THE NEW CAMPUS LANDSCAPE: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF NON-TRADITIONAL UNDERGRADUATES' IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION WHILE ENROLLED AT A TRADITIONAL PRIVATE COLLEGE

A thesis presented
by

Viviane S. Lopuch

to
The School of Education

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

in the field of
Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
February 2015
To Sergei Petrovich Sodbinow and Katherine Dakuginow Sodbinow.

Years ago, with little formal education and few resources, you arrived in the United States with my grandmother, six older siblings, and the desire that all of your children earn a college education. You added me to the family soon after and for years, worked to ensure that all seven of us received an education so we would not have to labor as hard as you did. I am grateful that you saw your dream come true. We love and miss you.
Acknowledgements

Numerous individuals contributed in very important ways to my academic journey, culminating here, at Northeastern University. These include adult students I have taught over the years, study participants, my thesis committee, members of the College of Professional Studies (CPS) community, and my family.

To the adult students I have taught, you inspired me to conduct this research. To the study participants, this research would not have been possible without you. You believed in the study and you trusted me with your personal stories. I am honored. Thank you for your participation.

I would also like to thank my thesis examiners, Dr. Al McCready and my former professor, Dr. Lynda Beltz, for being a part of my committee and for your constructive criticisms, guidance, and insight. You both challenged me to view this work with an even more objective and critical eye, making it a much stronger scholarly contribution to higher education research.

To my thesis advisor, Dr. Margaret Gorman, you were patient as I wrestled with early variations of this project, consistently guiding me until I found my focus. You gave me the final push I needed to get to the finish line. Thank you for being my advisor and a wonderful mentor.

To the faculty and staff in the CPS program who work to provide learning experiences, administrative support and other services to doctoral students, thank you for making me proud to be a Husky. To my special friends from the EdD program, Dr. Nikkole Davis, Dr. Rae Lenway, and Dr. Mamiko Reeves, I am so happy to have shared this journey with you!

To my sister, Elizabeth, you long ago set the example, encouraging my pursuit of any kind of education, even before I (like the participants in this study), returned to school as an adult. You have always been, and continue to be, my role model for character, determination, and resilience. Physical and communication impairments from stroke and Aphasia have not held you
back. I look forward to you soon completing the PhD journey that you started so many years ago. To my brother Pierre, who has done so much “behind the scenes” for all of us, especially our parents when they needed, you have been our family’s champion, facilitating so many family matters over these past years. None of us could do what we do without you, always there. To all of my siblings, I am proud to be the “baby” in the family. I love you guys.

Finally, to my husband George, you have been my rock, sustaining me all these years. You believed in my capabilities when I did not. When I returned to college at age 32, afraid that I would once again “flunk out”, you told me to simply take “one class at a time”. When I cried (multiple times) thinking how long it would take, as an adult student going to school part time, to earn that first two-year, and then the four-year degree, you repeated the mantra. You continued to remind me of it through each tier of my higher education journey.

You have made this adult student’s 25 year quest, from that first course when returning to school, to the final phase of this doctoral experience, much easier because of your unwavering encouragement and support. You have always understood my ongoing need to make sense of my own identity, and to seek, throughout my various life and career ups and downs, the answer to the question, “Who am I?” Thank you for always being constant. I love you so much.
Abstract

This was a narrative inquiry that explored how adult undergraduates described their experience as nontraditional students at a traditional college. Participants were adult students over age 24, attending four-year, private, nonprofit colleges while also working part or full-time. Individual and Relational identity factors from Stryker’s (1980) identity theory and Turner’s (1979) social categorization theory were used to examine and interpret participants’ accounts of their experiences in order to understand the role that identity processes played in their college experience.

The researcher conducted semi structured, face-to-face interviews (the primary data collection tool) with participants in order to learn their stories. After transcribing and verifying their accounts, the researcher used HyperRESEARCH analysis software to code data. Eight themes, falling within two identity categories emerged from the analysis. From these, the researcher came to three conclusions: Nontraditional students need their adult identity validated, nontraditional students seek affiliation from their college experience, and nontraditional students’ motivation is a factor in their ability to persevere.

Following a discussion of these conclusions, the researcher describes implications from the findings as they relate to both theory and practice, proposing possible applications of the knowledge for higher education institutions. In closing, the researcher also discusses possible avenues for future research from a cross-disciplinary perspective, and concludes the document with final, reflective thoughts about the research process and the findings.

Keywords: nontraditional students, adult students, older students, mature students, private college, qualitative study, narrative inquiry, identity, social constructivist, social categorization, social identity, symbolic interactionism, adult education, inductive analysis, HyperRESEARCH
Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT ................................................................. 10
  Context Overview ................................................................................................. 10
  Statement of the Problem ...................................................................................... 12
    Problem of Practice ............................................................................................ 12
    Purpose Statement .............................................................................................. 14
  Research Question ............................................................................................... 16
  Theoretical Framework - Identity ........................................................................ 17
    Identity Theory .................................................................................................... 17
    Social Identity Theory ....................................................................................... 19
    Identity Definitions ............................................................................................ 20
  Overview of Research Plan .................................................................................... 21
  Significance of Study ............................................................................................ 22
  Assumptions ......................................................................................................... 24
  Limitations and Delimitations .............................................................................. 26
    Delimiters of the Study ....................................................................................... 26
  Chapter 1 Summary .............................................................................................. 27
  Key Terms ............................................................................................................. 28

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ............................................................... 31
  Landscape / Backdrop .......................................................................................... 31
  Current Research ................................................................................................ 32
    Identity ................................................................................................................ 34
    Social Identity Perspective of Identity ............................................................... 35
    Social Identity and Self-Categorization Theory ............................................... 37
    Adult Learners, Adult Learning and Nontraditional Students ......................... 40
    Relationship of Research Questions to Literature ........................................... 44
  Table 2.1 – Identity Theory to Research Questions ............................................. 45

CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY ................................................................................. 46
  Overall Research Plan .......................................................................................... 47
  Researcher Role and Background ....................................................................... 50
  Participants .......................................................................................................... 51
  Recruitment and Access ....................................................................................... 52
  Data Collection ..................................................................................................... 53
    Interviews ............................................................................................................ 54
    Table 3.1 Summary of Data Collection Plan .................................................... 58
  Data Analysis Overview ....................................................................................... 59
    Table 3.2 – Early themes .................................................................................... 59
    Table 3.3 – Summary of Data Analysis ............................................................. 61
  Summary of Data Analysis ................................................................................... 62
    Overview .............................................................................................................. 62
    Data Analysis – Using inductive and deductive coding methods ..................... 63
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

This doctoral thesis focuses on the experience of adult undergraduates attending traditional, four-year private, non-profit colleges. This chapter describes the study’s context, the landscape of adult higher education, and the problem of practice that was the impetus for this study. After stating the problem and overarching research question, the theoretical framework that guided the study is explained, as is its utility in the interpretation and understanding of later findings. There is also a brief review of what Cresswell (2007) describes as researchers’ “philosophical assumptions” (p. 16). Finally, the significance of this particular investigation and the research plan are described. The chapter closes with a list of key terms that appear throughout this document.

Context Overview

Adult students are receiving a great deal of attention today, especially since U.S. President Obama announced his “bold new plan to lower the cost of community college -- to zero” (Obama, 2015, January 9, para. 10). Yet, the focus on adult students is hardly new. Adult learners, commonly referred to as nontraditional students, have been a part of the US higher education landscape for decades; most notably since the enactment of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (now known as the original G.I. bill). With educational funding benefits made possible by its legislation, vast numbers of military veterans, regardless of personal financial resources, race, or socio-economic standing, have been able to afford to attend college. Polson (2010) characterizes the G.I. Bill as “democratizing higher education” (p. 265) and its effect on higher education institutions significant. Since then, community colleges have grown in number and scope, four-year colleges and universities (both public and not-for profit)
have evolved, and as early as the 1970s, even traditional private colleges had begun developing degree-granting programs for adults (Husson & Kennedy, 2003).

The aforementioned military benefit, having evolved since its original inception, is now, post-9/11, best known as the “new G.I, Bill” (Radford, 2009) and continues to be an important factor in many veterans’ ability to attend college. Veterans however are not the only ones who have benefitted from greater access to higher education. In the past half-century, many Americans who would otherwise have not been able to attend college have done so, leading to an “educational and social transformation” (Polson, 2010, p. 265) that has changed higher education through a wider array of financial aid options, leading to increased student diversity (i.e. age, gender, and race) on campuses and a broadened view of the types of individuals, that may be regarded as nontraditional. Hadfield (2003) describes them as follows:

Nontraditional students are engineers, nurses, secretaries, CEOs, production line workers, teachers, parking-lot attendants, dog walkers, and exotic dancers. They are immigrants, displaced homemakers, professionals changing careers, individuals seeking personal growth and development, grandparents, single parents, and married couples (p. 18).

While the meaning of nontraditional encompasses a wide range of individuals, it is important to note that for just about all of the types of individuals described above, the changes in the workplace have had a profound effect. The most recent effects of globalization and technology advances, including downsizing and economic recession, have changed the landscape of the workplace, making employment more difficult to obtain (Hadfield, 2003; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011) Organizations’ increasing demands for skilled employees, and working adults’ educational needs are converging, and time has become an increasingly important commodity.
As a result, many adults (including veterans) have flocked to a number of private, for-profit entities, (i.e. Capella University, University of Phoenix) where they can take advantage of flexible and accelerated online course and program offerings.

The financial success of for-profit colleges against a backdrop of economic recession, reduced endowments for colleges and universities (public and private), and funding cuts at public institutions has been a wake-up call for many higher education institutions, including traditional, four-year private colleges who now increasingly recognize the adult student as a desirable, revenue generating commodity. At the same time however, these same students, comprised of the types of individuals described by Hadfield (2003) above, consider themselves as consumers of education and expect to receive satisfactory “customer service” just as they would for any other product they “pay for” (p. 19).

Given the interest that these colleges have in bolstering their student body numbers with adults, it makes sense to examine what that experience is like for the adult undergraduate and how that affects their retention and satisfaction. Findings from such a study, including this one, may possibly begin to offer insights that are useful to college administrators, staff and faculty at these, and other colleges, seeking to find ways to improve programs and services for adult students.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Problem of Practice

Adults returning to college (including returning military veterans), is a topic of much interest today, generating increasing media coverage in the news media (Obama, 2015) and on outlets such as National Public Radio, The New York Times, USA Today, and The Wall Street Journal (Casselman, 2013; Dao, 2013; Abramson, 2012; Smola, 2013). In fact, according to a
recent Huffington Post article, adults are “the fastest-growing demographic in colleges across the United States” (2013, June 14, para.1). Data from a federal web site supports this, projecting that the number of adults in college over the age of 25 will grow to 43% of all college students from 2010-2021. At the same time, growth for the under 25-age group will continue to slow (NCES, 2014), fueled in part, by the declining number of high school graduates in the Northeast region of the United States (WICHE, 2013). These notable factors fuel the national interest in adult learners and underscore the recognition that as a group, adults are critical to the viability of higher education institutions (Bash, 2003; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Institutions wishing to maintain their relevance in a landscape where adult students will soon comprise the majority on campuses must do more than simply offer low overhead, convenient delivery models of education. They must also incorporate an understanding of the beliefs, expectations, and perceptions of the whole student in developing curriculum, programs, and policies aimed at their needs, supporting them to persist to degree completion and beyond. A fundamental aspect of this understanding is to know how adults make meaning of their status as students enrolled at a traditional college. This includes developing an understanding of how they perceive identity and its effect on the quality of their undergraduate experience (Day, Lovato, Tull & Ross-Gordon, 2011; Kasworm, 2003; Ross-Gordon, 2011, Smith & Taylor, 2010). This study uses identity theory as a framework to get closer to understanding these phenomena.

Since the 1960s, identity has been a rapidly growing area of research in the psychosocial literature (Vignoles, Schwartz & Luyckx, 2010). Its popularity is due largely to the fact that identity is a fundamental aspect of how individuals think, feel, and behave in every aspect of their lives. Scholars have long been interested in the role that identity plays in one’s development, in defining who one is, and who one will be. The preeminent psychologist Erik Erikson,
originator of the stage theory of development, considered the search for identity as a driving purpose in life (Miller, 2011, p. 148). To that end, identity has been extensively researched, with volumes of research studies, all concerned with how individuals think, feel, and perceive just about every facet of their lives.

Yet, despite its popularity as a framework, there is a lack of substantial research on identity as it pertains to adult, non-traditional age undergraduate students (Kasworm, 2010). While there have been studies of identity and college students, the research has primarily been concerned with the traditional age student. In fact, Kasworm’s studies of nontraditional students in community college and research university settings comprise the meager few that concern adult undergraduate students (2003b, 2010). More glaring is that identity studies of adult undergraduates enrolled at traditional private colleges are virtually nonexistent.

In summary, adult undergraduate students like their younger counterparts, have needs while in college. Dealing with the cognitive, emotional, and psychological adjustments related to their new role as student, while managing existing life roles and identities, can have a profound effect on their self-concept and readiness to learn (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1973/2005). These experiences could also have negative effects on students’ experiences and satisfaction, with consequences for the institution’s ability to retain students, much less recruit new ones.

To know more about them, to gain the insight needed to know that experience, one must simply allow them a voice to tell their stories, to listen to what they have to say. Narrative research using an identity framework for analysis is one way to achieve this.

**Purpose Statement**

Donaldson and Townsend (2007) in their summary of the literature in higher education journals, note researchers’ general lack of interest in adult undergraduates, particularly in the
nonprofit space. They cite a number of studies that underscore claims that research on adult learners is lacking in focus, attention, and full and equitable treatment in the areas of “public policy, institutional programming, and development of institutional mission” (p. 28). Their content analysis of literature from 1990-2003 supports the notion that despite the fact that adults have been a growing presence on campuses for years, there is still a significant bias in their treatment in higher education that ultimately, “marginalizes” adult undergraduates and affects all manner of decisions related to adult students.

Giles (2012) in her review of the impact of adult education programs on private colleges found that the pace at which higher education has changed with respect to adult learners’ needs, was inconsistent with the rate at which the “traditional academy” operates, “where life has an unhurried, orderly pace and where things are slow to change” (p. 51). Unfortunately, these are not the only areas needing further research with respect to adult undergraduates. Identity is another. Kasworm (2010) attests to this, stating, “There is limited historic research concerning adult undergraduate students and their student identity role” (p. 145).

Today, colleges are scrambling to recruit adult students in greater numbers, with a growing array of programs designed for non-traditional age undergraduates, offered in a variety of formats, including hybrid, and online (Bennett & Bell, 2011; Rausch & Crawford, 2012). Yet, despite the increase in adult friendly options, many institutions that typically serve traditional-age, residential students, know little about adult students who, holding multiple life roles, have far different needs than that of their traditional counterparts. Furthermore, four-year colleges, those with reputations made serving traditional age students have little experience with adult students. With the exception of some for-profit schools, higher education, in general, neglects the “adult, non-traditional student” (Hess, 2011, p. 1).
Research Question

Maxwell (2005) advises researchers to explore areas “previous research has not adequately addressed” (p. 21). Thus the primary intellectual goal was to add to the knowledge about adult undergraduates in higher education, to understand how they make meaning of their experiences at a traditional, private college, and to explore issues of identity that may be present in their negotiation of the social and cultural aspects of academic life. The practical goal of this study aligns with the intellectual goal, with its primary focus being to use what has been uncovered in this research to help higher education administrators, faculty and others (including leaders) to “make better decisions” (Giles, 2012, p. 52) when developing programs and policies for adult undergraduates.

To that end, the findings described in the existing research literature on adult higher education and identity, including those noted in the section above, have shaped the development of the single guiding research question for this study. The research question takes into account the changing nature of identity, how it is influenced by the self and framed by the social context. The internal and external factors that are identity influences, including the role of social interactions were factors in its development. Ultimately, the research question aimed at exploring these interactions, and their individual, group, and social dimensions, as experienced by adults navigating their way through life on a traditional college campus, by capturing how they perceive and describe those experiences.

RQ: How do undergraduates describe their identity through their experiences as a nontraditional student at a traditional private college?

As Shadden and Agan (2004) noted, identity is constantly changing with individuals forming and negotiating their identity using language and communication to convey meaning.
Such interactions are at the core of social life and seeking to understand that meaning through a narrative research approach, using “the stories people tell” (Merriam, 2002, p. 38), was the primary goal of this qualitative study. Then, identity theory was used in order to examine the individual and collective stories of how study participants, perceived identity as nontraditional students attending a traditional private college, proving to be the logical framework to use when examining their narrative. Identity theory is described in greater detail in the following section.

**Theoretical Framework – Identity**

Identity is a broad term, and as such, it “is one of the most commonly studied constructs in the social sciences (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011, p. 1). The abundance of research on identity across numerous disciplines, including anthropology, education, psychology, sociology, (to name a few) has proliferated, since Erikson’s psychosocial stage model appeared in the 1950s (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). Research has gone in a number of directions, so much so that the area of study became so “vast and fragmented” (Vignoles, Schwartz, Luyckx, 2011, p. vii). In response, Springer Research published an almost 1,000 page, two-volume “handbook in 2011 just to try and compile it all.

To analyze findings from this study, the researcher used two theories that are very similar, often described as overlapping (Stets & Burke, 2000), with some even arguing that the two be integrated. These are Stryker’s identity theory (1968, 1980, and 2008) and Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) social identity theory.

**Identity Theory**

Stryker’s identity theory (1979) represents a symbolic interactionist approach to identity, focusing on the individual and social influences and structures that inform one’s perceptions about his or her identity. Stryker’s almost six decades of research on identity, began in the 1950s
with his own doctoral studies. His voluminous body of work since, was first fueled by his interest in social psychologist George Herbert Mead’s seminal 1934 work, *Mind, Self and Society*, and Mead’s ideas about the self as consisting of two sides, with the labels “me” and “I”, and their respective relationships with society. The “me” is the already formed part of the self that enacts behavior toward others and society, while the “I” is the version of the self that is shaped by society.

Mead’s notion of the self is summed up by the aphorism, “society shapes self shapes social behavior” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 285). Mead’s ideas influenced others, particularly sociologist Herbert Blumer, who in 1937, labeled Mead’s approach as Symbolic Interactionism, a term that stuck, and now provides a name for the theory (Blumer, 1986; Serpe & Stryker, 2011). Using the Symbolic Interactionism framework as the basis for his life’s work on identity, Stryker developed a structural variant, adding on to Mead’s theory, to update its viability in examining issues brought on by increasingly complex, modern times. Citing significant cultural, historical and sociological events since Mead’s foundational theory, Stryker (2008) stated,

> A current sociological view of society is very different, premised on experiences that include depression; two world wars and multiple more local wars; brutal dictatorships; genocides; widely destructive tribal loyalties; and virulent class, racial, and ethnic conflicts, etc. (p.18).

Thus, Stryker’s Structural Symbolic Interactionist approach to identity was established “to understand and explain how social structures affect self and how self affects social behaviors” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 285). Revising Mead’s earlier maxim, Stryker (2008) proposed, “Society shapes self shapes social interaction” (p. 19). His substitution of the word behavior with interaction more precisely captured the relational dimensions inherent in today’s diverse and
continuously evolving forms of social structure, whether institutional or organizational, or other variant (i.e. gender, class).

