and impact the ability of these students to remain on the course toward degree completion. The variables which most accurately described the key attributes of adult nontraditional students were age, part-time attendance and off-campus residence. Other variables were subordinate to these, and, by definition, all nontraditional
students possessed at least one of these core characteristics. Unlike traditional-age students living on campus, the social environment of the college did not have a great impact on adult student persistence. Whereas younger residential college students relied heavily on incorporation into the institution to define their social identity, adult students were more affected by the work and family roles in the off-campus community which demanded their first allegiance. Adult undergraduates were more interested in the academic benefits that derived from attending college, such as a degree or certificate which would help them advance in the workplace and provide more income for their families, rather than social engagement in a context which had limited relevance in their daily lives. These observations confirmed the need for further research that would determine the particular variables which had the most impact on an adult student’s decision to leave college or persist until graduation (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Metzner & Bean, 1987).

However, little research until that point had been conducted with adult nontraditional students in the field to discover in practice what factors would most impact their perception of the academic benefit of continued enrollment. During the development of the student attrition model, Bean and Metzner (1985) conducted an exhaustive literature review which included several hundred sources to discover prior research pertaining to the adult undergraduate. They found that only nine previous studies had examined in any way the attrition of adult nontraditional students, and the theoretical framework used in that research was derived from traditional student models rather than the population being investigated.

Using their conceptual model of adult nontraditional student attrition as the theoretical framework, Metzner and Bean (1987) conducted a study of a sample of nontraditional-age participants at a large Midwestern commuter college to determine which variables would have
the most significant effect on adult student persistence. The results validated that social integration was not an important factor in the decision of such students to remain in college.

However, a lack of academic integration in the institution, characterized by poor academic performance and a deficit of commitment to the educational program of the college, was discovered to be a major cause of adult nontraditional student attrition. The part-time enrollment of many adult students, often due to work and family commitments, limited the amount of exposure to the academic offerings of the institution, which, in turn, reduced opportunities for engagement. The stress of balancing the sometimes conflicting priorities of external responsibilities and class requirements contributed to absenteeism, exacerbating the inherent limitations of part-time student status. Poor preparation for college studies during high school and a resultant low grand point average (GPA) in college contributed to an intent to leave the institution. To persist under these adverse circumstances, the adult student’s belief in the utility of the degree as a means of achieving greater success through increased earnings, job opportunities and personal satisfaction became a motivating force to offset the effects of the negative academic variables that favored attrition (Metzner&Bean, 1987).

The financial challenge of tuition expense was another variable that impacted departure decisions. The monetary and personal costs of continued enrollment were weighed against the benefits derived from degree completion. A path toward graduation was easier to follow if the adult student saw that the investment in education would be repaid, and that success was probable as determined by a satisfactory grade point average (GPA). Support and encouragement from family and close friends was another external variable that promoted retention. As students progressed, some developed a strong striving toward goal attainment which, in turn, would enhance self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment (Metzner& Bean,
These variables which affect adult student persistence as identified by the research of Metzner and Bean (1987) were largely determined by factors external to the institution. Unlike the traditional-age residential students addressed by Tinto’s models of departure and student integration, adult students did not primarily define themselves in terms of the institutional relationship. They were more profoundly influenced by their life roles and aspirations in the workplace, family and community. Only the social integration variable of contact with the faculty was shown to have a slight positive impact on attrition when that relationship was supportive, and that effect was minimized by the limited interactions of the student with their instructors as a result of part-time attendance, and, in some cases, absenteeism (Metzner & Bean, 1987).

What mattered more than any aspect of social interaction among students and teachers in determining adult undergraduate persistence was the degree of academic integration as a whole that the adult students derived from their relationship to the institution (Metzner & Bean, 1987). Variables that affected academic integration among adult nontraditional students included access to desirable course offerings and scheduling flexibility that would enable those students to achieve their educational goals while maintaining non-collegiate personal responsibilities. Another variable influencing academic integration was the perceived quality of course offerings. The availability of academic advising to assist the student in planning their successful degree completion was another relevant variable. Course offerings, scheduling and academic advising were variables that were institutionally controlled. Positive student interactions with these institutional variables as expressed in a higher GPA and a lower intent to leave were a measure of the level of academic integration of the adult student (Metzner & Bean, 1987).
In Tinto’s model, the academic success of the traditional residential undergraduate was an indicator of both institutional commitment and integration into the collegiate environment considered by Tinto to be predictive of eventual student persistence and degree completion. GPA and academic achievement were seen as indicators of a successful transition of the student from the pre-college environment of home and community to the new world of collegiate life. In the Bean and Metzner model, academic integration into the institution was viewed as essential in overcoming the external environmental factors which might cause the nontraditional adult student to consider departure. Even though those variables originating from outside of the college could never be completely left behind, student satisfaction with the academic offerings of the college and a belief in the utility of the degree could compensate for the negative pull of intent to leave (Cabrera et al., 1993; Metz, 1992).

Both models share the key concept of integration of the student into the institution as a way to promote persistence. Other similarities between the Student Integration Model and Bean and Metzner’s Student Attrition Model have prompted some researchers to maintain that the congruencies between each in approach render them essentially two variations of the same theory. Cabrera et al., (1993) note that both models build on many common constructs to explain persistence, such as the fit between the student academic aspirations and the goals of the institution.

The primary difference between the two models centers on the role that factors external to the institution play in shaping student departure decisions. The Student Integration Model, based on research which focuses on the traditional student population, looks upon social integration within the on-campus environment as the best indicator of student commitment to the institution and the intent to remain until graduation. The Student Attrition Model recognizes that
variables external to the institution, such as family and work obligations, can shape student retention decisions. Because adult nontraditional undergraduates do not live on campus, factors external to the institution affect them more directly, since most of their time is spent in a non-collegiate environment. The Student Attrition Model was developed primarily as a response to the need to understand the high rates of departure from college among adult nontraditional students in order to find a strategy to reverse that behavioral trend (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Metz, 1992; Metzner & Bean, 1987).

Cabrera et al. (1993) recommend combining the Student Integration Model and the Student Attrition Model into a unified theory of student persistence, offering researchers and policymakers a comprehensive view of student departure theory encompassing the role of both institutional and external variables in influencing the intent to leave. Within the unified framework, the variables affecting adult student persistence would be viewed as a particular component of the larger problem of persistence. The perceived advantage of having two major theories of persistence to compare and contrast is diminished if commonalities far outweigh differences. Both major models contribute relevant knowledge to the study of student persistence. The interrelatedness of the two theories might be summarized by the observation that the departing traditional age student of today may well become the nontraditional adult student returning to college in a not-so-distant tomorrow.

**Critics of persistence theory**

Critics of Tinto’s Student Integration Model (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Cabrera et al., 1993; Metz, 2002; Rovai, 2002; Tierney, 1992) focus on his omission of factors external to the institution which influence student departure decisions. His research, centered on traditional college students living on residential campuses, investigated variables that existed within the
institution that would influence student retention, such as participation in campus extracurricular activities which would promote social integration and a sense of commitment to the college. Although he later amended his theory to recognize some of the external factors that might affect a student’s intent to persist, such as the influence of family and friends and financial difficulties, he did not fully recognize in his research the wide range of outside variables that could creep into the relatively insular world of the residential college and affect student departure.

Tinto’s use of the residential college campus as his research site also limited his contact with students who did not fit the profile of the 18-24 year-old undergraduate who began college directly after high school. Bean and Metzner (1985, 1987) recognized that the Student Integration Model did not fully explain attrition among adult nontraditional, students that lived off-campus and were influenced in their departure decisions by factors more complex than a lack of campus social integration or a deficiency of institutional commitment. Bean and Metzner (1985) proposed a new theory, the Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition, which complemented and went beyond the Social Integration Model to create a theoretical framework to guide future studies of the particular variables which influenced adult nontraditional student departure.

Tierney (1992) questioned the validity of Tinto’s Model when discussing the lack of persistence among students identified as members of minority groups. He objected to the idea that minority students, as part of the rite of passage described in Tinto’s Integration Theory, needed to check their previous cultural identities at the doors of colleges in order to become integrated into the new world of the institution. To Tierney (1992) and other critical theorists, attrition among minority students often was the result of pressures to conform to norms that were not their own and prescribed by the dominant culture on campus. The inability of minority
students to become integrated into the college environment and persist was not the fault of the individual student, but of the institution which defined the terms of integration in a way that did not respect diversity.

Berger and Braxton (1998) went in a different direction and declared that social integration was a vague concept and not clearly defined in Tinto’s theory, virtually meaningless as a factor in persistence. Their research attempted to clarify elements of social integration in terms that were organizationally specific in order to better understand how to achieve the goal of institutional commitment.

Rovai (2002) challenged both the Student Integration Model and the Student Attrition Theory to address the lack of persistence among online and distance education students, typically nontraditional, who formed a new class of part-time commuter student without a connection to a physical campus. Tinto’s concept of social integration into institutional life as a way of preventing student departure was not particularly relevant to the adult nontraditional student working online in isolation at home after a long day on the job. Attrition Theory offered a better insight into the variables influencing nontraditional student persistence, but, as a product of the higher education environment of 1985, a decade before the widespread use of the personal computer, there was not yet an awareness of the particular needs of the online nontraditional student. Although both major theories of student persistence still have the potential to explain current attrition trends and recommend possible solutions, there is a need, as Rovai noted even in 2002, for current researchers to update the models to specifically include the adult nontraditional online learner.

Finally, as noted by Cabrera et al. (1993), the perceived weaknesses in Tinto’s theory, such as a lack of consideration of external variables affecting persistence and the failure to
include nontraditional students in his model, would be remedied by combining Student Integration Theory and the complementary Student Attrition Theory to form one overarching Theory of Student Persistence.

**Rationale for use of persistence theory to frame this study**

The rationale for using persistence theory to guide this study was rooted in the research question to be answered: How do adults, who have returned to college, and who have completed a bachelor’s degree, make sense of and explain their academic success? Persistence theory investigates the many variables that may affect the attrition of adult undergraduates from college. Yet, knowing how students fail to graduate is not the same as knowing how they succeed (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). This study focused on how students ultimately succeed, and persistence theory offered a framework for understanding the process leading to success.

**Applying persistence theory to this investigation**

Persistence has been one of the most investigated topics in educational practice (Metz, 2002; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). This huge amount of academic attention to the problem still has not produced a completely satisfactory solution. Departure before the completion of a degree is costly to both the student and the institution, prompting even more research designed to find causes and to develop interventions to prevent attrition. The adult nontraditional student has been at particular risk of leaving before graduation, but the studies undertaken to discover the reasons for departure and to prescribe remedies have been descriptive in nature, small in number and not guided by theory pertinent to that population (Bean & Metzner, 1985). The use of IPA methodology in this investigation was an opportunity to open a fresh perspective on the enigma of adult student persistence through the documentation of the lived experiences of graduates, told in their own words, describing the factors which promoted the successful completion of their
bachelor’s degree programs. From these interviews unique knowledge may emerge from the study that could contribute to the development of a new theory of adult student persistence based on student perspectives as well as academic inquiry.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter offers a discussion of the literature that provided the background necessary to answer the central research question which guided this study: How do adults, who have returned to college, and who have completed a bachelor’s degree, make sense of and explain their academic success? Adult students over the age of 25 now comprise over 40% of undergraduates attending college in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Sixty-two percent of these students do not complete a degree within six years of enrollment, and many depart within the first year (Berker et al., 2003). This high rate of attrition represents a substantial cost to both the institution and the student. The retention of adult undergraduates in their programs of study is an important strategy to enhance the strength of communities while increasing the quality of the economic and emotional lives of the students and their families. In the context of the urgency of this problem of practice, additional and current research is needed to learn how best to overcome the obstacles to persistence and to discover how adult undergraduates successfully complete their bachelor’s degrees.

In response to this need for more complete knowledge of the complex factors affecting adult student attrition, this review of the pertinent literature underpinning this study will begin with a discussion of how adults learn best in formal educational settings. The investigation of this strand of literature will describe the influence of various theories of adult learning which may determine institutional policies which could affect student attrition. Next, the major theories of persistence will be explored with a focus on how those theories support the success of adult undergraduate students. Finally, the discussion will turn to current research and strategies to improve adult undergraduate retention in degree programs with an articulation of new theoretical perspectives and recommendations for practice. The unity of knowledge gained from the
examination of these three complementary strands of literature illuminated and informed the methodology that was required to comprehensively answer the research question which drove this study: How do adults, who have returned to college, and who have completed a bachelor’s degree, make sense of and explain their academic success?

**How Adults Learn and the Impact on Persistence**

The discussion of this first body of literature investigates some of the prevalent theories which have guided adult education policy during the last several decades of increasing nontraditional student participation in higher education. Many of these theories which attempt to explain how adults most effectively learn within structured educational environments are rooted in assumptions about the characteristics of adult students which often are not always supported by evidence obtained through systematic research, and are essentially observations and interpretations pieced together anecdotally to form a generalized concept of adult student behavior. A comprehensive understanding of the needs of adult learners is required to discover which educational approaches best facilitate the successful completion of courses of study. An empirical examination of these major theories, searching for elements of validity within each, might lead to a synthesis of approaches which will provide an academic and institutional framework which will promote the achievement of the desired goal of degree attainment.

**Context of the adult education discussion**

The education of adults in the United States has a rich history initially based upon the needs of adult learners to prosper within the context of unfamiliar societies and emerging technologies. At the end of the nineteenth century, large numbers of adults left the farms of the agrarian past to relocate to the cities where they perceived better opportunities within the factories spawned by the Industrial Revolution. At the same time, immigrants arrived from
Europe in record numbers, eager to pursue a new and profitable life in industrialized America. These adults arrived in the cities deficient in the basic skills required to successfully work and support their families (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007; Reese, 2005).

This era of demographic flux, economic opportunity and new technology, often labeled the Progressive Era by historians, was the crucible from which twentieth century concepts of adult education emerged (Reese, 2005). This movement to improve the lives of working adults went far beyond narrow vocational goals. The rapid rise of innovations in communication, transportation and industry created a novel realization in the adult population that different skills and revised ways of thinking might be necessary to take advantage of these far-reaching opportunities to expand their personal horizons. Learning within this context of perpetual change would necessarily extend beyond childhood and become a lifelong endeavor (Knowles, 1955; Stubblefield & Rachal, 1992).

The perceived need for an educational response to the frequent and profound change which challenged the complacency of daily life as the nineteenth century merged into the twentieth led to the development of many civic organizations dedicated to educating the public as part of their missions to serve the community. Evening schools for adults had begun even before the Civil War, but expanded dramatically with the arrival of the unrelenting waves of immigrants later in the century that required Americanization through education in order to be successful in their adopted country. In 1889 a budget of $15,000 was set for the establishment of evening lectures in the New York City schools, and, by the start of World War I, New York State funded a statewide system of evening schools, an acknowledgement that government had a responsibility to create educational opportunity for the governed. In 1891, the first correspondence school was founded in Scranton, Pennsylvania, a precursor to later forms of
distance education which allowed adults even in isolated areas to acquire the expertise to navigate the increasingly complex world (Knowles, 1955).

**Origins of current adult learning theories**

The term “adult education” to describe the array of formal and informal educational activities available to adults was popularized by Henry Marcus Leipzinger, director of the New York City Board of Education Free Lectures program, during his tenure in that position beginning in 1890 until his death in 1917. The public schools which educated children during the day became centers of adult learning at night during his administration, where newcomers to the United States and displaced workers alike could come to learn skills and exchange the information needed to prosper in the new century. The students learned from each other, drawing upon the wealth of their collective experiences as a resource, as well as from the knowledge imparted by the lecture (Stubblefield & Rachal, 1992).

At the same, Melvil Dewey, the renowned library cataloger, promoted a version of adult education which he termed home education, a broad concept which included learning activities which took place not only in the home, but in libraries, museums, study groups, university extensions and essentially any venue that could provide an educational experience for adults who could not abandon the business of their daily responsibilities to become full-time students. His motto was “higher education, at home, through life” which he explained more fully in an article which appeared in the *Journal of Social Science* in 1904. Another educator, Herbert Baxter Adams, a professor at Johns Hopkins and an advocate of the university extension, commented that the daily press was a public school for American adults, providing an ongoing resource for lifelong learning. In 1916, Bradford Knapp chronicled the agricultural demonstration work of his father, Seamon, who began teaching farmers how to boost their crop production on-site on their
own farms in 1904 (Stubblefield & Rachal, 1992).

The advocates of these various initiatives in the education of adults shared a common belief that adult learning should be lifelong, and could occur through educational experience outside of the formal classroom. The adult learners ideally would seek out the sources that would deliver the knowledge they desired in the format that best suited their needs. They would choose their learning situation from the myriad options offered, and would be able to access education without abandoning their roles as adults in the community. They would be able to share their experiences in group settings with other adults, learning from others through discourse and the exchange of mutually beneficial ideas (Stubblefield & Rachal, 1992).

These concepts of adult education were tested through the lived experiences of many adult learners striving to find a way to apply the challenges encountered at the beginning of the twentieth century to achieve greater success and personal fulfillment. Many adults realized that technology and social change could be used productively to move families forward even in times of societal upheaval if these potentially disruptive forces were understood through education. The adult education models so intensely discussed by educators and policymakers of the day promoted approaches which went beyond vocationalism and the simple acquisition of a trade or profession to become a dynamic journey of perpetual learning. Adult education, of necessity, became a way of life and a fundamental survival strategy in a complex world (Knowles, 1975; Rachal, 2002).

A century later, in the years leading up to the new millennium, adults again encountered disruptive influences which motivated an intense search for educational remedies that would enable them to compete in the ever-changing global marketplace spawned by the rise of the computer. The period of rapid transition from the blue-collar manufacturing jobs, which grew
out of the Industrial Revolution, to a labor force defined by the need to communicate and share information, often across international borders, became one aspect of the complex phenomenon known as the Information Age (Merriam et al., 2007).

As during the Progressive Era, waves of immigrants arrived in the United States, this time not from Europe but from the developing nations in Latin America and Asia, presenting demographic challenges to the system of adult education. Many of these new arrivals did not receive adequate childhood education in their home countries, creating an educational underclass that could not fully take advantage of the technologically complex jobs of the Information Age. Bringing this population to the point of being able to integrate into the workforce at an entry level became the specialty province of literacy instruction and adult basic education (Reese, 2005).

On a different plane, the explosion of knowledge available through the information-based economy has placed the ability to continually learn, analyze data and respond quickly to change as a highly valued skill in the twenty-first century workforce. A need to gain credentials to demonstrate competency for employment in this technology-driven labor environment has motivated many adults to return to college to complete or begin college degrees. At the same time, ever-changing additions to the stores of knowledge made accessible through computers has made lifelong learning a mandatory activity for everyone, from professionals who need to remain current in their fields, to auto mechanics who must stay informed of the latest repair updates on the highly complex electronic systems that guide today’s automobiles (Merriam et al., 2007).

Yet, despite the complexity of the challenges facing adult learners in the twenty-first century, the principles which guide adult education today remain rooted in the theories which had their origins in the similar societal conditions of flux that prevailed at the beginning of the
twentieth century. The ways to how best facilitate adult learning put forth and documented by educators such as Melvil Dewey, Herbert Baxter and Bradford Knapp were based on observation and anecdotal evidence, inspiring an optimistic advocacy typical of the Progressive Era which generated theory from perceived experience. Empirical studies were not conducted to substantiate these informed opinions with research results derived from data gathered from controlled groups of adult learners and analyzed to determine if indeed the theories advanced through simple observation represented accurate assessments of how adults learn most effectively (Merriam et al., 2007; Rachal, 2002).

From that time of freewheeling experimentation in educating adults, several themes emerged that still persist in adult education and affect policy decisions when devising curriculum and programs for adult students. Even though these approaches to adult learning still have not been verified for validity by research studies, the force of over one hundred years of educational tradition has resulted in the continued acceptance of these methodologies as best practice. An examination of the literature related to each of these themes which are reflected in adult education theory will inform an assessment of what policies at both the institutional and instructional levels best promote adult student persistence.

Self-directed learning

This construct of how adults best learn has assumed a universality that has endured since the era of Dewey’s home education movement and Baxter’s focus on the university extension. Participants in those Progressive Era alternatives for adult education could choose what they wanted to study, how to study and where they wanted to study. They could determine their own educational objectives. Although learning activities often brought about positive outcomes for the student, such as better employment opportunities and self-improvement, taking part in the
experience was voluntary. The concept of self-direction has a natural appeal and an intuitive validity based on the assumption, unproven by research, that adults have natural preferences for autonomy which differentiates their experiences from the dependent states of childhood (Garrison, 1997; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007).

Self-directed learning, although one of the most researched topics in adult education, does not have a clear and singular definition that would allow for the development of a unified theory applicable to diverse situations. The research pertinent to establishing self-directed learning as a general coherent theory has focused on the identification and description of the various models, rather than the construction of systematic, data-driven studies using these models as theoretical frameworks to test the applicability of the larger concept among actual adult learner populations. The ambiguous use of self-direction in the adult education literature has contributed to the confusion. In some contexts, the term means truly independent learning, with only the self as teacher. In other instances, self-direction is a means of organizing the learning experience, often in collaboration with others. Sometimes, self-directedness is seen as a personal characteristic, the state of being psychologically ready to learn in the self-directed environment (Cafferella & O’Donnell, 1987; Garrison, 1992, 1997; Merriam et al., 2007; Ponton, Derrick & Carr, 2005).

Another point of confusion is the use by adult education researchers of the term self-directed learning to describe activities engaged in by adult learners which more accurately describe the management of the learning environment, rather than the change in consciousness resulting from the cognitive process of learning. Arranging for courses, ordering books and materials and deciding whether to consult a teacher are activities that are often described as self-directed learning when undertaken by an individual desirous of learning a new skill, competency
or area of knowledge. Some adult educators, notably Brookfield (1984) and Garrison (1997), regard this activity as engagement in self-education, rather than self-learning. The self-management of the external environment sets the stage for a learning experience, but there is no guarantee that the internal environment of the student will be impacted in a way that could be defined as self-learning, an alteration in the manner in which the student thinks or perceives the world (Brookfield, 1984; Garrison, 1992, 1997).

In the context of the discussion of adult student persistence in undergraduate degree programs, an understanding of how the external environment affects student perceptions of learning may be essential to the retention of adult learners until graduation. A positive patina of desirability has enshrined the notion of self-directed learning as the best way for seemingly autonomous adults to learn. There is a certain romance in the popular belief that a properly motivated and resourceful individual can learn almost anything under their own volition with their unique life experience reinforced by fierce self-reliance as their primary teacher. In practice, most learning assumes a social, collaborative element when the student applies that new knowledge to effect changes in their world, even if the actual learning activity may have occurred in relative isolation (Chene, 1983). In formal learning situations which take place in the setting of college classrooms, the sense of being able to self-direct the course of study, in collaboration with the instructor, in a way that meets the needs of the participating student, reinforces the personal utility of what is being learned, and may motivate the student to persist (Brookfield, 1984; Garrison, 1992, 1997).

Garrison (1992) asserts that this anticipated control of the learning environment gives adult students the confidence needed to believe that they can attain the goal of their studies. Motivation to persist is influenced by two separate but interrelated factors: entering motivation,
which is the process of choosing to commit to participation, the intent to act, and task motivation, defined as the amount of effort needed to remain on course with learning tasks. The decision of a student to participate in a formal learning situation is predicated on an expectation of success, that the goals are realistically achievable. Persistence in the tasks of learning emerges from a perception of value and the utility of the educational outcome to the individual student, the reward of completing the tasks.

Task motivation in adult students is also related to control over the nature of tasks and the self-management needed to integrate all of the environmental factors necessary for the educational experience to occur, setting the stage for learning. In the process of achieving this integration, students become active learners, assuming the responsibility for their own outcomes which is at the heart of being self-directed. Volition, or the will to persist, arises as the result of task motivation as the diligence required to self-regulate and deliberately sustain the effort needed to achieve academic success becomes a way of life (Garrison, 1992; Ponton et al., 2005).

Volition can be affected by factors intrinsic to the student, such as internal conditions of a psychological or cognitive nature, or extrinsic, the result of factors in the external environment which impact learning. An overly restrictive classroom environment can provide a disincentive to student motivation by removing the sense of self-directedness which is the traditional goal of adult education, and assumed to be the preferred learning style of autonomous adults who do not require the close supervision accorded children who do not have enough experience in life to be permitted access to self-direction. Garrison (1992) asserts that for adult students to maintain their will to persist there must be opportunities afforded them by the institutions which design their learning environments to allow their input and participation in shaping the course of their education. Failure to provide that sense of collaboration, particularly in interactions within the
classroom between students, peers and instructor, can cause students to feel that their educational activities are no longer fulfilling their personal goals, resulting in an eventual leave-taking from their studies.

Chene (1983) cautioned against placing an overemphasis on the maintenance of autonomy for adult students in all situations, even though the literature on self-directed learning promotes autonomy as a prerequisite to taking responsibility for self-directedness. She maintains that autonomy, in this case defined as freedom from outside direction from teachers or institutions, is not possible or desirable if the adult student does not know how to set up an appropriate learning environment or does not possess the resources to do so. In these cases, autonomy is self-defeating because the adult learner does not have the means to support good intentions. A more productive course of action would be to redefine the role of the teacher as facilitator of the learning initiative rather than an authority figure who deposits knowledge into passive minds of recipients, a model known as “banking”, discredited by Freire (2007), as the antithesis of dialogue, which is the process of jointly determining the educational context through the shared input of students and teacher. Through dialogue, a balance can be maintained that allows students a voice in their learning, at the same time moderating the power of the teacher to become a helpful source of support and guidance for students as they seek to construct their educational environment rather than remain an arbiter of content and form that suppresses participation (Merriam et al., 2007).

In the effort to shift the power dynamic in the classroom away from the teacher and toward the students, the trend toward acknowledging adult autonomy may have gone far beyond the point of fostering self-direction to encouraging a laissez-faire pedagogy that respects autonomy, but leaves the student without the direction they may need. Adult students cannot be
self-directing if they do not know what they must know to make wise decisions concerning the

course of their learning. Adults may need more guidance to succeed than popular notions of adult

autonomy may acknowledge (Chene, 1983; Cranton, 2006). This concept that adults prefer as

little direction in their studies as possible may result in institutions with large numbers of adult

students neglecting to provide adequate support services for those students, thinking that they

want to be independent and rely on their own internal and external resources, as they seemingly
do in every other phase of their lives. The failure of those institutions to provide adequate

support services may result in adult students losing the will to persist if they encounter academic
difficulties upon returning to school that cause them to question their ability to complete a
degree. Too often these adult students and their needs are invisible to college administrators, as
they come and go from the campus at nontraditional times or study online. Because they are

adults, and presumably autonomous, there is an assumption of a preferred self-sufficiency when,
in reality, these students may require institutional assistance to become successful and remain

until graduation (Chene, 1983; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Lundberg, 2003).

Brookfield (1984) raised questions about the transferability of self-directed learning to all
categories of adult students, noting that research into the validity of self-directed learning as a
desirable way to conduct the education of adults was almost exclusively done using middle-class
participants who may have, in general, more positive relationships with formal education than a
broader sampling of the larger population. Working class or minority groups might find self-
directedness within a classroom more challenging because of prior deficiencies in their academic
preparation due to socioeconomic factors. These shortfalls in competency might make them
reluctant to make decisions regarding the context and circumstances of their learning. Lacking
confidence, these groups might feel more comfortable with an informed teacher setting the stage
for them, negating the idea that all adults naturally prefer to direct their own learning outcomes.

Another aspect of self-directed learning that requires further investigation before self-direction can be generalized as a theory of adult education is the relationship between the external self-management of learning tasks, which often passes as self-directed learning, and an internal change in consciousness and cognition which would indicate that self-learning, rather than a simple manipulation of the educational environment, had occurred. This process of reflection and questioning of values from which new meaning emerges as a consequence of the scrutiny of old assumptions is termed critical thinking, and is essential to the adult student having enough self-knowledge to construct an appropriate environment for further learning. Without a merger of external situational control with the inner transformation of individual students as the result of learning activities, self-directed learning lacks the depth and clarity to be considered a comprehensive explanation of how adults learn best (Brookfield, 1984; Garrison, 1997; Merriam et al., 2007; Roberson & Merriam, 2005).

**Andragogy**

Malcolm Knowles introduced the concept of andragogy to the adult education world during the 1960s and 1970s. The word andragogy was first used by the German educator Alexander Kapp in 1833, and was expanded upon by various other European practitioners during the 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) centuries. Knowles popularized the application of the construct in the United States as a way of describing how adults learn most effectively, and to set forth guidelines for best practice (Rachal, 2002).

Knowles described andragogy in 1980 as the “art and science of helping adults learn” (Merriam et al., 2007, p.84). His writing on the subject influenced many involved in the field that andragogy could be considered the foundation of a unified theory of adult education, an
explanation of how adults uniquely learn. A comprehensive understanding of how adults acquire, process and use new information would be immensely useful in formulating educational policy which would promote the participation and retention of adult students in learning activities (Elias, 1979; Taylor & Laros, 2014).

Andragogy as conceptualized by Knowles is based on a series of assumptions about adult learners, and distinctions are made between the education of children, termed pedagogy. In Knowles’ view, the self-concept of the adult learner matures as the student progresses from being a dependent personality as a child to emerging as a self-directed human being capable of deciding the conditions of their own learning. As the adult continues to grow, the individual accumulates reservoirs of personal experience which can serve as the foundation for future learning. The developmental environment of the adult learner, predicated upon the individual’s role in life, is a determining factor in the readiness of the adult student to successfully participate in learning activities. As adult students mature, their focus changes from learning a subject in the abstract to wanting to apply the newly learned concept to a practical situation to solve an immediate problem. In 1984, Knowles added two more assumptions to his list: internal motivations for learning are stronger than external ones for adult learners, and adults need to know why they need to learn something to stay on track with their educational goals (Merriam et al., 2007; Taylor & Laros, 2014).

In many respects, andragogy, as a potential theory to explain how adults best learn, complements many elements of self-directed learning. The concept of self-directedness is essential to understanding the applications of andragogy. For example, Knowles advocated the use of learning contracts between facilitator and student, mutually defining the conditions of the educational environment which included a determination of the resources to be used, the
methodology of the instruction and agreement on how to measure the effectiveness of learning outcomes. The classroom would support the needs of adult learners as they re-entered the academic world and assumed the role of student, encouraging collaboration in the setting of attainable goals that would encourage success and persistence. Andragogy uses self-directed learning to define its practice (Rachal, 2002).

Both andragogy and self-directed learning, seemingly related and growing out of comparable intellectual traditions, suffer from a similar lack of empirical research to validate their standing as full-blown theories. Rachal (2002) maintains that the fluid meaning of andragogy, based in philosophy and art rather than science, complicates the construction of studies that could verify the assumptions which underpin its often ambiguous practice in adult education. Taylor & Laros (2014) concur that this best known guiding concept of adult learning is riddled with questionable evidence and full of unsupported recommendations which call into question its validity. Calling andragogy “amoeba-like” (p.224) in its formlessness, Rachal (2002) expresses an imperative need for a criteria-based definition which would yield researchable questions which could then provide evidence to support policy decisions based on the practice of andragogy. Even Knowles recognized that andragogy could be situational, changing form in response to varying environmental factors, such as the different learning styles of students or the skill of the facilitator (Rachal, 2002).

Andragogy in its ideal state is a sympathetic compilation of desirable educational behaviors and outcomes which, in spirit, has been supported during the last several decades since its introduction by a broad spectrum of educators interested in providing a nonghostening and nurturing learning experience for adult students, especially those returning to classrooms after a long absence. As with self-directed learning, andragogy as a concept seems, on its surface, to be
particularly compatible with the image of how learning should be conducted in adulthood. The infrequent studies of andragogy during the 1980s and the 1990s at the height of interest in its development as a theory attempted to measure the effectiveness in practice of andragogy in producing achievement, knowledge acquisition and satisfaction with learning among adult students. Because these studies were built on a shaky foundation of uncertain suppositions about adult learning arising from observation and anecdote rather than empirical evidence, and conducted using multiple methodologies, the results were inconclusive and sometimes contradictory. Andragogy will remain an aspiring theory unless ways can be found to test its assumptions in the field of practice using scientific principles, instead of wishful thinking regarding its validity.

**Transformative learning**

At the same time that self-directed learning and andragogy dominated the discussion surrounding adult education in the 1970s and 1980s, transformative learning developed as an alternative which merged elements of both potential theories and seemed to present a more complete understanding of how adults learn. In the mid-1990s, transformative learning became the subject of many research articles and conferences as scholars and practitioners alike realized that transformative learning (TL) addressed the perceived shortcomings of both self-directed learning and andragogy and emerged as a stronger potential theory of adult learning (Taylor & Laros, 2014).

The success that some adult learners experience during their studies that propels them toward graduation may be the result of a supportive educational environment of teaching and peer interactions which encourages their achievement. TL provides a context for examining and understanding which factors directly influence the positive outcomes for these successful
students. Adults begin their classes with habitual assumptions acquired through years of personal experience. As they progress through their courses, they may encounter the beginnings of changes in perspective resulting from the learning processes in which they are involved that challenge what they think they already know. TL generates numerous frames of reference through which new knowledge acquisition can be integrated into past experience to facilitate a change in the way a student perceives a subject (Mezirow, 2000).

Jack Mezirow, an Emeritus Professor of Adult Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York City, is credited with the initial development of TL as an alternative to the long-held static assumptions concerning adult learners that resulted in educational practices which focused on the tasks of learning rather than the nature of the process, and on vocational outcomes rather than the ability to learn under a wide variety of circumstances throughout a lifetime (Kasl & Yorks, 2002; Sutherland & Crowther, 2006). Mezirow developed TL as way to explain the profound changes in the lives and attitudes of women participating in college re-entry programs in the early years of the 1970s (Mezirow & Marsick, 1978). He observed that, as these women returned to campuses to resume their educations after long absences from formal education, the vastness of new opportunities to learn seemed to transform their lives.

Mezirow conducted comprehensive research involving other groups of women returning to school in community colleges throughout the United States to verify the observations that he noted in the smaller cohort that he first studied in the early 1970s. This larger study, using grounded theory methodology to guide his field research of students enrolled in diverse academic programs, culminated in Mezirow’s introduction to the world of adult education a well-documented concept soon to be known as transformative learning. Mezirow published an article in 1978 in the journal *Adult Education Quarterly* entitled "Perspective Transformation,"
which further explained the concepts essential to the theory (Baumgartner, 2012; Mezirow, 2006).

Perspective transformation is an essential component of transformative learning. As an adult accumulates experiences, frames of reference, and cognitive and perceptual lenses through which the world is viewed, the individual develops ways to classify and label those experiences. This sorting method of making meaning of the environment, both internal and external, results in preconceived mindsets, habits of mind and prejudices which enable the individual a comfortable passage through episodes of uncertainty to avoid having to adjust to new, possibly disturbing, challenges. Such rigidity of perspective is not conducive to learning how best to live in a world riddled with complexity. Once particular frames of reference are set, the individual returns to these perceptual refuges whenever confronted by a different outlook, unless broken apart by disconfirming information often precipitated by a life crisis (Mezirow, 2006).

Transformative learning is the ongoing process through which rigid and limited frames of reference are modified to become more open, accommodating of new perspectives, and useful in promoting learning and growth. The ways of achieving this outcome involve the multiple methodologies of transformative learning, which can include classroom work and outside engagement in practice (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 1991).

An important element in the transformation of perspective is the participation in the activity of critical reflection on the part of the adult learner. Essentially a rational process through which the individual identifies the predominant personal frame of reference governing actions, thoughts and attitudes, critical reflection builds awareness within the learner of the origins and context of the more rigid frame which is targeted for transformation. Such awareness
facilitates the development of a new frame of reference more open to the diversity intrinsic to life in the world (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 2006; Taylor, 2009).

Profound changes in the frame of reference of an individual require the acquisition of new information which undermines old assumptions and promotes the transformation of perspective. Dialogue, or discourse, with other human beings encourages the use of the life experiences of the individual to provide a measure against which to judge the veracity of the new frame of reference. Effective discourse involves a maturity of communication, during which a participant listens with empathy to the views of others and respectfully handles disagreement as an opportunity to learn collaboratively, rather than as an invitation to competitively argue, and win. In this context, nonthreatening and inclusive, students can learn in the manner of adults, and transform their way of thinking to be receptive to continual learning (Mezirow, 2012; Taylor, 2009). This is the type of learning outcome that is the goal of both self-directed learning and andragogy.

TL answers the concerns expressed by Brookfield (1984) and Garrison (1992) that the practice of self-directed learning often deals with the self-management of the educational environment rather than the self-directedness which results from internal changes in consciousness and the impact on cognition that indicates that actual learning has occurred. Since TL attempts to explain how to effect a change in the mental state of the learner instead of how to modify the tasks and conditions associated with the acquisition of learning, TL seems to have more potential to become the unified theory of adult education that practitioners in the field desire. As the 1990s merged into the 21st century, TL largely replaced self-directed learning and andragogy as the focal point of discussions on the topic of how adults best learn (Taylor & Laros, 2014).
Yet, TL has its own set of limitations which might compromise its candidacy for the designation as the unifying theory of adult education. An evaluation of the impact of TL on an individual or group of students is complicated by the lack of a single criteria-based definition from which researchable questions can arise. Despite some field research done by Mezirow and others, too many of the studies of TL discuss convoluted philosophical concerns rather than data derived from evidence-based inquiries, and are redundant as they strive to clarify the ambiguities which become evident in practice (Newman, 2012; Taylor & Laros, 2014). Since TL at its core advocates a profound reconfiguring of perspective, accompanied by the development of more flexible, open and better understood points of view arising from within a student as a result of the process of transformation, there are multiple routes to achieving this state which often are dependent upon context. For example, in one situation, the change may follow a rational process, occurring primarily within an individual. In another context, the change may involve the individual within the structure of a group. The essence of a transformational change remains constant in both situations, yet the differences in context and methods which identify the particular transformation yield the appearance of variations in the proposed theory (Cranton & Taylor, 2012). In determining the factors which lead to the success of some adult students in finishing a degree program, a common definition of TL applicable across all situations would assist in identifying the role of transformative learning in facilitating their achievements.

Newman (2012) asserts that TL as a separate type of learning does not exist. He goes beyond a critique of the details of the concept to declare that TL is not different in kind from all other learning. In his view, all learning that is effective involves meaningful change. Mezirow describes the change that occurs in TL in dramatic terms, using language such as perspective transformation and disorienting dilemmas to describe the ups and downs that characterize the
daily lives of human beings (Mezirow, 1991, 2012). In this context, the idea of TL is equivalent to a metamorphosis of the student from a state of not knowing to a new type of learner awakened, through the process of TL, to heightened levels of self-awareness and fulfillment: the caterpillar soars as a butterfly. In reality, most adult learning encounters are essentially mundane, and, even if significant learning occurs, the student may be changed by the experience, but not transformed in the quasi-spiritual sense as portrayed in the literature of TL (Newman, 2012).

To further illustrate his argument, Newman (2012) tells the story of a friend who decided to change careers in late middle age to go back to college to become a botanist. Over the course of several years, she completed her degree, and emerged as a botanist as a result of her educational journey. Along the way, she did not critically reflect on her new circumstances, challenge long held assumptions or experience profound insights about the impact of the learning experience on her life. At the end of her course of study, her identity was changed from her former position to that of botanist as the result of good learning and practice, but her fundamental sense of self was not affected in the manner required to be considered transformative.

Newman (2012) concludes that much of what is termed transformative learning is actually practical changes in identity facilitated by education, and does not involve tectonic inner shifts in consciousness. Most adult education is essentially transactional. His friend, the botanist, contracted with the university to teach her botany. She received value and utility in return, measurable results and achievement in the form of a college degree. Newman (2012) goes on to ask how the results of TL can be quantified when the occurrence of transformation is a subjective construct verifiable only by what the student self-reports and has no external measurements of
attainment directly attributable to TL. Transformative learning may exist in the realm of proposed theory but cannot be confirmed in actual practice.

Summary

The three major constructs that have been advanced as proposed theories to explain learning in adulthood, self-directed learning, andragogy and transformative learning, emerged during the 1970s and 1980s in response to demographic changes in the educational landscape that brought large numbers of nontraditional adult students onto American college and university campuses to gain new credentials to better cope with a labor market in flux due to advances in technology and globalization of the economy (Merriam et al., 2007; Schuetze & Slovey, 2002). Discovering how those newly arrived adult students learned best became essential to the setting up of policies to support their retention in degree programs.

In this discussion of these would-be theories, several points emerge which call into question whether any of them are qualified to be considered unified theories of adult education capable of guiding policy decisions. The primary deficiency noted is the conceptual ambiguity reflected in the language used to describe these potential theories. In the case of self-directed learning and andragogy, there are no empirical research studies to support their claims of veracity, and no criteria-driven definitions of these constructs from which meaningful research questions can emerge. Both concepts propose activities which may result in good educational practice, but lack the element of general applicability that would constitute a theory. These recommendations are highly situational, sometimes workable, depending upon the circumstances of the learning environment and the nature of the participants. Although some research does exist to attempt to verify the existence and validity of transformative learning, these studies also suffer from a lack of clarity when discussing the definitions and criteria used in the construction of
valid research questions. Because of these factors, most of the research on TL exists largely in the realm of philosophy and dissertations, and becomes repetitive over time when no new knowledge is introduced by research findings (Newman, 2012; Taylor & Laros, 2014).

Another of the deficiencies which works against any of these three concepts becoming a generalized theory of adult education is their age. All originated during the 1970s and 1980s, and, although distance education had existed in some form since the correspondence schools of over a century ago, these potential theories are all very much grounded in classroom interactions and opportunities for positive, face-to-face exchanges between individuals and within groups. As the 21st century progresses, online education is becoming increasingly prominent as a delivery method for busy adult students balancing multiple roles who do not have the time or inclination to attend courses on physical campuses. The online environment, with each student usually working in isolation with only occasional live interactions with instructors via videoconferencing or telephone, necessarily requires that a student exhibit a high level of self-directedness to succeed (Rovai, 2003). A self-directed learning strategy for the digital age is a separate topic too unwieldy to be explored in this discussion. However, with online courses becoming a standard part of adult education, an area of research that would keep the notion of self-directed learning current would be to investigate how the best practices of self-directedness can be applied to online educational environments to facilitate student success, avoiding the assumption that self-directed adults can persist on their own when they encounter difficulties and prefer to do so. Proponents of self-directed learning, andragogy and transformative learning must find ways to develop these concepts to be relevant in the age of internet instruction or face obsolescence as the importance of the physical classroom steadily declines as new technologies emerge.
For practitioners seeking to discover the ways that adults learn best, the reading of the literature discussing self-directed learning, andragogy and transformative learning provides no clear direction. As previously noted, definitions are muddied and research made difficult by the lack of researchable questions that, if pursued, might answer concerns about whether the concept under investigation would be a valid foundation for practice. At the present time, policymakers looking for the most effective programs and strategies to support adult student persistence to graduation would not be able to find much guidance in the convoluted and often confusing verbiage found in this body of literature which tells the reader that the concepts under discussion lack the certainty associated with well-supported theories.

For that reason, this study, designed to answer the question of how adult undergraduates successfully complete bachelor’s degree programs, was significant, providing potential guidance to policymakers who need to know how adults learn best in order to plan and implement strategies which will support student success in learning. This acquisition of new knowledge was accomplished through listening to the voices of adult students who have succeeded describe and evaluate the lived experience of achieving their degree.

**Major Theories of Persistence**

What is known is that college student persistence is one of the most researched topics in higher education (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Most of these investigations have been centered on the traditional 18-24 year-old student who entered college immediately after high school and resided on a campus. This population was easy for researchers to study because members of this group are defined primarily by their student identities within the boundaries of the institutions they attend. Their role is that of full-time student, and other roles are secondary to that primary focus (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007).
Less well studied is the persistence of the adult undergraduate students who are returning to start or finish college degrees after a long absence from higher education. They have been known as the invisible college students because they typically live off-campus, attend part-time, and come and go to classes on nights or weekends, often apart from the traditional-age student population. Many study primarily online, and may live many miles from the campus. These adult nontraditional students occupy many roles in life beyond that of student, and most define their lives in terms of their identities in the world of work, family or community (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007).

Undergraduate persistence until graduation is a problem among both traditional-age students and adults, but is more severe among older students. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reported in 2011 that 64% of 18 year-old students enrolled in 2003-2004 graduated within 6 years, compared to 20% of those 24-29 years-old, and 16% of those age 30 or older. As age increased, graduation rates fell. Regardless of the age of the student leaving their studies, there is cost to the college in lost tuition dollars and prestige, and the student suffers from diminished personal opportunities and self-esteem (Bowman & Denson, 2014).

In the theoretical framework section of this study persistence theory was first introduced to explain the conceptual framework that guided this research, and the reasons for its selection. In this section, persistence theories are revisited to determine how adult undergraduates successfully complete bachelor’s degrees and how those findings might be applied to programs and strategies to improve adult student persistence through an understanding of what influences the intent to persist among this population.
Tinto revisited

Tinto’s persistence theory of student integration, which has been one of the most endurably influential studies to explain why students persevere (Rovai, 2003), is based on studies of full-time traditional-age residential students who remain in college as a result of personal alignment with the goals and culture of the institutions they attend. How well they fit in and feel comfortable in their new environment, sometimes far from family and friends, may determine academic success. The achievement of good grades works against premature student departure from college for this population (Bowman & Denson, 2014).

Prior to their integration into the life of the college, both academically and socially, the traditional-age college student must go through a period of separation from the old norms of their pre-college life in order to have the psychological clean slate required to be able to commit to a new institution. Family and friends from home recede in importance, and the college steps in to provide the new framework of commitment (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

In this model, the persistence of the student is dependent on two primary factors, termed integration variables: the degree of commitment that the student feels toward completing their degree programs, and the feelings of allegiance and identification with the institution which promotes student satisfaction and academic success (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980).

Tinto recognized that students continually calculate a cost-benefit analysis to determine if the college education is worth the investment of effort and money, or whether their resources might be better spent elsewhere. He knew that students may decide that the personal cost of remaining in college is too great, and depart if they think academic difficulties are imminent, or they feel alienated from the campus social mainstream (Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

At the time Tinto introduced the student integration theory in 1975 and continuing with
modifications in 1987 and again in 1993, he was intent on identifying the factors that influenced student persistence. From the beginning, he saw that the institution and its practices bore a large amount of responsibility for student departure decisions. In 2006, Tinto declared that the knowledge of why students leave has not, after years of investigation and research, translated into institutional policy decisions which support retention. Understanding why students go is not the same as knowing why they stay, and discovering what institutional interventions might encourage them to stay is necessary for their retention (Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

Although Tinto recognized that individual student attributes, such as motivation and the drive to succeed, are not under the control of the institution, institutional policy should be committed to the success of all students regardless of their persistence challenges, inspiring the motivated student to soar to greater heights at the same time offering an encouraging and supportive environment to the faltering. Support services, such as academic advising, mentoring, the establishment of learning communities where peers support each other in a group environment and accessible financial aid counseling are all actions that the institution can take to encourage student persistence (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). The effectiveness of these interventions has been supported by other research (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980).

Tinto’s theory of student integration has been questioned concerning its relevance to adult students who are not a part of a residential or traditional-age college experience and who emerge from diverse community affiliations apart from the campus. These students often do not feel the same sense of engagement in college life as the traditional-age student, and their persistence may be dependent upon many factors external to the college environment and related instead to their multiple adult roles as parents, employees, caregivers and volunteers in the community. The paucity of peer-reviewed studies of the adult nontraditional student has
hindered the determination of what factors influence persistence among this rapidly growing group which comprises approximately 43% of undergraduate college students (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Kasworm, 2003; Markle, 2015).

Tinto has acknowledged that his model of student integration may not be applicable to this population. Most adult students are at an age when the rites of passage associated with youth as described by Van Gennep (Metz, 2002; Tierney, 1992) are no longer important, and the process of integration into the college community is not essential to success because adults owe their first loyalties to their families, jobs and the larger community. Their primary identity is not usually that of being a student, and their frequently part-time status lessens that sense of integration even more (Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

Yet other scholars recommend withholding judgment about how little student integration theory applies to adult students. Tinto’s recommendations that institutional commitment is essential to promote persistence may be relevant to the adult learner as well. One of the interpretations of self-directed learning maintains that adults want to learn on their own, to be fully autonomous. As a result, fewer institutional programs may be designed to support adult students who may want or need assistance to persist. Other interpretations of self-directed learning allow that part of being self-directed is knowing when help is required to promote learning, and to proactively seek out the resources needed to persist in that learning (Chene, 1983). The types of institutional resources recommended by Tinto as part of the institution’s responsibility to the student, access to advising, financial aid counseling, learning communities and mentoring, among other activities, would also be useful to adult students in their efforts to persist if these resources were made readily available, and not assumed to be unnecessary for presumably self-directed adults.
Bean and Metzner’s attrition theory revisited

The development of Bean and Metzner’s attrition theory arose from the need perceived by researchers to better explain the causes of nontraditional students leaving college before graduation. Tinto himself acknowledged that his theory of student integration, which emphasized the role of the student feeling committed to the institution and being an integral part of the social and academic life of the college in influencing persistence, was more predictive of student success among traditional-age students living on-campus at four-year colleges, rather than for adults who lived off-campus, commuted to school and felt primarily defined by their lives outside of the institution (Davidson & Wilson, 2014).

In 1985, John Bean and Barbara Metzner introduced a conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition which investigated in depth the factors contributing to decisions among this population to leave college before graduation. Beginning with an extensive review of all of the literature pertinent to student departure, they determined the characteristics of the nontraditional student and identified patterns which revealed that, for the nontraditional population, social integration in campus life was not a determining factor in persistence decisions. Unlike traditional-age students, whose tendency to remain in college was reinforced by their degree of feeling part of the campus academic and social environment, nontraditional adult students were on campus less frequently, often at times outside of mainstream hours, and did not have the opportunity or motivation to spend much time on social integration when their networks of affiliation were off-campus. However, additional research did demonstrate that academic integration did play a significant part in shaping persistence decisions among adult students (Cabrera et al., 1993). Their reasons for enrollment often involved a desire to upgrade their
knowledge and skills to attain a credential for employment purposes. Strong academic performance was essential to the realization of that goal, and a sense of academic integration with the institution facilitated that performance (Davidson & Wilson, 2014; Metz, 2002).

Bean and Metzner (1985) also identified other variables, primarily outside of the domain of the institution and arising from the personal environment of the student, which influenced adult student persistence. Job commitments could interfere with schooling. Difficulties in financing tuition expenses could be a threat to continuing on, especially if the student no longer perceived the utility of obtaining the degree. Family commitments could influence the amount of time available for studies. Bean and Metzner (1985) found that when these and other environmental variables were positive, even if the student was performing poorly academically, the student would tend to persist. If the environmental variables were negative, even if student had a high GPA and experienced academic success, the student would tend to drop out. Negative environmental variables would cause the student to ask if the costs of attaining the degree were too high in terms of the amount of stress generated by trying to overcome the obstacles to success (Davidson & Wilson, 2014; Metz, 2002).

The validity of the emphasis placed on the importance of external environmental variables in determining the persistence of adult nontraditional students was later verified by an empirical research study conducted by Metzner and Bean using 624 nontraditional student participants recruited from a large Midwestern urban university in 1987 (Metzner & Bean, 1987). This research filled a recognized gap in the literature of persistence left unaddressed in the initial theories and research conducted by Tinto which focused on traditional-aged students more influenced by institutional environments. Although Tinto recognized in later studies that external environmental factors could affect even the relatively insulated from outside conditions campus-
oriented student, there remained a perception among researchers of the dichotomous nature of Tinto and Metzner and Bean in the persistence literature, the traditional student in comparison to the nontraditional (Cabrera et al., 1993; Davidson & Wilson, 2014; Metz, 2002).

Even though Tinto’s theory of social integration was not totally applicable to the nontraditional student situation, integration of a different sort did play a role in the departure decisions of those students. Metzner and Bean (1985; 1987) found that academic integration, a feeling that the teaching and course offerings of the institution were in alignment with the goals and needs of the student, was essential to persistence among adult undergraduates. Further investigation of the data also revealed that social integration was important for nontraditional adult students as well, albeit not defined by campus interactions exclusively. As long as nontraditional students felt integrated socially in some part of their environment, at home, at work or in their community, they would tend to persist, supported by the good will surrounding them in their social roles external to the institution (Davidson & Wilson, 2014; Metz, 2002; Metzner & Bean, 1987).

**Toward a unified theory**

Comparisons by researchers of Tinto’s Student Integration model and Bean and Metzner’s Student Attrition model began to reveal significant areas of convergence between these two major theories of student persistence (Cabrera et al., 1993; Metz, 2002) In the early 1990s, an initial exploration of overlapping concepts conducted by Cabrera, Castenada, Nora and Hengstler (1992) discovered that both theories emphasized academic integration as a factor in persistence and both spoke of commitment to the institution as being an important element in determining departure decisions. The major difference in focus between the two theories was the emphasis placed on external or environmental variables by the Bean and Metzner model. Social
integration as a variable was more prominent in the Tinto theory, yet social integration in the larger community outside of the academic environment retained some influence upon adult student persistence. The study concluded with the finding that the two theories were complementary, and could be used in tandem to form a more complete unified theory of persistence that could apply to all undergraduates (Cabrera et al., 1992).

Cabrera et al. (1993) maintained, echoed by Merz, (1992), that a merger of the integration model and the attrition model could offer an enhanced, comprehensive overview that would give increased guidance to policymakers seeking to better understand the problems of persistence on their campuses. To deploy academic resources to defend one theory over the other was counterproductive when, considered together, a stronger, unified theory emerged. The original argument that competing theories would assure that important factors contributing to student persistence would not be overlooked became less viable as Tinto incorporated external factors into his integration variables and Bean and Metzner recognized that academic and social integration could sometimes influence nontraditional student departure decisions. The unified approach would allow researchers to move forward with investigations that would contribute to new knowledge arising from a broader understanding of the problem rather than wasting resources attempting to validate one theory over the other (Cabrera et al., 1993; Metz, 1992).

Looking forward into the voluminous writings on persistence which have occurred since Cabrera et al., (1992, 1993) recommended a unified theory of persistence, there has not been any explicit indication in the literature that such a theory has evolved. Reason (2009) offered a comprehensive examination of persistence research which attempted to synthesize all that had been written about the topic beginning with the researchers who influenced Tinto and Bean through those engaging in persistence investigations during the first decade of the 21st century,
describing the task as “Herculean” (p.3) because of the overwhelming number of publications devoted primarily to persistence. In his study, Reason (2009) pointed out that these persistence studies shared one common shortcoming: a failure to recognize that myriad factors influence student persistence. Instead, the researchers tended to focus on a set of narrowly defined situations, specific remedial measures and inadequate institutional reforms. To have an effect on persistence, a broad conceptual framework must be employed that takes into account the numerous interconnecting variables of student, faculty and institutional characteristics which impact student outcomes. These variables, the institutional context, will be different for each institution, and solutions for the problems of persistence must be individually relevant to a particular situation, although the application of a broad conceptual framework will keep possible remedies in alignment with the overall needs of every stakeholder (Reason, 2009). No mention is made of a unified theory of persistence beyond this all-inclusive conceptual framework.