While it serves as the primary lens for this study, and is suitable for examining the study data as it relates to adult students and their interactions with others (faculty, other students) on a campus setting (social structure), it does not consider group membership, or the role that social groups, and one’s identification with them, has on one’s concept of self (an expected component within the findings from this study), Thus the need to also use self-categorization theory as explained below.

**Social identity theory (SIT)**

Through self-categorization, social identity theory further delineates one’s group memberships into narrower (personal), or broader (group, human) defining categories (Spears, 2011, p. 208). Self-categorization “cognitively assimilates self to the in-group prototype and thus, depersonalizes self-conception” (Hogg & Terry, 2000, p. 123). In this way, one’s behavior is driven by the standards of the in-group to which he or she belongs, as compared to that which is self-determined. In other words, self-categorization theory holds the notion that when individuals identify as belonging to social groups, that group norms and the strength of their group identification plays a role in self-concept, and that self-concept has a lot to do with how they perceive and behave toward other groups based on the strength of their commitment to the group. Thus, behaviors and perceptions may be positive or negative (Hogg & Terry, 2000).

Therefore, to reiterate, this study has drawn on both identity theory and social identity as its theoretical lenses to analyze findings from individual, social, and group identification contexts.
Identity Definitions

Before moving forward, it is important to first explain how identity has been described in the literature and in brief, what identity means in this study. For psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, identity is a process that occurs throughout each of the eight life stages as specified in his 1959 Theory of Psychosocial Development (Miller, 2011). Identity emerges as early as infancy, figures prominently in adolescence, and plays a role throughout one’s adult life (Hoare, 2011; Miller, 2011). According to sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967), identity is “a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society” (p. 194) and Miller (2011) describes it as “the understanding and acceptance of both self and one’s society” (p. 148). In addition to these, numerous other definitions of identity abound, depending on their level of focus (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). For example, individual definitions of identity derive from such things as personal beliefs, or self-concept, relational identities from identification with life roles (i.e. child, parent, student or teacher) and collective identities from identification with “groups and social categories” (p. 3).

While there are even more definitions of identity that have sprung from decades of research conducted from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, they are too numerous to discuss here. Drawing from the aforementioned definitions however, and for purposes of this study, identity may be described as the behaviors associated with one’s identification with life roles, or with group categories, as informed by self-reflexive, and interactional processes in the context of a social environment. The process of identifying with roles is a focus of identity theory, while identification with group categories, is a focus of social identity theory (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Identity approaches help to explain how individuals construct and negotiate who they are, or wish to be within their perceived social groups (Abrams, Hogg, Hinkle, & Otten, 2005). It
provides an ideal lens from which to examine how individuals, make sense of their higher education experiences in conjunction with the management of their multiple other roles. Findings from this study uncovered themes that may yield insights about the relationship between identity and learning as it relates to non-traditional undergraduate students’ expectations, experience, and satisfaction with four-year colleges.

**Overview of Research Plan**

The aim of this research was to understand how adult undergraduates on traditional college campuses described their experience. Therefore, it called for a study that could “understand how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). Consequently, a qualitative, narrative research approach was employed in order to capture the unique stories of the study participants, who were purposefully chosen based on their meeting the selection criteria of being an adult student enrolled at a traditionally oriented, private, non-profit four-year college.

Once they had been selected, and their signed IRB Consent forms received, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews using questions designed to know more about their identity processes. After the interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed, text verified by the researcher, and copies of each transcript reviewed with each participant in a face-to-face, member checking meeting, with data and early findings reviewed and verified. Participants were also asked to report additional reflections or thoughts that might have come to mind since the interviews.

Merriam (2009) describes data analysis for a basic qualitative study as being inductive and comparative, with findings that are “richly descriptive and presented as themes / categories” (p. 38). This study followed that basic approach; according to Miles and Huberman’s (1994)
three phase method to condense, display, and finally, verify data and draw conclusions. Chapter Three provides more explicit detail about the events described in this overview.

**Significance of Study**

Several factors converged that made this research problem timely and significant at local, state, and global levels. Chief among these were current and projected demographic changes in the population that will increase ethnic and age diversity in general, and specifically, on college campuses. While ethnic diversity may prove to have some relevance to the findings from the proposed research, it is not the specific focus of this study. This study however is concerned with age diversity as represented by the growing size of the adult student population and the effects of the corresponding decline in traditional age students on college campuses. For small, private traditionally oriented colleges in the Northeast, the expected decrease in the number of high school graduates in the region, those who serve as the main pipeline of potential freshman students for smaller colleges present both challenges and opportunities.

A Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE, 2013) study revealed the troubling statistics. The number of high school graduates in the Northeast region of the United States will decrease by 11%, or from 644,000 to 576,000 from 2011 to 2023 (p. 10). Locally, statewide, and regionally, colleges that are similar to the researcher’s own (above and below in tier) are likely to feel the effects of this reduction, as they begin competing more fiercely for the dwindling supply of potential freshmen. This will in turn, intensify the already competitive race to attract adult students who have long been a profitable source of revenue for colleges, especially those in the highly lucrative for-profit arena (e.g. University of Phoenix).

The research problem is just as important at the national and global levels. First, industry and political leaders are keenly aware that college attainment is crucial to the economic and
technological competitiveness, prosperity, and growth of the United States. Yet, only 39% of Americans aged 25 to 64 hold a college degree (Lumina Foundation, 2013), placing the U.S. lower in college attainment as compared to other nations. Consequently, higher education for adults is a national imperative. Second, the rate of change in today’s complex, global, and virtual work environments requires that workers possess the skills needed to succeed in rapidly changing and newly emerging information and knowledge-based jobs.

Today, however, many Americans simply do not have the skills needed to compete in an information based global economy (National Commission on Adult Literacy, 2008). Third, the U.S. employment marketplace has significantly reduced the number of jobs available to workers with a “high school education or less” (Merisotis, 2013, para. 4). Such jobs, typically associated with a manufacturing economy, are not likely to return and employers today, increasingly demand workers who possess no less than a college education for even the most entry-level of positions.

Together these factors, U.S. competitive standing as compared to other countries, rapid changes in technology, employment marketplace changes, and population demographic shifts, not only change the way organizations (in all sectors) must operate in order to stay competitive, but they provide compelling reasons to focus on adult learners. Increasing the educational attainment of adult workers has the potential to positively influence organizational outcomes, and in the long run, possibly the nation’s economy, and its competitive edge.

The importance of the aforementioned factors suggests that administrators, educators, and policymakers need to better understand adult undergraduates, how they make sense of their college experiences. The insight gained from this study may be useful in developing and improving programs and services that may positively affect persistence, satisfaction, and degree
attainment for non-traditional age students at all colleges, and in particular, traditional, private four-year colleges. Furthermore, because many adult students are already working or have established careers, and often have children who are, or will be of college age, adults’ satisfaction with their college may translate to a strong belief in the institution and loyalty to the brand. This could yield long-term benefits for the college, particularly for a smaller private college that must also co-exist in its local community.

For example, if satisfied with their own experience and having developed a strong sense of affiliation with their college, adult undergraduates as alumni, may be more inclined to want to continue their relationship with their alma mater, financially as donors, by enrolling in graduate programs, or possibly sending their own children to the college. Those who are active or influential in the local community, may support in other ways, helping to positively promote and solidify the college’s relationship with community members, while those professionally situated in local middle and high schools, or in emerging and growth fields may choose to give back in a number of ways, such as service on the college’s board, or by promoting educational and/or research partnerships (or other ventures) that could raise the profile of the college and add to, or improve the college’s academic reputation.

**Assumptions**

According to Cresswell (2009), a researcher’s worldview comes from his or her “general orientation about the world and nature of research” (p. 6), which is informed by influences from professors and advisors, the student’s discipline of study and his or her past research experiences. This researcher’s past and current studies in the areas of adult learning, education, and human communication, as well as her ongoing research and teaching experience in the field of human communication studies influenced her choice of a qualitative, narrative (communication based)
study from a social constructivist worldview. Additional held assumptions also shaped the design of this proposal.

- Adult student populations on college campuses will continue to grow, while at the same time, the numbers of traditional age students (particularly in the Northeastern United States) will decline (NCES, 2014; WICHE, 2013).

- Identity processes are fundamental aspects of the human experience, with individuals, (including adults attending college) undergoing identity and meaning making processes throughout their life span (Erikson, 1963).

- Adult undergraduates holding multiple life roles, experience college differently and have different needs than their traditional age counterparts, therefore additional identity related studies are needed (Kasworm, 2003b, 2010).

- “Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences” (Cresswell, 2009. p. 8), therefore understanding of adult undergraduates’ experiences can yield insights about the factors that relate to their satisfaction and ability to persist and complete college.

- Traditional private colleges that primarily serve 18-22 year old residential students have little knowledge of older (nontraditional) undergraduates’ needs (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010).

- Narrative research is the most suitable method to elicit adult undergraduates’ stories of their experiences in order to “educate the self and others” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).
The final assumption was that there would be a sufficient number of traditional private (residential) colleges with nontraditional students enrolled to yield the number of participants needed for this qualitative, narrative study.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

This study was a narrative study of seven adult undergraduates, 25 years of age and older, who work at least part-time, attend a four-year, private, not-for-profit college, and who volunteered and met the criteria for participation in the study. Thus, the study findings are not generalizable to other adult undergraduates attending other schools, regardless of their meeting the same study criteria (i.e. age, type of college). The qualitative nature of this study and its narrative approach with in-depth interviews rely on participants feeling comfortable with the researcher and the mutual relationship, therefore it also required delimiters as shown below. This study, because of its design and exploratory nature, was never intended for its results to be generalizable. Hence, the qualitative nature of this narrative inquiry, the unique characteristics of its participants, and the subjective role of researcher in interpreting the results, means that this study, even if replicated by others, would likely yield different interpretations.

**Delimiters of the study**

This study has delimiting conditions as described below:

- The first delimiter is that this study uses the individual student as the unit of analysis.
- The second delimiter comes from the unique nature of the infrastructure, culture, and offerings at traditionally oriented (residential) colleges located in smaller communities that are in the same geographic region. As a result, the findings from this study will not be generalizable to like institutions located in larger, urban settings.
• The third delimiter is the study’s focus on adult undergraduates age 25 and over, who are enrolled at private, not-for profit traditional, liberal arts, four-year colleges. Therefore, findings will not be transferable to all adult students at private and non-profit, residential, four-year colleges.

• The final delimiter comes from factors related to the researcher’s choice of methodology and data analysis strategy. For example, the researcher limited the scope of the project to colleges that met study criteria and were located in the Hudson Valley Region of New York State, while the sample size was kept to no more than seven participants. Seeking participants age 25 and over (with no maximum age cap) was also part of the design, which became delimiting factors. Each of these choices was deliberate and intentionally made in order to promote the relationship between researcher and participant that is characteristic of both narrative research, and in-depth interviews (Cresswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Saldana, 2012).

Statistically, most adult undergraduate enrollment at private colleges in the United States is at for-profit schools, with a large portion of the remainders at colleges and universities that are larger than the smaller, four-year residential institutions from which this study drew its participants. Therefore, the comparatively small number of adult undergraduate (nontraditional) students enrolled at smaller, traditional private colleges is another limiting factor.

Chapter 1 Summary

This doctoral thesis was intended to uncover information about the experience of adults who attend college as undergraduates at traditionally oriented private colleges. The objective was to capture and examine their told stories, in order to shed light on a group within higher education that has received little attention in the identity literature. Identity was used as a lens
because experiences and perceptions are socially constructed and identities are formed and maintained through interactions at group and organizational levels.

The preceding chapter provided a contextual overview of the research and the problem that was the impetus for this study. It also described the overarching research question and the analytical questions used in interpreting the findings from a theoretical perspective. It also described the overall research plan and explained why this study is significant in local and global contexts. Finally, this chapter closes with the below list of key terms (and their definitions) that appear throughout this document. Following that is Chapter 2, a synthesized summary, review and critique of the pertinent scholarly literature that represents the most current research available on the topics of adult higher education and identity.

**Key Terms:**

- **Identity:** Identities are part of the larger “self”, comprised of the “set of meanings” (Burke and Stets, 2009, p. 3) that are attached to individuals and in the roles they hold in groups and/or society.

- **Identities:** “Identities are the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is” (Oyserman, Elmore & Smith, 2012, p. 69).

- **Identity theory:** A sociological and psychological concept that is the basis for a large body of theoretical frameworks used to understand how individuals make meaning of who they are and how they differentiate themselves from others while performing, or occupying a social role, or claiming the characteristics of a role with which they identify (Burke and Stets, 2009).

- **Self:** An object, the product of one’s social interaction with others (Mead, 1934).
• **Self-Concept:** How individuals see themselves and how they perceive that others see them. Internal and external factors play a role (i.e. beliefs, values, social forces). Self-concept has been described as a factor in identity formation (Burke & Stets, 1980) but at the same time, as being comprised of one’s identities (Oyserman, et.al, 2012).

• **Social identity theory:** Refers to how individuals form their self-concept from their perceived membership in social groups of social groups (Hogg & Terry, 2000).

• **Social categorization theory** – refers to the process by which members identify with themselves by their group membership. The process of self-categorization, results in subordination of the individual self to the group identity (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

• **Social constructionism:** According to Berger and Luckmann (1967) “reality is socially constructed and that the sociology of knowledge must analyse the process in which this occurs” (p. 13).

• **Social constructivism:** An approach to qualitative research (Cresswell, 2009) that comes from Berger and Luckmann’s (1967) notion that knowledge is socially constructed, and Lincoln & Guba’s (1985) naturalist paradigm, which posits that knowledge is constructed by the “knower and known” (p. 37) and that there are multiple interpretations of reality.

• **Symbolic Interaction:** Human interaction (communication) through a system of shared symbols (Mead, 1934).

• **Symbolic Interactionism:** Self evolves from how individuals think about and make meaning (sense) of their communication interactions (via language /symbols) with others (Blumer, 1986).
Student /College Related Terms:

- **Adult undergraduate** Adult undergraduates are students aged 25 and over, who are pursuing a bachelor’s degree at a four-year college or university” (Sandmann, 2010, p. 222).

- **Adult Learner** – “Adult learners are defined as those aged 25 and over, who are participating in some form of post-secondary instruction in a four-year college or university” (Sandmann, 2010, p. 222).

- **Adult Student**: An adult student is one that meets the characteristics of the non-traditional age student (see below).

- **Nontraditional age student** – is over age 24 (NCES, 2014), has family and/or work responsibilities and has experienced a significant interruption in his / her schooling since high school.

- **Private College**: A non-profit college that is not a university and does not receive public funding (www.petersons.com).

- **Traditional age student** – this student is typically age 18, follows the conventional path from high school to college with no substantial break in between schooling, and has no significant work responsibilities (Pelletier, 2010).

- **Traditional college**: A four-year college typically targeted to residential, traditional age students (Pelletier, 2010).
CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

Landscape/Backdrop

Over the past decade, there has been growing public discourse about the ability of the United States to compete effectively in a global marketplace, with U.S. citizens’ higher education attainment status noted as an important factor. The problem of attainment is so worrisome, that it is now a key educational issue for the current White House Administration, addressed most recently in President Obama’s State of the Union Address (Obama, 2015) with his proposed plan to make community college free, stating, “I want to spread that idea all across America, so that two years of college becomes as free and universal in America as high school is today” (para. 35).

He is responding to the fact that today, a college degree is a basic requirement for gainful employment. It is a prerequisite for jobs in today’s knowledge driven economy, with employers demanding that workers obtain the education needed to “meet their competitive needs” (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010, p. 30) and to possess, at minimum, some type of college degree (Kelly & Strawn, 2011). It is no wonder that government, higher education, and private sector industry leaders alike, stress a college-educated workforce as being one of the most critical factors in the nation’s strategy to improve its economic and technological competitiveness (Hagelskamp, Schleifer, & DiStasi, 2013).

Early in his tenure, in an address to the joint session of Congress in February 2009, Obama had established a goal for America, to reclaim its world ranking as the nation with the most number of college graduates (whitehouse.gov). His most recent call continues his administration’s focus on higher education attainment. In the years since that first address, with federal funding to back the Administration’s educational initiatives, higher education institutions
have sought to do their share. Part of their strategy is to target the growing numbers of adult learners many of whom are employed, with a growing array of convenient, flexible, and low-overhead options, delivered in accelerated, hybrid, and online formats (Sandmann, 2010).

Yet, despite the increased flexibility of such offerings, many institutions, including traditionally oriented four-year colleges do a poor job of meeting adult students’ needs. Giles (2012), in describing the growth of adult degree programs describes them as “one of the most popular and successful innovations affecting private colleges and universities” (p. 45). Many of these institutions have built their reputations on attracting high-caliber traditional age students and serve them well in areas that include academics, athletics, and research, yet they have few notable (if any) accomplishments in meeting the needs of adult undergraduates (Hess, 2011).

One reason for this may be that many higher education institutions are simply ill equipped, lacking the experience needed to effectively serve this market, yet trying to take on its challenges before it has learned how. Giles (2012) likens this to “a retiree gaining custody of a two-year old” (p. 45). The metaphorical grandparent in this example needs to know more about the toddler in order to do an effective job in meeting his or her needs, just as small, four-year private colleges must know more in order to meet adult undergraduates’ needs. Making external changes through low overhead, convenient educational delivery models is not enough. Internal, infrastructural supports need building as well. Learning how adult (non-traditional) students make sense of their higher education experiences may be one way that private colleges can begin understanding adult undergraduates’ needs.

**Current Research**

Journal articles and book chapters on the topic of adult learners, adult undergraduates, mature students, and non-traditional students typically focus on several often-discussed concerns.
These include the educational landscape’s shift to becoming a market oriented endeavor (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007), adult learners’ growing prominence on college campuses (Deggs, 2011), and the general lack of attention this group receives in higher education research. In their 2001 journal article, Sissel, Hansman, and Kasworm challenge the adult education community to “resist hegemonic campus policies toward adult learners” (p. 17). Sandmann (2010), in describing how adult learners are positioned in 4 year colleges and universities, calls “educational opportunity for all adult learners” as a social justice issue (p. 229). Some researchers simply want to know whether higher education for adults is on the right track with Coulter and Mandell (2012), asking, “Are we moving in the wrong direction?” (p. 40).

Research studies on adult learners have focused on their academic performance, disruptive behavior, enrollment, engagement, motivation, persistence, their perception about the risks of higher education, their self-beliefs, and their support systems (Baxter & Britton, 2011; Brown, 2002; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Dobmeier & Moran, 2008; Gorges & Kandler, 2012; Hayes, 2012; Kasworm, 2003a; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013; Wyatt, 2011). Other researchers have been concerned with adult students’ emotional challenges (Kasworm, 2008) and online experiences (Melkun, 2012).

It is clear just from this small listing, that the topics are wide-ranging and varied. Yet, studies of adult undergraduate identity are few, despite identity being a topic of research in studies of non-adult students. Two examples of identity studies that span time are Anctil, Ishikawa, and Scott’s (2013) examination of the self-determination factors related to learning disabled students’ academic identity development, and an early study (1981) by Burke and Reitzes (the former now a leading identity scholar) examining traditional age undergraduates’ sensemaking of their college student identity.
In contrast, when using the search term “adult undergraduate identity”, only two studies emerge most frequently in scholarly databases (e.g. EbscoHost, ERIC, and ProQuest) and Google Scholar. Both are by a single researcher, Dr. Carol Kasworm, retired Dallas Herring Professor Emeritus at North Carolina State University. She is regarded as a “leading authority on adult undergraduates in higher education” (ahea.org) with researchers citing her work in scholarly articles pertaining to adult undergraduates and adult undergraduate identity. In one of her more recent published studies on adult undergraduate identity (available in academic databases), Kasworm (2010) urges the “exploration of theory and understandings of adult undergraduate co-construction of various life role identities” (p. 157). The proposed study aims to do just that, perhaps bolstering adult educators, administrators, and higher education leaders’ knowledge about adult undergraduates’ college experiences and identity.