**Summary**

Somewhere along the way from the time of discussions about a theory combining Tinto’s student integration model, and Bean and Metzner’s attrition model (Cabrera et al., 1993), in the early 1990s until 2009, when Reason published his conceptual overview of persistence, and continuing until the present, research into the persistence of the adult nontraditional undergraduate population seems to have become lost in the plethora of persistence studies which still are oriented toward the traditional 18-24 year-old undergraduate living on campus even though adults represent at least 40% of all undergraduates (United States Department of Education, 2012). A search of the Google Scholar database using the key words “adult nontraditional student persistence” brought up the 1985 work by Bean and Metzner as the first search result, and what followed was not closely related, indicating that little research using
those specific criteria has occurred recently. The explanation for this gap is not clear. Perhaps the Student Attrition model as a theory has withstood the test of time, and is adequate without revisions. Perhaps a de facto unification of Tinto’s Student Integration model and the Student Attrition model has occurred as Tinto has included more considerations of environmental factors in his work, leading to less focus on the attrition theory as a separate entity. Reason (2009) did not mention adult nontraditional student persistence specifically in his extensive discussion of persistence theories and literature, and only referenced nontraditional community college students briefly. Perhaps studies of adult undergraduates are now being conducted piecemeal, separately investigating the persistence of particular groups of adult students, such as adults in online programs, or working mothers returning to school. Perhaps, as Donaldson and Townsend (2007) noted, researchers still focus on traditional- age residential students because they are more accessible and easier to study than the diverse groups of adults who come and go, or study only online. Perhaps the persistence of traditional- age students is more important to colleges and universities as they compete for declining numbers of 18-24 year-olds and strive to maintain their enrollments and academic rankings. After all, adult students, by their very nature, often come and go as they try to earn a degree while juggling multiple life roles, and, although schools lament the loss of tuition revenue, a lack of persistence is not unexpected.

All of these uncertainties and possible omissions in the literature of adult undergraduate persistence indicate that this study, to answer the question of “How do adults, who have returned to college, and who have completed a bachelor’s degree, make sense of and explain their academic success?” was necessary to clarify what is missing from the discussion of strategies for adult student success.
New Research and Persistence Strategies for Adult Undergraduate Success

The discussions of the literature of how adults best learn and major persistence theories have led to the need for a consideration of the practical implications of what was covered and the impact on the lives of adult undergraduate students. What is being done by educators of adult students to improve their chances of persisting until graduation? What new theories are there to assist in guiding policy?

**Role theory and conflict**

A defining characteristic of the adult nontraditional student is the assumption of many roles in life beyond that of student. Adult students attempt to balance family, work and community commitments while attending college (Kasworm, 2005, 2010; Markle, 2015). Central to the idea of role theory is the reality of role conflict. School, work and family all demand a high degree of commitment. When the demands of these all equally important roles conflict, intense stress can result which may cause the student to relieve the pressure by removing one of the roles and its accompanying strain. The role of parent is nonnegotiable. The role of worker is necessary to maintain for economic survival. The role of student is usually voluntarily assumed and is optional. When choices are made to eliminate the stress of role conflict, withdrawal from school is more feasible than leaving family needs unmet or not going to work. Interrole stress negatively impacts adult student persistence, and is not easily controlled by the institution (Kasworm, 2010; Markle, 2015; Miller-Brown, 2002; Ponton et al., 2005; Spanard, 1990).

Women are more susceptible to the pressures of role conflict. Family structures have changed greatly during the last century, leaving more women in the workforce as single heads of household, or as a second income earner essential to the maintenance of the standard of living of the family. Despite working a full-time job, women still find themselves in the role of primary
caregiver to the children, although the roles of fathers in caring for their offspring have expanded in recent years. Complicating the stress experienced by women of being a full-time worker with a family and going to school is the often self-imposed model of being “the good mother” idealized in American culture. The woman feels guilty for selfishly engaging in schoolwork, especially when children are young, sacrificing mothering time to study. On the other hand, if she does not study, she will not do well in school, shortchanging her own development and decreasing her earnings potential by failing to obtain the degree. The cycle of guilt and anxiety may escalate until she makes a decision to leave school unless she can determine a way to be both the good mother and the good student (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Giancola, Grawitch & Borchert, 2009; Markle, 2015; Miller-Brown, 2002).

Ironically, the family responsibilities which produce intense role conflict in women can work in favor of the persistence of fathers. The idealized concept of the man as a “good provider” for his family inspires him to persist until graduation. The attainment of the degree will enhance his ability to provide a secure future for his children, and increase his self-esteem in his role as parent. His motivation can change if he begins to be disaffected with the institution or questions the utility of the degree, causing him to re-evaluate whether school is worth the cost in terms of the time taken away from his family or the money spent on tuition. If he does not see a return on his investment, in terms of personal growth and financial security, he may drop out in order to spend his resources more wisely elsewhere (Kasworm, 2003; Markle, 2015).

Ponton et al. (2005) approaches role theory from a slightly different perspective. Recognizing that adult learners occupy many conflicting roles, he and his team examined how those roles can interfere with the completion of learning activities, and even derail the intent to learn. Adult students may state that they value learning activities over non-learning activities
and realize the future benefits of engaging in the learning, but become distracted by a priority that may develop at a moment’s notice out of the complexity of being an adult. Ponton et al. (2005) uses the examples of adults fully intending to engage in a learning activity, but being pulled away by everyday tasks such as consoling a friend, taking children to soccer practice or repairing the roof. Those non-learning activities take precedence because adults are expected to do these things, whereas learning, especially formal learning in classrooms, is optional and voluntary, a job culturally associated with childhood and youth, the legions of adult learners flooding campuses notwithstanding (Chudacoff, 1989). The adult may feel conflict and guilt if the expected activity of adulthood is neglected to engage in optional learning, and the adult may fail to persist in the learning activity in response to that sense of guilt. The working mother who is also a student may feel guilt if she is not back from a class in time to read her children a story before they go to bed, or to fix dinner. Even though another caregiver might be there to step in, her role as a good mother is to be there for her family, and her absence is not congruent with that self-concept. These are complex emotions arising out of role conflict that can negatively affect persistence in adult undergraduates (Markle, 2015).

Ponton et al. (2005) offers a simple remedy to keep adult students focused on their learning activities. He recommends maintaining a journal, a type of learning diary, to keep track of missed opportunities due to the choosing of a non-learning activity over a learning activity, and the value of that lost activity to the eventual completion of the learning objectives. The journal will remind the student of the positive outcomes of choosing learning over non-learning activities. Emergency exceptions could be noted. The challenge would be to persuade busy adults to maintain the journals, but the concept of promoting persistence through an active realization of the utility of making value-driven choices relative to achieving the goal of degree
completion might assist students in prioritizing learning over the wide range of activities which might distract them from their declared educational objective.

**Schlossberg’s theory of college students’ mattering and marginality**

Psychologist Nancy Schlossberg in 1989 proposed that the feeling of not mattering experienced by first-year college students as they adjusted to college had a negative impact on their persistence. Although her research focused on traditional 18-24 year-old, residential college students, her findings could be extended to other populations, including adult nontraditional students experiencing a sense of isolation and anxiety about fitting in as they attempt to return to school after many years away from formal education (Rayle & Chung, 2008).

First described by sociologist Morris Rosenberg in 1981, mattering is the feeling experienced by an individual that he or she counts to other people. Mattering is the positive sense that comes from realizing self-worth in the eyes of others, of being a valuable asset in the world, the type of person whom others can depend upon. Marginality is the opposite, a feeling of not fitting in, that no one cares. Students who perceive that they do not matter to their colleges experience an increased rate of dropping out (Rayle & Chung, 2008).

Markle (2015) reported that the men and women in her study of adult nontraditional students at a public university in the southeastern United States felt marginalized by the institution. The support services provided to students by the school, such as advising and financial aid, were all geared to the needs of traditional students, making them feel unwelcome and out of place. These students sensed that their many roles and responsibilities placed them at a disadvantage in the eyes of their professors, who were accustomed to traditional students who could devote undivided attention to their studies. Women in particular felt that they were not accorded the proper respect by some of their instructors, being seen as less serious academically
because of their outside obligations to family and the needs of children. The additional stress experienced on campus combined with the tension resulting from role conflicts led many of these students to consider withdrawing from college.

Rovai (2003) wrote of the need for online adult students to have a sense of belonging to the college to be successful in their courses. Mattering to the institution and instructors is important to building the self-esteem and confidence necessary to overcome the sense of isolation that can result during online learning. Creating a virtual community of peers through videoconferencing and creative teaching methods can engender a sense of belonging and combat the sense of marginalization which negatively impacts persistence.

**Application of classical sociological theory to persistence**

Kerby (2015) reinforces the theory of mattering with the more classical explanation of alienation. Students who feel that they do not matter to the institution and the social structures within that particular higher education community become alienated, or separated from that community. Referring back to the application of the theories of Durkheim on suicide in Tinto’s initial model of student departure in 1975, the student who feels a sense of disconnectedness from the university society is at risk of committing the academic equivalent of an actual suicide by withdrawing from the institution. As in the greater society, the goal of the university becomes suicide prevention through the establishment of programs that lessen student alienation and reinforce a sense of belonging and place (Kerby, 2015).

A key disruptive factor in the development of the sense of belonging and integration is an individualistic bent to society that forces individuals to rely on personal resources rather than group resources to facilitate adaptation. In terms of student departure, the student who starts college and feels disconnected may unsuccessfully turn to internal coping mechanisms which
may fail in isolation from others in the society, causing the student to consider dropping out. If group resources are made available through appropriate institutional support strategies, the life of the student in relation to persistence may be saved (Kerby, 2015).

These institutional interventions must be tailored to the particular conditions at each institution, taking into account the unique interplay between internal factors under the control of the university society, and external factors which act upon the university, such as student body characteristics and community context. There cannot be one magical solution to the problem of persistence because each institution experiences a different combination of internal and external factors which affect student departure. The strategies needed to foster positive student persistence behaviors are multi-faceted, and no single approach is adequate, evidenced by the existence of myriad models and studies of persistence relative to various groups in the literature (Kerby, 2015; Reason, 2009; Terenzino & Pascarella, 1980; Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

As part of the process of determining adequate interventions to prevent dropouts, more research is needed into the role of a strong student sense of belonging in the stay-or-go decision-making of those students. The institution must view its function through its component parts, and figure how each office, each department, each discipline can make the student feel welcome, to be inclusive, to draw the student in, relieving the stress of adaptation. A sense of belonging takes time to develop as in any human relationship of trust, but the performance-based, accountability and knowledge-driven society in which the student must function does not naturally allow the time required for a sense of belonging to develop. A premium is placed on the capacity to move along quickly. In formulating strategies to promote persistence, the institution must set aside the time necessary within its policies and programs to foster that sense of student belonging which encourages the decision to stay and ultimately be successful (Giancola et al., 2009; Kerby, 2015).
This discussion of sociological perspectives on the problem of persistence is based upon research conducted using traditional college students, but the need to belong and fit in is common to adult undergraduates as well. Markle (2015) in her study reported that the nontraditional students felt left out and marginalized by university support structures that favored younger, traditional-aged students, and that alienation from the university society was leading them to consider dropping out.

**Interventions and remedies**

The challenge of promoting persistence as evidenced by the literature is multidimensional, and will not be solved by any one strategy (Kerby, 2015; Reason, 2009; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Promoting a particular approach as a panacea for persistence will be illusory, and present an incomplete picture as policymakers struggle to identify what is effective (Terenzino & Pascarella, 1980). Yet, certain strategies might make a difference in the persistence decisions of individual students, which, if enough students are influenced, may identify an effective remedy, if not a comprehensive cure.

The research on persistence has focused primarily on the traditional, residential 18-24 year-old college student and methods to keep that student enrolled from the freshman to the sophomore year at the same institution. The first year is considered to be the critical transition period during which time the student pulls away from old affiliations of high school, family and friends at home to become integrated into the college or university, replacing the former loyalties with a sense of commitment to the institutional culture. If this transition does not go smoothly, the student may drop out. Most interventions to prevent the premature departure of the student focus on this first year transition (Reason, 2009).

Steltenpohl and Shipton (1986) recognized that a similar critical transition period affects
adult students returning to college after many years away from higher education. Instead of transitioning from high school and home town into the larger world of college as traditional students do, the adult student transitions from being a citizen and actor in the larger world back to a role from younger years, that of being a student. Just as the traditional-age student experiences dislocations upon arriving on campus, the adult student may also experience a period of disorientation and adjustment as they return to formal education.

Steltenpohl and Shipton (1989), instructors at Empire State College in New York, a public institution dedicated to serving an adult student population since its inception, designed an eight-week comprehensive entry course that would help first-year adult students manage the transition between the external world and school as similar courses help first-year traditional students. The priority in the beginning of the course, taught in a group setting where the instructors acted as facilitators of discussion rather than pedagogues, was to reflect on the reasons for being an adult learner returning to college to establish a sense of purpose. The dynamics of the group interaction enabled students to support each other as they shared their anxieties about functioning in the college environment. Academic skills, such as writing and mathematics proficiency, were assessed to identify issues which might impede academic integration. As the course progressed, the students ideally developed a sense of belonging in the college environment, and a feeling of mattering to faculty and peers that would give them the confidence to persist beyond the first few weeks of college.

Chaves (2006) advocated establishing support services at colleges specifically for adult students to reduce their sense of marginality, especially encountered in intergenerational institutions where younger students seemed to be the focus. He recommended making available resources to assist in the adult transition back to college and skills assessments to determine
aptitudes and needs. He also advised establishing, both within the academic environment and the community at large, an information and referral clearinghouse to assist adults in finding extra help if needed with challenges faced as nontraditional undergraduates. He maintained that adult student support groups, networking, mentoring, both with peers and faculty, and supportive counseling would increase the student’s sense of mattering, reducing the alienation that can result when an adult student drifts at the edges of campus life. Additionally, Giancola et al. (2009) has defined a need for stress and time management classes for adult students challenged by interrole conflicts, and financial aid counseling particular to the situations of adults. These support services may increase student commitment to the institution, because, through offering this assistance to students, the college demonstrates a mutual commitment to the welfare of the adults through acknowledging in a concrete way their unique needs as adult learners.

Summary

The recommendations here to support adult student persistence require further study. There has been relatively little research to ascertain the actual factors which determine if adult students persist until graduation (Jacobs & Berkowitz-King, 2002). Giancola et al. (2009) recommend conducting a “qualitative study that gathers student stories and experiences” (p.260) in order to give depth to current and prior research findings that are often quantitative and only occasionally supplemented by limited interviewing of subjects. The impact of mattering, a sense of belonging and alienation on the persistence decisions of adult students is difficult to measure quantitatively, since these factors are subjective, and may also require further investigation to verify validity. From this investigation of this part of the persistence literature, the need is clear for a qualitative study designed to answer the research question of how adult students, returning to college, successfully complete bachelor’s degree programs, and make sense of and explain
their academic success.

**Conclusion**

From this inquiry into the literature of adult undergraduate persistence, evidence emerges that there are wide gaps in the knowledge of the factors that contribute to the success or failure of this group in completing degree programs. An examination of the literature of how adults learn best reveals that the major theories of adult learning are not supported by empirical research and are framed in such a way that researchable questions cannot be formed out of the confusing, imprecise definitions of self-directed learning, transformative learning and andragogy, leaving unanswered the question of how adults learn best. An investigation of the persistence literature demonstrates that the Student Integration model, which uses traditional-age college students residing on campuses as the subjects of the study, has inspired most of the literature regarding persistence over the last four decades, while adult student attrition has not been comprehensively explored since the research of Bean and Metzner in 1985 and 1987. The literature of new directions in the understanding of adult student persistence opens up a number of opportunities for future research to verify the validity of these novel perspectives.

Giancola et al. (2009) maintains that colleges and universities have an obligation to assist adult students in their transition back to higher education. Improving adult student persistence is a joint venture between the student and the institution, but, for improvement to occur; more knowledge is needed in light of the lapses in the literature. For this reason, this study of how adult undergraduates successfully complete bachelor’s degree programs, and make sense of and explain their academic success, was justified.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Adult students over the age of 25 now comprise more than 40% of all undergraduates attending colleges and universities in the United States (United States Department of Education, 2012). Research findings indicate that 62% of these students do not complete a degree program within six years of enrollment, and many leave higher education during the first year of their studies (Berker et al., 2003). The cost of this lack of adult student persistence to institutions is reflected in decreased tuition income and diminished reputation as colleges and universities are increasingly held accountable for the success of students. The impact on the lives of individual adult students who fail to graduate is equally profound, rendering them less able to compete and thrive in the complex, ever-changing job market of the 21st century (Markle, 2015).

Although the persistence of traditional-age college students is one of the most researched areas in higher education, comparatively few studies have investigated the factors contributing to the lack of degree completion among adult undergraduates (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Kasworm, 2005; Markle, 2015). The purpose of this study was to add to the body of knowledge which might be used by policymakers to increase persistence among adult students and assist in the resolution of this problem of practice within higher education. The research question which guided this inquiry was: How do adults, who have returned to college, and who have completed a bachelor’s degree, make sense of and explain their academic success? The discovery of how individual students succeed was accomplished through listening to the stories of participants in the study as they described, in their own voices, their pathway to graduation and the meaning of their experiences along the way.

Qualitative Research Approach

This study of adult undergraduates was qualitative in design as a result of the desired goal
to investigate in depth the experiences of participants through the medium of their own voices as they described and interpreted the meaning of those lived experiences. For the researcher, the intent of qualitative research was to explore how people make sense of their world through the study of subjects in their natural settings, observing and interpreting actual situations through the lens of the understanding that participants ascribe to phenomena under investigation rather than the determination of direct cause and effect relationships arising from quantifiable variables (Creswell, 1998; Maxwell, 2005; Mertens, 2005). Qualitative procedures provide a means of giving expression to the inner lives of individuals participating in a study that make visible the unseen factors which determine behavior in the context of the natural setting that are not easily measured (Mertens, 2005).

The qualitative approach allowed for a holistic exploration of how adult undergraduates successfully complete bachelor’s degree programs through determining the process which eventually results in graduation, rather than simply the identification of the precise variables which may predict the desired outcome (Mertens, 2005). Although external variables such as the availability of financial aid and the support of peers may affect adult student persistence, a more complete understanding of the process of achieving success may be obtained through entering the world of lived experiences of the successful students. The researcher gained access to that world through asking open-ended questions during in-depth interviews.

The atmosphere of reflection prompted by these inquiries encouraged participants to describe and share their perceptions of the environmental elements, both internal and external, which led to graduation. This strategy enabled the interviewer and the participant to reach a joint understanding through dialogue of every aspect of the process which resulted in the outcome of successful degree completion. In the qualitative tradition, questions beginning with either how
or what will encourage the widest variety of responses from participants which will facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study as described from the perspective of lived experience (Creswell, 2009).

The research paradigm which provided the conceptual framework and philosophically guides this qualitative study was the constructivist-interpretivist approach. As described by Ponterotto (2005), a research paradigm sets up the context of the investigation, and from the paradigm selected flows all other elements of the study, beginning with the foundational assumptions undergirding the research to the determination of tools, instruments, participants and methodology required to frame an effective inquiry.

From this perspective, the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm was particularly applicable to this study of how adult undergraduate students successfully complete bachelor’s degree programs. Within that framework is a recognition that reality is not absolute, and the perception of objective reality varies according to the lens used by the viewer to make meaning of the world. In addition, what the individual calls objective reality is a construct within the mind of that individual which must be accessed through deep reflection on the meaning of lived experiences in order to understand the factors which shaped that individual’s perception of reality. Reflection was prompted through an intensely interactive dialogue between the researcher and the participant which elicited a joint understanding and the construction of a shared reality (Ponterotto, 2005) which provided the foundation needed to answer the central research question of how adult undergraduates, returning to college, successfully complete bachelor’s degree programs, and make sense of and explain their academic success.

Access to the participant’s often deeply hidden and subconscious interpretations of reality can be achieved through the use of the in-depth, semi-structured interview typical of qualitative
research which taps into those reservoirs of meaning derived from lived experiences and brings them to the surface where researcher and subject can examine them together within the context of the research question. In the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, the researcher delves into the small details as well as the emergent larger themes resulting from dialogue with the participant to obtain a complete sense of how the participant interprets lived experience in relation to the phenomenon under study (Ponterotto, 2005). The researcher must carefully guide the questions to assure that the participant tells of their experiences in their own words, and not color the conversation with any pre-conceived expectations regarding results, recognizing in the unbiased construction of the study the validity of diverse viewpoints and designing the investigation to discover new knowledge which may or may not confirm old assumptions.

**Methodology**

The research paradigm of constructivism-interpretivism employed in the development of this study of how adult undergraduates successfully complete bachelor’s degree programs determined the context of the investigation, the philosophical underpinnings of the inquiry, and the methodology used in conducting the research. Since constructivism-interpretivism relies on researcher-participant dialogue as an essential component of the philosophy of recognizing the validity of multiple points of view, the research strategy of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was a particularly appropriate choice to guide the selection of methods and tools to conduct this study.

IPA as a methodology is a relatively new qualitative approach which provides a framework to examine the individual lived experience of research participants, to discover the meaning of that experience to the participants, and to find out how they make sense of their experience (Shaw, 2010; Smith, 2010; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA was developed by
its primary theorist, Jonathan Smith, of Birkbeck University of London, in 1996, and presented in the journal *Psychology and Health* in response to a perceived need to create a qualitative and experiential approach that was unique to psychological research and would not rely on methodologies imported from other academic disciplines which might not be wholly applicable to psychology. Conversely, IPA, with its broadly inclusive style of inquiry, has quickly become a research method widely adopted by those other disciplines such as health sciences, social science and education, as well as continuing to be one of the most common qualitative methods used to conduct research in psychology (Smith, 2010; Smith et al. (2009).

The use of IPA to guide a study requires that the researcher closely examine the lived experience of participants on a detailed personal level, discover the meaning of that experience and investigate how the participants make sense of the experience in question (Smith, 2010).

IPA is theoretically derived from elements of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, a complexity which facilitates its application to research studies within the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm where an examination of the lived experience of participants is essential to realizing research objectives (Shaw, 2010; Smith, 2010).

Phenomenology is the philosophy which is concerned with inquiries into lived experience, and the need to conduct a detailed examination of experience in order to understand the phenomena under investigation. Edmund Husserl, a philosopher who came to prominence during the early twentieth century, was the first to promote the concept that experience should be examined closely as it is, on its own terms, as it occurs (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl wanted to discover a means by which the individual could come to deeply understand their particular experience and, through reflection, identify the essential elements of that experience. The purpose of this reflective process would be to facilitate the transcendence of personal
circumstances to enable the development of a broader application that would illuminate for others the meaning of their own particular experiences. Through the identification of the essence of an experience, and the factors which brought about its occurrence, new knowledge could be discovered that could be generalized to the larger population (King & Horrocks, 2010; Smith et al., 2009).

Husserl developed phenomenology as a reaction to the scientists of his day that were, in his view, too quick to apply their own theories and perspectives to the phenomena under study in an attempt to arrive at a preconceived conclusion which matched their expectations regarding the outcome of an investigation. Researchers who employed phenomenological methods, on the other hand, were to set aside or “bracket” prior assumptions and suppositions in order to be open to a fresh understanding of the phenomena in question derived from investigations centering on the detailed reflections of participants as described in their own words (King & Horrocks, 2010).

Other phenomenological philosophers such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, expanded upon Husserl’s work. Recognizing that the complete bracketing off of prior experience was largely impossible in an effort to avoid researcher bias, this group of philosophers maintained that persons are inextricably entwined in a physical world of objects, situations and relationships. The pure essence of an object or concept existing in consciousness as idealized in theory by Husserl cannot exist apart from an involvement in the life world of daily activities, the unavoidable physical dimension that gives the ephemeral inner existence its meaning in the context of lived experiences (King & Horrocks, 2010; Smith et al., 2009).

The theory of hermeneutics is another of the major conceptual underpinnings of IPA methodology which is essentially the theory of interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). The ability to interpret involves the inclusion of new data into the unavoidable fore-knowledge that comes
from prior experiences of the researcher in the world, allowing a fresh perspective to emerge from the integration of old understandings and novel information. During research, the investigator must be aware of the bias that can arise from fore-knowledge of the phenomenon under study, and compensate for that prejudice when interpreting the meaning of the data obtained from participants (King & Horrocks, 2010; Smith et al., 2009).

Interpretation also involves empathy with the subject, a process through which the researcher ideally puts aside prior assumptions, although never entirely possible, and enters into the world of the participant to see experience through the perspective of the individual actually living the experience. Through a deep understanding of the situation of the participant, the researcher gains the ability to interpret from the small details revealed during extended interactions the larger context of the data, and, from that position, question the ways in which participants describe events and their meaning, resulting in a more complete interpretation of what is happening to the individual by incorporating the perspective of the investigator into the dynamic of the study (Shaw, 2010).

Researchers using phenomenological methods such as IPA must find a way to extract from participants the meaning of their experiences in the life world as processed in the hidden regions of individual consciousness to better understand how those experiences influence the relationship of the individual to the phenomenon under investigation. The experiences as they exist within the consciousness of another person, the participant, cannot be directly accessed by the researcher. Descriptions of those experiences must be elicited as part of a process of engagement between the researcher and the subject which reveals the data from which interpretations can be made. During conversations with the researcher, the participant tries to make sense of personal lived experience. At the same time, the researcher attempts to make
sense of the participant trying to make sense of what has impacted them in the context of a particular place and time (King & Horrocks, 2010; Smith et al., 2009).

This investigative process of extracting the meaning of experiences from the participant and the researcher, then engaging in an interpretation of those descriptions, illustrates the double hermeneutic characteristic of IPA research. In this way the researcher is able to access the hidden significance of experiences as stored in the consciousness of another individual and bring them to light where those experiences may be subjected to an interpretative lens through which the researcher endeavors to make sense of the participant making sense of their experiences (Shaw, 2010; Smith, 2010).

The third major conceptual foundation of IPA is idiography, which is the study of the particular. Much of the qualitative research done in psychology and related fields has focused on the findings made on the group level, and using that data to make generalizations about the behavior of the larger population. IPA, with its concentration on the particular, enables the researcher to study a particular case in great detail, offering a depth of analysis not possible to achieve when considering a large group. A focus on the particular also allows the researcher to explore how particular events or situations have affected particular, purposively-chosen subjects at a particular time. The idiographic approach facilitates a detailed understanding of lived experience from the perspective of a particular participant situated in the context of a particular time and place, yielding a rich trove of information not normally accessible through methodologies concerned with groups and norms (Smith, 2010; Smith et al., 2009).

IPA, with its roots in phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, presented a multi-pronged research strategy which offered a comprehensive approach to this investigation of the central research question which guided this study: How do adults, who have returned to college,
and who have completed a bachelor’s degree, make sense of and explain their academic success? The source of this strategy is the qualitative research tradition, which is a process of inquiry that weaves a complex, holistic narrative comprised of many methodological inputs such as observations and interviews conducted in the natural environment of the participants (Creswell, 1998).

The phenomenology component of IPA builds upon the fundamentals of qualitative research through the identification of the essence of personal lived experience in relation to a phenomenon under study as described by the research participants in their own words (Creswell, 2009). Hermeneutics as employed in IPA investigations facilitates the interpretation of that lived experience in a way that is accessible and meaningful to both the researcher and participant. The process of the double hermeneutic characteristic of IPA promotes the analysis of lived experience as the researcher attempts to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is going on within and around them (Smith, 2010). The element of idiography in IPA is the focus on the particular, enabling the researcher to delve deeply into the lived experience of the participant in great detail, and emerge with an understanding of both the individual and the particular context in which the participant’s experience occurred, situated in place and time (Smith et al., 2009). The utilization of all three aspects of IPA together, phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, was the most appropriate strategy to attain the research objective of understanding how individual adult undergraduate students perceive and make meaning of their success through an in-depth analysis of their experiences as they lived them.

The intended outcome of using IPA to guide this study was to weave a detailed interpretative narrative arising from an understanding of how individual participants who were recent alumni of a bachelor’s program described and made sense of their success in achieving the
completion of their degrees. The findings resulting from this analysis have contributed an innovative perspective on the problem of practice of poor degree completion rates among adult undergraduate students in the United States in a way that larger studies relying on statistical comparisons cannot emulate. In-depth personal accounts of the lived experience of success in the words of those who persevered may provide new guidance to higher education practitioners who are concerned with promoting adult student persistence while simultaneously giving hope to adult students who may be struggling to achieve graduation.

The use of IPA as the methodology affected every step of the research process. The intent of employing IPA was to delve deeply into the lived experiences of participants to arrive at recurrent and divergent themes that explained the phenomena being investigated. To access what was in the minds of participants, the researcher opened a reflective dialogue with the individual. Asking open-ended interview questions which encouraged reflection and discussion on the part of the participant was a key strategy to achieve the level of detail required for an in-depth understanding of the data which is essential to IPA research (Smith, 2010; Smith et al., 2009).

Data collection methods used in IPA research are designed to allow for the preservation of the interview data in a way that can be easily accessed later by the researcher, and analyzed. Descriptions of the lived experiences of the participants as revealed through interviews must be in their own words, requiring audio recordings which are later transcribed and checked for accuracy to preserve the detail. Interviews may also be conducted through videoconferencing if performed from a distance, which gives the researcher a window into the nonverbal communication of the participant which otherwise would be absent (Smith, 2010; Smith et al., 2009).

The analytic focus of an IPA study is to determine how the participants make sense of
their lived experiences in relation to the phenomenon being investigated. To achieve this end, the researcher engaging in IPA data analysis begins with a careful reading and re-reading of the transcripts, followed by an initial noting of comments and observations arising from the data. The next step is the identification and development of emergent themes, including a search for the connections and commonalities across those themes. The researcher moves from case to case, analyzing the data from each participant on its own terms. After each case is examined in detail, the researcher identifies emerging and divergent themes across cases. From this analysis, interpretations arising from the particular cases may lead to a more general interpretation based on multiple individual perspectives, which, when taken together, may offer a better understanding of the phenomenon under study (Smith, 2010; Smith et al., 2009).

**Participants**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the individual experiences of adult undergraduate students to understand their perceptions of how they succeeded in completing their bachelor’s degree programs. The central research question that guided this study was: How do adults, who have returned to college, and who have completed a bachelor’s degree, make sense of and explain their academic success?

In the context of the statement of purpose and the research question, the State University of New York-Empire State College (SUNY- Empire State) was selected as the research site. Empire State, a public institution founded in 1971, has a total undergraduate enrollment of 10,878 spread across 35 small campuses in every region of New York State and is part of the larger State University of New York system. The Center for Distance Learning serves students worldwide unable to attend classes at brick-and-mortar locations. The gender ratio is 39% male, 61% female. The median age of the student population is 36 years. The mission of the college is
dedicated to adult student education and overcoming the obstacles which interfere with success.

Consistent with IPA methodology, the participant sample was purposefully selected in order that this study might offer insight into the particular experience of adult student success. Participant selection was focused on a homogeneous group of Empire State alumni who have graduated from the college within the last five years. This sample of alumni met the definition of success, completion of a bachelor’s degree, adopted for this study. The participants were also 25 years of age or older while achieving the degree, the standard of adulthood as applied in this research context. Through this sample, the researcher gained access to the phenomenon under investigation, how adult students successfully complete bachelor’s degree programs, and the research question pertaining to that experience was meaningful to those purposefully chosen participants (Smith et al., 2009).

Participants meeting the criteria of the sample were identified with the assistance of the Empire State Office of Alumni and Student Affairs in Saratoga Springs, New York. The alumni office emailed the researcher’s letter of intent (Appendix A) to that pool of alumni. In the letter, potential participants were asked to communicate their interest directly to the researcher. From the initial mailing, 15 alumni who met all of the criteria agreed to take part in the study, pending the obtaining of their informed consent prior asking any research questions.

The primary instrument of data collection used in this study was the in-depth, semi-structured interview conducted one-on-one with the participant and researcher. In this case, participants and researcher were widely separated geographically, with one participant living as far away as New Orleans. For this reason, interviews were conducted using the digital conferencing and recording service Freeconferencecall.com, and arranged at a mutually convenient time.
The choice of the interview to serve as the main method that data was accessed from the participants in this study reflects the goals of IPA research to build a narrative based upon detailed, personal accounts of individual lived experiences as revealed by participants in their own words. The strengths of this data collection method included the opportunity to build rapport between participant and researcher which allowed the participant the sense of freedom to reflect deeply on their responses, to speak and be heard. Personal, in-depth interviews encouraged the development of trust within the research relationship between interviewer and subject which promoted the objective of IPA research to examine the lived experience of participants within the context of the phenomena being studied. The limitation of the one-on-one interview is the possibility that the researcher will become personally invested in the story being told by the participant, and, in the process of making sense of what the participant is revealing, identify too closely with the participant’s perspective, exhibiting a bias which results from that empathy which may threaten the validity of the research findings (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005; Smith et al., 2009). In this study, this risk was minimized by the researcher consciously bracketing off any personal experiences with the phenomenon under investigation to avoid mingling the researcher’s perspective with that of the participant, facilitated by the keeping of a reflexive journal noting potential points of researcher bias.

Procedures

The first step in conducting this study of how adult undergraduate students successfully complete bachelor’s degree programs and make sense of and explain their academic success was to obtain the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Northeastern University and the equivalent IRB at Empire State College, which must be granted before any research can start. Upon receiving permission from these review boards, participant identification and selection
proceeded with the cooperation of the alumni office at Empire State. Potential participants received the letter of intent (Appendix A) via email. This initial communication assured the recipients that taking part in the study was entirely voluntary, and that they had the option to withdraw at any point. They were also told that their identities and personal information would be safeguarded at all times. The planned use of pseudonyms was explained as a means to further protect confidentiality. The parameters of the study were also discussed in the letter, such as the time obligation and interview schedule involved. In addition, participants were told that a $15 Dunkin’ Donuts gift card in a digital format would be emailed to them at the conclusion of the study as a thank you for their time.

After the potential participants responded to the letter of intent and confirmed their interest, the researcher sent out an informed consent document (Appendix B) for their inspection, accompanied by a request to set up a time for a first meeting to discuss the contents of the form. The informed consent document facilitated among the participants an understanding of their rights as participants, and the responsibility of the researcher to maintain confidentiality and inflict no harm. During the discussion of informed consent, the researcher made clear to the participant that he or she could decline to answer any question or probe that was uncomfortable, and could exit the study completely at any point without consequences. The participant, if in agreement with conditions of the study, gave their verbal consent while the affirmative response was recorded by the researcher, indicating their willingness to be part of the research. While recording consent, the researcher also obtained verbal affirmation from the participant that the recording of interviews was acceptable. After the completion of this interaction, arranged and digitally recorded through a password-protected account on Freeconferencecall.com, the first interview began.
In the tradition of in-depth phenomenological interviewing typical of IPA, a series of three separate interviews (Appendix C) were conducted with each participant (Seidman, 2013). Each interview served a particular function in the construction of a sense of trust between the researcher and the participant which facilitated access to the inner reflections upon lived experience as told by the participant in his or her own words (Smith et al., 2009).

The first interview placed the participant’s experience within a context of personal history and background which allowed the researcher to build rapport with the participant based upon a common understanding of the meaning of that context, established through the construction of a shared empathy (Seidman, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). This initial interview focused on enabling the participant to become comfortable with talking to the researcher through a discussion of the particulars of their past life leading up to why they decided to participate in the study. During this conversation, the purpose of the research was discussed again, interview protocols were covered (Appendix C), and participant commitment confirmed. The desired outcome was to set the stage for the researcher to become a co-participant in the investigation of the answers to the research question of how adult students who have returned to college successfully complete bachelor’s degree programs and make sense of and explain their academic success. This interview lasted 30-45 minutes, and included several biographical questions to clarify context. During this time, the participant also self-selected the pseudonym which was used throughout the study to protect participant confidentiality.

The second interview explored the details of the lived experience of the participant in relation to the research question, and consisted of a schedule of twelve opened-ended questions (Appendix D). The first questions in the series encouraged reflective responses to accustom the participant to sharing with the researcher their perceptions in the in-depth manner necessary for
IPA research. This interview lasted 45-90 minutes (Seidman, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). During this encounter, participants were encouraged, through the design of the research questions, to describe their lived experiences as adult undergraduate students which may have contributed to the successful completion of their bachelor’s degree programs. Each question included in this interview supplied a part of the answer to the central research question of how such success is achieved.

The third interview served to construct a joint reflection on the meaning of the content of the first two interviews from the perspective of both the participant and the researcher, a dialogue characteristic of IPA research methodology. The third interview was an integration of all of the interviews with the intent to merge past experiences into an understanding of the present and a projection into life in the future for the participant. As part of this process of making meaning, this interview was also an opportunity to revisit and share with the participant the transcripts of the two previous interviews. In this process, known as member checking, the participant had the opportunity to review verbatim quotes made to the researcher for accuracy, as well as review emergent themes apparent in the transcripts (Creswell, 2009). This transparent discussion of interview data with the participant increased the sense of trust between researcher and subject, facilitating the open reflection which assisted in assuring the validity of the research (Seidman, 2013). This final interview lasted approximately thirty minutes.

After the completion of each interview, the recorded data was downloaded from freeconferencecall.com onto a password-protected personal computer with cloud storage, and then self-transcribed with the assistance of transcription software. After the completion of transcription process, data analysis was begun using as a guideline the steps outlined in Smith et al., 2009 which preserved the attention of the researcher on the words and perceptions of the
participants.

Data Analysis

The focus of data analysis in IPA research is on the attempts by the participant to make sense of lived experience in relationship to the phenomenon under investigation. The role of the researcher in this analysis is to accurately record, understand and ultimately interpret the data as part of a dialogue of joint meaning-making with the participant, which will, after analysis is done, answer the central research question and fulfill the purpose of the study (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA does not prescribe a set method of data analysis, allowing the researcher some flexibility in managing the relationship between the data collection and findings, while remaining centered on the dialogue with the participant. Yet, over time, common practice has seen the emergence of certain steps in the completion of data analysis which have proven conducive to the achievement of the goals of IPA research (Smith et al., 2009).

For the researcher in this study, the first step in this process involved the careful reading and re-reading of the first transcripts of the recorded data while listening to segments of the audio in order to recreate the sense of being together with the participant. This method of putting the participant at the center of the inquiry guarded against the natural tendency of the researcher to quickly summarize the contents of the data, a practice which might have led to a drowning out of the nuances and cadences of the spoken word which was part of the process of entering the participant’s world of lived experience during the interviews, and added a dimension of reality not easily achieved through the reading of the printed transcript alone. Researcher neutrality was also promoted through the recording of personal reactions to the transcribed data in a notebook apart from the transcripts, and became a way of bracketing off first impressions which could
have prejudiced subsequent readings and supplant the voice of the participant (King & Horrocks, 2010; Smith et al., 2009).

Step two in IPA data analysis was a merger of the careful, neutral reading and re-reading as described in step one, with the first attempts to make notes on the actual manuscript. Keeping an open mind while composing a written commentary which clarified and guided the organization of the data to make sense of what the participant had revealed during the interviews, the researcher created an initial map of the encounter with the participant, going through all of the stages of engagement, from introductory statements, the rich details of interview two, and concluding with the meaning-making characteristic of the last interview in the series (King & Horrocks, 2010, Smith et al., 2009).

These comments in the margin were of several types, including description of situations, linguistic notes on language and other utterances used by the participant, and conceptual impressions, which annotated the more convoluted inner world of the participant and provided a basis for eventual interpretation of experiences. This process of noting became a way of fully engaging with the text through an intense familiarization with every element of the transcript which, through an exploration of multiple levels of meaning revealed by the data, allowed the researcher the access required to interpret the lived experience of the participant in relation to the phenomenon under study (King & Horrocks, 2010; Smith et al., 2009).

The third step in IPA analysis was the identification and development of recurring themes in the narrative of the participant through the use of exploratory comments during the reading of the transcripts to clarify the parts of the interview that had relevance to the research question. For this researcher, once the transcripts were noted with comments and observations, patterns began to stand out as key words and phrases emerged from the larger context of the interview. This
process was a way of winnowing down the substantial amounts of data into relevant groupings which became the emergent themes of the study. A practical method which facilitated this theme identification was to write preliminary comments in one margin of the transcript, and thematic concepts associated with the initial notes in the other margin (King & Horrocks, 2010; Smith et al., 2009).

The fourth step of IPA analysis consisted of searching for connections across emergent themes. From the chronologically listed transcript notes and related enumerations of emerging themes, thematic groupings were recognized that recurred and could be bound together into superordinate themes encompassing similar concepts and observations. The construction of a table (Table 1) which graphically represented how the themes which emerged from the analysis of the transcripts came together as superordinate themes of the study arising from the data facilitated an understanding of how the interviews assisted in answering the research question (Smith et al., 2009).

The fifth step in IPA analysis was moving on to the next case, and repeating the processes described in steps one through four. Each participant in this study was engaged in the set of three interviews, and was regarded as a separate case. The superordinate themes which arose from each case were partial answers to the research question, and were guarded until all interviews were complete and the work of assembling a comparison of the cases began.

The sixth step in IPA analysis was looking for patterns across cases. In larger studies such as this one consisting of 15 participants, a consistent definition of what constitutes a recurrent theme must be established to guarantee validity. For this research, a theme was considered recurrent if present in over half of the sample. To determine frequency, the researcher took the tables created to illustrate the superordinate themes present in each case, and placed
them side by side as a visual, concrete way of identifying thematic commonalities and disparities. Some cases presented themes which, in the end, were anomalies, and others were rich in themes which resonated across all of the cases. A finding in one case sometimes illuminated a puzzling observation in another case. The particulars of one case might have become part of a recognizable pattern across all cases which then emerged as a superordinate theme of the study. In this example of IPA research, the particular informed the concept of the whole, and a group table of the super-ordinate themes of all the cases informed how the data answered the research question (Smith et al., 2009).

After assembling a picture of the whole, a unique step in IPA data analysis moves beyond the procedural and involves a revisiting of the particulars of a case where a certain passage in an interview transcript may gleam like a conceptual diamond and invite the researcher to pick it up for a closer, deeper evaluation. In the course of this scrutiny, layers of meaning may be uncovered which impact the understanding of the whole through this nuanced interpretation of one small section of the interview. The picture of the whole, which had been informed by an assemblage of the particulars, may be substantially modified through the deep investigation of a seemingly small detail, which, as the result of an in-depth interpretative inquiry, turns out to be the crucial piece in understanding the phenomenon under scrutiny. This interpretative step in IPA analysis, essential to the methodology, cannot be easily prescribed, but arises out of the nature of the data unique to each case. During this study, each examination and re-examination of the transcripts by the researcher yielded additional perspectives which enhanced the quality and validity of the data analysis (Smith, 2010; Smith et al., 2009).

**Ethical Considerations**

The most important ethical consideration which guided this research study was to do no
harm to the participants in the research. The concept of doing no harm is founded on the principle of respect for the research participants. Maintaining the confidentiality of the research data collected from participants was a large part of the concept of doing no harm and demonstrating respect. Strict adherence to the guidelines set forth by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Northeastern University and the IRB of Empire State College was the cornerstone of maintaining procedures during this study which protected participants from any adverse effects related to their participation. IRB review and approval was the first major step in the construction of an ethical environment for the carrying out of this research (Creswell, 2009).

Ethical research practices for this study required that participants actively and consciously decided to take part. The rights and associated protections offered to participants were be made clear at the time of recruitment into the study. Each participant reviewed the informed consent document before research activities began which explained the parameters of the study, the role of the researcher and the measures being taken to preserve confidentiality. The document assured the participant of each individual’s right to withdraw from the interview sequences at any time without consequences. Participants were told that their identities would be hidden by the assignment of pseudonyms during all phases of the data collection and analysis, and pseudonyms were self-selected by the participants before the first interview question was asked. At that time, the participants also affirmed their agreement to become part of the study while having their statement of consent recorded by the researcher. Presenting the informed consent document and obtaining affirmation of intent to enter into the research signified that the participant had all of the information required at the outset which would indicate that false promises or undue coercion were not used to persuade a participant to join the study (King, 2000).
Ethical conduct on the part of this researcher did not stop with the recruitment process, but became part of a moral code which guided all phases of the study from data collection and analysis to the reporting of results. Central questions regarding values which provided the researcher with the moral compass to make ethical decisions were: Who benefits from the research? Is there an element of reciprocity? Will the new knowledge gained help both the participant and the researcher better understand the phenomenon under investigation? and, Is there a useful application in the larger community? Through an acknowledgement of mutual benefit, a sense of transparency and trust promoted the open flow of information between researcher and participant which eliminated the need to employ coercive or deceptive practices to obtain needed information from participants. A guiding principle of this study was that research should never be conducted to benefit the researcher at the expense of participants (Creswell, 2009; King, 2000).

The ethical treatment of subjects continued even at the end of the study, when a debriefing, or member checking, third interview was offered to participants where they had the opportunity to review the data and express any need for corrections. At any time during the study, participants had the right to ask that specific data be deleted from the findings. Participants were also told that their data could not be effectively removed from the study once the research paper was published and placed into the public domain (King, 2000). For this reason, the member checking interview was an important safeguard to protect participant confidentiality and enhanced the validity of the study.

Transparency governed ethical practice in the handling and storage of data which further guaranteed that the confidentiality of participants would not be violated. Data that was collected in this study was not accessible to unauthorized individuals while being transported or stored.
Identities of participants were concealed through pseudonyms and were not apparent in data collection documents. Participants were assured that the data would be securely held, and, if they ever felt uncertain about the manner in which the data was being handled, that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without having to explain their action or suffer any repercussions (King, 2000).

Written and recorded data was stored in a locked enclosure only accessible to the researcher during analysis, and transferred to password-protected digital longer-term storage throughout the data collection and analysis phases. The data will be preserved in this manner for a variable period of time, depending upon the needs of the researcher to access the data for verification purposes in the event of questions regarding validity and to contribute to the design of future research. At the end of the study, all identifiers and data links to participant identification were destroyed to prevent possible unauthorized access by other researchers or other breaches of confidentiality (Creswell, 2009; King, 2000).

The in-depth, semi-structured interview which was at the heart of this IPA research presented unique challenges to the maintenance of confidentiality during the data collection and analysis stages of this study. As a participant reflects deeply during responses to interview questions and shares rich, detailed descriptions of their lived experiences, information revealed in the emerging data might be so particular to that participant that anonymity could be threatened. Often this result is unanticipated at the outset of the interaction, but wells up as a natural outcome of the methodology which encourages the participant to explore a profound inner world. In this study, if this condition of moving into unexpected territory began to occur during an interview, the researcher exercised the ethical obligation to be vigilant, and discussed the situation with the participant, jointly deciding on how to proceed in order that data integrity
and confidentiality could be maintained without incurring any unintended harm (Creswell, 2009; King, 2000).

Conducting in-depth interviews in the online environment presented particular threats to confidentiality arising from the essential nature of the internet, which is potentially accessible to anyone determined to break its security provisions. In addition, internet service providers may at times be compelled to monitor user accounts, further compromising confidentiality. E-mail and electronic correspondence sent through university servers may fall under the scrutiny of network administrators. The participant or researcher could accidentally share data with an unintended third party (King, 2000). All of these situations were part of the everyday risk incurred in online environments during the course of this research.

As a result of these potential threats, the responsibility of the researcher during this study was to minimize any risk to the participant to the level of harmlessness through the careful handling of data obtained through the internet by storing interactions in password-protected, cloud-based accounts, and destroying any links to participant identifiers at the conclusion of the research. In the event that an interview veered into unexpectedly sensitive territory, the researcher either moved the questioning to a more secure forum or proceeded on to another topic (King, 2000).

IPA as a methodology binds the researcher and participant in a shared dialogue, which might lead to the temptation to cross the boundary between a research relationship and a friend arrangement, especially if the participant seems to benefit from discussing personal details that arise in the course of the interviews with an interested third party, the researcher. Such extracurricular sharing might affect the validity of the research by introducing information that was not present in the interview, coloring the interviewer’s interpretation of the data. This study
placed clear limits on the nature and duration of participant-researcher interactions, and did not violate the ethics of maintaining data integrity (King, 2000).

Research conducted without integrity is an unethical use of resources and does nothing to expand the understanding of the problem under study. In many cases, falsely reported data and deliberately slanted or incomplete results might cause harm to the larger community when actions are taken based on misleading assumptions.

**Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) put forward four criteria to assist in the evaluation of the trustworthiness of qualitative studies: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

The first element in the establishment of trustworthiness is the credibility of the study, realized through a transparent process in the design and execution of the research, which is clearly demonstrated throughout in a manner that allows any other researcher or peer to follow the logical plan leading to the findings. A valid and trustworthy IPA study will have a foundation of strong data obtained primarily through skillful interviewing, with careful development of convergent and divergent themes to present a balanced description of the phenomenon being studied (Smith, 2010). Credible results will flow from a consistent adherence to the theoretical framework, the direction provided by the central research question and the careful utilization of IPA methodology throughout the interviews of participants. (Yardley, as cited in Smith et al., 2009). The credibility of this study of how adults, who have returned to college, and who have completed a bachelor’s degree, make sense of and explain their academic success, was assured through the thorough execution of every element in the research design by the researcher.

Verification of the researcher’s assertion of credibility was supported by the content of
the third interview with each participant that was scheduled at the conclusion of the study. During that interview, the researcher discussed the findings, emergent themes and sections of the individual interview transcripts with each participant to elicit comments and feedback on the accuracy of the material and its interpretation. This final interaction with the participants, known as member checking, allowed the researcher an opportunity to revisit and possibly revise any questionable areas in the research as seen through the lens of the participants, which further supported credibility through the openness to dissenting points of view (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005).

A second cornerstone in the verification of trustworthiness is the transferability of the findings of the study into a larger context beyond the parameters of the research. In IPA methodology, the transferability of the results of the study is dependent on the rich, descriptive detail arising from participant responses to the open-ended interview questions typical of IPA data collection. Participants attempt to make meaning of their experiences with the phenomenon in question in their own words, and the researcher endeavors to make sense of their accounts to gain understanding of their perception of what is occurring in their lives. (Smith et al., 2009).

In this study, the multi-layered, in-depth data obtained during the interviews and the subsequent meaning-making process formed the basis of the research findings, and became the thick description needed to establish evidence of transferability. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Other researchers, through a careful reading of the findings, were provided with sufficient data to determine the applicability of this study in their own settings, and, from the given context, decide if they could build upon the research, expanding the knowledge gained through this investigation of how adult undergraduates completed a bachelor’s degree and made sense of that success. The use of this study as a basis for further research would be additional evidence of transferability.
This research will also be seen as transferable to other situations if there some alignment with the existing related literature on the subject of adult undergraduates. Through filling a gap in that literature, by introducing new knowledge, the transferability of this research study will be confirmed if the study fits in with what has gone before, and extends beyond what is already known in a logical sequence. Readers will be able to evaluate the research and decide for themselves in the light of their own practice how transferable the research results are to their experience, within their own context. Rich and detailed data analysis consistent with IPA methodology will provide readers with the necessary information to determine the applicability of the findings across larger contexts (Smith et al., 2009).

Dependability, the third cornerstone of trustworthiness, is built upon solid research practices consistent with IPA methodology which are replicated across other studies using IPA analysis. The lengthy interviews characteristic of IPA allowed the researcher to gain large quantities of information from participants, which increased the dependability of the themes emerging from the data during interpretation. The development of strong interviewing skills by the researcher prior to beginning the study reinforced the rigor of the research, and produced dependable results consistent with the chosen methodology through skillful management of the dialogue between researcher and participant. The dependability of the study was enhanced through careful writing with a clear focus which could be easily followed by any reader, enabling a sufficient understanding of how the research contributed to the exploration of the phenomenon under investigation. The quality of the dependability aspect of the research was made apparent through the logic demonstrated in the construction and execution of the study which led to results consistent with the data rather than researcher bias or prejudice (Creswell, 2009; Smith, 2010; Smith et al., 2009; Yardley, as cited in Smith et al., 2009).
Confirmability, the fourth element in the concept of trustworthiness, arose from a rigorous adherence to the data revealed through the interviewing process. Participant responses, rather than the data as seen through the lens of researcher bias, governed and shaped the analysis and interpretation of the data. Maintaining the integrity of the data meant that other researchers would be able to confirm the validity of the research results through a comparison of the themes arising from the interviews to the final interpretation of those themes as seen in the research findings (Smith, 2010). A consistency in the match between data and interpretation, a logical interrelationship, indicated the confirmability of the study, and generated new knowledge which created insights which impacted the understanding of the primary research question: How do adults, who have returned to college, and who have completed a bachelor’s degree, make sense of and explain their academic success?

**Potential Research Bias**

The interest of this researcher in studying the lived experiences of adult undergraduates returning to college after a long absence from higher education was the result of a personal journey through the challenges and rewards of being an adult nontraditional student earning an undergraduate degree while working fifty hours per week at a full-time job. That experience has created a unique personal perspective on this problem of practice.

However, seeing the educational experience of adult students through the lens of personal lived experience raised the danger of applying a biased viewpoint to the research. Researcher enthusiasm for others to be successful in obtaining their degrees could have led to assumptions that what had worked in the case of this researcher to reach the goal of degree attainment would be transferable to study participants. Such an assumption could have caused the development of a study design that would have seriously limited the discovery of new knowledge and only
would have confirmed what the researcher already thought she knew.

Awareness of the potential for bias was the first step in overcoming the effects of possible prejudice. Designing safeguards to prevent bias from unduly affecting the study was the next step. In this research, before participant interviews began, the researcher composed a journal of the ways that her bias could affect the outcome of the interviews, and, ultimately, the research results. During the interviews, the researcher made discreet notes when she detected personal bias entering into her reaction to the participant’s narrative. When carefully reading transcripts of the interviews, the researcher referred to her field notes and annotated the transcript in order that during analysis of the data these prejudices would be noticed and neutralized through a more balanced interpretation (King, 2000; King & Horrocks, 2010; Maxwell, 2005).

Research bias in this study was overcome through a rigorous search for convergent and divergent themes in the analysis, and consideration of any data that might have disconfirmed an expected research finding. During the last interview in the series of three built into the design of this research, participants had the opportunity to comment upon research findings. Any feedback which challenged the results caused the researcher to return to the transcripts to investigate, and, if there was validity in the claim of inaccuracy or misinterpretation, the dissenting opinion was respected and results were appropriately modified (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005).

Limitations

Limitations to this study might arise from the standards used in the selection of participants, who were invited to join the study based on the criteria that they were alumni who graduated from Empire State College during the five years prior to the inception of the research, and 25 years of age or older while earning their degree. Many other characteristics, such as race, the presence of disabilities or socioeconomic background, which might have influenced how
individuals perceived or experienced success, were not considered. In order to maintain the homogeneous nature of the sample and to keep the size manageable enough to allow time for the in-depth interviews characteristic of IPA methodology, diversity was limited.

The structure and mission of Empire State College could also pose a limitation for the transferability of the results of the study. Students at Empire State are primarily adult learners. The experiences of adult students at a college populated by a majority of traditional-age students might be substantially different from the experiences of adult students at Empire State, where institutional support of adult students is expected and encouraged. Other higher education institutions, which do not focus on the needs of the nontraditional adult student population and enroll large numbers of traditional-age students, could discover that implementation of the findings of this research to be challenging within the limitations of their institutional structure and resources.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this research study was to discover how adults, who have returned to college, and who have completed a bachelor’s degree, make sense of and explain their academic success. Consistent with IPA methodology, this chapter presents an exploration of the experiences of adult students who recently graduated from Empire State College, as described by the participants in their own words, as they reflected upon the academic and personal journey which culminated in the attainment of a bachelor’s degree.

The analysis of the transcripts of the interviews with the 15 participants has identified 3 superordinate themes and 8 subthemes which emerged from the data. The table below names each superordinate theme, together with the associated subthemes. The table also breaks down the distribution of the occurrence of the subthemes among participants.