Identity

Shadden, in writing about individuals with disabilities, described identity as “quite simply who we are, and where we are coming from” (Shadden, 2005, p. 211). This simple definition seeks to explain a complex and pervasive aspect of one’s existence. In fact, the role of identity in shaping who and what individuals believe they “are” is a rich subject with its roots in developmental psychology and psychoanalytical theory. Much of the research on identity originates from Erikson’s model (1959) which described the lifespan as a series of (eight) stages, during which the quest for and reformulation of identity is ongoing.

For the preeminent psychologist and psychoanalyst Eric H. Erikson, best known for his stage theory of identity development and for coining the term “identity crisis” (Gregg, Sedikides, & Gebauer, 2011; Miller, 2011) psychosocial identity is central to one’s sense of self. According to Erikson, striving for identity is something that individuals spend whole lives in search of, in
order to know, “Who am I” (Miller, 2011, p. 148). Even Erikson, who described his own struggles with needing to understand his own, immigrant identity, older students enrolled at a traditionally oriented college might also feel out of place, searching inward toward the self, and outward, seeking others like themselves, to determine who they are, or where they fit within the social structures of their life and new surroundings.

Social Identity Perspective of Identity

The social identity perspective assumes that groups share a “psychological reality” (Abrams, Hogg, Hinkle, & Otten, 2005, p. 102) resulting from members’ identification with the group and their feelings of having a shared identity with others in the group. This feeling of shared identity however, exists only in the mind of its members, therefore the group is a perceived one, rather than a formal one, serving to reinforce both the individual’s and the group’s self-concept. It endures only as long as individual members, or the group as a whole, continue to share this feeling.

As such, maintenance of the group as a “subjective entity” (Abrams, Hogg, Hinkle, & Otten, 2005, p. 102) occurs as individuals within the group seek to retain positive feelings about the group itself and their affiliation. Group membership and positive associations with one’s group membership are often factors in one’s development of self-esteem and have demonstrated implications for one’s “psychological well-being and other outcomes” (Iyer, Jetten, Tsivrikos, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009, p. 708).

To bolster one’s group identification and to nurture his or her feelings about the group’s importance or distinctiveness, individuals regularly evaluate their group, identifying positive characteristics that set it apart from others, continually examining their own feelings about their individual membership and the group as a whole. Often, they do this by comparing their own
with other, similar groups (Hogg & Terry, 2000). For many, the desire to maintain positive affiliation with their group is a strong motivating factor in one’s maintenance behaviors, for unwilling (or unprepared) separation from the group has “negative consequences” (Iyer, Jetten, Tsivrikos, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009, p. 708).

Strong group identification subsumes one’s individual identity, “depersonalizing self-conception” (Hogg & Terry, 2000, p. 123), replacing it with a group one. As a result, shared reality with the group influences and even overrides, individual inclinations in favor of a collective response that is inconsistent with individual beliefs. Such intra-group responses are a result of “prototype based depersonalization” (p. 121) and can lead to feelings of “cognitive dissonance” (Glasford, Dividio, & Pratto, 2009, p. 415).

The use of prototypes to inform group behavior may explain the manifestation of groupthink, long associated with poor group decision making and sometimes-deadly consequences, as in the now infamous Challenger disaster. Hogg and Terry (2000) explain, “Groupthink may arise because overly cohesive groups choose highly prototypical and, thus, perhaps, task-inappropriate members” (p. 130).

Researchers have long sought to understand this dichotomy, the individual versus collective response, and the effect it has on group dynamics. They have used the Social Identity Perspective to further delineate and analyze specific aspects of groups such as, life cycle, identity, and influence, by expanding it to include a number of more narrowly focused theories. Most prominent of these theories are social identity theory (SIT) and self-categorization theory (Abrams, Hogg, Hinkle, & Otten, 2005).

Self-categorization, against the backdrop of social identity, produces group-based (or collective) behaviors. In fact, Hogg and Terry (2000) describe social identity theory as “a
platform” (p. 121) for an understanding of self-categorization for it takes into account one’s identity shift from individual to group member (Abrams, Hogg, Hinkle, & Otten, 2005). Researchers have used social identity theory to examine how interpersonal and intergroup relationships influence individual behaviors and in turn, group processes.

The following section of this literature review includes an examination and discussion of both theories. Consistent with others’ treatment of the two, it describes research in both areas from the level of the social identity perspective. From here forward, SIT and SCT replace the terms social identity theory and self-categorization theory (respectively).

**Social identity theory & self-categorization theory**

According to Hogg & Terry (2000), social psychologist Henri Tajfel originated the concept of SIT in 1972, defining it as “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (p. 122). Therefore, a key attribute of both SIT and SCT is the acknowledgement that the group has a pivotal role in shaping one’s individual identity, self-concept and in turn, his or her inter-group behavior (Glasford, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009; Abrams, Hogg, Hinkle, & Otten, 2005). While SIT has been described as focusing on the “group in the self” (Abrams, Hogg, Hinkle, & Otten, 2005, p. 121), the relationship is more like a two-way street, with the group identification affecting the self and vice-versa.

Regardless, the group as an entity is an internal manifestation based on one’s feelings, and plays an important role in group processes; consequently, researchers have used SIT (and SCT) in a number of ways. They have studied its effects on, among other things, one’s feelings of achievement, affiliation, collaboration, decision-making, eating and health habits, inclusion, inter and intra-group relations, and motivation within groups (Abrams, Hogg, Hinkle, & Otten,
Others have used the theories to examine how individuals use stereotypes of others (categorizations) when processing and making sense of their whether in a smaller setting such as an office or school setting or in a larger one, as in an airport (Abrams, Hogg, Hinkle, & Otten, 2005). Stereotypes, both positive and negative, are especially influential in one’s processing of his or her racial and/or ethnic identity. Iwamoto and Liu (2010) examined the role of racial and ethnic identification on the psychological well-being of Asian students born in the U.S. and those studying in the U.S. They found a positive correlation between Asian students’ racial and ethnic identities, their Asian values, and low racist attitudes as having positive effects on health and psychological well-being (p. 4). Like racism, stereotypical attitudes and behavior affect those being stereotyped (including athletes and female engineers) including in terms of their feelings of self-confidence and performance (Abrams, et al.; 2005; Logel, Walton, Spencer, Iserman, von Hippel, & Bell, 2009; & Yopyk, & Prentice, 2005).

While none of the studies using SIT or SCT involved adult, non-traditional undergraduate students, several dealt with students in general. Iyer, et al. (2009) also examined the role of identity, specifically social identity and students’ identification with their intended university. They concluded that identification with the university was an important factor in reducing the negative effects associated with the transition.

Yet students rarely have just one identity. Even for those whose social identity springs from affiliation with the university, competing identities surface, and the one with which the student identifies most can serve to bolster or impede performance. Field and Morgan-Klein
(2010), focused on the concept of studenthood as it relates to adult students. They describe studenthood as being a transitional identity and conclude that it is both ambiguous and confusing. It overlays students’ other, past, or competing identities, and because of its transitory nature, is “a cause of discomfort, or as inconsistent with other established identities” (p. 4).

Another example of a strongly held identity is that of military veterans. In her research on student veterans, Smith (2014) describes her own experiences as a female veteran who had transitioned out of the military. Using intersectionality as a framework, she sought to understand the complex nature of identity for military veterans and the role it plays in their ability to transition to higher education. She describes the social constructs of the military, and higher education and describes the role of multiple social identities on veterans’ experiences in these spaces. The significance of Smith’s study was in its discussion of identity themes, including social categorization, the concept of “otherness” and marginalization, and her call for higher education institutions to improve its understanding of the student veteran; in order to promote effectiveness of veteran focused communication and policies.

Multiple identities are also the focus of Yopyk and Prentice’s (2005) aforementioned study wherein they examine the role of identity salience on math test and self-rating performances for student athletes with multiple social identities (e.g., race, gender, role – as in athlete or student). They found that students drew upon different identities when approaching the two tasks, depending on how they were primed to think of themselves (i.e. as athletes, students, or some combination of their race). Stereotypes and their perception by students (and others) were an additional factor.

For example, if a student is primed to think of him or herself as an athlete (while at the same time buying into the stereotypical notion that athletes are not strong academically) then he
or she might perform less well on an exam than if primed with the identity of an academically oriented student. This underscores the role of self-esteem in SIT, which is often characterized as an influencing factor for inter-group behavior (Abrams, et al., 2005). This may provide an explanation for why individuals continually evaluate the groups with which they identify, to ensure themselves of its distinctiveness and usefulness in elevating his or her social status.

As is clear, the underlying premise of SIT, that group membership and one’s positive feelings about group membership, plays a significant role in individual motivation, performance, and well-being, continues to be tested. Just as Yopyk and Prentice (2005) found correlations between these factors so too did Haslam, et al. (2009). They showed a positive relationship between social identity and health outcomes, with coping and social support as important factors in increased self-esteem, emotional control, and reductions in depression and anxiety.

**Adult Learners, Adult Learning, and non-traditional students**

The National Center for Educational Statistics, or NCES (2003), refers to adult undergraduates as being age 24 and older, and many colleges and universities follow this convention in their recruitment collateral. An Internet scan of higher education web sites substantiates this. In their analysis of the adult education literature, Donaldson and Rentfro (2006) explain that authors of adult education literature leave the definition of adult learner to the “reader’s discretion” (p. 2). In contrast, most authors of higher education literature rely on “the age criterion” (p. 2) with most using age 25, followed by age 24 to characterize adult learners (Donaldson & Rentfro, 2006; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). Yet, some researchers, including those in the higher education space, resist using age as a key factor in their categorization, pointing out that many adults as young as 18 work for living, and also have responsibilities for
dependents, while also attending school, two additional criterion used to differentiate adult students from traditional (Kasworm, 2010).

Sissel, Hansman, and Kasworm (2001), in describing how higher education has historically neglected adult learners, describe adult learners as being over the age of 25 (p. 17). Although they widen the scope of adult learners from those in credit bearing college courses, to those in non-credit bearing courses in community extension, or other programs, “the definition of adult is for the most part culturally and socially derived” (Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010, p. 14). Thus we may think of adult learners as “those adults who engage in learning activities that may promote any sustained change in thinking values or behavior” (p. 14). Knowles, Holton and Swanson (2005), define adult learning as “the process of adults’ gaining knowledge and expertise” (p. 174). Adult participation in learning is often self-initiated, leading Gorges and Kandler (2012) to describe adult learners as being self-directed and in control of “their engagement in education” (p. 611).

These attributes, autonomy, and self-directedness make their learning different from that which occurs for the traditional age student. Adults typically take charge of their own learning process, choosing what they learn and how they learn. Their motivation is different too, with adults needing to understand the relevance of what they learn to their own lives and practice. In general, their focus is on problem solving, and they wish to apply their knowledge immediately.

The terms andragogy and pedagogy distinguish adult from children’s learning, with each defined as the “art and science of helping” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 84). The difference in their definition is in who is being helped, adults or children. They also operate on different assumptions, including one’s readiness to learn, and his or her ability to take
responsibility for the learning process, and to apply that learning. Experiences and life stage
development are factors in these assumptions.

Thus, differences between adults and children require altogether different approaches.
Pedagogy, “the art and science of teaching children” (Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 2005, p. 61) is based on the teacher deciding what the student should learn and how, whereas in
andragogy, the student takes a more active role in his or her own learning. In pedagogy, the
student’s self-concept is that of a “dependent personality” (p. 62). In andragogy, the adult’s self-
concept is more complex. Adults have a desire and are ready to learn, and have a number of
experiences that may aid in their learning. They are also in charge of their own lives and desire
control of the educational experience. Yet some adults still wish others to teach them, just as they
had when young.

Having placed adult learning theory in context, and having established (from the
literature already reviewed) that social identity is an important factor in one’s self-esteem, self-
concept, having the ability to affect one’s motivation and performance; it is understandable that
some researchers have explored its impact on adult students. These (few) researchers examined
the role of identity in general, and student identity more specifically, as contributing factors in
adult, non-traditional students’ transition to, performance in, and satisfaction with their
educational experiences (Kasworm, 2010a, 2010b; Justice & Dornan, 2001; O’Donnell &
Tobbell, 2007; Wolf, 2009).

One group of researchers, Chen, Kim, Moon, and Merriam (2008) analyzed more than 25
years of adult learners as depicted in adult education journals, both “research and practice
oriented” (p. 6). The articles they examined covered adult learning related topics such as
instructional strategy and design, program development and participation, and general
commentary on learning or other miscellany. Overall, their findings showed adult learners as being a homogeneous and motivated group whose life stages motivate them to participate in education. This differs from Justice and Dornan’s (2001) study of the “Metacognitive differences between traditional-age and non-traditional-age college students” (p. 236) which found similarities in motivation. However, like Yopyk and Prentice’s athletes (2005), older women, in self-categorization tests, and due perhaps to their perceived identities, fared less well than their younger counterparts did.

There is little diversity of individuals described in the aforementioned studies. In fact, Chen et al., (2008) describe this as a problem in their study, recommending that future practitioners and scholars continue to conduct studies in this area, using a diverse pool of adult learners in order to determine the motivations of today’s non-traditional student. A contemporary focus on adult learners must also take into account that there is no “typical adult learner” (Pusser, et al., 2007, p. 4) therefore, additional studies require alternative approaches like that used by Wojecki (2007), who examined adult students’ narratives as a way of gaining insight about adult students’ experiences in vocational and workplace education programs.

Wojecki (2007) sought to understand the role of such narratives in student learning, and encouraged educators to consider the role that adult students’ learning stories, whether positive and negative, play in both developing and/or rehabilitating their learning identities. From Wojecki’s work, one understands the importance of narrative in adult education research, for there are similarities between adults telling and re-telling their learning stories, and the evaluative process used by individuals when categorizing themselves and others, and their social identities (Abrams, Hogg, Hinkle, & Otten, 2005).
Wolf (2009) too explored narratives in order to illustrate how women develop their social identity within the educational context. She cited the growing number of older adult women as potential learners and found that the women learners in her study, like the student athletes in Yopyk and Prentices 2005 study also contended with stereotypes, which can affect performance, self-concept, and relationship with fellow students and instructors. Wolf, in pointing out that women’s identity “seems to come from their colearners” (p. 57), reinforced the idea that one’s identity is comprised not just of the self, but also the group (Abrams, Hogg, Hinkle, & Otten, 2005).

**Relationship of Research Questions to Literature**

The different perspectives of identity as seen from the studies mentioned above include interactional, conventional (or positional) and perceptual ways that individuals think about and enact their identities. Therefore, in order to derive some understanding of the overarching question for this study, the researcher, analyzed responses to semi-structured, conversational interview questions, using the following analytical questions:

- How do adult undergraduate students describe identity?
- What characteristics and behaviors do adult students associate with the role of an adult college student?
- How do adult undergraduates describe themselves as compared to the characteristics and behaviors they associate with being an adult student?

The chart shown below (Table 2.1) shows the relationship between identity theory literature and the research questions that guide this proposed study.
| Table 2.1 – Identity theory: Overall Social Structural Approach – Stryker (1980) |
| Overarching Research Question: “How do adult undergraduates describe their experience as a nontraditional student at a traditional college?” |

| Identity theory Roots |
| From Psychosocial as *Identity* (Erikson, 1950) to Sociology/Social Psychology as *Symbolic Interactionism* (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1986) |

| Subquestion # 1: How do adult undergraduate students describe identity? |
| Perspective and Influential Theorist(s) | Key concepts of perspective |
| Interactional | Role Identity is idiosyncratic. The individual improvises role behavior and seeks support for idealized performances (McCall & Simmons, 1978) | Self is situational. People “act” out their *ideal selves*, to facilitate how they wish others to see them. They are “actors” performing multiple roles based on both societal expectations and their unique interpretation of the role(s). A hierarchy of factors, including role prominence, role support, and rewards/costs of the role, determine the role he/she deems as most important to enact. Related concept: *reflected appraisal* |

| Subquestion # 2: What characteristics and behaviors do adult students associate with the role of an adult college student? |
| Conventional | Role Identity enactment is tied to position within the social structure. Relationship with others while enacting a role determines commitment to the role (Stryker, 1980) | People act out role identities based on the shared meanings that society ascribes to the role. Social structures and situational circumstances determine the role(s) that individuals perform based on their internalized expectations of the role(s). A hierarchy of factors; one’s commitment to the role, the number of persons who know him/her in the role, and the depth of his/her relationship with others while identified with that role determine role salience. The more salient the role identity, the more likely it is to be enacted across a variety of situations. |

| Subquestion # 3: How do adult undergraduates describe themselves as compared to the characteristics and behaviors they associate with being an adult student? |
| Perceptual: Identity is a “set of meanings” (Burke and Stets, 2009, p. 49) that comprise control measures one uses to compare his/her behaviors against what they believe is the role (identity) standard.(Burke, 1980) | Meaning is associated with a particular role, and one’s own (and others’) perceptions of behavior expected of the role. Together, control measures (identity standard, perception, comparator, and behavior) highlight incongruence between role behavior and the identity standard. According to this view, individuals with high commitment to the identity will change their behavior in order to close the gap between the desired standard and their situation specific behavior. |
CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand the experiences of adult undergraduates attending a traditional private college. The following overarching research question guided this study: *How do adult undergraduates describe their experience as a nontraditional student at a traditional college?*

The researcher’s stated goal, to understand adult undergraduate experiences, provides a clue as to the Social Constructivist worldview that was the philosophical foundation that informed this study. According to Cresswell (2009) and (Merriam, 2009) this worldview is interpretive in nature, working on the assumption that individuals develop meaning of their experiences, including identity and sense of self, through their myriad interactions with others (Bardhan & Orbe, 2012).

Thus, Social Constructionism informed every aspect of this research project from its genesis to its conclusion. It influenced the researcher’s choice of method (qualitative), research purpose (to understand), research question (to describe experiences), the in-depth, in-person interview method employed (Seidman, 2006), and the type of questions (semi-structured). The choice of identity, the “phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society” (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 194) as a theoretical framework from which to analyze collected data, was also informed by this worldview.

This chapter will explain these factors, first describing the overall research plan and methodology, participants, recruitment and access, and then move on to the research questions. It also describes researcher role and background, data collection, data analysis, and data storage. It concludes with several illustrative passages from the researcher’s reflexive journal, describing
her ruminations about the research, including participants’ responses, the researcher’s own thinking and mindset, and her motivations for conducting this particular study.