Table 1, Superordinate Themes: Emergent Subthemes, with Distribution of Occurrence among Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate: Adult students experience special challenges</th>
<th>Subthemes:</th>
<th>Occurrence:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Work/ life obstacles impede degree completion</td>
<td>15 of 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Lack of confidence in academic ability</td>
<td>14 of 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Time management challenges</td>
<td>15 of 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total for Superordinate:</strong></td>
<td><strong>15 of 15</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Superordinate: Institutional flexibility promotes success

Subthemas:  
- Flexibility of degree programs and course design 15 of 15  
- Online programs are important 11 of 15  
- A positive environment for adult undergraduates 15 of 15  

Total for Superordinate: 15 of 15

Superordinate: Supportive relationships are important to success

Subthemas:  
- Faculty/mentor support is essential 15 of 15  
- External support networks are significant 15 of 15  

Total for Superordinate: 15 of 15

Adult students experience special challenges

This superordinate theme arises from the experiences of adult students as they enter a bachelor’s degree program after many years away from college. The participants in this study all graduated from Empire State College in either 2014 or 2016, but their educational journey toward that achievement for most had begun years before. The challenges which these students encountered during the pursuit of their goal of attaining a bachelor’s degree were explored during the interviews, and from that process of making sense of their experiences, three subthemes emerged.

The first of the subthemes to be identified from the data was work/life obstacles impede degree completion. The participants had recognized how important the attainment of a bachelor’s
degree was to their personal success for a number of years, yet their many adult roles, as well as complications arising from the struggle to fulfill role responsibilities while attending college, had obstructed their progress toward that goal. The second subtheme to be identified was a lack of confidence in academic ability, a persistent influence that contributed to a sporadic enrollment pattern among these adult students. The third emergent subtheme was time management challenges which further hindered degree completion by placing the student in a stressful balancing act, straining to complete assignments while making time for other essential parts of their lives and the responsibilities inherent in maintaining family, work and community relationships. Taken together, these subthemes represented significant challenges to be overcome to reach the goal of bachelor’s degree attainment for the adult students in this study.

Work/life obstacles impede degree completion

The participants in this study of adult students returning to college after an extended absence from higher education and successfully completing their bachelor’s degree programs fit the defining characteristics of the adult nontraditional student. None had enrolled in Empire State College directly after high school. Most had taken courses at other colleges prior to enrolling at Empire. Only one participant had exclusively studied at Empire State, but his enrollment was not continuous, leaving and then returning six years later. The role of student, although important to them as a way to achieve more opportunities, both in their professional and personal lives, was secondary to their work and family roles. Yet, because attaining the bachelor’s degree was such a significant goal for these students and essential to maintaining their self-esteem, they were willing to make sacrifices and extensive adjustments to achieve the balance that would allow them to study, work and, at the same time, have space for their families and personal lives.
The age of these students when beginning at Empire State reflected another defining characteristic of the nontraditional student, who is typically 25 years of age or older at the time of initial college enrollment. Only one participant was younger than 25 when he first enrolled at Empire at age 21, although he later withdrew and did not return until he was 27. The next youngest participant was 31 when he first enrolled. Two others were in their mid-thirties, and the oldest was 62. The remaining participants in the sample, the majority, were in their forties and fifties.

The older ages of these students at the time of initial enrollment meant that they had already lived as adults for many years, and, as adults, encountered the obligations associated with adult roles that would not usually entangle younger, more traditional-aged students. All but three indicated having families with children of varying ages, as well as spouses. The majority occupied full-time jobs, ranging from police officer to teaching assistant to hospital administrator. Some worked two jobs. Others had time-consuming commutes which added hours to their workday.

The enrollment patterns of these adult students as they entered higher education were often influenced by what was happening in their family and work lives. The daily distractions of running a household while simultaneously thinking about and preparing for work would draw students off course, away from their studies. To manage the stress, adults would be tempted to enroll very part-time, or to take time off from college, especially if the educational environment was not supportive of the needs of adult students. Students who were parents often felt a sense of guilt devoting time to their studies when their children might benefit from the hours spent on schoolwork being applied to family interactions and outings.
The demands and life disruptions arising from this balancing work, family life and college often contributed to derailments along the straight track to achieving the bachelor’s degree. For many of the adult students in this study, getting back on track toward degree completion was a circuitous route travelling through stops, starts and getting lost in life along the way. Yet, despite these challenges, each of the research participants eventually reached their destination of degree completion.

Joan’s story of her meandering pathway to eventual success was typical among these adult students. She first enrolled in the local Empire State College center in Rochester, New York, at age 36, eventually dropping out. She re-enrolled fourteen years later, and graduated in June, 2014, at age 52. She described what she experienced during those intervening years, and the motivation which kept her moving toward her eventual achievement of her goal:

I enrolled in Empire State twice, and … the first time I might have been thirty-six. It was an unsuccessful attempt at Empire State at that time… I re-enrolled when I was fifty. The first time I was enrolled for about two years, not quite two years. There was a lot of turmoil in my life, and I really felt unsupported in the program that I had chosen to do, and I just gave up on it at that point, which was sad, I went through a lot of other things…I got married and had a couple of children. I homeschooled my children for five years, until they were halfway through elementary school, and then, when they were back in school, I was, like, what do I do now? I started working at the middle school as a teacher’s assistant….All of the teachers would ask why aren’t you a teacher? And I would say, I need to finish my bachelor’s. I was a teaching assistant for three years, and finally, I think when my son started high school, that’s when I went back to Empire to finish my
degree…When I came back. I think it probably took two and a half years to finish. I was taking one course at a time because I worked a full-time job and a part-time job.

During this narration of her convoluted educational journey, a tone of determination could be heard in her voice as she told of being inspired to continue on despite the obstacles in her path: “I had a goal. My goal was to be a teacher.” Her vision of what she could become transcended the routines of her two jobs and her daily life: “For me, I knew that my place was somewhere different.”

As she spoke of her resolve to achieve her dream, the sense of urgency that she had experienced was evident in the tenor of her speech, the feeling that time could be running out as she grew older, and that she needed to seize this possibly final opportunity to realize her desired role in life that would only be attainable if she could earn her bachelor’s degree. This compelling sense of urgency was not fully articulated, but was apparent when listening to the interviews, when wistful tones of voice converted into expressions of greater resolve as the interviews proceeded. This was a common thread, varying in intensity, which ran through the interviews with all of the participants.

Paul, a technical writer also of Rochester, New York, was age 49 when he first enrolled in Empire State in 2013, graduating in June, 2016. Like Joan, he experienced a similar winding route to the bachelor’s degree. His opening remarks during his initial interview in this study indicated that he had been “chipping away” at the degree since 1999. His route was complicated by a job loss which resulted in the end of the tuition reimbursement that was paying for his expensive tuition at a private area college. This forced a gap in his educational journey of seven or eight years until his new job eventually began to pay tuition reimbursement in 2011, and
enabled his subsequent enrollment at Empire State in 2013. Also, adding to the stress of seeking a new well-paying job with tuition reimbursement benefits and an affordable college which could accommodate the schedule of a full-time working adult, he had the responsibility of supporting his wife and young son.

Paul described his experience of his path toward attaining his bachelor’s degree as a process which at many times that he “thought would never end.” Despite the obstacles which he encountered, a motivation endured within him which drove him to serially persist through multiple educational environments until finally achieving his goal: “Getting that degree …it took so long to get that thing, complete it, 1999 until 2016, that's a long, long road…It seemed to me that I was never going to be able to get to the end.” Yet he continued on, convinced that for job opportunities, the welfare of his family, and his self-esteem that he must finally obtain his bachelor’s degree.

Dancer was age 45 in 2014 at the time of her enrollment at an Empire State center located a Buffalo, New York suburb. A mother of eight children at the time she agreed to participate in this study, she and her family were homeless, and she was also unemployed. Although Dancer was able to finish her degree within two years of her enrollment, graduating in August, 2016, she had followed a convoluted educational path prior to arriving at Empire State, and the challenges which she experienced while striving to earn her degree represented an extreme example of how life circumstances can impact degree attainment. She described her situation and her determination to overcome this obstacle in a resolute tone:

There was a time when I did not have a house to live in and I was in college but my family was homeless… but I kept going to school. I wanted to show my children that it doesn't matter what obstacles that you face or whatever, you can
do it. I kept going until I graduated. You know, I feel good knowing that even though I experienced this hardship and this obstacle I still had a mindset that this is going to be worth it in the end… just keep going… You are teaching your children not to quit, not to give up … It was very stressful, very emotional and I was angry at times… Sometimes it's just a struggle even completing college. Things in life happen, you have to withdraw and sometimes it takes almost a year or two, sometimes longer, to even go back or to build yourself up to go back and complete. Still, to me, from my personal experience, it was, girl, come on, just get through.

Dancer’s commitment to overcoming personal adversity to earn her bachelor’s degree arose in large part from her desire to better support her children materially, as well as to show them the value of persistence in the pursuit of life goals and in achieving eventual success.

John, a quality assurance manager at a firm in the New York City area, was age 49 when he enrolled in Empire State College in 2014. Going to college was an aspiration that had been part of his life since his teenage years, but not easily attainable for him. He arrived in the United States at age seventeen from Spain as an undocumented worker, requiring adjustments in his immigration status before he could work or attend college. Finally, after becoming a legal resident, he was able to enroll in a local community college where he earned his associate’s degree in 2006. He described the circumstances in his life at that time which impeded a straight path forward toward the bachelor’s:

I got my associate’s and did not continue with the bachelor’s. We had another kid and things were too busy with work, so I put it off and in two thousand and
fourteen, you know, I decided to finish what I had started, and so I enrolled in Empire State.

John’s determination to earn his bachelor’s degree as an adult arose from his sense of being shut out of higher education when he was younger. He commented:

I did not have an opportunity to go to college as a teenager… I went to high school in Spain. I did not have the opportunity the other kids had, you know, to go to college, and now I have to go to college as an adult…I went back to school to inspire my kids so that they can see that if their father can do it, they can do it too.

His deeply rooted longing for educational attainment, combined with a drive to give his children a positive academic role model, were the motivations that John needed to finally complete his bachelor’s degree.

A.J., a financial adviser working in New York City, was 47 years old when he enrolled in Empire State in 2014, graduating in June, 2016. He became a financial planner after a lengthy period of self-employment, where he did not need a bachelor’s degree to succeed. When A.J. left his business and decided to enter the financial services profession, he began to realize more acutely the disadvantage of not having an academic credential, and recognized a sense of personal longing for degree attainment:

I am in a profession where credentials are important. The attainment of more credentials typically equates to a more successful practice…so not having one was preventing me from actually moving forward in terms of furthering my education in my profession.

First and foremost, getting the bachelor’s degree, from that standpoint, was incredibly important. It was also important for me as an accomplishment of something that had been sort of eating at me for many, many years. I was an entrepreneur for fifteen years and
didn't feel an overwhelming need to have a degree because I was an entrepreneur and I was running a seven million dollar company with twenty-two employees and, you know, I didn't really think that a degree was going to benefit me in a lot of ways at that time, but when I transitioned out of having my own business and working more in corporate, I realized that a degree is a credential that is thought of as a basic necessity and that's why it became more important. But again, you know, the idea that I didn't complete it earlier in my life…You know, it would come up in social settings where I would be asked, AJ., where did you go to school and I always had to say, you know, I never really completed school, and that wasn't always the best answer and it wasn't always the answer that I was proud to say.

For both John and A.J., not having the bachelor’s degree nagged at their self-esteem, remaining a piece of unfinished business in their lives which drove them to persist for the sake of feeling personally complete, satisfied that they could succeed academically before the time to do so ran out.

**Lack of confidence in academic ability**

All but one of the participants in this study who returned to college after years of being in the workforce and living multiple adult roles told of a lack of confidence in their academic abilities after so much time away from the formal educational environment. Some had experienced poor academic outcomes even in high school. Their anxiety increased as they wondered if they could function within the college classroom which would place unknown demands on their rusty or inadequate skills as students. Some felt a generalized apprehension when contemplating being in school and suffered performance anxiety arising from a fear of failure and the embarrassment that would cause in front of peers and professors. Others suffered
maximum anxiety when confronting particular subjects: mathematics and writing were common triggers.

Academic anxiety played a role in the sporadic enrollment patterns of these adult students. Often, when encountering an obstacle in the classroom, some of the students were quick to attribute any problem to their own inadequacies, feeding a narrative that they were doomed to failure, and might as well drop out. The desire for the attainment of the degree, whether for personal satisfaction, professional advancement or both, lingered on, though, inspiring the participants to eventually return and, in the case of this group, graduate with bachelor’s degrees.

Mike, a police officer in Westchester County, New York, was age 31 when he began Empire State College in 2008 through the online Center for Distance Learning, graduating in June, 2016. When asked what the greatest obstacle was to his academic success, he replied, without hesitation: “Academic anxiety…you know, it never goes away.” Throughout the seven years that he worked on completing his degree, he experienced a free-floating apprehension, a fear of not being able finish, to stay the course.

Mike described his greatest challenge as an adult undergraduate student “as overcoming personal academic anxiety, which has been an issue my entire life.” He reflected upon how he was able to increase his self-confidence sufficiently to overcome his academic anxiety and eventually graduate. With a tone of self-deprecation in his voice, he said:

Probably the fact that I got tired of being an undergrad and finishing this was a major life accomplishment so just pushing myself through it and facing the issues instead of just dropping a class and trying to, you know, procrastinate.

Sarah was age 38 when she first enrolled in Empire State College at the Niagara Frontier
Center in Buffalo, New York, in 2010, graduating with her bachelor’s degree in English in 2014. A mother of four school-age children, she had always wanted to be a teacher, and her interactions with her children reinforced that desire. Prior to starting at Empire she had taken a scattering of four or five college classes, here and there, a typical pattern that befalls adult students which prolongs degree attainment, and erodes confidence as progress toward the degree seems elusive and distant.

As Sarah began her classes, she was not certain that her residual academic skills from high school were equal to the task of mastering college-level work. One evening, she found herself suddenly in a state of self-doubt, of abrupt panic, as she took a freefall into academic anxiety:

I think, it was night, after one of my first classes I took, and I was reading a story and it was the man with enormous wings and I was sitting at my dining room table reading this story, and I don’t understand the story. Why does this man have wings? I just started crying, and I'm, like, I can't do this. I don't know what the story's about and I was feeling so sorry for myself and then I went to bed and I am done, I can't, I can't do this. I can't believe I decided to go back to school and then, the next day, I woke up, I'm, like, I want to try to read the story again and I read the story again and I'm, like, oh, my gosh, I do get this, I get this!

Sarah experienced a full-blown academic panic attack, which often paralyzes adult students into inaction, and convinces them that they cannot go on, that they cannot see the way forward, that they are done and do not possess the ability or skills to go on. By stepping away, even overnight, Sarah was able to reframe her narrative, and move toward eventual degree completion with a clear vision to guide her. She displayed an innate resilience in the face of self-
doubt which contributed to her eventual success in earning her degree.

Both Mike and Sarah experienced a generalized academic anxiety. Other participants in this study were anxious about particular subjects, which could also derail degree completion if the anxiety affected performance in a particular course needed to finish a degree.

Ann, a teaching assistant at a private school in New York City for thirty years, enrolled at age 52 in Empire State in September, 2012, graduating with her bachelor’s degree in June, 2016. Before beginning at Empires State, her last college experience had been the acquisition of a few credits in 1995 at a local community college. When Ann’s mother developed a terminal illness in 2005, she urged her daughter to return to college for her bachelor’s degree, and, to honor her mother’s wish, Ann sought out a college which would be compatible with her needs and schedule.

Ann habitually experienced performance anxiety in mathematics classes, and, as she searched for an appropriate college, she was confronted by entrance examinations in math which she knew that she would fail. In 2005, she attempted a remedial math class in order to gain admission to one of the colleges, but the class was taught by novice teachers in a rote fashion that was not effective for an adult with limited and rusty math skills. She described her struggle:

I failed three times and that, like, really turned me sour, discouraged me. As hard as I tried, I just could not pass that math class, so it took me awhile to transition the loss and move on with life

Ann’s stressful experience with math anxiety in the remedial class delayed her journey toward her bachelor’s degree for seven years until a friend referred her to Empire State, where she did not face a math requirement for entrance. In that less restrictive environment she was able to relax enough to gain the perspective she needed to finish her degree.
Peppy, a long-time employee of the New York City Board of Education, entered Empire State College at age 62. Her pursuit of a bachelor’s degree had been impeded over the years by a generalized academic anxiety, complicated by a specific anxiety about writing at the college level. She finally decided to confront her lack of confidence in her academic ability because she wanted a pay raise, and attaining the bachelor’s would result in an increase in her earnings.

Peppy described the source of her anxiety:

I don’t have a lot of confidence in my academic ability…The reason I went back to school was really to make money… And I really hadn’t been a good student when I was in high school… I've been out of school a really long time and when I was in high school I was more interested in, like, you know, running after my boyfriend, having a social life.

Peppy told of a time when she felt alone with her anxiety and sought out help to cope with her fear of not being able to complete a writing assignment unassisted:

I was stressed throughout going to school, for the most part. Like, I was really stressed all the time about it, about, you know, doing well, and, you know, about completing each assignment. One time I… I was even going to, I was going to pay somebody to do a paper for me, even though I know that's wrong, but that's how bad I was thinking that I couldn't do it… Anyway, he said, I can't do that. He said, I can help you, I could teach you, but I couldn't do that for you. And, you know, that worked out for that forced me to do it myself…Really, that was the best thing he could’ve said to me.

Pappy’s experience with overcoming this challenge was a significant first step toward confronting her writing anxiety and feeling confident enough to move forward
toward the completion of her bachelor’s degree.

Karen, who was age 36 when she began at Empire State as an online student in 2012, experienced a form of academic anxiety which was not commonly encountered prior to the widespread use of computers in classrooms and online course instruction.

She recalled her online experience and the anxiety that arose from not knowing exactly what to do at the beginning, having to largely teach herself how to navigate the online coursework through trial and error. When asked to describe her greatest challenge as an adult undergraduate, she responded:

I would say, you know, when I first went to Empire, you know, learning how to do an online course, you know. I was one of those old school people that wasn't really tech savvy so just being nervous, you know, going from a community college where, you know, you're sitting in a classroom and, if you have questions or doubts, you can just simply raise your hand.

Karen learned to become more self-reliant as she adapted to the online environment and her skills increased through practice, which contributed to the confidence that she needed to overcome her anxiety and finally complete her bachelor’s.

Some of the participants in this study could trace the origins of the academic anxiety that they experienced as adult students back to specific situations in their earlier educational backgrounds and family lives prior to any exposure to higher education. A.J. recounted the beginnings of his lack of confidence in the classroom:

I wasn't a very good student in high school. And I’ll track it even further back… When I was five years old, my father passed away…I wasn't really a very good student from the onset, and I don't know if, you know, I internalized the passing
of my father in my own way, but I found it difficult to concentrate in school and I didn't do that well, kind of squeaked by. College to me was an enormous, you know, endeavor to even consider and I'm the type of person who needs to read something five times before it settles into my head… I was trying to get past the idea of whether can I really do this?

Paul suffered from a lifelong learning disability, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, (ADHD), which affected his self-confidence during his years of primary and secondary schooling, and undermined his expectation of success in college. He described how coping with ADHD created academic anxiety as he contemplated the challenges he might encounter in a higher education environment:

In my youth I had ADHD and terrible learning disabilities and even getting a C or B was just something to celebrate, so I didn't think once I became an adult that I could ever really accomplish anything successful at college. I originally went to college back when I was in my early 20s. I did ok, but then something switched on within me and I didn't know what it was… My father is a psychologist and he explained the nature of ADHD. People tend to blossom and bloom later and that was the case with me, so when I was in my 30s, I went back to college and I found that I could get As, so I became obsessed with getting an A. That was a big motivator for me. It just is reinforcement…it proves to me that I'm not stupid and it erased all of the terrible, terrible programming of my youth.

Both A.J. and Paul suffered from learning disabilities which increased their feelings of academic anxiety until they began to experience individual successes within the accommodating framework of Empire State. Step by step, their confidence in their
ability to achieve graduation grew. Their anxiety receded as the goal of degree attainment finally seemed within reach after so many years of trying.

**Time management challenges**

Time management for the participants in this study was both the challenge that they faced in making time for their studies while fulfilling all of their multiple adult roles and the actual systems that they used for accomplishing the necessary scheduling of their available hours in a way compatible with the attainment of their goals.

When asked about the greatest challenge that they experienced as adult undergraduates, some of the participants mentioned time management by name. Others described obstacles which were heavily influenced by time management issues. During their narratives, many told of the difficulties involved with deciding how to arrange the priorities of their daily lives. Some elaborated on their personal time management strategies which had facilitated their own success. A few of those strategies were carefully considered plans, while others were more free-form, created by a force of will and self-discipline which involved seizing every possible moment that the student could pry away from other activities, directing those parcels of time toward study and assignment completion.

Throughout the interviews, time management concerns, directly stated or indirectly described, emerged as a common subtheme which preoccupied every study participant. Beth, who was age 40 when she enrolled in Empire State’s Metropolitan Center in New York City in the autumn of 2014, had been away from any contact with college courses for at least fifteen years, when she had last taken a random class that did not contribute to a degree program. Beth spoke emphatically about the importance of time management to her success as she cared for two small children, maintained a household and went to school full-time: When asked about
her greatest challenge as an adult undergraduate, she replied without hesitation:

Time management was not just big, it was make or break. Finding enough time to get my reading and writing and my studying done, finding enough time to take care of my kids, finding time to go grocery shopping and finding a babysitter, yeah, that's the scheduling and the time management of all of it and that needed to happen in order for me to even just to get to class.

Angela, a hospital administrator from Westchester County, New York, was age 50 when she began as an online student at Empire State after taking some scattered courses at a local community college where she found that attending traditional classes did not fit into her busy work schedule.

As did Beth, Angela described her greatest challenge as an adult undergraduate as a struggle with time management:

My greatest challenge, I guess, would be learning to be disciplined and sticking to the schedule that I've set for myself. And not wavering from that because it's very easy to let life get in the way… oh, you've got a party you want to go to, you want to go out to a movie or hang out with the girls, and I said, I have to get this done, so even cleaning the house lots of times got pushed off.

She then told of how she managed to remain on track with her schedule:

By keeping myself locked away from any distractions in a back part of the house that was dedicated just for when I would go in there either to pay bills or do my studying. So I wouldn't be distracted by the T.V. or anybody coming in and out of the house. There wouldn't be any other distractions. I'd be able to focus totally.
Sarah, a mother of four young children, reflected upon the importance of time management in carving out a time in her home life to complete her assignments. The heart of her time management system was seizing an opportunity every day to make sure that she completed her homework, and not letting a single day slide:

The greatest challenge was: You have to set a time to do your homework. It was different when you're younger because you come home and, you know, that it is your job, just to do your homework… but when you're older, you know, you have to make dinner and make sure the house is clean and make sure you do laundry and make sure that all of the kids are taken care of, and it is the biggest challenge because there’s just so much going on. You just have to set aside the time to do your homework and not go away from it because you always have to stay right on top of it because once you stop and even miss a day, you're behind, and it is very, very difficult to catch up. I always made sure I had a set time, but again, you have your kids get sick or you get sick, you know, something happens, the car breaks down. I mean, you know, there's so many different challenges that you don't experience when you're younger..

A.J. reflected on the nature of time management within the context of the multiple roles that define the lives of adult undergraduates as they strive to attain the bachelor’s degree:

The …challenge, I think, in later years, is more responsibility at work and responsibility to care for my family. You know how it goes when you're in your forties and you have kids and you have all the complexities of life…To make time to study and stay on course and continue to push forward toward your goal can definitely be challenging… So, I think that my motivation, my way I overcame it, was a desire of mine to prove to myself I can do it.
A.J. went on to describe how the short-term strategies of time management evolved into the accomplishment of the long-term objective of achieving the goal of graduation:

I think that one of the biggest challenges for anybody who's an adult, has family and has jobs, is managing your time and setting your priorities, making this a priority, seeing it as short-term challenges that will equal a very long-term accomplishment

**Conclusions**

Each of the participants in this study experienced challenges and obstacles as they returned to college after long absences from higher education. Because they did not follow a traditional pathway of graduating from high school and then attending and completing college, complications to degree completion began to creep into the space between the goal of going back to college someday, and the realities of daily life, the exigencies of the here and now. Getting married, having children, job and community commitments were responsibilities and distractions which made returning to the student pathway problematic for an adult fully engaged in priorities which would compete with school for their attention and limited time.

As they became lost in their lives, it became more difficult to follow the bread crumb trail back to their dreams.

Some of the participants did not persist in college after high school because of significant anxiety derived from prior educational experiences. Some developed a poor self-image as academic performers, arising from insecurities in particular subject areas, such as mathematics or writing. Others were drawn off the path toward their degree by time management worries, fearing that they might not be able to balance the demands of college with the requirements of work and family. Money for tuition was sometimes an impediment.

Underlying all of these doubts often was a lack of fundamental self-confidence, a
deficiency of faith in their abilities. This uncertainty was fed by a nagging feeling that perhaps they were beyond the age to be successful in college, that they should be beyond that stage in their lives, that they should be focusing on their families and careers instead. They experienced feelings of guilt because they wanted to step outside the accepted roles appropriate for their age. Mike might have called this hesitancy “procrastination.” A.J. would have called this condition “not knowing if I could do it.” The result was the same. They delayed returning to college, sometimes for many years, as they toyed with a return, taking a sporadic course here and there.

Yet, the most important characteristic shared by these participants was, that despite obstacles and challenges, they all graduated with their bachelor’s degree. They all ultimately succeeded in reaching their goal. Another commonality was that there seemed to be a turning point among these long-term persisters when they became students at Empire State.

During the interviews, these successful students all exhibited a strong desire to succeed after so many years of waiting and self-doubt. This determination can be heard in their voices, as well as in their words. This quality of working through the obstacles to achieve the goal could be called resilience, stamina, persistence or true grit. They all shared this drive to rise above, and evidence of how they did so may be found in their individual descriptions of their experiences of being an adult undergraduate at Empire State College.

**Institutional flexibility promotes success**

Institutional flexibility promotes success is the second superordinate theme to emerge from the data. Every participant in the study, when asked what was most important to them as an adult college student, mentioned flexibility in the way that colleges schedule courses and construct degree programs. Working adults with multiple role responsibilities often cannot accommodate the more rigid scheduling of classes which takes place at colleges primarily...
designed for traditional-aged students.

Empire State College, founded in 1971 as a college to make higher education accessible to the non-traditional student, particularly working adults, developed other approaches for these students which worked in conjunction with the expanded hours for classes needed by adults and online course offerings. Essential to the institutional structure of Empire State is the system of faculty mentors which provides personalized support for each student. Upon enrollment at Empire, every student is assigned a mentor, who ideally, barring unforeseen circumstances, such as illness, transfers and incompatibility, remains with the student throughout the degree attainment process from the first semester until graduation.

The mentor assists the student in the submission of transfer credits from other institutions, as well as the writing of applications for the evaluation of prior learning acquired through life experiences outside of formal educational settings, such as verifiable college-level knowledge gained on the job. Advanced standing credits awarded through transfer and prior learning assessments (PLA) can significantly shorten the time until graduation, boosting student confidence that degree completion is possible, and contributing to the perception that the college supports academic flexibility for the benefit of its students.

The mentor also provides guidance to the student in the setting up of independent studies, often conducted with other faculty members with specific expertise in particular subject areas, for those enrolled in a degree program who prefer to direct their own learning one-on-one with a professor, working at their own pace and incorporating their own learning style. This additional flexibility of approach enables even those students with unconventional schedules who could not be accommodated by more traditional academic environments to see a pathway toward degree completion, boosting their resolve to finally achieve their goal.
Flexible degree programs, course design and access are essential

Every participant in the study, when asked why they chose Empire State over other institutions when they decided to return to college, referred to the flexibility of degree programs, course design and access to classes available at Empire. Another aspect of flexibility at the college was the ability to combine different methods of course delivery in the degree program. A transcript of a completed degree might include seminars, online courses, independent studies, prior learning assessments and transfer credits. There was no set pathway to degree attainment, opening up possibilities which had not been available to these participants in the past. Several mentioned that the rigid course structures and scheduling that they had encountered at more traditional colleges had led them to drop out, unable to accommodate their work and family responsibilities into the narrow parameters of the course scheduling at those colleges. After dropping out, many stayed out until they heard that there might be a more flexible approach to adult learners being offered at Empire State which might enable them to return and complete their degrees.