**Overall Research Plan**

Leading research methodologists (Cresswell, 2000; Merriam, 2009) agree that a study’s purpose determines the inquiry methods, and that a study concerned with lived experiences is best served through qualitative research methods. Thus, a qualitative approach was appropriate for this study, aimed at understanding how adult undergraduates perceive their experiences at a traditional college. In fact, the central guiding question for the study demonstrates that the participants’ experiences, and how they interpret and make sense of them, are the main objective of the inquiry: “*How do undergraduates describe their experience as a nontraditional student at a traditional college?*”

The focus on getting at the “meaning and understanding” (Merriam, 2009, p. 14) of lived experiences from the participant’s point of view, is however, just one defining characteristic of qualitative research. Merriam (2009) describes three others that are agreed upon as key; the researcher’s role as “the primary instrument of data collection and analysis” (p. 14), researcher’s use of an inductive approach to analysis of the data (working with the smallest components and building up to uncover themes), and a final narrative product (i.e. story) that uses language and imagery in a “richly descriptive” (p. 14) way to present study findings.

Given these defining elements of qualitative research, a narrative approach was deemed appropriate for this study, because it required participants to tell their stories through “the languaged data” (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 138) of words. The section that follows describes the narrative research approach in greater detail.

*Narrative Research*
According to Clandinin & Connelly (2000), narrative as a form of inquiry, has a “long intellectual history” (p. 2) and may be traced to Aristotle's Poetics and Augustine's Confession” (p. 12). In fact, the use of narrative dates back to studies of sacred religious texts, including the “Bible, Talmud, and Koran” (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 1). Since those early times narrative became an accepted research methodology in the humanities, gaining even further popularity in social science research in the 1960s, an era during which John Dewey’s educational philosophies became influential. Dewey is known for his thinking that experience is a fundamental aspect of learning. His views on experience have been described as being the basis for narrative inquiry (Cresswell, 2009) because experiences occur in individual and relational contexts, and are shaped and reshaped within a time continuum of past, present, future.

Thus, according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), experience becomes “an inquiry term” (p. 2) that enables one to consider not just the object of the inquiry, but also related factors that effect it and shape its larger context (i.e. people, places, things, time). For this researcher, what this meant was that participants’ experiences were not to be examined as standalone events. Rather, they were considered and analyzed in light of the individual’s experience, the relational others that were part of that described experience, and the place in time (e.g. historical, future) in which the events occurred.

As just stated, experience and time elements are key factors in narrative as both a form of inquiry and as a methodology. Participants’ experiences were integral to their stories. Like others who have used the narrative method, this researcher understands that here, she has played a dual role, as both inquirer and as a “part of the experience itself” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 81). In the end, the stories that emerged from this study; the larger narrative, and the ones specific to each participant, resulted from mutual collaboration between the researcher and participants,
with each one reflecting the “views from the participant’s life with those of the researcher’s” (Cresswell, 2009, p. 13).

Narrative methods are especially suited to a study of identity, with Saldana (2012), describing it as “appropriate for exploring intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions” (p. 132). Narrative is a popular genre of qualitative research in education (Merriam, 2009) because it seeks to uncover and convey stories about “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 23). Thus, it was ideal for this study which sought to explore participants’ identities in relation to the social and cultural framework of their college experience.

In order to gather these data, the research used narrative research, the study of experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000. p. 189) in the form of unstructured interviews with open-ended questions. This aligns with Seidman (2006) whose in-depth interviewing approach offers a way to know participants and learn their stories. It is also consistent with Cresswell (2009) who advocated using “unstructured and generally open-ended questions” (p. 181). Cresswell also stipulates the number of questions needed to guide a qualitative study, as well as the importance of language used in formulating the question(s). He suggests a broad central question, followed by no more than several sub questions, advising qualitative researchers to “expect the research questions to evolve and change during the study” (p. 131). In addition to the more standard questions regarding participants’ background and observations, researchers are also advised to use “how” or “why” questions (Cresswell, 2009), or hypothetical, “what if” questions (Merriam, 2009, p. 91) in order to yield affective responses about experiences, feelings, sensory perceptions, and held values.
This qualitative interpretive study followed the recommended protocol, with questions that in the end, were effective in eliciting participants’ stories about how they made sense of their experiences at a traditionally oriented college. Their accounts formed “the narrative text of this research approach” (Merriam, 2009, p. 286) which captured the stories embedded within participants’ narrative of their college experiences. It proved to be an informative way to understand each of them, as they described, in their own language, what they experienced within the social structure (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) of a traditional college environment.

**Researcher Role and Background**

Qualitative, interpretive researchers are an integral part of the research process simply because the nature of their inquiry aims at understanding (Cresswell, 2009). Those that use the narrative method embed themselves even more deeply in the process. The researcher’s connection to and deep involvement with participants, and the analyses and interpretation of the text(s), shape the emerging stories. The very nature of qualitative inquiry relies on the researcher’s ability to discover various meanings from the data, eliciting participants’ interpretations along with their own, and to interpret the findings repeatedly, to see what “multiple views of the problem can emerge” (Cresswell, 2009, p. 176). Yet, despite the long-held understanding of the “human as instrument” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 183) concept, the qualitative researcher must also identify factors that might influence his or her “interpretation of the data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 219). Through the process of reflexivity, researchers can identify and confront possible biases or other ethical concerns that might affect the study.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note the critical role of the researcher’s experience in describing narrative, stating that such inquiries “are always strongly autobiographical” (p. 121). In fact, this researcher’s interest in adult undergraduates’ stories comes from having been an
adult undergraduate at a traditional college, and from her professional role as instructor and advisor of adult undergraduates at her alma mater. While this type of perspective is important in establishing credibility with participants, and in understanding context and interpretation of the data, the researcher also sought to avoid factors that might have compromised the integrity of the study. Therefore, the researcher sought participants from several institutions, thus avoiding “backyard research” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992 in Cresswell, 2009, p. 176), known to negatively affect a study’s reliability. Ultimately, participants were seven individuals from three separate institutions, including the researcher’s own, which mitigated the potential backyard research concern.

**Participants**

This study required nonprobability sampling strategy, “the method of choice for most qualitative research” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77) and purposive (or criterion-based) sampling, its “most common form” (p. 77) in order to recruit participants. The criterion established for the sampling consisted of four of seven characteristics ascribed to non-traditional undergraduate students, as specified in a 2003 National Center for Education Statistics report: over age 24, delayed entry to college from high school, financially independent and working part or full-time while attending college. An additional criteria that bounded the context of the study, is that participants needed to be attending a traditionally oriented private and non-profit, four-year college.

For this study, to assure variation, and later triangulation, it was preferable that students come from several different sites, but sharing some characteristics and experiences, such as type of school attended, and geographic location (Cresswell, 2007). Thus, purposeful selection, a strategy where individuals are “selected deliberately” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88) was used to
identify individuals that were best able to yield the “information-rich” (Merriam, 2009, p. 76) data central to the study’s purpose (Cresswell, 2007).

Finally, with only seven participants, their number was not large, and in fact, did not need to be. Cresswell (2007) noted “many examples” of narrative studies using “one or two individuals” (p. 126). He also stated that the size should be small enough to enable the researcher to collect adequate data from each participant, and that participants should share common attributes (e.g. being an adult undergraduate student enrolled at a traditional, private college, or living in a similar type of area). The participants for this study met these criteria.

**Recruitment and Access**

The researcher used a purposive sampling method to recruit participants from three colleges located in the Hudson Valley Region of New York State. The colleges were chosen because they were highly similar in that each was highly residential, each a four year, private and non-profit college, each relatively small in size (under 6,000 students) as compared to larger institutions, and because they would best yield participants meeting the sampling criterion described in the preceding section. The college locations were also similar in that each was located, in smaller communities located outside of large urban areas.

The researcher recruited participants by sending an email to those individuals at each college who, as part of their job, worked primarily with adult students (as advisors or some other administrative capacity). Each of these contacts in turn, sent a mass email directed to adult students, and attached to that email, a document from the researcher that explained the study and its criteria (see Appendix A). In that mass email, potential volunteers were asked to contact the researcher directly via email if they were interested. Once volunteers initiated contact in this
manner, subsequent communication was conducted via email and telephone conversations until the first face-to-face interviews.

The participant sample was convenient because proximity facilitated the researcher’s ability to conduct a series of interviews with each participant without extensive travel as an impediment. This geographic proximity to the researcher had been an important consideration because in a narrative inquiry, face-to-face interviewing is highly preferable, in order that researcher and participant develop what Seidman (2006) describes as an “I-Thou” (p. 95) relationship. One that is sufficiently intimate and personal over the course of the three in-depth interviews, while at the same time, maintaining important distance, so that the researcher and participants are able to hold and enact their separate and distinct roles.

This study met all Northeastern University Institutional Review Board Requirements and protocols for protection of human subjects, with IRB approval granted in February 2014. Copies of approved IRB forms are included as appendices to this document. For example, Appendix A is the Informed Consent form which explained participant’s right to refuse to participate or withdraw at any time during the study. To preserve participants’ anonymity, pseudonyms were used. The Data Storage section (below) addresses how the researcher maintained confidentiality of data and how long specific items were (or will be held) in locked and password secured storage areas as per IRB guidelines.

**Data Collection**

There are a number of ways that a researcher can collect the kind of data (e.g. quotes) needed to develop the “richly descriptive” (Merriam, 2009, p. 16) product that is the goal of a qualitative study. These include interviews, documents of many types (i.e. charts, records, and
photos), researcher field notes, and observations (Cresswell, 2007). The following describes the data collection methods used in this particular study.

In a narrative research study like this, where the aim is to hear adult students’ accounts of their college experiences, interviews that are “less structured” (Merriam, 2009, p. 90) are often appropriate. In fact, Seidman (2006) recommends that interview questions are open ended in order not to “presume an answer” (p. 84). Incorporating their suggestions, this researcher collected study data through semi structured interviews with participants and through compilation of her own researcher’s notes. Thus, research questions used to guide the inquiry were prepared in advance in order to elicit particular data from all participants, but were not written as a script needing to be followed in exact order. The notes were comprised of the brief annotations made on copies of the transcripts during repeated listening to interviews, through multiple readings of transcribed text and the researcher’s reflective memos.

The following section further describes the data collection process for this study. It describes how the researcher used Seidman’s (2006) three-interview series for formal data collection, and then explains the data analysis process.

**Interviews**

Seidman recommends that researchers learn participants’ stories through a series of three separate interviews, each 60-90 minutes in length; the first to share their experience from the context of their life history, the second to discuss in detail their experience as lived in the present, and the third to reflect on the “meaning of their experience” (p. 18). He suggests that these interviews occur with enough spacing in between to allow the participant to reflect on the prior interview without losing sight of it later, when the next one occurs. Yet he also acknowledges that researchers may have need to alter the “structure and procedures” (p. 21) as it relates to both
“duration and spacing” (p. 21) and describes an instance where his own research team needed to conduct all three interviews with a participant on the same day, with “reasonable results” (p. 22).

For this study, the researcher conducted four interviews with participants as follows:

1. Interview one was conducted by email and telephone to gather preliminary qualifying data from the prospective participants after they had contacted the researcher stating their interest. The further purpose of this first interview was to verify prospects’ qualifications for inclusion in the study, describing what their participation entails, and explaining what signing the consent form means. The researcher followed these conversations by emailing consent forms to the interested parties, and then followed up with an email or telephone call to determine the participant's interest and his or her understanding about the study, the consent form, and any other questions he or she may have. This first interview was important because it served to establish valuable rapport with those who asked to participate in the study, positively setting the tone for a possible researcher-participant relationship. As a result, when meeting with them in person, typical awkward steps of getting to know someone had been eliminated, perhaps promoting participants' openness to "share with me what they are saying" (Merriam, 2009, p. 106). Thus, having already been introduced ahead of time (although sight unseen), the first face-to-face meeting felt like picking up a conversation that was already in progress.

2. Interview two was conducted face-to-face and focused on learning about the participant’s life history. After having already verified their willingness to participate in the study through email and telephone contact, this next step entailed meeting each participant individually, in person, for a face-to-face, pre-arranged interview. At each
of these meetings, the researcher met prospective participants at a quiet place of their choosing, on their campus or off. As they had agreed via email or phone, each one came prepared to his or her meeting with the signed consent form. After collecting signed consent forms, the researcher asked participants to fill out a demographic information form, asking each to choose a pseudonym to use for the study. After each chose a pseudonym, the researcher again reviewed details about the study, reminding participants they could withdraw at any time. After asking each participant if he or she was willing to be recorded, and securing their assent, the researcher recorded the interview. After proceeding with the background questions, the researcher paused the recording, and before proceeding with what Seidman (2006) describes as the current lived experience interview, the researcher again informed each participant that he or she could withdraw at any time. Again, each one stated their willingness to continue, after which the researcher resumed recording and moved on to interview three.

3. Interview three was conducted right after interview two, on the same day. The focus of this interview was the participant’s present lived experience as an adult undergraduate at a traditional private college. After this interview was completed, the researcher explained that she would contact participants for a follow up and final interview. The total combined time for interviews two and three were between 60-90 minutes in duration.

4. The fourth interview where participants reflected on the meaning of their experiences was conducted separately, and included participant’s review of their transcripts and the researcher’s initial observations. Here, participants shared additional thoughts and
clarified, or concurred with the transcripts, thus member checking the data. Each of these interviews was between 30-45 minutes in duration.

The following Table 3.1 is a graphical depiction of the above described process:
Table 3.1
Summary of Data Collection Plan via semi-structured interviews using Seidman’s (2006) three-interview approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHASE</th>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preliminary contact</td>
<td>Contacted potential participants (via email and/or telephone)</td>
<td>Made preliminary notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collect preliminary information and establish Initial Rapport</td>
<td>Send IRB forms and study information to participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Set up interview time and locations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview # 1 G4ather</td>
<td>15-20 Minute recorded interview with each participant to gather demographic information</td>
<td>Made brief notes on paper while conducting interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>demographic information</td>
<td></td>
<td>Kept note-taking to a minimum to assure attention to participant was maintained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview # 2 Background and Semi-Structured (main) interviews</td>
<td>Followed by 60 minute semi-structured recorded interviews</td>
<td>Verified transcripts against audio recordings for accuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews conducted face-to-face</td>
<td>No new questions asked or new data obtained - however some participants wanted to elaborate on some of the stories as part of the review (reminiscences, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview # 3</td>
<td>Sent transcripts to Rev.com service</td>
<td>Made brief notes on paper to capture these</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conducted 30 minute, final member checking / follow up interviews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conducted face to face, transcript and theme verification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Left clean copies of transcript with each participant for further member checking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis Overview

Researchers suggest a number of tools to aid in the analysis, coding, and interpretation of the extensive qualitative data associated with narrative studies. These include reflective memos, notes in margins of text, spreadsheets, and Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software, such as NVivo, MAXQDA, or HyperRESEARCH (Cresswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009, Saldana, 2012). Here, the researcher used both deductive and inductive approaches as described by Cresswell (2009), Miles and Huberman (1994) and Saldana (2013) to systematically organize and analyze the data.

For example, the researcher used the identity theory literature to deductively derive initial themes that could be used to organize the data within participants’ interviews. These initial themes included motivation, resilience, and self-concept, each of which is a factor in identity. Inductive analysis was accomplished through the researcher’s read through of each transcript, and the manual process of line coding each case (individual interview), using colored highlighters to mark each passage of phrase that represented a particular aspect of identity. For example, motivation was green, resilience was blue, and self-concept, yellow.

The chart below shows the three early themes along with a few examples of quotes.

Table 3.2 – Early themes to literature and data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Themes</th>
<th>Representative samples of literature (and authors) from which themes were derived</th>
<th>Examples of participant statements that illustrate their connection to the themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Motivation     | Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 2005; Kasworm, 2005; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Oyserman & James, 2011 | Andre: *I will always have a vision that I will always keep striving, so I’ll continue to pursue my degree, and get my education*  
Kay: *I was really looking forward to just coming and just soaking up all of this information.* |
| Resilience     | Kasworm, 2008; Levin, Montero Hernandez, & Cerven, 2010; Munroe &                | Frank: *I've always said that the first thing is I'm going to get that degree ...*  
*Even if I'm in a wheelchair give it to me.* |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Concept</th>
<th>Pooley, 2011)</th>
<th>Kay: <em>Nothing can stop me, I can do anything I choose once I know what to do</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
|            | Kasworm, 1980; Oyserman, 2001, Serpe & Stryker, 2011 | Kay: *My spirituality has a ... is a big part of who I am. Me being the eternal optimist, I always think I can handle it, no big deal.....I’ll come back tomorrow*  
Rose: *There’s a certain sensibility that comes from being raised working class...more purposeful, a deeper reason to be here in some ways rather than to have a social experience or to do it because your parents want you*  
Virginia: *My parents are so proud of me. They didn’t really support me going back to school because I didn’t do very well before. They’re so proud of me, adding “my friends are really proud of the things I’ve done.* |

Analysis also entailed the researcher making purple and red colored ink notations in the margins of the transcript copies to capture her personal thoughts about the data so she could reflect upon and interpret its “underlying meaning” (Cresswell, 2009, p. 186). Throughout these processes, the researcher iteratively read through the texts, identifying “in vivo” (Cresswell, 2009) codes, determining higher level categories and themes, and aligning the data with the research questions. For this qualitative study, the researcher utilized all of these tools; reflective memos to capture ideas and thoughts during the various research phases, shorter notes in the margins of text, spreadsheets to draft data display tables, and HyperRESEARCH software for in-vivo coding.

The researcher’s deductive and inductive analysis processes enabled her to scrutinize code and derive themes from the data using steps described by a number of experts (Cresswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Saldana, 2012). Using the steps described above to code, categorize, and interpret the data, the researcher engaged in the repetitive process of sorting the data from its lowest levels to higher
order ones which Cresswell (2009) describes as “increasingly more abstract units” Cresswell, 2009, p. 37). He explains that this is a “bottom-up” approach (p. 37) which requires multiple rereading of all of the data, including transcripts, researcher developed interview summaries, and researcher’s notes. His and others’ recommendations were followed with the aim of finding participants’ stories as imbedded within the texts, and interpret their meaning.

The chart below shows key steps taken using Miles and Huberman’s approach:
Table 3.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of Data Analysis using Miles and Huberman’s (1994) approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data Reduction Steps</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upon receipt of transcriptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher read each typed transcript twice without attempting to organize the data, in order to get a sense of the whole interview. Then ---------------------------- →</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upon the third reading, the researcher chunked (Miles and Huberman, 1994) the data from each interview for further coding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Throughout, the researcher selected from the large amount of data collected from interviews and other field notes, narrowing them down to manageable form from which themes, patterns and concepts emerged.  ---------------------------- →</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher verified against the audio recordings, listening and reflecting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The researcher closely read the raw text, “cleaned” it, printed new copies and then read through again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----→ Using clean copies of transcripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher reviewed each transcript, reviewed field notes, looking for statements, phrases and passages related to identity themes from the literature (motivation, resilience, self-concept)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Output was emergent themes evident in each of the seven narrative cases</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Display Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Researcher arranged data visually in order to “see” associations between the themes that emerged from the reduction process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example: ------------------------ →</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The researcher used color coded highlighters to distinguish common ideas across the participants’ interview data (For example, motivation was green, resilience was blue, and self-concept, yellow).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example: ------------------------ →</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The researcher wrote participant summaries (shown in chapter 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tables using columns and rows to sort.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The researcher prepared a table showing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary of Data Analysis

Overview

Semi-structured interviews, along with researcher field notes, were the primary sources of data for this study which employed data analysis strategies from several established qualitative methods. According to Watt (2007), choice of qualitative analysis method is “up to the individual” and “unique to the project” (p. 82). For this study, I applied aspects of Miles and Huberman’s (1994) recommended three-step process for qualitative analysis; concurrently reducing and displaying data, implementing recommendations made by Cresswell (2007) and Saldana (2013), to code and analyze the data thematically (Riessman, 2008). Consistent with Seidman’s (2006) example however, this researcher suspended the in-depth analysis of the data, drawing and verifying conclusions until after all of the interviews were complete, transcribed and verified.