Eileen at age 59 enrolled in Empire State as the result of a conversation with a friend who had heard how accommodating the school was for adult learners. She described her experience as a student at Empire State after matriculation, and elaborated on how flexibility within the institution assisted her progress as an adult undergraduate:

Well, it certainly was challenging to work full-time and, you know, have a home life and a social life and get the work done. It was a challenge, but Empire State College made it as easy as possible. I have to say they were so accommodating, so flexible… I was able to do both independent work as well as some classroom work. I actually do better as a student when I have interaction and so I was able
to do a combination, which really helped me at times, you know, as a working adult. They had evening classes that I could take. They also have their prior learning assessment credit where you have a topic that you're knowledgeable on and you write an essay about your knowledge and how you came to have that knowledge and then you get credits for it, and I actually got nineteen PLA credits, which is a big reason why I was able to get through it in two years. And then the other part is the mentoring program that they have and I had an absolutely fabulous mentor. She was always accessible. She was supportive. She was extremely helpful, and I don't think I would have gotten through it without her.

In addition to the PLA credits, Eileen was also able to receive transfer credit for her associate’s degree earned at another college. Because there was not a single set pathway to her degree, Eileen was able to combine the course delivery methods which best suited her personal situation, a collaborative effort with the institution which recognized that flexibility was necessary to promote successful outcomes among adults immersed in multiple role responsibilities. This bolstered her confidence that she would finally graduate and inspired her to persist since the degree seemed to be within her reach.

Paul spoke of the institutional flexibility of Empire State College as the primary reason for his enrollment there:

I have to give them a lot of credit, and I didn't realize it until I got in it, is how malleable the courses are. You can pretty much construct these courses within the guidelines of New York State’s requirements for satisfying a degree. All the other colleges I looked at, even a couple of high-end colleges, are pretty much canned structures. They offer
courses and you select those courses and that's it. Empire State was just a totally
different experience. Empire State allowed me to select the classes, choose the textbook,
construct the course and it made me apply myself far more than anything that was
required of me…

Mike, the police officer whose academic anxiety had impeded the attainment of his
bachelor’s degree, felt less overwhelmed by the challenges of fitting college into his life when he
discovered the more flexible institutional structure at Empire State. The demanding and irregular
schedule at his job had made earning his degree at more traditionally configured colleges with
their tighter course designs and set class times seem out of reach.

When some of the courses offered online at Empire State in a more conventional format
seemed too basic and not sufficiently challenging for Mike, his mentor suggested a degree
program comprised of independent studies. Instructors were selected who were well-versed in
the subject matter, and conducted their interactions with Mike entirely online to allow him the
scheduling flexibility he required. Mike commented:

I didn't have to actually attend class. And it was just a lot more convenient to work
independently than having to attend classes, you know, on a weekly or a multi-weekly
basis… that's how I was able to successfully get ahead

Because of the institutional flexibility of Empire State, Mike was able to cobble together
through multiple means the requirements for his bachelor’s degree, Even though the road to
graduation took seven years, he was allowed the time that he needed, step by step. Each obstacle
that was overcome along the way helped Mike feel that he could manage his academic anxiety
and built his self-confidence with every course that was successfully completed.

Often the participants in this study experienced a sense of running out of time, a feeling
of being under pressure to complete assignments while trying to manage multiple adult roles, which generated additional stress as the students struggled to fit everything into a finite number of waking hours. Empire State’s institutional flexibility extended to giving adult students the space that they required to resolve stressful situations and to be able to ultimately succeed in completing their work. This flexibility encouraged students to remain enrolled, instead of dropping out because their lives felt unmanageable and their resources to cope seemed overwhelmed by personal, work or family complications.

Eileen went through a period during her degree program when she felt stressed and overextended. Her mentor at Empire State was understanding and offered her more time to complete her assignments. She was able to continue on with her studies despite encountering adversity because she felt supported by the college. She described her thoughts during those times which she considered to be her most challenging moments as an adult undergraduate:

One semester I took two courses plus a residency and that was a lot of work. The biggest challenge… was getting all of that work done and getting it in on time. Then I had some family issues on top of that. But, you know, in communicating with my mentor, she assured me that if I needed extra time for anything that she could certainly give that to me and the constant support and help of my mentor really helped me get through that…And, you know, that again goes along with the flexibility of the whole program. If they know that there's something extenuating going on in your life and it can impact the work that you're doing, as long as they know about that, they're willing to work with you and that's very encouraging, you know, to know that they're not, you know, drawing a line in the sand.
Online programs are important

The widespread availability of online courses and entire degree programs delivered online through Empire State’s Center of Distance Learning contributed substantially to the institutional flexibility of the college. Through the online courses, students who could not attend physical classes because of work or family schedules were given a pathway forward to degree completion through virtual classrooms and independent studies conducted online.

Three of the participants in this study were graduates of the Center for Distance Learning, and were not affiliated with any Empire State on-ground location. These students would not have been able to obtain their degrees without the flexibility provided by the Center for Distance Learning. Another student took all of her courses online, but was enrolled through a physical Empire State campus. Four others did not take any online classes. The remainder of the fifteen participants graduated by putting together a degree program combining some online classes, other methods of course delivery, PLAs and transfer credits.

Several of the participants indicated were hesitant initially to enroll in online courses. They may have shared the anxiety experienced by Karen when she began her online courses, wondering if they could cope with the technology. Most made their peace with the online process as necessary to achieve their goal, and others, after their initial period of adjustment, came to prefer the liberation from time and place constants that the online environment provided.

Karen commented upon how she adjusted to learning online and the way that she felt about that method of study after having gone through becoming accustomed to the unfamiliar technology:

Really, you just do it. It's like any other online thing you do. You have to play around with it. Once I got used to it I actually started to prefer, you know, the convenience
aspect, not having to drive, you know, physically, to school. You can just get on the computer wherever and do your work. Once the scary part was over, it actually turned out to be a positive aspect.

Dancer’s positive experiences with online programs at Empire State, which contributed to her own success, reinforced Karen’s assessment of the benefits of online study for adult students:

Empire is really geared for working people because of the flexibility of online… That really is beneficial for those who have a family or who are working… That is the ideal academic way to go, where there won't be as much straining or pressure to try to make it to class or to work or to get your children. So that is the ideal, which kind of helps to push adults to want to come and return to college. Some of them say, I haven’t been to college, I can’t go and sit, but doing the independent studies online, you could do it at your own pace.

Angela, the hospital administrator with multiple work responsibilities, described how the online program at Empire State meshed well with her personal and professional lives, and facilitated her attainment of her bachelor’s degree in 18 months while maintaining her demanding schedule and going to school full –time. She described her online experience:

I came to be a student at Empire State because of the online program and the flexibility it allowed me to fit the time to study into my schedule… My entire bachelor's degree was completely online … I found that the online program was well set up, well thought out… The professors provided video conferencing so that you could have discussions with other classmates. There was some interaction and you feel like you're connected, you know, you are not just left out on your own… When I needed assistance, it was, literally just a click away. I could send
an email to the professor, and they responded immediately… I just found that, for me, it worked very well. I was able to accommodate my personal, my business and my academic schedule. I just developed my work schedule and I knew when I had to be at the computer and doing work and when I could be out with my family.

Bob, age 27 when he enrolled at Empire State for the second time, had no choice but to attend the college through the Center for Distance Learning. At the time of his enrollment, he was in the United States Navy, stationed on an aircraft carrier based out of Norfolk, Virginia.

He dropped out of Empire State the first time in part because he found having to log in to a website in order to participate in an online classroom session to be too restrictive, difficult for him to manage when he was sometimes on duty out to sea and away from reliable internet connections when the classes were held. Yet, Bob still wanted to complete his bachelor’s degree to enhance his job prospects once he left the military and for the personal satisfaction of obtaining his degree. Bob commented: “I want to be able to hand my employer my bachelor’s and say, yes, I am a college graduate!”

A family friend who worked at Empire State persuaded him to try again. Upon his return, he encountered some of the same issues with the online courses that were delivered in a classroom format that had derailed him during his first enrollment:

One of the things that I found frustrating again was having to log into modules for classes at certain times and I wasn’t getting a lot of feedback from my professors the way I needed to be. The school ended up working with me to try to find an even a better fit, to help me graduate, to get it done. They ended up assigning me a professor that would work with me from point A to point B, point A being the
start of the next semester and point B being graduation… I could work at my own pace and get everything done… He was great at getting back to me and being able to tell me what I needed to work on. The school and its agility has been a huge plus for me.

As with Mike, the policeman whose on-duty schedule as a public servant often could not be made to conform to classroom schedules of any sort, Bob found that the online independent study format, customized to accommodate his military obligations and individual learning style, gave him the program flexibility that he required to complete his degree within 18 months.

Adviser was another adult student who was able to earn her bachelor’s largely as a result of the flexibility and accessibility of the online offerings at Empire State. A resident of New Orleans, she was age 48 when she enrolled in the Center for Distance Learning in 2014 after a friend, who was attending Empire, recommended the school as a friendly environment for adult learners. In particular, Adviser needed flexibility because, as a legally blind student who was also working, traditional college formats and schedules were not feasible for her.

As Adviser became accustomed to the online studies, she recognized that the non-traditional approach gave her the flexibility that she required to both manage her disability within the academic environment and continue working: She reflected upon her online experiences:

If you are disciplined, online study is a good choice, especially if you are juggling work or have other responsibilities…Online is another alternative for getting an education, and that is pretty neat because the student doesn’t feel like they are strapped into only one way they can learn. It does give them a choice, and it does give a little freedom of choosing which type of learning style and learning setting you learn best from.
Advisor’s online program gave her a sense of mastery and control over her academic environment which had been difficult for her to achieve at traditional colleges. Throughout her early years of schooling, the expectations for her academic success had been low because of the severity of her disability. Advisor considered the attainment of her bachelor’s degree to be, in her words, “…a way for me to prove to everyone that ever told me that I would never be able to do any academic work, or any type of worthwhile, meaningful thing, that they were wrong.” In proving herself to others, her graduation, made viable through her online studies at Empire State, also increased her self-esteem and demonstrated that she had the motivation required to overcome any obstacles to future success.

As a result of the flexible institutional structure of Empire State, the Center for Distance Learning was able to offer online programs which could match the particular learning styles and personal circumstances of each student in ways that would promote degree completion.

A positive environment for adult undergraduates

All of the participants in this study described Empire State College as offering a positive environment for adult undergraduate students seeking to complete their bachelor’s degree after an extended absence from higher education. The institutional flexibility of Empire State was mentioned by every participant as important in facilitating the attainment of their degrees. Having more than one path to degree completion removed some of the anxiety that they had previously experienced when they had tried to conform to the more restrictive schedules and requirements of the traditional colleges that many had interacted with prior to enrolling at Empire State. A supportive culture emerged from this openness to program experimentation which complemented the policies of institutional flexibility and gave adult students the
confidence that they could succeed, when, in the past, self-doubt had often obstructed their path forward toward their dreams.

A.J. described his perception of the learning and cultural environment at Empire State:

Actually, everybody was super helpful, super understanding of the challenge...a great learning environment. I think it started from the gentleman who started the college in 1971. This particular individual thought that this would be a great addition to the educational process to have working adults be able to complete their degrees. I do think that the culture that has been developed is one that is supportive of folks that have larger challenges than most college students.

Beth shared her initial feelings of being an adult undergraduate at Empire State after a long absence from both college and the workforce. She told of how the cultural and academic atmosphere at Empire State reinforced her belief that she could succeed as an adult student, and created an ideal environment for her as an adult returning to college:

Well, I feel like Empire was what I needed. I felt that I was in an academic environment that was respectful of the background and the living that an adult has done prior to ending up in an educational setting. It was a big factor for me to not show up and feel like, wow, I'm a kindergartner. You know, I'm just still getting my undergrad but that I was a respected adult regardless of my level of education. That was very important. The flexibility of class timing and availability of courses in different ways was also very helpful to me. So I would say those are the two most important things, recognizing that adult learners will likely be juggling many other things than just school and so making getting to class as easy as possible and also respecting the students as adults who have
already accomplished many things that may not fit into an educational label. Confidence was a big factor for me. I feel like I came out much more confident in my ability to learn

Sarah echoed and expanded upon Beth’s perception of the supportive environment at Empire State and the role that the culture played in promoting her success as an adult student:

So, I would say that, an ideal situation is, like, the kind of experience that Empire was. They were so willing to help you…. It was nice being able to have people who actually cared about you as an individual, not just someone that wanted, you know, oh, I just want your money and, you know, having someone who actually really cared, who wanted to see you succeed and I think that was so important as an adult learner because, you know, it's so easy to just give up because there's so much going on but if you have that network of, you know, people willing to help you and have your back and willing to care and make you feel like they really care about you, you want to succeed and you want to continue on.

Bob described his ideal experience at Empire State as being comprised of independent studies where he could set his own pace, while still having the support and guidance of a mentor. He reflected on what his academic outcome might have been at a more traditional college with less flexibility to accommodate his unique schedule and learning style:

I wouldn’t have finished. I wouldn't have finished college because the rules and regulations at most colleges are way too stringent for a person trying to be successful in their field. I mean, a lot of the time, students like myself know where they want to go and everything like that. They just don't know how to get there. To say there's only one way to get there, it's not something that is in reality because there's always more than one way to do anything … A lot of colleges, in
my experience, have not been so flexible. That's what really kind of stood out for me about Empire State, the flexibility. If you don’t like one way, then here's another path to your destination.

Conclusions

The institutional flexibility of Empire State College offered the adult students in this study degree program options that fit their work and family schedules. During some of their previous attempts at completing their degrees at more traditional colleges, they had eventually dropped out in frustration when trying to manage all of their multiple adult responsibilities and go to college too overwhelmed their resources to cope with the resulting stress. Credit for life experience gained through prior learning assessments and transfer credit acceptance gave the participants the sense that their path to the degree was measurably shorter which generated renewed confidence that they could actually reach their goal, a push toward perseverance.

The positive academic, and, by extension, social environment created by the institutional structures at Empire State encouraged degree completion by giving these participants a safe space where their doubts about themselves as adult students could be alleviated within a framework of programs which incorporated an understanding of the particular challenges of balancing work, family and personal lives while pursuing a degree. Institutional flexibility removed the stress of having to meet rigid deadlines for assignments when students, due to life circumstances or disability, required more time, and recognized that diverse learning styles among adults should be accommodated through providing multiple pathways to degree attainment. Online programs opened college participation to students who might not have otherwise been able to attend by removing the requirement of having to report to a physical classroom at a scheduled time, lessening the constraints which impeded their academic success.
Supportive relationships are important to success

Every participant in this study responded that supportive relationships, both within Empire State and among their circles of families and friends, were essential to providing them with the positive reinforcement that encouraged the confidence that they needed to achieve graduation with the bachelor’s degree. This finding emerged as the third superordinate theme of this research.

Faculty/mentor support is essential.

The concept of the faculty mentor providing support and guidance to a student is central to the Empire State model of institutional flexibility. The mentor is the gatekeeper that provides access to the multiple educational models that Empire State offers by working closely with the student and assessing, together with the mentee, the best pathway forward, and arranging the means to achieve the degree through appropriate course selection and method of delivery. The mentor’s role also includes being an academic coach, cheering the student on and encouraging self-confidence through facilitation of the degree program which demonstrates to the student that graduation is achievable. The boundaries between mentors, faculty members and even administration, are fluid. A mentor is also a faculty member, and may teach courses, as well as guide students. An administrator may step into the mentor or faculty role, usually on a temporary basis, as needed. This integration of roles encourages students to feel that support is always near.

All but one of the participants in this study indicated that the mentor who worked with them until graduation largely fulfilled the description of the role of an Empire State mentor, although, in some cases, earlier mentors had not been compatible, or had moved away, making necessary mentor reassignments. Among the students reporting a positive mentor relationship, the degree of enthusiasm varied, but they all described the mentor interaction as significant in
their achievement of success. The one participant who did not have a positive relationship with his mentor, Paul, established a good relationship with one of his professors which replaced some of what was missing in terms of support from his assigned mentor.

Eileen described her very positive relationship with her mentor:

Empire State uses mentors so every student has a faculty mentor and they are the ones that you work with to develop your degree plan and pick your courses. They're your adviser and mine was phenomenal. We just clicked right away. Whether I called or emailed her, however I needed to get in touch with her, she always got back to me within a few hours by email or, you know, if I needed to talk on the phone, she was there. I met with her in person several times to work on my degree plan, and she was, along with my husband and my best friend, the third person that if it wasn't for her, I probably, I may not have gotten through. In fact, there was a time when I changed jobs and I thought, ok, you know, I've got another job and I'm doing really well and I'm making a lot of money and do I really need the added stress of school? Maybe, maybe, I don't need to finish and so I met with her and I talked with her about it and she said, ‘Of course you have to finish’ and she went through it all with me... it gave me the incentive to keep going.

Beth told of her own positive interactions with the faculty at Empire State:

It was very different than all of my other educational experiences where I felt there was a big divide between students and faculty members. I did not feel that at Empire State. I felt very much a part of the learning community and that the faculty was accessible and interested, not only in my education, but that of my
fellow students as well. That was very welcoming. It was an exciting relationship to be in.

Beth also spoke of how important she felt that having a mentor was to her academic success:

I felt that it was really helpful for me to have a person that seemed to understand me more than just what my courses looked like on a piece of paper. The mentor thing was one of the main reasons why I did decide on Empire State, the thing that made me feel comfortable about being guided in a way that was going to be right for me. For some reason it felt very scary thinking about going back to school, so my mentor was pivotal for me.

Dancer’s mentor experience demonstrated the fluidity of roles within the institutional structure of Empire State, which reflected the cultural commitment to providing continual support to adult students who can become discouraged when they feel that needed guidance is lacking. She described the arrangements that her mentor made to assure that she would not be left without help during her absence:

When my mentor wasn't available she always had someone else lined up that I could speak to, someone we could go to so we wouldn’t have to search around for someone to help us. She wouldn’t just leave. It was set up that I would go to the dean of the school in place of my mentor. So I would go to her, and the dean was very, very helpful. Who knew that the dean of the school would be a mentor and assist me? She never threw me off. I was always able to call and get an appointment with her to help me with a paper or with choosing the classes. Most deans are active, but not in this way. The dean of the school was actually helping me with my papers!
One participant, Paul, was assigned a mentor, Frank, who, in Paul’s assessment, did not behave in a way culturally consistent with the characteristics of supportiveness and empathy identified by other participants as being typical of their Empire State mentors. In this he was an outlier, the only participant in the study who had a negative mentor experience that lasted through until graduation day. Overall, Paul had a positive view of Empire faculty. The void created by his poor relationship with his mentor was filled by another teacher who informally mentored Paul.

Paul shared his perception of the faculty at Empire State, and his evaluation of his mentor:

The faculty was pretty much a good experience. I wasn't happy with my mentor and I never expressed that to the college. I know, he smiled and I got along with him and we never argued, but I didn't learn a lot from him. I don't really know if he ever even read anything I gave him, and I would never get much of any feedback when I would meet with him. It was more him talking to you, and then, when you talked back, his gaze would wander. I don't even know if he was even listening to me. I got the sense with Frank, and I never told anybody this, is the fact, you know… I got the sense… I don't think he was very interested in meeting with the students. I think that he wanted to get what little money he got from the college and that was pretty much it…. So there was another teacher there, I loved him. Alan was his name, and he and I got along great. He would give me excellent feedback. In fact, he would sit there and read my paper in front of me when I went to hand it in and that would be part of the day's class.

Joan described the consequences of a lack of teacher feedback in the online setting based upon her experiences in taking online courses. There were instances when she felt alone as she
navigated through her assignments:

I felt isolated at times…I didn’t feel like anyone from my course was there.

When students feel that isolation, I think that's when online students drop out. If there's no one to meet with, if there's not a mentor or a professor that is immediately available, I think that people will drop out. They will drop the course and say ‘I can’t do it!’ I think it would be important to have a human contact if at all possible, either by phone or by, you know, some way to contact through available office hours, or, you know, say what times are available if a student needs to call...It's so easy on the computer to feel invisible, like no one is checking on you or no one is following up on you and so I don't have to do this. Maybe that means more interaction from a professor on a discussion post, or just checking in with a student once a week on the computer, and asking, how are you doing? Do you have questions? How is your reading going?

Joan’s mentor stepped in to give her the support that she needed to overcome the isolation that she felt in these classes, demonstrating again the academic safety net of staff working together to catch deficiencies in the college environment that might endanger student success.

**External support networks are significant**

External support networks are defined as family members, friends, work colleagues and employers, who provided supportive relationships which promoted the success of the participants in this study in achieving graduation with a bachelor’s degree who were not employed by Empire State. All of the participants told of at least one significant external relationship which facilitated their journey toward bachelor’s degree attainment.
Of the 15 participants, 14 reported that some member of their families, and, in many cases, more than one member, provided significant support. That support could be material, emotional or both in nature. Family members were considered to be a spouse, parents, siblings, children or other extended family.

Three of the fifteen reported very minimal or no support from friends. Karen and Angela told of only slight support due to work schedules which limited interactions with friends, and, in Karen’s case, the friends were not interested in knowing about academic life. Bob, stationed on an aircraft carrier which berthed in a strange city, where his wife was his only family member present, reported no support from friends, although his shipmates, his colleagues at work, were sometimes helpful in covering shifts for him when he needed to study. When friends were mentioned as being supportive, they were most often described as a cheering section to offer words of encouragement to reassure and inspire the student. Only one participant mentioned a friend who played a significant role in helping her to complete her bachelor’s degree, together with her husband and mentor at Empire State.

In the work environment, employers were most helpful to the participants by providing full or partial tuition reimbursement. Seven of the fifteen received some level of reimbursement. Karen and Bob had their degrees paid for by the military. Beyond financial support, some employers made minor adjustments to accommodate school schedules. One or two others offered minimal words of encouragement. They were not mentioned as significant sources of emotional support.

There was consistent overlap in the category of friends and work colleagues. Many friends were also work colleagues because of the large number of hours that the working participants spent at their jobs. With the additional time commitment of schoolwork added to the
already burdensome number of hours spent on the job, there was less time for relationships with ordinary friends apart from the workplace. Outings with friends were curtailed in favor of study.

One of the most significant contributions that friends and colleagues made to the success of the participants was in recommending Empire State as a college favorable to adult learners returning to higher education to complete their degrees. Ten out of the 15 participants selected Empire State based on the recommendations of friends or work colleagues. As Mike said,” I was looking to continue and finish my bachelor's and a fellow, a coworker, told me what Empire did, awarded life experience credits and that was a big draw.” Typically, the friend told the participant of some aspect of Empire State’s flexibility and accommodating attitude toward the unique needs of adult students trying to balance work, family and school.

John described his network of family, friends and colleagues, and how the support of that network contributed to the successful completion of his bachelor’s degree: 

My wife and my kids are the only family I have here. I'm an immigrant, so I have nobody else here apart from my wife and kids. The role that they played is that they encouraged me and they gave me the space and freedom that allowed me to pursue what I was doing without feeling the pressure of you are not fulfilling the family things for us and it was always thought of as a team effort as a family. I never felt like I was taking time away from my wife or neglecting my family. Neither my wife nor my kids made me feel like that.

He went on to tell how his friends, many of whom were also colleagues at work, influenced his decision to return to college:

My friends were instrumental for me to go back to school. I needed my friends to inspire me. They were the ones who advised me that there were colleges in the world with good,
flexible programs and that, yeah, you can do it!

Beth described her support network of family and friends. The role of her husband was particularly important:

Oh, they were huge. My husband was very, very supportive of me and he happened to also be my paper editor, so that was helpful, and him being understanding of getting home on time so that I could leave in time for a class if I couldn't find somebody who could to care of the kids. You know, not only did we have to spend money on my tuition, on top of my tuition there were childcare costs involved. So having him on board was really, really, really important. And my extended family was very supportive as well, which was nice but not as immediately instrumental.

Her friends were helpful in keeping her positively motivated to continue on with her studies:

They were very supportive and they were very excited for me. While not immediately impactful on my schoolwork, they were helpful because they understood when I wasn’t available for social things, or when I came stumbling into school totally exhausted from writing a paper all night. They bolstered me.

Paul’s father provided special motivation to his son, urging him to finish his degree to have better opportunities, and to fulfill the promise that his father saw within him:

My father was very much a motivator in the sense that he was always nagging me to finish the degree. Being in psychiatry, he was very close and attentive to me and towards me, and he always wanted to see me succeed. It broke his heart to see me struggle and try and just not seem to get ahead. And so, when I decided to go back to school later on, he just thought it was fantastic and then, he saw all the successes I had. Then he saw me get
laid off and I was unemployed for five-and-a-half months and he saw me get passed up for lots of jobs because I didn’t have a bachelor's. I was more than halfway through it at that point, and then he just kept hounding me over and over and you really should finish up that degree …and it was mostly that just became an echo of the voice that was already in me, that was saying, that knew, I should finish the degree, and he was a big motivator.

A.J. described the role of his family in encouraging his academic success:

Support, understanding… Especially when I am the father of three small children… I still have to balance my responsibility as a dad and my work and try to carve out time to read and do assignments. You know, when you have the support of your family and their understanding of the important goal you're trying to achieve, it is paramount, I think, to achieving the goal, because without that support, you would have added stress.…

A.J. went on to speak of the role of friends in promoting his success:

I think the role of friends was a little less important, but it's nice to have a cheering section. You know that you have people cheering you on, and understanding. They know that you've got a lot on your plate, balancing family and work and everything else, but yet you're putting in the effort to move forward, to try to accomplish the goal. I think that they play a role by saying ‘Good job!’ to cheer you on.

Conclusions

The institutional culture at Empire State was designed from its inception in 1971 to be a supportive environment for adult students returning to college after long intervals of absence from higher education. This culture ideally is embraced and practiced by every employee of Empire State. The goal is to provide uninterrupted support to students as they work to attain their degrees. Together with the institutional flexibility of degree programs which provide multiple
pathways to graduation, the mentors and faculty who facilitate access to these programs are essential to student success.

Every participant in this study was drawn to this supportive culture at Empire State, and decided to enroll because they felt more confident of being able to achieve their bachelor’s degree in a welcoming environment designed for adult students. Every participant in the study mentioned having mentors to guide them academically and faculty members who cared about their success as deciding factors in their decision to attend.

The mentors at Empire State gave the participants a safe haven academically where they could ask questions and seek help without feeling, as adults often do, that they should not be asking questions because, as adults, they should be self-sufficient. The helpful, open culture at Empire encouraged dialogue between mentor and student, and became an expected standard. When an individual mentor failed to live up to that standard, the institutional culture was such that another mentor or faculty member would step into the void, as happened with Paul, providing support to a student who needed guidance before an irreversible sense of isolation could threaten the student’s ultimate success.

Relationships external to the college, families, friends, colleagues at work, were often significant sources of support for the participants when academic work seemed overwhelming. Encouragement from others inspired the participants to want to persevere. The material support offered by family members, such as fixing dinner, gave tangible relief to a weary student who was then motivated to succeed because someone cared, and replicated the supportive atmosphere that was found at Empire State. Friends, who cheered the student on, saying you can do it, contributed to the sense of confidence that the culture at the college was also striving to build. When some of these external relationships were less supportive, more reliance was placed on the
mentor/student relationship to provide the positive impetus for the student’s success.

**Conclusion**

This study answered the central research question which guided this investigation: How do adults, who have returned to college, and who have completed a bachelor’s degree, make sense of and explain their academic success? The data was collected from 15 participants 25 years of age or older, who graduated from Empire State College with a bachelor’s degree within the last five years. Following IPA methodology interview protocol, the participants responded to twelve open-ended questions and reflected upon their experiences as adult undergraduates who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree at Empire State.

The first theme that emerged from the data acquired through the interviews is that adult students returning to college face special challenges arising from their status as adults. The adult world is not set up to be conducive to college attendance. Unlike traditional-aged college students, whose main role is to be a student, adults have many competing primary responsibilities associated with adulthood, families, jobs, and commitments in the community, which consume their time and attention.

The special challenges which impede degree completion originate in this tension between what these adult students are obligated to do, caring for their families, going to work and assisting in the community, and what they would like to do, which is going back to college to earn their bachelor’s degree. Every participant in the study indicated that difficulties in balancing their work/life obligations with college attendance was a primary cause of their inability in the past to finish their degrees, and was an obstacle which had to be overcome to enable degree completion.

Another special challenge that emerged from the interviews was the academic anxiety
experienced by 14 out of 15 of the participants. Adults returning to college after many years of absence from higher education often doubt their abilities to function effectively again as students, worrying if their skills are adequate, or if they have the resilience to cope with new educational technologies and unfamiliar coursework. These adult students many times panic when confronted with academic obstacles. Their lack of confidence leads them to conclude that they will not be successful, and often they drop out, fearing what they see as the humiliation of possible failure, fulfilling their self-prophesy and delaying indefinitely degree completion.

Every participant in the study identified time management as a particular challenge, finding the hours in the day to fulfill all of their obligations, family, work, school, without shortchanging any of them. These adult students devised many personal strategies to carve out the hours needed for schoolwork. Time management was both the problem and the solution. A perceived lack of time to complete assignments would create great stress in the participant, but identifying and implementing strategies to find the time to study could lead to a sense of empowerment and control which gave the student the confidence to persist. Not finding effective time management solutions could cause the student to feel overwhelmed by their obligations, causing them to withdraw from college, sabotaging degree completion.

The second theme to emerge from the data is that institutional flexibility promotes success. The challenges of work/life balance, academic anxiety and time management can be alleviated if the institution itself is structured to allow for accommodations which address these challenges faced by adult students. Flexible degree programs, course design and access are essential to allow students many pathways to the bachelor’s degree, which relieves the stress of having to conform to rigid academic requirements often based on the traditional student model. Adult students, because of their family and work schedules, have difficulty attending physical
classes held at set times. For this reason, 11 of the 15 participants in this study made use of the flexibility offered by online courses to be able to complete their degrees. Online courses were important to their success.

This study used Empire State College as the research site because the college has incorporated institutional flexibility into its mission and culture since its founding, and is dedicated to using that flexibility to promote adult student success in degree completion. For this reason, every participant in the research agreed that Empire State was a positive environment for adult undergraduates, and that the institution itself played an essential role in their success.

The third theme to emerge from the research data is that supportive relationships are important to student success. The challenges of work/life balance, academic anxiety and time management-related stress seem less formidable if the adult has someone whom they can count on for help and encouragement, who cares whether the student earns their degree or not and offers consistent support. Encouragement was a key word which cropped up in the interviews with all of the participants in discussions of the reasons for their success.

At Empire State, the college is set up to provide each student with a faculty mentor, who gives the students a safe space where they can come with their questions and anxieties. Adult students, because there is a societal expectation that adults should be self-sufficient and self-directed, may not ask those questions unless encouraged to do so. The student may feel isolated and overwhelmed by academic worries which can be relieved with the assistance of the mentor and other concerned faculty if the student accepts this resource. The importance of the mentor/faculty supportive relationship with the adult student in promoting degree completion was confirmed by every participant in the study.

Another important source of student support was the network of family, friends and co-
workers who cheered the student on when their resolve or confidence began to flag, when they started to doubt their ability to succeed, when the road to the degree seemed rocky and without an end. Every participant mentioned at least one supportive relationship external to the college which promoted their eventual success.

The fact that each of these participants overcame their challenges, and graduated with a bachelor’s degree after many years of trying, is significant. The one experience that each of these students shared was the culture and academic environment of Empire State College, which played a pivotal role in demonstrating to the adult students that they could finally complete their bachelor’s degrees and achieve their personal goal of being a college graduate.

The key words which repeatedly occur throughout the transcripts of the interviews are flexibility and support. In any evaluation of how the participants in this study, having returned to college and earned bachelor’s degrees, make sense of and explain their success, these two words should form a prominent focus for discussion.

These findings emerged from the detailed and in-depth interviews conducted with 15 adult student participants, graduates of Empire State College with bachelor’s degrees. The findings were replicated consistently across all of the interviews, providing evidence to support the validity of the claims. Further support for the findings can be obtained by a careful reading of direct quotes from the interviews included in this research. Over and over again, similar words, sentences and phrases emerged from the voices of the participants, to describe the phenomenon which is the subject of the research question. The researcher has been an adult undergraduate student, and, to avoid bias in the presentation of the findings, made notes on all of the transcripts to clarify points where possible bias might creep into the analysis. Finally, the interviews were reviewed with the participants, and the third interview of the series of three was a meaning-
making interview where the participants had an opportunity to comment on the completeness of the transcript, and add further information that they may have decided to include for clarity after reflecting on the answers given during the first and second interviews. These precautions and procedures assure the validity of the findings.

In the next and last chapter, these findings will be explored more completely, and recommendations for practice will be discussed.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this research study was to explore how adults, who have returned to college after extended absences from the world of higher education and then complete their bachelor’s degree, made sense of and explained their academic success. The theoretical framework which guided this study was persistence theory. Two complementary strands of persistence theory defined the direction of the research from which the findings emerged. One of these theories, Tinto’s Student Integration Model, first published in 1975, explains why students remain in college instead of deciding to drop out, especially during their first year when their transition from home to their new environment strains their ability to cope. Tinto’s work focused on the experiences of traditional-aged residential students who entered college directly after high school. According to Tinto, the persistence of this group was largely dependent upon achieving a good “fit”, or integration, between the student and the institution.

Although the Student Integration Model contained some elements which could pertain to adult students, a theory which was more specific to nontraditional students over the age of 25 arose from the work of Bean and Metzner in 1985. Their Conceptional Model of Non-traditional Undergraduate Attrition took into account the multiple variables which influence adult student persistence, such as the pressure of balancing work, family and school, which are not typically encountered by traditional-aged college students residing on campuses. Bean and Metzner discovered that adult student persistence was more influenced by a sense of academic “fit” in an institution, whereas social integration in the life of the institution was more important in determining whether the younger students remained enrolled and graduated within four years. Cabrera et al. in 1991 suggested that the Student Integration Model and Attrition Theory were, in effect, complementary theories and argued that they should be combined to create a unified
theory of persistence which would deliver a more complete understanding of why some students complete their degrees and others depart.

This qualitative study used the methodology of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to discover how the participants made sense of their experience of academic success, defined as the attainment of their bachelor’s degree, in many cases after a long journey through multiple obstacles which challenged their will to succeed. Qualitative research, which values observation over quantification of responses, offers a means to understand the experiences of participants through the medium of their own voices as they tell their stories in the research setting in a conversation with the researcher in response to open-ended interview questions (Creswell, 1998; Mertens, 2005). IPA carries this interaction one step further as the researcher attempts to make meaning of the experiences as described by the participant while the participant is also involved in trying to make sense of what has happened, to investigate and understand the phenomenon in their life which demands exploration. This is the double hermeneutic aspect characteristic of IPA, the joint meaning-making activity between researcher and participant which enables the researcher to interpret the accounts of lived experience as expressed in the participant’s own words and arrive at research findings based upon interpretations of those perceptions (Smith, 2010; Smith et al., 2009). The use of IPA methodology in this study provided the means to access the inner experiences of participants in a way that allowed the researcher to enter their perceptual worlds to acquire the raw data needed to reliably answer the question of how adult undergraduates who have earned bachelor’s degrees make sense of and explain their academic success.

The ability to discover answers to this research question paved the way to the role that this study played in updating the reservoir of knowledge concerning adult student success which
had not been substantially explored in the literature during the decades of the rapid expansion of this population as a percentage of enrollments in institutions of higher education. Donaldson and Townsend (2007) demonstrated the dearth of academic articles written about adult undergraduate students: only 1.2% of 3,219 articles in peer-reviewed journals between 1999 and 2003 concerned adults as college students, just at the time that these students were pouring into undergraduate degree programs across the country, reaching 40% of the total enrollment by 2012 (United States Department of Education, 2012). A quick scan of the references used in this study will reveal that comparatively little has been written about adult students even in the years after 2003. Placing the literature concerning adult students within a historical context, Bean and Metzner’s theory appeared in 1985, when microwave ovens were first becoming common appliances in American kitchens, and well before the mid-1990s when affordable personal computers began to transform the educational landscape. The majority of the research cited was completed prior to 2000, when most adult students still had to attend physical campuses, and little was found after 2007, when digital devices and social media began to exert increased influence on learning environments.

The consideration of historical context led to an urgent realization of the need for current research to better understand how adult students could successfully complete their bachelor’s degree in the 21st century environment. The drive for a more contemporary understanding of the challenges encountered by adult students in attaining their bachelor’s degrees guided the design and execution of this study in its search for new knowledge that could assist institutions and students alike to discover novel ways to increase success that are more relevant to the educational experiences of adult undergraduates today than those of several decades ago.

To discover the data needed to form the foundation of new knowledge concerning how
adult students understand and explain the successful completion of their bachelor’s degrees, 15
participants were recruited using purposeful sampling from a group of alumni of Empire State
College, State University of New York, who were at least 25 years of age at the time of their
graduation and had obtained their bachelor’s degree within five years of the inception of the
study. Each participant took part in three separate open-ended interviews to discover how they,
as adult undergraduates who successfully completed their degree programs, made sense of and
explained that success.

The responses to the interview questions were analyzed using IPA methodology, and
from the careful reading and rereading of the interview transcripts, three superordinate themes
emerged which were essential to discovering answers to the research question which guided this
study. These themes were described by every participant as important to understanding how
adult undergraduates successfully complete their bachelor’s degrees and made sense of that
academic success. These three superordinate themes were: *Adult students experience special
challenges, Institutional flexibility promotes success and Supportive relationships are important
to success*. Embedded within the superordinate themes were a total of eight subthemes, which
expanded upon the larger themes. These subthemes will be identified and explored in this
chapter as comparisons are made to how the findings of this study fit within the context of the
already existing literature, and the selected theoretical framework. Finally, this chapter will offer
implications for practice and recommendations for future research based upon the research
findings.

**Adult students experience special challenges**

The work of Bean and Metzner (1985), which provided some of the theoretical
underpinnings of this study, was also instrumental in identifying the unique challenges faced by
adult students as they tried to balance multiple adult responsibilities with the demands of being a student. This initial research was further expanded upon in an additional study (Metzner & Bean, 1987) undertaken on the campus of a large Midwestern commuter college using the nontraditional adult student population as participants which confirmed the 1985 findings that adult undergraduates encountered particular obstacles as a result of being adults in an educational environment which had been largely engineered to meet the needs of a much younger, traditional-aged student demographic. Even though adults were becoming more prevalent on campuses than during the 1980s, colleges and universities, in their structure, course offerings and teaching methodology often did not have a vision or strategy designed to help adult students succeed.

Bean and Metzner (1985) determined variables intrinsically present in the lives of adults which hindered academic achievement among adult undergraduates beyond the institutional challenges encountered by adults striving to find a place on campuses oriented toward the needs of traditional-aged students. Many of the variables which affected adult student persistence arose from the roles that adults assumed outside of the college environment. Unlike traditional-age students who were campus-focused and, in many cases, resided at college, adults spent the majority of their time in their communities, and, as a result of that involvement, encountered stress and distractions which younger students were not expected to experience in their more protected environments. Although achieving social integration in campus life was a primary concern and source of stress for traditional-aged students, they were largely exempt from the typical stressors which often derailed adult students in the pursuit of their degrees which developed from their involvement in multiple roles in the external community. Some examples of the many variables cited by Bean and Metzner (1985) which had a negative impact on adult
student persistence were job-related tensions, family conflicts which resulted from trying to balance domestic responsibilities with academic work and financial challenges from the strain of paying for college as well as household expenses,

Markle (2015) further explored the variables affecting adult student persistence introduced in the work of Bean & Metzner (1985) two decades earlier. She noted in the introduction to her own study of adult student attrition, involving a sample of 494 nontraditional students 25 years of age or older attending a large public university in southeastern United States, that only several studies had been conducted in the intervening years since Bean and Metzner’s work had been published in 1985 to understand why and how this population overcomes obstacles and continues on to achieve the eventual completion of their degree requirements. The paucity of literature regarding adult student retention has obscured from the view of policymakers in higher education the widespread perception among adult undergraduate students that they encounter special challenges to academic success that result from their particular status of being adult students returning to college. Without recent research findings to identify and document the obstacles faced by adult undergraduates, colleges and universities are hindered in devising institutional strategies to increase retention among this academically vulnerable population. This study was undertaken to augment the body of literature available to assist in making those policy decisions.

The participants in this research of how adults who have returned to college, and who have completed a bachelor’s degree, make sense of and explain their academic success provided, through the telling of their experiences perceptually augmented through a process of self-reflection, the evidence to support the validity of the superordinate theme: adult students experience special challenges. All 15 of the participants in the sample of 15 demonstrated,
through the recounting of their individual stories, that they had encountered special challenges as adult students which, at times, threatened the successful completion of their degree programs. The types of challenges described by participants were congruent with the variables affecting adult student persistence explored in the research of Bean and Metzner (1985, 1987) and consistent with the theoretical model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition which emerged from their work.

Three subthemes were identified during data analysis which clarified the nature of the special challenges facing adult students as well as their individual responses to those obstacles. The first subtheme to be recognized as dominant in the findings, **work/life obstacles impede degree completion**, was named by every participant in this study as an important influence on their academic lives. Although literature was meager on all areas of adult undergraduate experience, this subtheme was the most fully explored in the existing persistence studies involving adult students.

Bean and Metzner (1985) cited conflicting roles in the community, at home, in the workplace and in college as creating stress in the lives of adult students as these multiple roles extracted commitments of time which often felt excessive and difficult to prioritize since all were perceived as important. Students weighed the expected utility of attaining the bachelor’s degree and its potential for bettering their lives against the price paid in terms of the anxiety arising from their attempts to fulfill their numerous responsibilities while not shortchanging any one of them, a sometimes daunting feat. When role anxiety among these adult undergraduates exceeded the perceived benefits of persistence, dropping out might occur, especially if the financial burden of tuition was heavy and the academic environment at the college was not seen as relevant to realizing personal goals.
Markle (2015) identified this phenomenon of role overextension within the theoretical framework of role theory, which provided the basis for understanding the genesis of the anxiety which accompanies juggling multiple realms of responsibility, family, school and work, all of which demand intense commitments of time and allegiance. Male and female students may experience this role pressure in different ways predicated on how they view their primary role mission. Despite increasingly equitable divisions of labor in nurturing children between mothers and fathers in the 21st century, Markle’s research noted that many men still feel that their primary role is that of being a good provider for their families, fostering a intense devotion to success in their jobs whereas women subscribed to what Markle termed “the ideology of intensive mothering,” a lingering cultural ideal of always putting the welfare of children and the family first regardless of other obligations. Failure to do so in defiance of these internalized behavioral norms resulted in intense guilt among female adult undergraduates who were mothers. The completion of assignments and attending class was subconsciously identified as robbing time from the needs of the children, even if consciously the women recognized that attaining the bachelor’s degree would result in an improved family life for all through higher earnings and an improved home educational environment.

As in the Markle (2015) research, the participants in this study of adult undergraduates who eventually completed bachelor’s degrees at Empire State College demonstrated evidence of the stress of role conflicts affecting the trajectory of their academic journeys. One participant told of how he delayed the start of his bachelor’s program because of the birth of children and the need to earn more money for their support through working longer hours. He later described the stress that he would feel when he would stay late at his job to complete his assignments in the quiet of his office in order to have a little bit of family time on weekends, sacrificing evenings at
home with his daughters to achieve that exchange, a bargain struck between the roles of parent, employee and student to maintain the role equilibrium that he needed to move forward toward his degree.

Another participant recounted a convoluted pathway to eventual success which spread over a span of 16 years, and included several significant delays due to role conflicts arising from family obligations. She first began college during her mid-thirties, remained for two years, then dropped out because of turmoil in her life and unsupportive professors. After awhile she married, had two children, homeschooled them for five years, and, when they entered public school, eventually took a teaching assistant job. All during this time of maintaining her role of mother, and later, working mother, she felt that she was meant for something more beyond the roles which had defined her for so long. She reached an internal tipping point when the confidence that she had gained through overcoming obstacles along her way propelled her toward college and completing her degree.

Role conflicts, as delineated in the scant recent literature of adult student persistence and as demonstrated in the findings of this study, were recognized by study participants as important potential threats to degree completion. Some of the participants, a minority, did not have children or spouses. Yet, they were not exempt from role-related pressures. Other forms of role conflict existed which affected a broad range of their daily life activities. Balancing the role of student and the role of employee was a source of conflict for many of the participants in a business culture which valued professional commitment as measured by spending long hours on the job.

Even though further education and attaining a college degree typically has been seen by employees as a plus in facilitating job advancement, none of the participants in this study told of any personal interest expressed by employers, beyond an occasional perfunctory comment,
regarding their educational progress. Tuition reimbursement offered by some employers, and occasionally being flexible in employee scheduling to accommodate attending a class, were the extents of the support experienced by participants while on the job. Tuition reimbursement, when available, provided significant financial assistance, but, as a corporate benefit, could not be used as a gauge to measure the attitudes of individual supervisors toward employees who might be balancing school and work obligations, taking hours that could have been used for an expanded role at work to make time for classes and doing assignments. Considering the level of apparent employer disinterest in the educational success of individual employees in their workplaces, the adult students participating in this study might have had good reason to feel in jeopardy on their jobs if the role of student cut too deeply into the role of employee, creating a unique form of role anxiety which might prompt a decision to abandon college in favor of moving those hours toward an expanded role at work.

Employer apathy toward the academic achievement of adult students in their employ was an unexpected finding, and, because of the small sample size, may be an anomaly that requires further investigation to determine if employer indifference has a substantial negative impact on employee persistence in degree programs. Looking back through what was encountered during a review of the literature which laid the groundwork for this study, no evidence of academic research into this specific topic was found in the sources referenced.

*Lack of confidence in academic ability* was the second subtheme associated with the superordinate *adult students experience special challenges* finding, and was identified as a significant obstacle to degree attainment by 14 of the 15 participants in this study. In the searches conducted of the existing literature as preparatory background for this research, the problem of lack of confidence in academic ability adversely affecting the performance of adult
undergraduates in their coursework was referenced only as part of larger, infrequent discussions of prior negative high school experiences in preparation for the transition to college. Bean and Metzner (1985), as part of the literature review for their study of nontraditional undergraduate attrition, cited some earlier studies which had indicated that performance in high school, consisting of grade point average, class rank, and scores on standardized tests, was the strongest predictor of eventual graduation from college. Bean and Metzner, while inclined to accept the results of those studies, also noted that not enough research had been done on older students to validate the findings which linked high school achievement to college success among that age group.

Participants in this current study who identified academic anxiety as a significant obstacle to degree completion recounted that their lack of confidence often originated in their pre-secondary and high school years, long before any attempts to enter college. One said that academic anxiety had been an ongoing problem throughout his educational career. Another mentioned ADHD as a significant barrier to early academic success. Still another described problems in his elementary school days that seemed to indicate that a learning disability, compounded by the emotional trauma of the death of his father, had interfered with his progress and resulted in poor grades. A serious accident experienced during high school years prevented another from attending classes on campus and caused her to fall behind in mathematics. All of the stories, told by participants to explain the origins of their academic anxiety, tend to support the literature that identifies poor prior academic performance as contributing to a lack of persistence among adult students when they return to college after many years away from formal education.
Kasworm and Pike (1994) identify the intervals between episodes of college attendance, the stopping out behavior common among adult students who may drop out periodically and later return, as problematic and contributing to possible permanent dropping out later on. Spanard (1990) noted that the longer the absence from college between intervals, the less likely an adult student will be to re-enroll and ultimately graduate. The interruptions in continuity can perpetuate a perception among adult students that the pathway to the degree is long and filled with obstacles. Transfers between colleges can result in some courses needing to be repeated to fulfill new requirements at a different institution. During the gaps in enrollment, the skills required to be a successful student may weaken through lack of practice. With each departure and subsequent return to college, adult students have reason to experience heightened levels of academic anxiety which might cause still another instance of dropping out.

Kasworm and Pike (1994) also reported that inadequate levels of college preparatory courses in high school, coupled with rusty academic skills resulting from delayed entry into college after high school, contribute to erratic patterns of college enrollment among adult undergraduates. In this context, a increased sense academic anxiety among adults returning to college could be an expected response as they sometimes struggle with courses that tax their suboptimal skills and challenge their will to persist. Not explored in the literature is how academic anxiety might also be based on a fear of personal failure among individual students in reaction to their awareness that they are not fully prepared for college work.

All of the participants in this study of how adult undergraduates successfully complete bachelor’s degrees and make meaning of that experience were students who followed a very convoluted path toward graduation. All had stopped in and out of college degree programs, going to school in episodes of attendance. Several required fifteen years or more to complete their
degrees, from the time that they enrolled at their first college until the time that they graduated from Empire State. In this respect, they are typical of the adult students described in the literature. The difference is that all of the participants in this research had finally obtained their degrees.

The review of the literature conducted for this study did not discover any scholarly articles written about the effects of academic anxiety on adult student persistence. Inferences are drawn from the academic literature cited and referenced in this research, but specific inquiries into the question have not yet been encountered. The lack of a dedicated study regarding this phenomenon is a significant gap in the literature. This study contributes to an understanding of the impact of anxiety and lack of confidence on adult student academic performance and eventual success.

As part of the investigation of the larger question of how adult students who earn bachelor’s degrees make sense of their academic achievement, the use of IPA methodology and the extended, in-depth interviews that are characteristic of IPA encouraged the participants to describe their experiences and perceptions in their own words, which may have elicited more detailed responses regarding feelings of academic anxiety, fear of potential failure and lack of confidence in academic settings. Multiple studies using methodologies other than IPA may have missed discovering the widespread incidence of academic anxiety among adult students because the methodology employed in the research may not have asked questions in a way that allowed data-rich responses to emerge. In this study, the themes of academic anxiety and lack of confidence in academic performance recurred throughout the interviews and the prevalence of such feelings were a significant finding that became obvious as an emergent theme during data analysis.
The third subtheme arising from the superordinate *adult students experience special challenges* pertains to *time management challenges* that must be confronted to find the time to accommodate all of the busy roles in the life of an adult student. Every participant in this study cited that time management pressures created a significant challenge to degree completion. In the literature of adult undergraduate persistence, researchers recognized that adult students often felt stress trying to fit all of the demands of school, family and work into every day, and that failing to achieve that balance might cause the student to question whether a college degree was worth the sacrifice in other areas of their lives. Adult students might conduct a cost-benefit analysis as they weigh all of the factors that figure into the actual cost of college attendance, the personal, work and family time sacrificed in pursuit of the degree, plus the monetary costs of tuition and related expenses, against the perceived, potential benefit to earnings and self-esteem resulting from attaining the bachelor’s (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Spanard, 1990). If the equation showed that the sacrifice exceeded the gain, the adult student might cut their losses and withdraw from school. The student puts time and money into the institution of higher education to obtain the expected output of academic and cultural benefits from the institution as returns on the student’s investment, culminating in degree attainment (Spanard, 1990).

The institution bears significant responsibility in convincing adult students to persist through the delivery of services which exceed student expectations and allow them to achieve their degrees through programs which minimize the stress felt by adults as they try to find the time required to manage their many roles. A discussion of how the institution can play a major part in tipping a student’s cost-benefit analysis in favor of retention will follow in the next section under the superordinate theme *institutional flexibility promotes success.*
As with the subtheme involving academic anxiety, the literature pertaining to time management challenges does not focus wholly on that obstacle (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kasworm, 2005; Kasworm & Pike, 1994; Lundberg, 2003; Markle, 2015; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Spanard, 1990). References to the stress among adult students of managing time to accommodate multiple priorities are embedded as sections in research articles exploring the larger questions of adult student persistence. No research was encountered which wholly was dedicated to the effects of time stress on adult student retention, and how students and institutions can work together to alleviate that stress to increase graduation rates among adults. This study fills a gap in the literature through the in-depth interviews with adult students who successfully managed their schedules to find time to study, work and interact with family and friends. The participants shared their individual strategies and feelings about time pressures, offering knowledge of how they overcame this obstacle to achieve graduation.

A key part of their strategies which emerged from the interviews was a determination to place their academic work at the forefront of their time management priorities, choosing to study and do assignments after all vital tasks were completed and forgoing optimal leisure activities that would eat away at study time. Participants also described delegating household tasks to spouses and older children in order to have more time for schoolwork. Others took their study materials with them wherever they went to squeeze in a few moments of work. Still others retreated to isolated rooms and office spaces to have a peaceful place to study away from the chaos of daily life. Whatever their strategies, which varied by individual, they focused single-mindedly on their academic work.

A sense emerged from the interviews, a feeling not verbally articulated but picked up upon through their inflections and tone, that the participants, as older students, felt an urgency to
finally get their degrees after years of wandering about academically in order to achieve their dreams before they became too old to benefit professionally from the credential. For others, receiving the bachelor’s degree became a crisis of self-esteem. They had been trying for so long for the bachelor’s that not to graduate ever after so much effort spread over years became personally unacceptable. Still others wanted to provide a good educational role model for their children, and did not want to feel inadequate in front of family members and friends who had college degrees.

To achieve their educational goals, the participants in this study actively selected uses of their time which moved them closer to degree attainment, and eliminated or de-emphasized activities which interfered. Ponton et al. (2005) told of a similar prioritizing process among adults in his research who saw themselves as lifelong learners, but did not always choose learning activities over non-learning activities when presented with discretionary time free of other obligations. The participants in his study experienced higher self-esteem when they engaged in learning activities which reinforced their self-image of being lifelong learners, rather than spending time on diversions or tasks that did not enrich their lives beyond the moment.

Participants in this research into how adult undergraduates describe and explain their success in earning their bachelor’s degree in the face of many challenges told of viewing time management as essentially the action of making degree attainment a priority, and seeing the short-term obstacles from the perspective of the long-term achievement of the degree. Actively choosing uses of time that advanced their goals improved self-esteem among participants and increased confidence that they were in control of their educational destinies, and could, in fact, persevere.
The participants in this study exhibited what Markle (2015) termed “a will to persist,” an internal force which could not be measured but could be clearly seen in behaviors and results. Beyond this mention in Markle’s research, the literature investigating adult student persistence did not directly address a drive to persist as a reason for persistence, perhaps because the manifestation of the phenomenon occurred differently in each individual and could not be neatly labeled. Some of the elements that made up that “will to persist” were discussed episodically in the literature. For example, Deutsch and Schmertz (2011) mentioned the drive to be a good role model for children as one of the motivations that worked in favor of persistence. However, no study was found during this research that fully explored the development of the “will to persist” in adult undergraduates, and how colleges and universities might encourage and support the growth of those intense feelings as a resource to increase degree attainment at their institutions. A significant finding in this study of how adult undergraduates successfully completed their bachelor’s and describe that success is that the participants all attributed their enrollment in Empire State College, after years spent struggling to overcome obstacles to graduation, as the starting point in their turnaround.

**Institutional flexibility promotes success**

The second superordinate theme to emerge from the analysis of the interview transcripts was *institutional flexibility promotes success*. Two closely related subthemes also emerged which are complementary and also clarify the overarching superordinate. These subthemes are:

*flexibility of degree programs and course design* and *a positive environment for adult undergraduates*. Every participant in the study directly linked *flexibility of degree programs and course design* to the creation of *a positive environment for adult undergraduates*. For this reason, these two subthemes will be discussed together as they relate to the superordinate and the
literature. A third subtheme, *online programs are important*, will be discussed separately as an important subset of flexibility.