Miles and Huberman’s (1994) three-step process was implemented in a manner very like what Cresswell’s (2007) describes as a data analysis spiral (p. 151). Through simultaneous, iterative processes, the researcher managed the data, organizing, reading, making notes, reflecting, and working it into categories that could be interpreted, and finally presented in this document. Cresswell does point out however that each researcher and each study ends up being

| (like using a chart or graph for numbers in a quantitative study) Example -------------> | Identity concepts and their relationship to the analytical questions |
| The researcher reviewed the data, developed themes, and upon saturation, derived and verified conclusions | Cross case analysis of codes, and their occurrences across all cases |
| | Combining and consolidating codes into themes |

**Drawing and Verifying Conclusions**

The researcher reviewed the data, developed themes, and upon saturation, derived and verified conclusions. Cross case analysis of codes, and their occurrences across all cases. Combining and consolidating codes into themes.
unique, with “analytic procedures that evolve in the field” (p. 150) where researchers “learn by doing” (Dey, 1993 in Cresswell, 2007, p. 150).

In narrative research, analysis methods also vary in form and practice, although they do hold the participant’s story as the most central aspect. Thus, at the heart of the data analysis process is the importance of using in-depth descriptions that situate events and other details as conveyed by participants in the final representation. Suggested ways to do this include relating participants’ experiences chronologically, locate epiphanies, and interpret the “larger meaning” (p. 156) of their stories.

Throughout the researcher needed to be mindful of the sociological contexts (Saldana, 2012) of these stories keeping them intact. This aided the researcher in gaining a preliminary understanding of how adult students enrolled at traditional private colleges understand and manage identity. The development of such stories is especially meaningful, and perhaps as Riessman suggests (2008), may be far reaching, and effective in “creating possibilities for social identities, group belonging” (p. 54).

For this researcher, the analysis process did indeed “evolve” while working to retain participants’ voices and tease out their stories. The analytical steps that comprised the data analysis, reduction, display and drawing and verifying conclusions are shown below.

**Data Analysis – using inductive and deductive coding methods**

As stated above, qualitative analysis of data (interview transcripts, researcher notes and reflective memos) generally followed Miles and Huberman’s three-step method of concurrently reducing, displaying, and drawing and verifying conclusions in a spiral, loop-like process. Therefore, many of the steps described below, such as reading, chunking, and coding, although listed sequentially in this document, did in fact, occur in tandem.
The researcher used both the literature and the data (interviews and field notes) to derive codes. For example, when formulating interview questions, the researcher had already identified key concepts from the identity literature to derive themes that aided the chunking process. Examples of these included resilience, motivation, and self-concept. Pre-establishing codes (or themes) in this way is common in qualitative research and thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008), particularly in qualitative health related studies (Cresswell, 2007).

To begin, recorded interviews were transcribed using Rev.com (www.rev.com) and the returned text documents simultaneously read through and verified (by the researcher) against their audio form. This allowed the researcher to clarify those areas of text marked by the word “inaudible”, clean the data to remove extraneous text (i.e. um, uh huh) and determine that no significant statements had been omitted. After reprinting clean copies of the transcripts, another read through while listening to audio followed. After the verification process, the researcher again read through the transcripts, without making notes or coding in order to get a “sense” of what the participants were saying.

Next, the researcher did the following:

1. Prepared a summary document of the participants’ interviews and set this aside. It was used later to include in Chapter 4.

2. Using another set of clean copies of the transcripts, the researcher reduced the text, “chunking” or categorizing the data into groups according to themes from the identity literature (as described above).

3. Inductively coded (manually) the chunked transcripts and set them, along with notes on margins and other reflective writings aside. This became useful later when comparing
and contrasting in-vivo codes from all sources to identify areas of similarity. This is described in more detail in the Data Reduction section below.

4. Although chunked data had been manually coded (step 3) the researcher wanted to ensure that the coding had been comprehensive, while at the same time, not wanting to obsess over achieving a quantifiable amount of codes. Cresswell (2007) addresses this concern, acknowledging that Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest code counts and their frequency, but points out that “counting conveys a quantitative orientation” (p. 152), that might suggest that all codes are weighted equally in importance, and could be misleading. He then states that while he does find counts useful in his analysis that he does not “report counts”. Knowing this alleviated this researcher’s obsession with counts, however to assure validity, she also inductively coded fresh, unchunked transcripts using HyperRESEARCH software in order to find “additional codes”. As she had done in step 3 (above) with the chunked data, the researcher comparing and contrasted in-vivo codes to identify areas of similarity. This is described in more detail in the Data Reduction section below.

Moving on, the following section describes the specific coding steps used with both the clean copies of the chunked transcripts, and the clean copies of each full (unchunked) transcript.

**Data Reduction**

Coding consisted of multiple rounds of working with two sets of transcripts, full unchunked transcripts, and those that had been chunked using codes from identity literature. Unchunked transcripts were coded using HyperRESEARCH. Chunked transcripts were coded manually (see steps 2 and 3 above). In each instance, the researcher iteratively read/reread data to derive codes. In-vivo coding promoting integrity of participants’ voices (Saldana, 2012). The
rounds of coding of data entailed a close read of each transcript, and the in-vivo assignment of a corresponding “word or short phrase” (Saldana, 2012, p. 91). During this phase, and in fact, throughout the entire data analysis process, the researcher applied a constant comparative method (Merriam, 2009) to examine both codes and themes within and across interviews.

As stated previously, HyperRESEARCH was used, chosen after several attempts to learn and use other programs (i.e. MAXQDA and NVivo) proved daunting. Interestingly, although Cresswell (2007) had stated that counting codes was unnecessary, the researcher felt compelled to note that she had identified 343 separate codes from the unchunked transcripts alone. These were then compared and contrasted, pared down to remove duplicates and similarities, reduced in number, and grouped into themes and categories.

**Data Display**

Miles and Huberman (1994) state that data display as an integral part of the analysis process, pointing out that the effort of developing displays is in fact, a process of data reduction. The purpose of displaying data visually is so that the researcher, having organized the data in some fashion, can see what the data represents more clearly at a more abstract level, as opposed to being buried in detail. To develop that abstract view of the data for this study, the researcher created a number of hierarchical, matrix type displays using Microsoft Word and Excel, creating tables and laying out columns and rows in which to sort the data.

As is common in research, some of these first efforts were incomplete or poorly executed. Some were abandoned and others modified as the researcher applied examples from Cresswell (2007), Miles and Huberman (1994), and others before selecting formats that proved useful. Cresswell explains, “The researcher will not know what approach to use until he or she starts the data analysis process” (p. 171). This was indeed true for this researcher, who employed several
methods early on in the analysis, including a chronology and plot structure approach, as well as a three-dimensional approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) throughout. While every display method is not included in this final document, their use however, did help the researcher to clarify her ability to “see” the data and the stories that emerged much more clearly.

The following describes three types of data displays that the researcher used for this study. The first was to organize participant responses by the interview question (as described in step 1 of Data Reduction above). The second, with multiple versions, depicted the relationship between codes, themes and categories. A third type that proved useful in the researcher’s analysis was to use Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional layout, which Cresswell (2007) recommends as an option for narrative analysis and which, with its three broad components, interaction, continuity and situation corresponded to the individual, social and structural components of identity theory.

**Drawing/Verifying Conclusions**

The third step in Miles and Huberman’s (1994) data analysis approach is to draw and verify conclusions. As described in the data reduction and data display sections above, this third stream has been ongoing throughout the analysis, even Seidman (2006) who states that his “own approach is to avoid any in-depth analysis of the interview data until after interviews are complete” (p. 113) acknowledges that researchers are constantly thinking about the data as they process each interview. From the first look at the data, interpretations and yes, conclusions sprung to mind, however as Seidman and other experts note, these early judgments about the data and their meaning must be suspended until verified for validity. The process undertaken by this researcher to get closer and closer to themes, categories and final conclusions consisted of all
of the analysis steps described above. The specific themes and conclusions drawn from this study are detailed below, in their respective sections in this chapter.

**Researcher Reflexivity and Reflective Memos**

Watt (2007) describes reflexivity as being an “essential mediator in the research process” (p. 83). This may be because it allows the researcher to think critically about what he or she is thinking and doing when engaged in data analysis, and throughout the research process (Cresswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldana, 2012). Data analysis processes were described in detail above, and this brief section explains how in this study, the researcher engaged in reflective practices. For instance, before, during and after conducting interviews, the researcher jotted notes to self onto paper, computer, iPad, or smartphone, in order to capture immediate thoughts. While the form of these “notes” were varied in form, sometimes consisting only of words or phrases, or even “a sentence, a paragraph, or a few pages” (Glaser, 1978, in Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 72), they were a “sensemaking tool” (p. 72). Collectively they were useful, prompting recall about aspects of the interviews that would have otherwise been lost had only interviews been used as data. In conjunction with listening to and reading personal notes, personal memos nudged later recollections, helped focus thinking, and clarified ideas. Samples of this researcher’s reflective memos are included in the latter part of this chapter.

**Data Storage**

The stated required retention period for research data varies, with three years commonly indicated for funded studies (USDHHS, 2013). For this unfunded study, the researcher is retaining, and will destroy data per the following schedule.

Table 3.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Retention Period</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Final Disposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recordings of interviews (mp3) | Until final approval of thesis | Password protected (secure) USB disk in locked cabinet at researcher’s home | Destroy/shred
Signed Participant Consent forms | Three years after final thesis approval | A locked filing cabinet at researcher’s place of work | Destroy/shred
Personal notes and transcribed data | 10 years after final thesis approval | A separate, locked file cabinet (in a different location at researcher’s home) | Destroy/shred

**Trustworthiness**

Loh (2013), in describing the criticism aimed at non-positivist research approaches, (e.g. naturalistic and narrative forms of inquiry) points out that despite a multitude of researchers’ efforts to develop well-accepted standards for trustworthiness, only Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria seem to have stood the test of time, as the accepted standard for qualitative researchers. Their seminal work, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (2005), provides a series of steps whereby a qualitative researcher addresses the study’s credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, thereby demonstrating its rigor in much the same way that their quantitative equivalents, trustworthiness, internal and external validity, generalizability, and reliability serve quantitative researchers (Merriam, 2009).

Since Lincoln and Guba, there have been subsequent attempts to define uniform criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research however, the variety of its methods (e.g. case study, ethnography, narrative) continues to result in the inability of the “research community to develop a consensus” (Merriam, 2009, p. 212). Given the wide range of views held by qualitative researchers regarding validity, including Maxwell’s statement that “validity is a goal rather than a product” (p. 105), or Wolcott’s notion that validity is absurd (1994, in Merriam, 2009) many seem to agree that measures of trustworthiness depend on the nature of the inquiry itself (Cresswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009).
Maxwell (2005) goes on to describe validity as relative, “to be assessed in relationship to the purposes and circumstances of the research” (p. 105). Cresswell (2009) seems to agree, describing the ways that different perspectives on validity vary with the type of research (e.g. phenomenological, grounded theory, case study). Regarding narrative research, he explains the steps that researchers can take to develop a “good study” (p. 214). These include:

- A small number of participants (1-3, or larger, “to develop a collective story” (p. 126)
- Identify participant stories that relate to an important “issue” in his or her life
- Chronologically connects various “aspects of the story” (p. 215)
- Restories the original story and tells it in a “persuasive way” (Cresswell, 2009, p. 215)
- Uncovers broad themes for analysis
- Engages in reflexivity, bringing “himself or herself into the study” (p. 215)

The researcher followed the aforementioned guidance for the narrative study, and also Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) guidance regarding credibility. Chief among their recommendations is a continuous process of member checking as a way to determine whether the themes and interpretations the researcher has uncovered adequately express participants’ “own (and multiple) realities” (p. 314). They suggest ways to do this, including reviewing interview summaries with the respondents, or asking respondents to comment on the output derived from others’ interviews. Lincoln and Guba (1985) also recommend triangulation, “the use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators and theories” (p. 305). Multiple sources can be numbers of participants, as well as multiple ways of gathering information (e.g. interviews, artifacts, or verifying the same account via different means).
Another essential element in trustworthiness is that which the researcher establishes with study participants. Seidman (2006) states, “participants should know the full identity of the interviewer” (p. 63). Cresswell (2007) cites the importance of “building trust with participants, [and] learning the culture and checking for misinformation” (p. 207). The preliminary interview phase of the proposed research (described in the Data Collection section above) was the researcher’s opportunity to establish rapport with potential participants, to describe the study, its purpose and risks and benefits of participation, and to state that participation is voluntary and anonymous. In the first email correspondence prior to the study, and just preceding formal interviews, the researcher described her own background as an adult student, instructor of adults, and her personal and professional reasons for conducting the study. Furthermore, from her work, the researcher has an understanding of the social and cultural context of a private college. Combined with her personal experiences as an adult undergraduate, as instructor for same, and an authentic interest in listening to their stories, the researcher was able to build rapport with the study’s participants.

Ultimately, validity relies on the researcher’s personal integrity (Maxwell, 2005). The researcher collected data until it was saturated (Merriam, 2009), had several colleagues peer review the raw data to determine if the findings made sense, and through analyses, sought out data to contradict findings, all the while engaging in reflexivity to illuminate “personal biases, dispositions, and assumptions” (p. 219). Although the researcher suspended analysis of the data until after all interviews had been conducted (as per Saldana, 2012) it was clear that significant data saturation was achieved by the time the sixth and seventh interviews were scrutinized, for there were no longer any new emerging insights or themes.
Reflective Journals

As stated above an important aspect of validity is the researcher’s willingness to engage in reflexivity (Maxwell, 2005). In fact, according to Watt (2007), “Since the researcher is the primary “instrument” of data collection and analysis, reflexivity is deemed essential” (p. 81). Watt, whose account of engaging in reflexivity is a form of narrative, describes how, as a new scholar, she found reflective journaling as useful in making connections between her past experiences and her reasons for conducting her research. Like Watt, this researcher found that the act of committing thoughts to paper (or a computer screen) enabled greater clarity of thinking about the research. Here then, are three passages from the researcher’s journal that illustrate her ongoing reflections about the research, including her personal and academic reasons for interest in the research topic.

The first passage, describes a pivotal event from the researcher’s own experience, written when reflecting on statements made by participants during the semi-structured (main) interviews. For example, when Kay stated that she felt “less than” traditional age students, or when Rose described how, in her experience, in the classroom, professors don’t recognize or acknowledge her as being an adult student. The following passages are taken from the researcher’s reflective journal and the language in the researcher’s “voice”.

_I will never forget being in class with traditional age students, sitting with three other adult women students who were as actively engaged as I, yet having the professor take me aside later to ask that my compatriots and I tone down our participation, so that younger students could participate more. I remember being taken aback by his request, and diplomatically but firmly explaining to the professor that if the younger students wished to be successful in the workplace, _
that they would need to learn how to speak up for themselves, because a boss was not likely to intercede if they were unable to assert themselves on the job. I also remember my frustration that the professor did not even acknowledge my, and my friends’ in-class contributions in a positive way during our discussion. Instead I left that conversation with the feeling that my companions and I were simply an obstacle to his desired teaching approach. This is no different than what Rose is saying when she describes professors who teach only in one way, to one audience, to the masses, or would Virginia says when she explains that she always starts conversations with others with preface statements like, I’m an adult student, or I’m a returning student. It also reminds me of Kay, who feels that she is measured by the same yardstick as students much younger than she. Where’s the acknowledgment or recognition of their value as individuals who have lived interesting, sometimes difficult lives, and who have so much to offer others if only they had the opportunity to share these? They are not so old however regardless of the institution’s primary objective, to serve traditional age students; it is doing a disservice to mature students when it goes out of its way to recruit them and leaves them high and dry.

The following, another passage from the researcher’s reflective journal, was made when reflecting about the researcher’s professional interest in the study.

I spend every waking moment of my workday thinking about my adult students, thinking about the things that they share with me about how they feel they are treated by our institution, or even, sadly by some of the professors. Many of their stories are positive and they express great satisfaction in their experience, and
honestly, they sometimes exaggerate claims, stating that are treated like children, and how dare the professor speak to me like that? They come to me with all sorts of complaints about having to take a test, working in groups, too much work, etc. and sometimes I find it hard to keep my mouth shut and not say to them, “Well you are acting like a child, suck it up!” Yet, I also know that we don’t always do things right, in fact we probably miss more than we hit, and every day I am reminded of ways that external pressures (i.e. changing demographics, economic factors, technology advances) and internal ones (i.e. strategic goals, leadership) seem to dictate how we serve our adult students. At schools like the ones my study participants are attending, maybe it is easier, and perhaps more cost-effective, to place greater emphasis on serving the larger constituency, and if there are any resources left over, perhaps those who are in the minority may also be served. After all, isn’t that what Trevor said? I really hope that once I get this doctorate I can find my way into a job where I can be an advocate for adults, nontraditional students and is much as I hate administration and bureaucracy maybe I can find some way that I can still teach and also serve as an advocate for these guys. I think would be cool to be in a place that was truly committed to adult learners, and put its money where its mouth is and took the time to develop the infrastructure, and one of the resources needed to improve things for this group of individuals. Everywhere I look in the literature while I’ve been working on this project I see the numbers of adult students increasing, I see that statistics and other reports from the government sources talk about the fact that adults need to attain their degrees and that employers are demanding they do so. If that’s the
why is it that more colleges don’t seem to be doing what it takes? I would really like to be a part of some movement either in my institution or in larger context to develop and implement policies that can improve how adults are perceived on their campuses, provide education for faculty, staff, and administrators so that they understand the unique needs and concerns of adult students. I hope to find a way to incorporate these desires into the larger strategic plan for whatever institution I am at any given time.

The following passage from the researcher’s reflective journal describes her third motivation for embarking on this study, to satisfy an academic curiosity. Here again, is an excerpt from the researcher’s reflective journal that speaks to this particular motivation.

I love doing research as crazy as that sounds I actually love the research process. I think some of the difficulties I might be having with getting this thesis done however is that I love researching but I don’t necessarily find it easy to figure out what it is I want to do with that research. My capping students think I’m crazy because I tell them that the process of developing their 25 page literature review paper should be exciting to them because they get a chance to research a topic that they care about. Chris said to me that he couldn’t believe how excited I was about his topic and how in class, I seem to be excited about everybody’s topic. I think he found that odd. I guess what I try to tell them is that unless you find something you care about deep in your heart that you will never be able to get through the research phase, instead it’s going to feel like a long slow slog through a swamp. I really like working with the adult students because they kind of get it. They complain sure, they have meltdowns, which drives me crazy, but I
have to put up with all of it because in the end it’s my job to help them find that thing that connects them in some meaningful way to the research. In a way to good thing that I’m doing my own thesis because I have plenty of examples to give them about the challenges, frustrations, and the joys of the process. I always tell them that just being curious about something from an academic point of view is really cool. So somewhere, in my thesis I’m going to have to talk about some of the stuff so maybe writing down will help, but at the end of the day I think what really motivates me is the whole curiosity thing. I get frustrated because when I look at all this research on identity on adults about how education, etc. I wonder to myself while I’m not exactly the smartest person in the world what about the people who are in positions of power don’t they read this stuff or are they just responding to consultants’ reports about what direction the institution should be headed in. Why don’t more institutions use their faculty who are researchers to conduct these studies? Instead they pay some firm to deliver a report that, when I read it I think. I can’t believe you spent so much money on this stuff. I could have told you this. Maybe this research that I’m doing now could be something like that, something that can be used in someone else’s study and delivered to the decision-makers of whatever college thinks it needs change. So academically I guess I’m just plain curious and I want to continue being curious about identity. I remember that it was in Sandy’s class, maybe a group communication class, that I first stumbled upon this topic of identity, or actually, social identity. I still have that paper maybe I can turn it into something one day. At any rate just babbling
now but I think this study is just the beginning of what I will begin to do once I get this thesis out of the way.

In summary, this chapter described the overall research plan, its methodology, participants, recruitment and access, and research questions. It also discussed the researcher role and background, data collection, analysis, and storage and closed with several passages from the researcher’s reflexive journal.

In the next chapter of this document, the researcher describes research findings, beginning with a summary of the study’s context and a list of key terms and definitions. It also includes participants’ demographics and stories, emergent themes and concludes with a summary of conclusions from the research.
CHAPTER 4 - RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter is a report and discussion of the findings from a qualitative, narrative study of adult undergraduates students enrolled at traditional private colleges. The study’s purpose was to learn from participants, how they experienced identity as adult students at a traditionally oriented, non-profit, four-year institution. Seven individuals, ages 26-56, from this college type, located in the Northeastern region of the United States, participated in the study. Each one was selected because he or she met the study criteria; they were over age 24, enrolled at a traditional private four-year college, and were attending school while also working full, or part-time.

The theoretical framework for this study was identity theory, because identity is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Thus, its related processes (i.e. identification, categorization, and comparison) are significant influencing factors in one’s development and maintenance of relationships, with self and others (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For example, in education research, identity has been demonstrated to play a role in college students’ achievement, motivation, and self-concept.

The fields in which student identity has been studied also include fields such as psychology and sociology, with a wide range of identity sub-topics represented, including ethnicity, gender, national culture, race and lifestyle (i.e. drinking, drugs, smoking). Yet, most of these studies have focused on traditional age students, who comprise the majority at smaller, private, non-profit institutions, and while research on adult students does exist, those focused on adult undergraduates are rare. The goal of this study then, is to contribute toward the knowledge about adult undergraduates in higher education, add to our collective understanding about their identity processes and to fill an existing gap in the line of research concerning adult undergraduate students.
The overarching question guiding this study was: **how do adult undergraduates describe their experience as a nontraditional student at a traditional college?** Secondary, analytical questions informed the analysis of findings. These were: How do adult undergraduates describe identity? What characteristics and behaviors do they associate with adult student role? How do adult undergraduates describe themselves compared to those behaviors and characteristics? Study findings were analyzed in relation to these questions using concepts from identity theory (Stryker, 1980) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and this chapter provides a review of these.

There are three sections in this chapter: The study context, participants’ stories, and a summary of research results. To start, the study context describes the background of the research, definition of its key terms, and demographic information about the study participants. These stories are presented in section two, along with the themes that emerged from the ongoing analysis. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of findings from the research.

**Study Context**

According to Donaldson and Renfro (2006) adult students have largely been ignored in the research literature. Consequently, research pertaining to specific aspects of their experience, such as identity, has been rare (Kasworm, 2010). This lack of research is a problem given the current and evolving landscape of higher education, where adults, undergraduate and graduate, make up “38% of all students” (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2012).

Adult undergraduates age 25 and older are just a subset of this larger group. In fact, according to NCES data, of the full-time enrollment at four-year colleges, adult undergraduates comprise 70% (private, for profit), 13% (private, not for profit), and 12% (public), of all students. The numbers of those attending part-time is even more striking at 78% (private, for profit), 66%
(private, not for profit), and 50% (public). This study however is focused only on those students attending private, not for profit schools.

**Description of the Participants**

The following brief overview shows participants’ demographic information, providing needed context for the reader. The study, an examination of adult student college experiences, took place in late spring 2014, with seven participants from three distinct, non-profit, private, small to medium sized, liberal arts colleges located in the Hudson Valley Region of New York State. Each of the colleges is described as highly selective in *US News and World Report* (2013) rankings, with acceptances in the 24-37% range. While most of the undergraduate students at these schools are primarily of traditional college age (18-22), having recently graduated from high school, the participants in this study were older, working adults, ranging from 26-56 years of age. All but one was enrolled in college full-time while working in some capacity, full or part-time when first recruited for the study. By the time of the first interviews, only six of the seven were still employed. The seventh had just quit working part-time in order to focus on school.

The researcher felt a strong sense of rapport with the participants. From the initial conversations leading up to their participation, during the semi-structured interviews, and later when member checking, every one of the participants, in his or her own way, expressed interest in the study, in sharing their experiences, and in wanting to know its outcome and findings. Through their statements, it was clear that they wanted to share their experiences of being an adult student, in the hopes of their stories having a positive effect on other adults returning to college. Throughout the process, participants were cooperative, expressing their desire to be accessible, and willing to meet even beyond the planned number of interviews, if needed.
In order for the researcher to gain understanding of who they are as individuals, participants were asked to fill out a Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix D) where they provided their own pseudonym for use in the study (to protect their identity). They were also asked to provide age and marital status. On questions relating to gender and ethnicity, participants were asked to state that with which they personally identify. Their demographic profiles are shown in Table 4.1 (below).

Table 4.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Race / Ethnicity</th>
<th>Stated Gender</th>
<th>Birth Country</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Primary Language</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Student Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andre’</td>
<td>Jamaican</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>F/T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>U.S.A</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>P/T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kay</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>F/T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>U.S.A</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>F/T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>U.S.A</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>F/T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevor</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>U.S.A</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>F/T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>U.S.A</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>F/T</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Six of the seven study participants are between the ages of 26-32, and can be described as Young Adult Millennials (NCES, 2014), the oldest members of an age group comprised of those born between 1980 and 2000 (Green, Coke & Ballard, 2014). This cohort is characterized as having grown up with technology, who now, as adults, “will shop for the most relevant courses that meet personal needs of flexibility” (p. 87).

Using similar generational nomenclature, the remaining participant, is a member of the Baby-boomer generation; a group that spawned the term “nontraditional” when adults began enrolling in college in the 1970s (Green, Coke & Ballard, 2014). This is the group that “inspired much research on adult learning” (p. 85), resulting in the development of adult oriented options that are now virtually ubiquitous in higher education, including night and weekend based courses,
and accelerated and online programs (Green, Coke & Ballard, 2014). Described as “serious, task-oriented, dedicated to career achievement and very competitive” (p. 85), students of this generation continue to be a presence in higher education as they respond to economic pressures that require they delay retirement, and seek to maintain relevance in today’s workplace.

While participants’ self-described traits and characteristics might seem to be in accord with such generalizations about their age cohorts, the participants all had their own unique stories. From their interviews, the researcher was able to get a sense of what it means for each to have returned to school at this stage in his or her life and in particular, what it means for them to be an adult student on a traditional college campus.

Andre’

Andre is a 27-year-old married male who is employed full-time as a residential program specialist working with autistic individuals, while also attending college full-time. English is the primary language for Andre who was born in Jamaica, where he attended and completed community college. At 19, after receiving a scholarship, Andre’ planned to complete his bachelor’s degree at a New York City college; however, his plans fell through when he lost his sponsorship to come to the United States. He explains,

*I got a scholarship to attend a college in the city to complete my bachelors, but certain events took place. One of my family members then declined to provide me with the sponsorship to go to the college in the city. I had to start over.*

Starting over for Andre meant that when he did arrive in the United States two years later, that he would need to complete community college again, before he could pursue a bachelor’s degree. Afterward he chose to attend a four-year state university citing its financial affordability; however he describes his experience there as being “not the best” and the reason that “led me to
stop going” (to college). After a six-month gap away from school, with prior college transcripts taken into account, Andre enrolled as a sophomore, at his current institution.

Throughout the interviews Andre described that he had always had a long-standing dream to earn a bachelor’s degree, ever since he was a young boy, “in order to get where I wanted to be in life”. He recalled being age 14, visiting relatives in the United States, and walking on the campus of the college he is now attending, declaring to his friend and relative that this was where he wanted to go to college. In spring 2014, at the time of the interviews, at age 27, Andre was a senior preparing to graduate from the college he had long dreamt of attending. In a few short months, he would be realizing his dream.

Frank

Frank is a 56-year-old divorced male, with two grown children, and the oldest among the participants. Born in the United States, English is his primary language. He is employed full-time in the public sector as a state development aid worker, where he supervises and mentors youth aged 14 to 21 years housed in a secure facility. Frank attended college part-time at various institutions over a period of several decades. He recalls, “I first took classes in the 80s”, and explains that he had attended three colleges before graduating with an Associate’s degree. After taking a three-year break from school, Frank enrolled at his current college in 2012, as a full-time student in an accelerated Bachelor’s degree completion program.

When asked about his reasons for returning to school, Frank had initially stated that there had been no particularly significant life experiences that led to his decision. According to Frank, he simply acted upon learning about the program after attending an information session held at his workplace. He stated that the admissions representatives’ description of the accelerated program, to be delivered at his workplace, comprised of other state employees, sounded like
“something that I could do with my full-time work schedule”. When I asked again however, Frank explained “In my job, although I have a lot of experience, I could not move any further in terms of the ladder in my career without a four-year degree”. For Frank this meant that despite his many years of experience, without a Bachelor’s degree, management jobs would just be unattainable.

Frank described how good it felt “being with other students at my age that have families and similar jobs, careers, and things of that nature” but also described his struggles from the first course onward; with the online aspect of the course, the need to be adept with the course platform and related technology, and the accelerated pace. Over time, Frank found that his efforts to keep pace with the accelerated schedule, and workload demands made the program difficult. After a year, those struggles caught up with him and he was placed on academic probation. Not one to quit, or lose hope, Frank worked with his academic advisors to find an alternative schedule that would allow him to improve his grades and stay in school.

At the time of the interview (spring 2014) Frank, had switched from the accelerated program to a traditional 15-week semester program, requiring him to (now) travel to campus two days a week. Although this meant a four hour commute each of those days, Frank was upbeat when describing his new schedule. He was able to rearrange his work schedule to suit, and stated that the workload for the course was now “more manageable, or at least it seems that way because the turnaround for assignments is longer”. He stated being optimistic about his ability to complete his Bachelor’s degree. By the conclusion of our conversation Frank was describing his interest in following his undergraduate degree with a Master’s degree in Psychology.
Kay

Kay, a 32 year old female, born in Jamaica, is an Army veteran who attended several colleges, including a for profit online school, prior to, and after serving in the military. At the time of the interview Kay was enrolled full-time as a freshman at a small, suburban Ivy League college, living on campus, away from her family home several hours away. In describing a significant life experience that led to her decision to return to college, Kay said she needed to support her three children, explaining that she had been in “a marriage that was going downhill fast” and realizing that “if I didn’t get my life together, at some point I was going to hit a wall that I probably wouldn’t be able to recover from”.

Kay learned of her current college’s newly formed initiative to recruit veterans back to college campuses while searching for a job at a career fair. She was approached by a college representative seeking military Veterans who wished to return to college and for whom scholarships would be awarded. Recognizing a unique opportunity, Kay was determined to take advantage of the program. She stated that had it not been for the program targeted to veterans, and the scholarship, that she might never have dreamed of enrolling at her Ivy League school, much less been able to afford it.

Kay came to her current college understanding the significance of her opportunity and despite the sudden change in her living circumstances, of having to leave her children behind and separating from her husband, she was excited. She describes the experience of that first day

*I was really looking forward to just coming and just soaking up all of this information. But, once I finally got here and I saw how the classroom was structured, it was different from any other classroom I had ever been in because it was more conversational. That is … That’s one of my biggest sort of fears is public speaking and relationships. Each class was just this giant relationship, so it was just really complicated, when I first got here, to imagine myself succeeding*
Throughout the interview, Kay described her experiences that first semester, her anxiety and nervousness about public speaking in conversation intensive classes, being an older student, how it felt to leave her children behind in order to transition and become acclimated in the first year. She described what it was like being one of a group of individuals who, despite their small number (nine) and being part of the same incoming cohort, seemed to have nothing else in common. It seemed to Kay that members did not reach out to other members, and despite the hype of bringing in the first cohort of Veterans into this new program, neither did the college seem to promote shared activities.

Kay expressed having wanted connections in the beginning, include mentoring from her professors. Her desire for connections seemed informed by her being one of few older students, one of few Veterans, and one of few African American students on campus. She also spoke about perceptions, her own, and that which she ascribed to others, including her sense that some of the early possible opportunities to connect and form mentoring relationships with faculty, including African-American professors, had not materialized. She stated, “I almost wish I would’ve had more of a mentorship type of relationship with the professors here, especially the African American professors”. She elaborated further,

But, and I’m wondering if there’s something to what I’m experiencing also because in the beginning, some were very friendly. Now that the year has gone a little further, I don’t sense that they’re as friendly as before. Especially the African American professors, like I mentioned. So, I just wonder if there’s anything afoot in terms of perception, again. Maybe I’m wrong, but people are people, and so I try to …Let’s say, the African American professors, for example.
I can understand maybe some disappointment in seeing African American students, adult students, that we’re veterans, the whole 9, on campus and we’re not sort of producing at a level where African Americans need to in order to get respect, in a sense. So, I can see where there may be some disappointment there, and that’s only because I understand the nature of the community, the African American community. There’s lots of pressure there for the ones that can to do.

The above excerpt, along with the whole of her interview reveals a more complex relationship between Kay and her environment. Her age, ethnicity, and veteran status, whether sole factors or combined, placed her in the minority on campus, as did her world-view as informed by her socio-economic, marital and parent status. These factors combined made her story singularly unique among those told by the participants.

Nina

Nina is a 32-year-old Hispanic female whose primary (first) language is Spanish. Like the other participants in the study, Nina had attended several schools prior to arriving at her current institution in the spring of 2013. At the time of enrollment, she had been employed in the health care field, but stated being “unhappy with where I was at that time working”. Nina elaborated, stating that her dissatisfaction was not with the job itself, but rather, with “the environment of my job”. When asked about significant life experiences that might have influenced her decision to return to school, Nina, described having put off her education for marriage and family. Like Kay, Nina was also a mom, but with only two children. When explaining what led her to college at this time, Nina stated that she had always known that once the kids were older that she would resume her education, “I knew I was done having kids. It was now my time to go back to school and figure out my life”.
At the time of the interview, Nina was a full-time senior, having completed 15 out of 24-months in an accelerated, degree completion program for adult students. As someone with a strong interest in the medical field, who was working in the health care field, a Liberal Studies degree had not been her first choice. Prior to enrolling at her current institution, Nina had planned to enter a local community college in order to earn a nursing degree, however the program would have taken longer than she wanted. According to Nina, the time to earn the nursing degree time “was just too long for me”. Describing herself as someone who takes immediate action, who does not like to procrastinate, she characterized her decision to enroll in her current school and program as immediate and impulsive, “It was the perfect situation, the perfect time“.

From the interview it became clear that although her degree program had not been her first choice, that her college experience was positive in other ways. It had an accelerated, pace, appealed to her work ethic, and provided her with connection with others like her. This affinity for connections seemed an extension of her upbringing, with her family, and the concept of family playing a significant role. Nina’s family played an important role in her decision to enroll in college and it informs her approach to managing work and school. It is present in her recall of conversations surrounding her decision to postpone school initially, in order to raise a family, and the “joint decision” she and her husband made when she returned to earn her Bachelor’s degree.

She remembers her father giving advice when she first enrolled, “You have to remember, this is a marathon. It’s not a sprint”. She mentions the ongoing support from her husband and a cousin, who adjust their schedules to be at home when she must attend class. Her references to family also extend to her classmates, who are in the cohort based program with her, “We have
developed a relationship like a family, Dysfunctional but a family...Big events we celebrate with each other”. At the time of the interview, Nina informed me that she expected to graduate in summer 2015 and was already making plans to apply and attend nursing school at Columbia University.

**Rose**

Rose is a 28-year-old single female, born in the United States whose primary language is English. On the background information sheet (Appendix D) Rose described herself as employed “predominantly as a waitress while attending school full-time”. During the interview she revealed that she had just days earlier decided to quit her job in order to focus on college. At the time of the interview, Rose was a junior transfer student majoring in film production.

When asked about her past college experiences, Rose explained that she did not attend college after high school. In describing what she had been doing in the years before coming to her current school, she explained that she had wanted to avoid debt, and to be self-supporting, therefore, had worked “in all sorts of jobs” and doing “a lot of extracurricular things”.

Her life activities before coming to her current college consisted of many non-academic pursuits, including her involvement in the creative scene of her (then) local community. Rose considered such endeavors as learning opportunities, stating that she considered them as “part of my education”. Driven by the desire “to not go into debt”, Rose stated that she “worked all kinds of jobs” in order to support herself, thus, “it wasn’t until three years after high school that I first attended college full-time”.

Her first college experience was at community college. After graduating, Rose spent one semester at a private arts school before arriving at her current institution. When asked to describe significant life experiences that led to her returning to college at this time, Rose explained that
her many creative activities had led to her interest in film studies, which in part led her to her current school. Another key factor in that decision was her desire to be close in proximity to a relative who was dealing with health issues. Her current college location and its type, a small liberal arts based institution with an arts emphasis and film studies program, satisfied both needs.

During the interview, Rose described how needing to work affected her time at school. In discussing a mandatory three-day orientation during that first week of school, she stated, “I was working six days a week so I couldn’t even come to all of their required events. I was driving here, coming for a little bit”. She further described what it was like to be a working adult just starting school with traditional age students, and the effect working had on her schedule. She also described how students and college staff respond when they learn she has a job.

Yeah. I was feeling a bit hectic because I was literally racing to go right to work. I had to bring my work clothes with me to orientation and then leave early to get to work. It’s like having two different lives. It’s like you’re playing very different roles when you’re at school and when you’re at work. I remember I was the only person that had to go work which I was fine with, I like work. The person who is leading the orientation was surprised, “What? You’re going to work?” A lot of the kids that just showed up from …Yeah, like that was odd, or, “Oh! You have a job? That’s good for you. Where do you work?” They showed some interest. I was, “I’m just trying to pay the bills”.

She also described the effect of her age and job on her social life at school. It’s been difficult in a lot of ways because I haven’t connected socially so much with these other students. I haven’t been here a lot, I commute. I think just the social aspect is like I don’t really have a social community here. Everybody is
much younger than me. I can commute 40 minutes. I feel a bit out of place a lot of the time.

From her interview, it seemed that like Kay, that Rose’s world-view had given her a unique perspective on her current college experience, one that created a sense of cognitive dissonance. “For Rose, earning her degree was a certain goal, but at the same time, she felt that she was missing out on other experiences. Part of this stemmed from being at small college in a small town. When describing her college town, she stated “It wouldn’t be my original choice for a place to live. I tend to want to be more where there’s a bit more of a city or a community, things happening”. While at school, she felt as though she was missing out on opportunities, adding, “I almost feel that I’m out of the game”. “It’s like I’m not in the right place at the right time”. She used the following words to describe how being on campus, interacting with students and professors, while juggling a busy work schedule felt like, using words and phrases such as “a disconnect”, displaced”, “invisible”, “overlooked”. She also stated, “In many ways I think maybe I would be better off not in school”.