The notable aspect of this finding of *institutional flexibility promotes success* is that, according to the existing literature, the relationship of the adult undergraduate to the educational institution, the college or university, is not expected to be as important to adult student success as the institution is to traditional -aged undergraduate student success. Much has been written about the significance of institutional fit and social integration as driving forces in determining whether 18-24 year -old students persevere beyond their crucial freshman year when their relationship to the their new environment is being formed (Tinto, 1988).

Adult undergraduates, who did not live on campus and were rooted instead in the community, were expected to be more influenced by their lives and roles in that external world, and less shaped by their relationship to the educational institution as an entity. Bean and Metzner (1985) found that academic integration, how well the school meets the academic needs and expectations of adult students, rather than social integration, was more important to the persistence of those students since they attend college primarily for academic reasons. Social integration was a secondary concern for most adult students because they had already established social networks outside of college, and the limited number of hours that they spent on campus lessened their opportunities for social engagement with other students, extracurricular activities and faculty.

To clarify, the institutional flexibility named by the participants in this study as being important to their eventual success, was a combination of both academic and social integration in the institution. In this case, the institution, Empire State College, from its founding days, was designed as a new educational ecosystem to meet the particular needs of adult students and to
support their persistence to graduation. Faculty and staff were to interact with students with that goal in mind. The program of faculty mentors offered both academic and social support to the adult student as they navigated the uncertainty associated with returning to college. Degree programs were made flexible to accommodate different learning styles and scheduling requirements. The institution, beyond being a collection of brick-and-mortar campuses scattered across New York State, became a conceptual structure, a culture, a manifestation of an educational philosophy that recognized that adult students experience special challenges, and that the institution has a responsibility to those students to help achieve academic success through curriculum, degree programs and staff support. In this way, the sense of institutional commitment, described by Tinto (1988) as an antidote to student intention to depart from college, was enhanced. The adult students in this study decided to persist in part because they felt that the institution was providing them with the means to be successful, and, under those circumstances, to continue on became a positive investment of time and effort, and, significantly, finally seemed possible after many years of struggling to attain their degrees. All of the participants indicated in the interviews that the positive environment for adult undergraduates at Empire State played a decisive role in the completion of their bachelor’s degrees.

A significant part of the creation of that positive environment for adult students was the understanding shown by Empire State faculty and administration when interacting with students who were struggling with a personal or family crisis and needed more time to complete assignments. They never drew a line in the sand, as one student recounted, but worked with the individual to find a reasonable accommodation. Other students noted that, in classroom situations, instructors treated adult students with respect, as peers, mindful of the fact that the students were older adults who had experiences and competencies already in their sometimes
lengthy resumes, and could be tapped as a knowledgeable resource to enrich classroom discussions. Knowing that Empire State faculty understood the special challenges that arose from the very condition of being an adult beset with multiple responsibilities who was intent on earning a bachelor’s degree gave the adult students the self-confidence that they needed to persist, knowing that the institution was not adversarial but supportive in meeting their needs for flexibility.

In the review of the literature related to the superordinate theme, institutional flexibility promotes success, very little was found that could illuminate these findings from another perspective. Steltenpohl and Shipton (1986), two instructors at Empire State, conducted a study during the mid-1980s which confirmed that the core values of the college regarding the instruction of adult students were present in practice over three decades ago, and in this current study there is confirmation of the continuity of educational philosophy and institutional identity as exhibited in the lived experiences of the current participants. Markle (2015) reported that the adult students who participated in her research expressed a desire to be treated respectfully as adults by their instructors, have more flexibility in course offerings, receive recognition that adult students face unique obstacles and should be accommodated as needed when family crises occur, as well as other benefits that are routinely available at Empire State. Markle’s findings validate the premise that adult students have similar concerns, and suggest that the institutional support strategy developed at Empire State to promote adult student persistence could be transferrable to other institutions with large populations of adult students, such as Markle’s.

All of the participants in this study of how adult undergraduates successfully completed bachelor’s degree programs acknowledged that the flexibility of degree programs and course design at Empire State played a large role in promoting their ability to graduate by making
accommodations in coursework to fit their unique schedules and learning styles an institutional policy. At Empire State, there were many pathways to degree completion, and, as one participant commented, if first way did not work out for the individual student, there was always another to try.

A linchpin of the flexibility of course design and degree programs offered was identified in the third subtheme *online programs are important*. Taking courses online freed adult students from the constraints of time and place in planning their degree programs. Eleven of the 15 participants in this study found online course offerings essential to their ability to proceed. After long days of managing the multiple roles of work and personal life, these participants recognized that online coursework, accessible from any place with internet service, removed a layer of stress from being an adult student, and made their persistence until graduation more likely.

The review of the literature conducted to begin this study revealed that very little has been written concerning the experiences of adult undergraduates with online learning, in contrast to the ubiquity of such courses in the offerings of institutions of higher education, both large and small, throughout the United States. Rovai (2003) cited studies that showed persistence among online students to be 10-50 percent lower than the completion rates among students taking courses in traditional formats, underscoring the need for a more comprehensive focus on the particular needs of adult students as they transition to, what may be for them, an unfamiliar way of learning.

Rovai (2003) described the pedagogy of online courses as being rooted in the larger purview of self-directed learning, which, for adult students with limited experience in online coursework, should not mean unsupervised or minimally regulated learning. Adult students
engaged in learning from a distance need to feel that they are part of the larger institution, a community, and not laboring in isolation, especially when they encounter difficulties along the way that cause them to consider dropping out. Rovai (2003) suggested that adult students in online courses receive special outreach from the college to draw them into feeling that they have the institutional resources available to help them confront any challenges that they might experience during their adjustment to online learning. After the initial phase of familiarization, adult students require the continuing participation of their instructors and others in the class to maintain a sense of connectedness to the institution which encourages their will to persist, because the larger community cares about their success.

The perceptions of the participants in this study support Rovai’s views on how best to promote persistence among online adult students. One participant commented that she had sometimes felt isolated during online coursework, but knowing that she could contact her mentor, even if the instructor was unavailable, made her feel secure in her ability to persevere. She noted that online students often feel invisible, but regular interactions with the instructor and other students can replicate some of the give and take present in traditional classrooms and reassure the adult student that they can persist in the online environment, that help is only a click or phone call away.

**Supportive relationships are important to success**

The third superordinate theme to emerge from this study, *supportive relationships are important*, was a dominant thread running through the interview data from all of the participants. Two subthemes were present within the superordinate: *faculty/mentor support is essential* and *external support networks are significant*. Every participant in the study responded that supportive relationships, both within Empire State and external to the college, were essential to
providing the encouragement that they needed to bolster their confidence that they could finally obtain their bachelor’s degrees and overcome any remaining obstacles to success.

In the institutional model of Empire State, the role of the faculty mentor in providing support and guidance to the adult student returning to college is central to the degree planning process. Together with the student, the courses needed to complete the degree are selected, and the manner of course delivery is determined. Key to the educational philosophy of Empire State is the concept of self-directed learning among adult students. In the interpretation of self-directed learning suggested by Brookfield (1984), Chene (1983) and Garrison (1994, 1997), when the adult student is able to have some control over the design of the course of study in collaboration with the instructor or mentor, and the resulting learning plan satisfies the educational objectives of the individual, the personal utility of the learning for the student will be reinforced and the student will be more likely to persist. Through the creation of their degree programs, adult students gain confidence in their ability to ultimately graduate, for they are active in directing the process. Chene (1983) cautioned that not every student may be ready to assume a lead role in planning their degrees. In those cases, the mentor becomes a more important source of support and encouragement for the student until they gain the necessary confidence and self-knowledge.

Every participant in this study but one had a positive relationship with their mentors. Even that one student who reported the negative encounter had an overall positive experience with the mentors and faculty at Empire State, for others stepped in to provide the support that he did not get from his assigned mentor. Although the concept of the mentor is an important component of the culture of the college, the mentor is not an independent influence, but, rather, an integral part of the whole institutional commitment at Empire State of providing a flexible and positive environment for adult students returning to college where they can gain the confidence
and resources that they need to achieve their degrees. Because in this study mentors were part of a larger discussion of a particular organizational culture and its impact upon students, the literature review did not include an extensive investigation of mentoring approaches and practices. Indeed, the significance of the Empire State mentor to participants was, in fact, uncovered as a finding of this research.

Classmates and other staff apart from mentors and faculty were not described by participants as a significant source of support. Interactions with administrators, although positive when they occurred, were episodic. Most of the participants in this study completed their degrees through independent studies or online, which limited or eliminated face-to-face interactions with other students. The casual supportive relationships which develop in physical classrooms among classmates only occurred irregularly when a student was able to enroll in an occasional seminar or on-ground course. Empire State campuses are widely scattered geographically across the state of New York, and vary significantly in size and scope, which can also impact opportunities to engage with peers and administrators. For these reasons, interactions with mentors and faculty may have increased in importance,

The second subtheme to emerge from the superordinate, external support networks are significant, was supported by data present in all of the participant interviews. Every participant cited at least one external relationship which was a source of encouragement and support when they encountered obstacles along the way toward achieving the bachelor’s degree. External relationships were defined as family members, friends, work colleagues and employers. Of all of these relationships, family members provided the most consistent and sustained support. Several of the women among the participants told of supportive husbands who would assume cooking, childcare and household duties in order to give the spouse the time that she needed to complete
her assignments. Older children offered similar material support. One of the participants described the support given to him by his immediate family as a team effort to help him to achieve his degree which would benefit them all. Only one participant reported that a friendship had a significant impact on her degree completion. A majority of the participants said that friends and colleagues at work were primarily a cheering section, but played a part in persistence because they became more motivated when they knew that others were interested in their success. As noted earlier, employers, beyond sometimes offering tuition reimbursement and an occasional casual word of encouragement, were the least supportive.

This study provides a needed update to the literature on this topic. Bean and Metzner (1985) reported that, at the time of their development of attrition theory, a lack of research directly investigating the effects of various external relationships on adult student persistence. That lack of research, noted decades ago, still was the case at the conclusion of this study in 2018. Some research had been done over the years among traditional-aged student populations on residential college campuses, indicating that parental encouragement was a significant determinant of persistence levels, and that friends on campus could influence departure decisions. Since most traditional-aged college students do not have spouses or children, there is little opportunity to acquire information about the effects of those relationships on persistence arising from studies conducted on younger age groups.

Evidence to support Schlossberg’s theory of college students’ mattering and marginality was offered by this study. Two of the superordinate themes among the findings were institutional flexibility promotes success and supportive relationships are important to success. Schlossberg (1989) proposed that a sense of not mattering to the institution could prevent the formation of institutional commitment which might ultimately interfere with persistence. Her research was
conducted using first-year traditional-aged college students, but the results could seemingly apply to adult students returning to college after many years away who might experience similar anxieties upon their resumption of classes as younger students would. The participants in this study stated during their interviews that the positive environment toward adult students encountered at Empire State and the support that they received from faculty and mentors was instrumental in creating a sense of mattering to the college, a feeling that the institution cared about their success, which inspired a will to persist that resulted in the completion of their degree programs.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study answered the primary research question which guided this investigation: How do adults, who have returned to college, and who have completed a bachelor’s degree, make sense of and explain their academic success? The 15 participants in the study, all graduates of Empire State College with a bachelor’s degree within the last five years and over 25 years old, answered 12 open-ended questions, in their own words, describing their lived experiences as adult undergraduates following IPA interview protocol. The results were remarkable, for most research on adult undergraduate students in the past was conducted by researchers who collected data using more traditional research methods, and published their findings as a report, using quotes from participants in an extremely limited fashion, if at all.

Giancola et al. (2009), frustrated by research on adult student persistence which was largely outdated and, even then, over two decades old, called for “a qualitative study that gathers student stories and experiences” (p. 260). This research is that study that Giancola et al. (2009) hoped for.
The first superordinate theme that emerged from the data analysis concerned the special obstacles and challenges encountered by adult students in pursuit of their bachelor’s degree. The second and third superordinate themes explored the means to overcome those obstacles and persist until graduating. What follows in the next section are recommendations for practice based on the new knowledge obtained from the findings of this study.

**Recommendations for Practice**

This study of how adult undergraduates complete their bachelor’s degrees and explain their success was conducted using Empire State College as the research site, an institution whose mission is to help adult students, especially those resuming their educations after being in the workforce, make an easy transition back to college. Some of the recommendations discussed here may arise out of practices developed at Empire State which can be adapted, in whole or in part, to any institution with large populations of adult or online students:

**Create a committee to investigate the needs of adult students**

At institutions with a significant population of adult students, create a committee of all stakeholders to identify obstacles which might impede adult student persistence. Stakeholders would include representatives from the administration, faculty and, most prominently, the adult students themselves, in addition to any others who might have a legitimate reason to become involved. The first task of this committee will be to raise awareness that adult students do experience special challenges in pursuit of their degrees. Subsequent tasks would focus on alleviating those challenges. The committee would be ongoing.

**Set up adult student resource centers with online access**

Establish support centers for adult students to reduce the sense of marginality that they might feel when searching for student services on an intergenerational campus with mixed
populations of younger and older students. The center would be a one-stop resource where adult students could seek financial aid information, counseling services to assist in their transition back to college, and assessments of academic skills which could lead to referrals to obtain extra help. The center could become a social center as well where adult students would congregate and mix with other students or faculty. Career services could hold information sessions on job opportunities for graduates. Seminars could set up on topics such as organizing study time or conducting research. This center would be open nights and weekends to accommodate the schedules of adult learners, and an online version of the resources would be created for 24 hour access. The size and scope of operation could be tailored according to the space and budget limitations of the individual institution, as well the numbers of adult students enrolled. The resource center would be fluid enough to respond to changing needs as required or requested.

**Special forums for online students**

Set up forums for online students to engage in discussions on pertinent topics proposed by both students and instructors to build a sense of community and reduce the isolation of online studies. These forums could either be part of a course or initiated to informally discuss academic topics of interest to the participants. Instructors should build a culture of delivering rapid responses to student questions or concerns, and, if an instructor is going to be away, a system of back-up responders should be established in order that online students may obtain the help that they need, even if their own instructor is unavailable. This will reduce the online student’s sense of being “invisible” and not mattering to the institution.

**Set up special activities targeted to engage adult students**

Set up on-campus residencies for online students to increase institutional commitment if they live far from the college. For those living close enough to attend events on campus, send out
online invitations to special events which might be of interest to adult students, including the driving instructions and contact information to encourage attendance.

**Pre-admission testing to identify academically vulnerable adult students**

Evaluate new adult students to identify those who might need intensive assistance in the transition back to college. Provide a class for those who would most benefit based on the assessments given at the time of admission. See the description on page 64 of such a transition class (Steltenpohl & Shipton, 1989). The course would also be available in an online format through videoconferencing.

**Create a mentoring program based on the Empire State model**

Although it might be challenging to adopt the entire Empire State mentoring model to an institution with a different structure and a student body not entirely composed of adult learners, a modified program which would provide a faculty mentor to support academically vulnerable adult students at the start of their return to college might be a feasible place to begin. Faculty mentors could be supplemented by graduate student volunteers.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

As determined in this study, the literature pertaining to adult student persistence is outdated and sparse. There are many opportunities to contribute to a comprehensive overhaul of the knowledge available to help policymakers and practitioners make more informed decisions regarding strategies to promote adult students success.

Three particular areas for further research were identified in this study:

- the impact of academic anxiety on adult student persistence
- the challenges encountered by online adult students
- the effects of employer attitude on adult student persistence
Another potential area for future research would be to revisit the participants in this study in five or ten years, to determine if the strategies used to successfully complete their bachelor’s degrees helped them overcome other obstacles in their lives. Is the will to persist a transferrable quality applicable to achieving success in other situations? Has that will endured? Did attaining the degree have the desired impact on their lives?
Appendix A - Letter of Intent

Subject Line: Nancy Sweeney, alumna of Empire State, requests your participation

Dear ______________,

My name is Nancy Sweeney. I am currently a student in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University, Boston, MA. I began my journey as an adult student at Empire State, earning my associate’s degree, and from there I continued on to where I am today, thanks in large part to the positive values and confidence that I gained as a result of my experience at Empire State.

I am now developing a study for my doctoral dissertation and I would like to invite you to participate in this research project. As you are aware, the challenge of being an adult student trying to balance home, job and school can sometimes be overwhelming, yet you found a way to rise above those challenges and graduate with your bachelor’s degree or very soon will graduate.

My study will focus on how adults, who many times have returned to college after years in the workforce or other endeavor and achieved their bachelor’s degree, make sense of and explain their academic success. The insights gained through this study may help in the design of programs and support services which will result in even more adult students attaining their bachelor’s degree. You, as a successful student as defined by completing your degree, are in a unique position to contribute significantly to the findings of this research through the sharing of your experiences as an adult undergraduate at Empire State.

If you decide to accept this invitation to join in this study, your participation will take the form of engaging in three separate interviews, which I will conduct with you either in person or remotely, via telephone or videoconferencing, at your convenience. The total combined time commitment for the interviews is approximately two to three hours. Interviews can be done either in person at a location you choose, or via web conferencing.

After the completion of the third interview, you will receive a $15 Dunkin’ Donuts gift card as a thank you for sharing your experiences.

Participation in this study is voluntary: you may discontinue your involvement at any time without consequences. All information acquired during the interviews is kept confidential, and your identity will be protected through the use of a pseudonym throughout the process, including in any public reports of the findings.

If you decide to volunteer to join the study, please e-mail me at sweeney.na@husky.neu.edu, or call 845-336-5267, and provide your name, phone number and preferred e-mail address, as well as the best time and method to contact you. I will then be in touch to discuss the research in more detail and to answer your questions prior to setting up any interviews.

Thank you for taking the time to consider becoming a participant in this study.

Sincerely,
Appendix B
UNSIGNED CONSENT DOCUMENT
Northeastern University, Department of Education, Doctor of Education program

Name of Investigator(s): Principal Investigator: Joseph W. McNabb, PhD, Student Researcher: Nancy Sweeney, MS

Title of Project: Returning to College: An Exploration of the Perceptions and Experiences of Adults as Undergraduates

Request to Participate in Research
We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. The purpose of this research is to investigate individual experiences of adult undergraduate students to understand their perceptions of how they succeed in completing bachelor’s degree programs.

You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project.

The study will take place at a time and place convenient for you and will take about 2-3 hours, divided into three separate interview sessions. If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to answer a series of questions about your experiences as an adult undergraduate student who has successfully completed, or soon will complete, a bachelor’s degree program at Empire State College.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. However, your answers may help us to learn more about how adult undergraduates in bachelor’s degree programs successfully complete their degrees. The knowledge gained may assist in the design of support services which will result in more adult students achieving graduation.

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researchers will know that you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will use only group data and will not identify you or any individual as being of this project.

The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time.

You will receive a $15 gift certificate to Dunkin’ Donuts after the completion of the third interview.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to call Nancy Sweeney, the person mainly responsible for the research at 845-336-5267, or e-mail: sweeney.na@husky.neu.edu. You can also contact Dr. Joseph W. McNabb, the Principal Investigator, at 857-205-9598, or by e-mail: j.mcnabb@northeastern.edu

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

You may keep this form for yourself.

Thank you.

Nancy Sweeney
Appendix C
Interview Protocol

Primary research question: How do adults, who have returned to college, and who have completed a bachelor’s degree, make sense of and explain their academic success?

Alumni/Student Interview Protocol

Interviewee (Pseudonym): ________________________________

Gender: ________________________________________________

Age at time of initial enrollment: __________________________

Year of graduation or projected graduation: ________________

Empire State College home location (including the Center for Distance Learning): _______________________________________

Area of study or concentration: ____________________________

Part One: Introductory Interview (30-45 minutes)

The purpose of this interview is to introduce the researcher to the potential participant, explain the study, describe the elements included in the Unsigned Consent Document and answer any questions. The participant’s agreement to join the study will be obtained as evidenced through a recorded voice affirmation of consent. No further interview questions will be asked until that verbal consent is recorded by the researcher. (Note: The information being requested above will not be asked for or recorded until the Unsigned Consent Document is affirmed by the recording of the spoken agreement of the participant.)

First Interview Protocol

Words to prospective participant:

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. I value your interest in participating in this study. You have been selected to join in this research because you are someone who, through your record of accomplishment as an adult student at Empire State College, will have many insights which might help other adult students experience academic success.

We will spend some time now before proceeding any further with a description and review of each element of the Unsigned Consent Document. In this document, your rights as a participant and my responsibilities toward you as a researcher are explained in detail. Your role in this
research is also described. If you agree to join the study, you will be asked to participate in three separate interviews. Nothing beyond that interview participation will be asked of you. If, at any point, you decide not to continue with the study, you may exit immediately without consequences of any sort. Any data already collected will be destroyed.

The purpose of this research is to discover how adult students who have returned to college and complete their bachelor’s degree make sense of and explain their academic success. Your status as one of those students gives you a unique understanding of the factors involved in attaining that degree. Through this series of three interviews you will have the opportunity to explore and describe your personal experiences in your own words concerning your personal journey. In doing so, you will contribute to our understanding of what happens during that process of degree attainment, and what we discover may ultimately help others to persist.

I will now go through with you each section of the consent document. If, at the end of our discussion, you decide to agree, through your spoken affirmative answer which I will record, to participate in the study, I will ask you a few questions designed to help us get started on this research. This will constitute the first interview. In total, our interaction will last from 30-45 minutes. I will ask your permission to take written or recorded notes. At the end of this interview, if you agree to continue, we will make arrangements for the second interview, which will last from 45-90 minutes. The third interview, lasting 30 minutes, will be scheduled at the conclusion of the study to give you the opportunity to review the data from the previous interviews, suggest changes for clarity and accuracy, or ask that data be removed from the record prior to final publication. You may also offer additional reflections that you may have arising from your participation in the study.

After the completion of the third interview, you will receive a $15 Dunkin’ Donuts gift card as a thank you for your participation.

At this time, do you agree to join the study?

If the potential participant agrees, and allows the recording of an affirmative response, the information-gathering and interview questions are asked. Interviewee receives copy of the Unsigned Consent Document to keep.

If this exchange is occurring over the internet, by videoconferencing or by phone, the Unsigned Consent Document will have been sent electronically or by postal mail by the researcher prior to the meeting. If the potential participant decides to join the study, the researcher will record the participant’s verbal affirmation of consent prior to the start of the first interview.

If the potential participant declines to join the study, the person is thanked for responding and reassured that there will not be any consequences, personal, professional or academic associated with that individual choice.
Second Interview Protocol

The purpose this second interview is to learn more about your experiences as an adult undergraduate student at Empire State, and how you achieved success in your bachelor’s degree program. I will ask a few questions designed to assist in the sharing of your thoughts about various areas which may have had an impact upon your success. This interview will last from 45-90 minutes.

Because of the open-ended nature of these questions, I may need to interject comments or queries as you speak, for the sake of clarity or to focus on a particular detail. I will not include any references to my own thoughts, experiences or feelings in the commentary. This interview is all about your experiences, and your perspective on your academic success. To achieve an accurate record of your narrative, I would like to record your remarks during our conversation. (If the participant is being interviewed online or by phone, the script will be: In order to achieve an accurate record of your narrative, I would like to record our remarks during our conversation using freecall.com or Skype recording software.) I will also be taking written notes to back up the recording. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

All of your responses will be confidential in accordance with the guidelines explained in your informed consent document. We will use your pseudonym throughout our interactions and in the transcripts.

Do you have any questions for me before we start this interview?

Interview questions

1. Can you tell me how you came to be a student at Empire State College?
2. How would you describe your experience of being an adult undergraduate at Empire State College?
3. What is the meaning of academic success to you?
4. Can you tell me about a time when you experienced what you thought to be an obstacle to your academic success? How did you feel? How did you cope?
5. How would you describe your most positive personal experience as an adult undergraduate?
6. How would you describe your greatest challenge as an adult undergraduate student?
7. How would you describe your interactions with faculty at Empire State?
8. How would you describe your relationships with other students at Empire State?
9. Based on your experiences as an adult undergraduate, how would you describe the ideal academic environment for an adult returning to college?
10. How would you describe the role, if any, that your family played in your academic success? Friends? Employers? Colleagues at work?
11. Did you interact with an academic advisor, and if so, would you describe your experience with that individual? Did you interact with any other administrators, like the registrar, or
anyone else at Empire State? If so, would you think about and tell me how that interaction may have affected your success.

12. How different do you think your experience of academic success would have been as an adult undergraduate at a college with a more traditional-aged student population?

Thank you for taking part in this interview today. I will mail or e-mail a copy of the transcript of what you told me here today for your review by __________ (date). After you have had an opportunity to look over the transcribed interview, I would like to schedule the third and last of this interview series, during which you will be able to discuss with me any concerns or clarifications that you would like to make, or additional insights that you might have.

Third Interview Protocol

Member checking

This final interview will serve as a debriefing session, and an opportunity for you to clarify or update for accuracy any of the material that you encountered in the interview transcripts that you were mailed or e-mailed after our last meeting. During this interaction, we will jointly reflect on the meaning of the prior interviews and what was discussed, and the implications for better understanding adult student success in bachelor’s degree programs. This interview will last approximately 30 minutes.

Concluding Remarks to Participant

Thank you very much for your participation in this study. Your contributions are valuable to the research to better understand how adult students who complete bachelor’s degree programs make sense of and explain their academic success. The discovery of this knowledge may be applied to helping other adult students attain their own success. I look forward to sharing with you the final results of this study when available.

(At this time, the participant will be given the $15 Dunkin’ Donuts gift card if meeting in person, or arrangements will be made to either e-mail or send by postal mail the gift card to remote participants within one week of completion of this third and final interview).
Appendix D
Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me how you came to be a student at Empire State College?

2. How would you describe your experience of being an adult undergraduate at Empire State College?

3. What is the meaning of academic success to you?

4. Can you tell me about a time when you experienced what you thought to be an obstacle to your academic success? How did you feel? How did you cope?

5. How would you describe your most positive personal experience as an adult undergraduate?

6. How would you describe your greatest challenge as an adult undergraduate student?

7. How would you describe your interactions with faculty at Empire State?

8. How would you describe your relationships with other students at Empire State?

9. Based on your experiences as an adult undergraduate, how would you describe the ideal academic environment for an adult returning to college?

10. How would you describe the role, if any, that your family played in your academic success? Friends? Employers? Colleagues at work?

11. Did you interact with an academic advisor, and if so, would you describe your experience with that individual? Did you interact with any other administrators, like the registrar, or anyone else at Empire State? If so, would you think about and tell me how that interaction may have affected your success.

12. How different do you think your experience of academic success would have been as an adult undergraduate at a college with a more traditional-aged student population?
Appendix E

Audit Trail

A.J.: I wasn’t a very good student in high school...I found it difficult to concentrate...I just kind of squeaked by...College was an enormous endeavor to even consider...I’m the type who needs to read something five times...Can I really do this?...

Bob: A lot of colleges, in my experience, have not been so flexible. That’s what really stood out for me about Empire State, the flexibility. If you don’t like one way, here’s another path to your destination.

Bob, who was in the Navy, was unable to attend traditional classes. Flexibility in course design gave him hope that he could graduate.

Institutional flexibility promotes success. Participants had multiple pathways to degree completion available, bolstering their confidence.

She felt uncertain about navigating the unfamiliar college environment without anyone to guide her. Her fears could have caused her to drop out. Her mentor cared about her academic success and assisted her.

Faculty/mentor support and encouragement is important to adult students and promotes persistence.

Beth: The mentor thing was one of the main reasons why I did decide on Empire State, the thing that made me feel comfortable about being guided in a way that was going to be right for me. For some reason, it felt very scary thinking about going back to school, so my mentor was pivotal for me.

A history of poor past academic performance can cause anxiety when an adult first returns to college.

A lack of confidence in academic ability can impede degree completion.
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