Like Kay, Rose, who “worked in so many different situations” having “traveled a bit”, been “raised working class” and “without very much money”, having supported herself since she was 18, factors such as her age, socio-economic status, and background results in her experiencing college in a unique way. She too presents a particularly compelling story. Rose expects to graduate in May 2015.

Trevor

Trevor is a 26-year-old single white male born in the United States whose primary language is English. Trevor describes going to culinary school at age 18. “I was really interested in cooking”. After graduating with a culinary arts degree, he “ended up getting a really good
internship at a resort in San Diego. I worked there, but then pretty quickly thereafter I decided I didn’t want to cook anymore”. After leaving the internship, he enrolled in a San Francisco community college taking “1-2 classes per semester, trying to figure out what I wanted to do education wise”. He then took “a couple of years off” and relocated to Los Angeles where his partner was to attend graduate school. There, he began working as a cheese buyer for a large, organic and health food supermarket chain and living with his partner, who was attending graduate school.

At that time, while working, he also took courses at a well-known, online division of a large, private university in the Northeast. He described it as a “good experience”, but “weird because I was at this large elite university and living on campus with her”. After she graduated, they moved east when his partner took a job at the college where Trevor is now enrolled. He stated “I was able to transfer here and be back in the classroom, which is nice”.

During his interview, Trevor enthusiastically described his journey from culinary school to his current studies. For Trevor, the transition to now being an adult student on a campus primarily comprised of younger students was “seamless”. Having been on the flip side during culinary school, as a young student among older ones, he now finds himself as the older student among younger ones. He stated, “Because culinary school tends to be older students. I was an RA in the resident hall and most of my residents were in their 30s or 40s... I was really used to being an anomaly, age wise, in the classroom”.

At his current school, “all of a sudden, I’m in Latin 101 with 18 year olds which is really unusual. Yet despite his student role, he interacts with individuals at the college as an adult because his partner is a college employee. He feels that in many ways, despite being a student that he is on equal footing with the adults on campus who are employed there. Unlike Kay and
Rose, whose adult experiences and adult roles outside of school seem to make no difference in how they perceive their treatment on campus, Trevor is able to have “that tangible sense of adult status”. Perhaps it was not surprising that when asked what might comprise an ideal experience for an adult student like himself at his school, he initially replied, “I honestly don’t know what I would change because I feel really supported”. Then he added, “I think if I didn’t have that I would wonder what community would look like for me. I think there would need to be something else. I think that community is very important in figuring out what that looks like for an adult student”.

Like each of the stories already described and Virginia’s below, Trevor’s story is also distinctive. While his experience as an adult student on a traditional campus seems to contrast markedly from Kay, Nina, and Rose’s experiences, his story is nonetheless unique. It seems to show what that experience could be like for adults, and how it could adults’ roles could be positively received and reinforced with some type of integration into campus life. For Trevor integration is facilitated by his partner. For others, it might require some other person, group or situation to provide that link. Such possibilities are explored in Chapter Five.

Virginia

Virginia is a 26-year-old divorced, white female, born in the United States. Her primary language is English. She attends her current college full-time while also working part-time as an assistant to a professor, and volunteer crisis counselor. Describing herself at that time as being “basically too smart for high school, she entered an early college program at her (now) current college just after her sophomore year of high school. She explained, “I left high school after sophomore year. I was accepted to…and attended two years of undergrad without a high school diploma before taking a break”.


She did not complete early college however, leaving because her “grades plummeted”, a circumstance she now attributes to several factors, including not knowing “how to go to college when you’re 16 and live by yourself”, being “assaulted by another student”, and having an “undiagnosed learning disability”. Between the time she was enrolled at early college experience and her arrival back at the same, and current school, she had undergone a number of life experiences, including traumatic and unconventional ones, and attended several colleges along the way.

She recalls being 18 and enrolling for one semester at a community college, but states, “I don’t even remember it”. She then describes having what “might’ve been a six-year break” from school, during which time she got married and divorced, worked, volunteered at a “made a lot of money”, and been “abused”, “raped”. She states that she had “a little bit of a checkered past” and recalls, “I definitely kind of just saw myself like a victim, a divorcer, and a stripper...because that’s what I was doing before I moved out here”.

When asked what significant life experiences influenced her recent decision to return to school, Virginia explained,

> What really did it for me, and the reasons why I really wanted to go to school, I decided that I... I had just left an abusive relationship. I’m divorced. My therapist suggested that I become...get my Master’s in Social Work and you know, to really start helping people. Something immediately clicked and I just went for it. Everything I did just changed.

Fueled by her newfound career and academic goals, she researched four-year colleges and graduate programs in the Northeast. She was specifically seeking smaller, liberal arts
colleges, located “*somewhere near where I might have some kind of friends or community*”,
*assistance for my disabilities*” and a “*smaller classroom setting*”.

She also set out improve her grade point average by taking courses at the local City
College where she was living, because she had “*really poor grades when I was first at school*”. She interviewed with several in the Northeast, including that which she first attended at age 16, and she investigated the possibility of attending one of two women’s only, small colleges. She applied to one that had a program just for adult women returning to school, but was not accepted. Her description of this school stood out in contrast with the experiences she describes as having as an older student at her current school. In describing the adult, women-only college, she stated, “*they have a whole house that you live in with older students, and they put you in classes with older students. They wear different graduation robes, and they’re kind of like this, you know, mythical, unicorn, older student*”. At the time of the interview Virginia was a first semester senior majoring in art history.

As their brief stories (related above) show, the seven participants are diverse individuals, from distinctive backgrounds, having had different life experiences and holding their own particular world view. Their stories are distinctly their own, yet they share one thing in common, they are adults, seeking to earn their undergraduate degrees at institutions that are relatively small, where older students are few in number. As such, they have a shared experience. Through their individual stories, and their own words, common threads have emerged as themes that connect their experiences. The following section describes these themes.

**Themes**

From the data analyses, using both inductive and deductive processes (as described in Chapter 3) eight themes within two categories emerged. Categories were based on levels of
identity processes as defined in the literature (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). The following is a paragraph that conveys the synthesized essence of the themes, which are discussed in more detail throughout this section.

Motivated by life circumstances, adult undergraduates at traditional private colleges are often grateful for the experience and opportunity to start over and develop affiliation and connections with others. Once there however, they may feel unsupported and marginalized by the institution, its members, and the environment. Possessing a strong sense of self, they persist in their goals, remaining hopeful of the future.

The themes that inspired the above statement were as follows: Circumstances, Motivation, Institution, Gratitude, Perceptions, Affiliation, Self-concept, and Goals. Each theme corresponds to one of two categories, Individual Context, or Social Context, because the underlying codes within the themes overwhelmingly supported a personal or social (relational) context of identity.

The following section provides an overview of each theme, followed by a table that displays participants’ pseudonyms, illustrative quotes from the interviews, and related codes.

**Theme: Life Circumstances**

Life circumstances played a large role in participants’ decisions to return to school. In their interviews, they described significant life events and challenges they considered or needed to overcome. Overall, key factors in their decision to return to school included background/upbringing, family, finances, past academic experiences, and jobs/work. Not surprisingly, some circumstances overlapped with others (e.g. family and finances, or finances, jobs). Some of the participants described having experienced poverty or some degree of financial strain (e.g. unemployed, low-paying job, no job). Background/upbringing issues included
domestic violence, poverty, rape, and substance abuse, while family issues revolved around children and divorce/separation from a spouse.

Financial issues were ever-present with every participant describing either the need to provide basic support for themselves, their family, or needing to pay for college in some way. To varying degrees, past academic experiences were also cited, with a number of participants describing poor previous academic performance, prior abandoned or failed attempts at past colleges (large, small, or online) and nervousness about their ability to handle workload or manage time. Some described it as a new or fresh start, either in their personal lives or in their employment situation. Jobs and work related concerns had to do with needing to leave a boss, change a job (e.g. career shift, follow a dream), and improve income.

The seven students attend three different schools; however Kay was the only participant from her college. Four of the students relocated geographically in order to attend school, one within the state, the others, across the country. Trevor followed his partner to her new job and Virginia set out to start over with a new chapter in her life. Kay too, was starting a new chapter, for she had never dreamed she could one day attend her college. Recognizing that she had a once in a lifetime opportunity, Kay left her children behind with her parents, embarking on a quest to begin building a new life for her family. For Rose, choice of school and studies will also help her to build a new life, one where her love of arts and community can come together in creating a collaborative community of artists that may one day inspire others.

While these four left home to come to school, they were not the only ones to travel a long road, whether through life experiences, age or other measure. Frank’s years of experience in the workplace, his role as parent to two grown daughters, and past academic and life experiences informed his desire to return to college, as did Nina’s life choices as wife and mother, setting her
own educational goals aside until the time was right for her, for her time. Finally, for Andre’
attending his current college was fulfillment of a long held goal, one formed when he visited the
United States while still living in Jamaica. In his interview, he described how he had walked his
current college campus over a decade before, stating to his companion; this is where I want to go
to college.

Each of the seven study participants came to their respective schools for a number of
reasons and because of a variety of life experiences that are intricately woven. For these adults, it
was not a simple, I want to go to college, where do I go scenario, but rather a complex decision
that needed to factor in a multitude of other considerations and other people. For these
individuals, the choices and decisions were not simple, and perhaps this researcher has only been
able to ascertain only a few of the circumstances that led them to their schools. The following
table with excerpts from the interviews illustrates some of these, gleaned from their interviews
and their told stories.

Table 4.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Theme: Circumstances - Illustrative examples</th>
<th>Related In-Vivo Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andre</td>
<td>My idea was, I would want to go to a college where I could at least take maybe one or two classes while I'm</td>
<td>Take one or two classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>working full time, so I won't put much stress on myself to complete all of my assignments, plus taking</td>
<td>Reduce stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>take of my personal life</td>
<td>Take care of personal life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>In my job although I have a lot of experience, I could not move any further in terms of up the ladder into my</td>
<td>Could not move up without</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>career without a four year degree</td>
<td>a Four Year Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kay</td>
<td>I had a marriage that was going downhill fast, and he wasn’t able to support the family, neither was I, on</td>
<td>Marriage downhill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>our own. We couldn’t do it together because he had a substance abuse problem. So, I realized, very quickly,</td>
<td>Need to support family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>that if I didn’t get my life together, at some point I was going to hit a wall that I probably wouldn’t be</td>
<td>We couldn’t do it together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>able to recover from. I had to take action fast</td>
<td>Hit a wall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wouldn’t be able to recover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I had to take action fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>I was very unhappy with where I was at that time working…in the environment of my job. My boss was like a nightmare If you don’t have your Bachelor’s degree….You really are low at the totem pole I really needed to figure out what I needed to do. I needed something that was … that in a way just as if it was made for my life</td>
<td>Unhappy in job and environment Boss like a nightmare Low on totem pole Need to figure out Made for me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>I figured that if I could live here and still pursue my undergraduate education…it had a lot to do with the location… they do have a very well-known filming program It is a good school … I have a relative who has had some health issues and I felt I needed to be living in … nearby</td>
<td>I could live here Well known film program It is a good school Relative with health issues Need to live nearby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevor</td>
<td>My partner …got a job…here. …wherever she got the job I wanted to follow her I plan to go to law school…get a PhD and hopefully teach at law school in philosophies. Something about how all those things come together and the foundational importance of liberal arts education.</td>
<td>Partner got job I wanted to follow Law school Teaching Importance of Liberal Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>I had just left an abusive relationship. I'm divorced. My therapist suggested…get my master’s in social work …to really start helping other people. Something immediately clicked and I just went for it.</td>
<td>Abusive relationship Social Work Help people Something clicked I went for it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme: Motivation**

The prior section contained a review of the key circumstances that led to participants’ return to school as adults. Yet, even in the presence of those compelling, and largely extrinsic reasons for returning to school, all of the participants indicated other underlying attitudes that motivated their wanting to complete their degrees, for choosing their school and degree type, or provided clues as to their resolute natures.

For example, Rose, whose world-view has been shaped by eclectic and wide ranging employment and creative pursuits, opting for a school where she could immerse herself in film studies aligned with her interests and goals. Yet, despite her belief that her choice of college had
been the right one, and that she was firm in her goal to graduate, she expressed ambivalence about being in school. She described weighing the “pros and cons” and how she had not yet been able to fully immerse herself in, or enjoy college life. She commuted to school, worked while attending classes, saw no other adults like herself, was not able to take advantage of lectures and other aspects of college social life, and furthermore, felt she was missing out on other, perhaps more valuable professional opportunities. This caused her to question whether college life was “feeding” her enough. Below she describes what it is like for her as compared to others.

I think maybe for other younger students, they can be in school all the time but they’re also, it’s a social thing for them. That’s part of the experience. For me it’s not, but I spend the most time at school. I’m almost like shutout from having those other experiences in a way.

Even so, Rose expressed satisfaction in a number of her courses, restated she had made the right choice and admired, empathized, and identified with others, particularly international students, who she felt had an even tougher time than she. She also stated that she had just changed her schedule, and quit working so she could start participating more fully in college life.

Having attended larger universities in the past, Trevor and Virginia expressed wanting to be at a Liberal Arts college, where philosophical and critical thinking were mainstays of the curriculum. Virginia described wanting to be at a “thinking school”, one where she could “be around people who are excited about ideas”. Throughout his interview, Trevor spoke of his passion for Philosophy, describing what it is like to be at a school where “everyone is reading Plato”. Even for Rose, studying film, there is a philosophical element that she appreciates. When discussing film making, she stated, “It’s like philosophy... It’s a lot about thinking, and thinking about...the decisions that you make and what you’re trying to communicate”. For others, like
Andre’ Frank, and Nina, the need to work full time and yet, quickly completing their undergraduate degrees was a motivating factor in their choosing an accelerated program.

For Kay, who separated from her husband and came to school in order to get her life together, motivations weren’t simply about financial or socio-economic gains. She needed to lift herself up from her feelings of depression and feeling defeated because of daily life struggles. She yearned to experience what “normal” people do, to “just be a student” to live a life like others, those “who have privilege or …who have generations before them that have been to college”.

Finally, determination and resolve is at the heart of many of their stories. They describe “being ready”, using phrases such as, “I’ll never stop”, “I can do this”, “I have to do this”, “I’m going to”, and the words “dream”, “strive”, and “vision” express what drives them. They talk about their excitement and passion for learning or subject matter, their hopes and their concerns. In addition, their caring for others, whether immediately or in the future was at the heart of many of their stories. This was a strong motivational factor that enabled their resolve.

While not every quote that relates to motivation and resolve are included, the below table provides a number of illustrative statements from their interviews that represent these elements, as told in their words.

Table 4.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Theme: Motivation - Illustrative examples</th>
<th>Related In-Vivo Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andre</td>
<td>I’ll never stop regardless of all the stuff that might have been true in my life. I will always have a vision that I will always keep striving, so I'll continue to pursue my degree, and get my education It was a dream for me ever since I was young I have more confidence…to know that I can achieve</td>
<td>I’ll never stop I will always have a vision I will always keep striving I’ll continue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>I've always said that the first thing is I'm going to get that degree ...</td>
<td>I'm going to get that degree Even if I'm in a wheelchair give it to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kay</td>
<td>Nothing can stop me, I can do anything I choose once I know what to do</td>
<td>Nothing can stop me I can do anything I was ready</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>I can complete this goal...I have to do this</td>
<td>I can complete this goal I have to do this I'm excited I want to give back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>It’s like Philosophy….It’s a lot about thinking and thinking about what</td>
<td>Philosophy Thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and what you’re trying to communicate</td>
<td>Put so much time Not sure it’s reciprocal Feeding me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I put so much time into this and I’m not always sure it’s reciprocal, if</td>
<td>Not sure if it’s enough Be more present Meet people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>what I’m getting out of it is really feeding me enough</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I recently changed my schedule so I’m not working right now with the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>intention to be more present at school…meet people.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevor</td>
<td>I love Philosophy and I’m definitely passionate about it</td>
<td>Love Philosophy Passionate Energized by classes Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>My therapist suggested that I become … get my master’s in social work</td>
<td>Helping people Motivated by fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and you know, to really start helping other people.</td>
<td>Had to do own work Growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I remember being so motivated by fear</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I feel I’ve had to do a lot of my own work…in being uncomfortable in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>situations, a lot of my own growth has come out of that</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Every decision I make is how is this going to affect people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme: Institution**

The section and table above described participants’ motivations and resolve. This next section however, will provide an overview of the role that the institutional factors (i.e. degree
program, college) played in their decision to choose their school. For examples, institution related factors include its reputation, campus, or social life. The table shows how these elements corresponded to participants reasons for choosing the college, or how they experienced it once there. Their statements about these factors which combine into the theme, Institution, yielded statements that provided insight to the importance of the aforementioned elements for participants in terms of their desired expectations before coming, or once they got to school. Their perceptions about these are captured in their statements and in their expressed feelings.

For example, for Kay, Trevor, and Virginia, the fact that their college was a four-year school, a smaller school, a Liberal Arts school was important, as was reputation. Kay described being “overjoyed” at attending “a really good school” yet being aware of her “position” and knowing the “significance” of her time at school. Trevor said his college was “prestigious” and “special”. For Andre’, even knowing college entailed “a lot of work” was a source of pride.

For many, the campus setting, or simply being on a college campus was worth noting. Virginia, remembers coming on the first day and thinking how unusual being on campus seemed. “Isn’t this novel, she thought, I’m parking in a college parking lot. I’m going to go into that college classroom building. It was very ... I don’t know. It seemed so foreign and exotic to me”. She observed that everything was “fancy and small”. Frank, Nina, and Rose expressed appreciation for their respective schools as being “attractive” or “beautiful’, with Rose noting the “architecture”, describing the location as “pastoral” while Trevor evoked imagery of scholars reading Plato on the “river”. For Frank, the campus was also “attractive”, “relaxing”, and “tranquil”. He stated, “I just like being on campus” and described how he even comes on days when he does not have school, just to use the library. Nina, who takes courses at a satellite
location, stated what it felt like to come to the campus that day for her interview, and to simply “be outside” and “walking around”.

These and the other illustrative examples shown in the table below shows, in their words, how participants conveyed what the college and its reputation means to them, and how some thought they might have once, now do, or someday hope to, interact with the physical campus environment.

**Table 4.4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Theme: Institution - Illustrative examples</th>
<th>Related In-Vivo Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andre</td>
<td>When I started the first course knowing that …is the name on the reputation of this school. Going into the program I knew it would be a lot of work</td>
<td>Name reputation of school A lot of work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>I just like being on campus. I don't know, it's more relaxing for me. The way that the library is laid out, I can actually go and spend hours there. Again, the campus is actually a very attractive campus, a kind of relaxing, it's almost like real tranquil for me.</td>
<td>I like being on campus Relaxing for me Attractive campus Tranquil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kay</td>
<td>That was my dream, “Oh, I just would love to go to a really good school I need this degree, definitely. I almost wish I didn’t, but I do. I realize that it’s important in how I’m perceived later on. I recognize the significance of my time here, my position here, and that also puts a lot of pressure on me. I was really overjoyed with being here I couldn’t imagine it</td>
<td>Really good school Need this degree How I’m perceived Significance Pressure Overjoyed Couldn’t imagine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>Just coming here today, and walking on the campus it was like, this is such a beautiful campus. It's so beautiful to be outside. It's just a feeling of, “This is my school.”</td>
<td>Walking around Beautiful campus My school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Yeah. I came over with a friend and we walked around and looked at… it’s very beautiful, this architecture</td>
<td>Walked around Very beautiful Architecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevor</td>
<td>Going to a school like this, it’s something I'm very proud of. I think the institution I go to is pretty prestigious and really special I really wanted to be somewhere that valued the Liberal Arts It looks like I was in Thomas Kinkaid painting.</td>
<td>I'm very proud Prestigious institution Really special Values Liberal Arts Thomas Kinkaid Painting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
was in the middle of summer and everything was really, really green. It was really beautiful and I'm born and raised in California, and had never lived anywhere but California.

There are not a lot of small liberal arts colleges on a river where people just read Plato. It’s very special.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Virginia</th>
<th>I was just so happy to be in a four-year school I wanted a liberal arts school Because this is… and everything’s fancy and small. I kind of wanted…to live on campus I kind of wanted to integrate, and be closer to the library</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>four-year school Wanted Liberal Arts Fancy and Small Live on campus Wanted to integrate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The preceding section described the importance of the institution on participants’ reasons for being at their college. It also described some of the ways that they perceived the environmental setting or the college reputation.

What follows below is an overview of how gratitude, as informed by students’ appreciation for their college experience, factored into their perceptions. These perceptions were about their daily interactions, whether in their courses, with professors, or on campus. While each participant comments on a different feature of college life, they each note, in some way, the value they place on it.

**Theme: Gratitude**

The majority of participants expressed being grateful for their college experience; for example, Andre, who is in an accelerated program, is part of a small cohort of students. He describes professors that “really do care” in order that students “get the best education”. He explains that this is different as compared to his prior college experience at a larger university setting, where he did not feel that support. Frank too feels he has more support academically since switching from an accelerated program to a traditional one, noting the benefit of “the
classroom setting and the slower pace on the campus”. Rose finds value in the creative aspect of her studies, where she has been able to get “a clearer appreciation of art” and “connect to a heritage and a lineage of the art form”.

Trevor also appreciates what school is doing for him, he described now being on a “trajectory” as he discussed his future plans to attend summer school and later, law school. Virginia spoke at length of her “personal growth” during her time in college, stating how happy she had been since the first day, adding, “I’m still just so grateful to be in a classroom and just so excited to be there”. She was not the only one who expressed her enthusiasm in that way. Kay also described being “excited” at the prospects for her future as she registered for courses on that first day, and stated that she was “overjoyed with being here”.

Yet not everyone was positively appreciative. Nina is one such example. In the previous section, her statements, “this is such a beautiful campus”, and “this is my school” do reveal the admiration and pride she feels in her college. At the same time, however, her statement, “I don’t feel that we get to appreciate it, really know about it, or anything like that” suggests that she is aware that she is missing out on an aspect of campus life that she would like to know. She adds, “I would like that”, stating her desire to want to be able to enjoy and appreciate that part of campus life.

The following table shows these and more illustrative statements from the interviews. As stated at the top of this section, they provide insight as to how participants’ gratitude has been informed by the things they appreciate, or would like to appreciate more, about college life.

Table 4.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Theme: Gratitude – Illustrative examples</th>
<th>Related In-Vivo Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andre</td>
<td>To know that wow, they really actually do care about making sure that we get the best education and making sure we do the work the right way</td>
<td>They really do care Making sure we get the best education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
instead of maybe some past experience where teachers would be like, "You didn't do that assignment? Okay, that's a zero."

Making sure we do the work the right way

Frank
I find that for me the classroom setting and the slower pace in the camp is better
I actually spend a lot more time on campus now. I come down on my days off; I spend the day a lot of times.

Setting
More time on campus
Stay at the library later
Come down on days off

Kay
It was pure excitement ... pure excitement; looking forward to a bright future. I just ... I mean, I was really overjoyed with being here

Pure excitement
Looking forward to bright future
Overjoyed being here

Nina
It's a beautiful campus. I don’t feel that we get to appreciate it, really know about it, or anything like that. I would like that

Beautiful campus.
Don’t really know it
Would like to know it

Rose
I think that being at ...and studying here is giving me is a clearer appreciation of art, like looking at things in a critical... I that I connect to a heritage and a lineage of the art form.
I feel good about the decision
It’s starting to have the benefits I had anticipated

Looking at things in critical (way)
Connect to a heritage
Feel good about decision
Starting to see benefits

Trevor
I’m very proud and I feel like I’m on a certain trajectory now that I wouldn’t be on if it weren’t for ...

I’m very proud
On a trajectory now

Virginia
I don’t think I was ever disappointed because I was so happy just to be in a four-year school.
It changes me every day.
I remember when I first came here; I wasn’t really able to read very well…
This is something I worked so hard for
I’m still just so grateful to be in a classroom and just so excited to be there

So happy to be in a four-year school
Changes me every day
Personal growth
Worked hard for
So Grateful
Excited to be in classroom

Theme: Perceptions

Psychologists have long noted the importance of gratitude as a factor in one’s well-being (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley & Joseph, 2008), therefore understanding what experiences shape participants’ feelings, as indicated in their statements in the previous section is important.

It may however, be even more illuminating to learn what other feelings, in addition to gratitude,
might be evoked from their college experience. The following section is an overview of how participants described what college feels like for them. While their stories are unique, they are all about perceptions, whether about campus setting and life, themselves, or others.

The physical college setting and the way they perceive it as older students came through in Andre, Frank, Nina and Rose’s statements. Andre’, who is in a small cohort setting, takes courses away from the main campus. He describes the setting as a “work area” where he is around other adults and away from traditional age students. For Andre’, being set apart from the mainstream students seems appropriate because “we’re all focused”. Frank, who had also been enrolled in an accelerated program, held at his place of employment, had by the time of the interview, transferred back onto the main college campus and traditional format. For him, this new setting and pace were more suitable, and as described briefly above, he enjoyed experiencing college in that way.

Kay, Rose, and Trevor observed that they were unlike students on their campuses, who were rich, having been raised under privileged circumstances, and while Trevor shared that his parents were now very successful, that early on, his mom had once been “on welfare” and his dad had “worked in machine shops”. He stated that he was a “first generation college student” adding, “What I’m doing is just a big shift from that world”. He described his worldview as informed by his age, life experience, and past job at an upscale supermarket dealing with “customers in the west side of LA that are really wealthy and really anxious about the cheese”. In describing school, he stated, “some of it is very silly like spoiled rich kids that are wearing all vintage clothing and living in squalor. For them it is exotic and they’re living out their fantasy”.

Rose, pointed out that “there’s a lot of kids that aren’t really working class here”, adding, “That’s not necessarily a bad thing, there’s lots of really sweet people that come from rich
families”. She however, describes herself as “working-class” and says, “When people are working class, I could tell”. She recalled that before she enrolled at her school, a professor had said to her, “Don’t tell anybody I said this - don’t go to ...It’s all these rich kids”.

For Kay, the difference between her background and students who came from a life of privilege, the contrast was felt. Despite her appreciation for being in school (as described in the Gratitude section above) she was working through how it felt to be at her college day to day. Like Rose and Trevor, who indicated that they had different “perspective” or “sensibility” than the “kids, Kay also felt the differences. She felt that other students could “not relate”. Kay perceived that, for them, college was simply a normal fact of life. It had not been that for her. She described almost feeling “ashamed” to be at school at age 32, as though she had “less value”. Despite having served in the military, raising three children, being a wife and mom, and her many other life experiences, now that she was at school, she felt the contradiction of being on “equal footing” with other students, “barely out of their teens”. She felt that she and they were measured by the same yardstick and described feeling as though there was a sort of “discrimination” because of that. In addition, because she saw no others like herself on campus, she felt alone.

Finally, for Nina, who did see others like her, and felt supported because she was in an adult only program, there were still perceived differences, only these related to student services that were unavailable for adult students like her, yet seemingly plentiful for traditional age students. For example, she takes courses at a facility away from the main college, one that is a part of the college, but leased, off-site space solely for adult and graduate courses. Thus, students at the facility cannot readily visit the bookstore, a place where Nina described wanting to go, “I
keep saying I want to go the store, the school store because I want a traditional ... sweatshirt”. I haven't done that yet because I'm not here on campus. Regarding college functions, she states

They have tons of functions for undergrad students. I don’t ever see functions for undergrad adult students. Doing something like that on the main campus would ... to just include us, not feel like a stepchild, Right now we’re outsiders, nobody knows we exist.

For Virginia, the differences between her and other students, was like Kay’s. Although age was a factor in each of their cases, that was not their only area of divergence from others. Both Kay and Virginia described backgrounds they perceived as being much different than that of other students at their schools. Kay stated that she felt other students could “not relate” and Virginia was hesitant to be open with others about her past life, stating, “I'm really afraid that they're not going to really understand where I'm coming...or that they're not able to talk about it”. Virginia also describes having felt like an outsider, despite originally having wanted to integrate into campus life. For her some of the early difficulties with being on campus stemmed from her feeling of not being treated like an adult, or recognized as a consumer of education. She recalled an incident on her first day, trying to meet with a professor in order to secure a place in her course.

The woman wouldn’t give me office hours. I ended up literally yelling at her. I was like, “What do you mean,” in front of the entire class because no one talked to me like that in a really long time, and you know, I used to have interns. I got offered positions with assistance, and you know; coming from the work world, I had never had anyone kind of not give me that time especially if it was, you know,
a way that I kind of think about my schooling here is my professors work for me because I'm paying them.

As is illustrated in their statements, participants are keenly aware of the differences between them and the majority student population, including how they and others think about college, the opportunity to attend, their experiences while there, and how their presence individually or as a group, is received by others, including the school. Participants experience those perceptions through others’ their treatment of them, at a personal or collective level. They also process their college experiences through a lens whereby they compare themselves in terms of attitudes and behaviors. The illustrative statements shown in the below table provide a little more detail about these.

Table 4.6:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Theme: Perceptions - Illustrative examples</th>
<th>Related In-Vivo Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andre</td>
<td>It's not really much like the traditional college, campus. It's more like a work area. We’re not around…the traditional students…We’re here because we’re adults We’re all focused…to get our degrees…to better our lives</td>
<td>Not like college campus A work area With other adults Focused Get degrees Better lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>I find that for me the classroom setting and the slower pace in the campus is better</td>
<td>Classroom setting Slower pace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kay</td>
<td>People who have privilege or people who have generations before them that have been to college, and there’s just this normal pattern to life…. I don’t know if people who live like that can even relate to what I’m saying I almost feel ashamed, and I feel almost like students look at me as though I have less value because I’m in my 30s They’re barely out of their teens, but we’re sort of on equal footing I feel that there’s just a vast amount of discrimination based on that I don’t see others like myself</td>
<td>People with privilege Don’t know if people can relate Almost feel ashamed Less Value Barely out of teens but equal footing Discrimination No others like me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>They have tons of functions for undergrad students. I don’t ever see functions for undergrad adult</td>
<td>functions for undergrads, Don’t see functions for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Trevor</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I almost feel that I’m out of the game. I’m up here on this pastoral liberal arts college very removed, very insular, isolated from the rest of real life. I feel I’m a bit out of touch with what’s really going on. There’s a lot of kids that really aren’t working class here. That’s not necessarily a bad thing, there’s lots of really sweet people that come from rich families.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Very few people have the opportunity to have this perspective on it… some of it is very silly like spoiled rich kids that are wearing all vintage clothing and living in squalor. For them is exotic and they’re living out their fantasy, whatever that is in With nontraditional students they could be more supportive…like financial aid My partner works in the administration… I kind of get to go home and feel like an adult too which is nice because I see both sides of things. Now that I have friends who are students navigating that can be a bit tricky.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I remember really feeling kind of like an outsider Everything I do here just seems to be untraditional. I'm like, I'm going against grain. They didn’t give me the time of day I don’t think they really understood where I was coming from being a returning student I find it a little hard to integrate here… I still do… &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of the game</td>
<td>Out of touch</td>
<td>Outsider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very removed, insular</td>
<td>Out of touch</td>
<td>Everything untraditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolated from the rest of</td>
<td>Not a lot of working class kids</td>
<td>Going against grain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>real life</td>
<td>Rich families</td>
<td>Didn’t give me time of day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>where I was coming from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hard to integrate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The preceding section on Perceptions summarized participants’ accounts of what college feels like. From their statements, we might begin to understand how their observations about their interactions with others, including the institution itself, might influence the strength of their feelings of affiliation with their college and with individuals and social groups. This section provides a synthesis of statements taken from six of the seven participants (Andre’, Kay, Nina, Rose, Trevor & Virginia) that corresponded to feelings of identification, perceived identification, and affiliation. There were no corresponding statements found in Frank’s interview responses.

Kay, Nina, Rose and Virginia all commented in some way about their lack of connection with the college due to their adult student status. For Nina, being offsite was an indication that as adult, she was not in the mainstream. Despite “paying all this money to go”, she was not able to avail herself of a typical college student experience, to go to the campus store and buy a logo sweatshirt. While this is the sole illustrative example used to support the affiliation theme, one is reminded of her earlier statements in the Perception section (above) regarding the lack of adult oriented events, and apply it to this theme as well.

One may easily extrapolate, thinking of additional examples to support how adult students’ ability to connect more closely with their college might be impeded (i.e. access to the physical campus library). Thus, it seems reasonable to draw from her statement that Nina might want to extend her feelings of affiliation with her college, beyond the strong bond she already feels with her student cohort in the adult only program. After all, she does want to buy a college sweatshirt, yet she is not easily able to come to campus and do what most college students do as
a matter of course, shop at the college store for cultural artifacts (i.e. a sweatshirt) that when worn, demonstrates not only her pride in her school, but her affiliation at group (i.e. alumni, student) and organizational (i.e. college) level.

Like Nina, Andre too finds satisfaction in identifying with his fellow adult students. Although he made no statements about wanting or needing a stronger affiliation with the institution itself, he did identify with what he characterized as adult student behavior, noting it to be more favorable than that of their younger counterparts. For example, adults are in college to “focus” while younger students “slack off”. This idea that younger students are in college less for the learning than for other reasons, is suggested in Rose’ statement (when describing her own motivations as a working class person), “There’s more purpose, a deeper reason to be here in some ways rather than to have a social experience or to do it because your parents want you to”.

Kay, Rose and Virginia came to college wanting to become a part of campus life and to connect with others. Kay had thought she would have this because she was part of a small group of other Veterans returning to school like her. Yet she recalled no efforts made by the institution to promote group social connections. Furthermore, it seemed that individually, neither she nor the other group members instigated such opportunities to connect. It does not seem surprising to this researcher that Kay did not initiate any contact with others however, because in her interview there were a number of times that she discussed her fear of public speaking and relationships. For example, when asked if she had any concerns about being back at school, she described being intimidated by the classroom seating arrangements, designed to promote conversations, stating, “That’s one of my biggest sort of fears is public speaking and relationships. Each class was just this giant relationship, so it was just really complicated”.
Social relationships were also hard for Rose to establish, not because of public speaking fears, but because of her job. As described in an earlier section, making time for social life was difficult (in part) for Rose to achieve because she was not on campus enough. “Working, I also miss a lot of the extracurricular benefits of college like guest lectures and being part of clubs or seeking internships”. She wanted connections, and to be around others her age or older. Yet, on campus, she found that “nobody would really know that I was much older”, that she “kind of mixed in” and “passed”. In her interactions with professors she felt “invisible”, “overlooked” and stated that it seemed that professors were “not aware” that there were older students in class.

Virginia also noticed that faculty seemed unaware of the adults on campus. She stated, “I wish there was a point person or kind of more of a dialogue on campus about being an older student, or some kind of program that was a little bit more integrated”. For Virginia, it was important for others to understand that not only was she a student, but she was an adult student with other life roles. The previous section (Perception) included her comments about expecting to be treated as an adult. For example, “My professors work for me because I'm paying them”. She also describes other ways in which she, as an adult student, is unlike the majority of students on campus. “I want people to know I pay taxes. I paid taxes for a while. I'm old enough to drink. These are things that people don’t think students are normally able to do. I'm divorced. I'm a normal person. It seems clear that she wants her identity as an adult acknowledged but she also wants others to know that does not mean she is different, but simply “normal”. She recalls a conversation with one of her professors who is younger than she.

I remember one of my first teachers here, I told her a little bit about the things I have done. She was just like... she was 30 or something. She’s like, Yeah, I went straight through school, and you’ve much more life experience than I do.
Even Trevor, whose affiliation with the college seemed to have been established seamlessly because his partner works at the school, recognizes that adult students are in the minority on campus. Yet, own his past experiences as the minority younger student among older ones at culinary school, and his current experience as one of few adult students on campus may have shaped a pragmatic view of the condition. He experiences relationships with staff, faculty and even the dean differently because he is not just an adult student, but he is also partner to a college staff member. As is seen from statements shown in his profile at the top of this chapter, things might be different for him, like it is for Kay, Rose and Virginia if it were it not for his affiliation needs being met by others’ acknowledgement and acceptance of his “other” role. Thus he seems to have a unique experience as compared to that of the other participants in this study. It seems to inform his view that while it would be “great if there were more, older students”, greater numbers would not change things at a college that is “predominantly more traditional students”.

The following table shows the illustrative comments I have just described and more.

**Table 4.7:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Theme: Affiliation / Connection Illustrative examples</th>
<th>Related In-Vivo Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Andre       | We're not around different type ... the traditional students  
We're here because we're adults. We're not a traditional student where we could maybe slack off or not be focused. We're all focused on one to get our degrees, so to better our lives. | Not around traditional  
Want degrees  
We’re adults  
Not traditional student where we could slack off  
We’re focused |
| Kay         | I’ve felt alienated from…group since the beginning, I’ve given up hope of there being any moral support or group mentality  
I almost wish I would’ve had more of a mentorship type of relationship with the professors here, especially the African American professors. | Alienated from cohort  
Given up hope  
No moral support or group mentality  
Mentorship  
With African American professors |
<p>| Nina        | “Yes, this is my school, this campus and it's a | My school |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Tags</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beautiful campus, but I'm paying all this money to go but I don’t get to really use it and utilize it,” I keep saying I want to go the store, the school store because I want a traditional … sweatshirt. I haven't done that yet because I'm not here on campus. I wish I could have as an adult…just being able to walk around campus in the grass, and experience the air, you know, in that aspect of it.</td>
<td>Paying all this money Don’t get to use it Campus store hard to get to Want a traditional sweatshirt Want to experience campus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>I think that the age thing is one … I think that professors getting to know us, it was definitely tailored around his expectations that we’re all 21 or 18 even They expect that we’re all partying and drinking and living on our own for our first time. There’s just not aware, the professors. I don’t know if they get a notice or that this student has a difference experience. They’re just talking to a class. They’re going to talk to what they know, have known the dominant group to be. I’d like to be around people more my own age or older. Actually, most of my friends are older than me. There’s just a bit of a disconnect to working with these younger students.</td>
<td>Age thing Tailored around 21, 18 Partying and drinking Living on own To be around people own age or older Disconnect to working with younger students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevor</td>
<td>It would be great if there were more older students here, but I think that can be hard to expect and I don’t really know how that would change things because I think in a school like this it’s going to be predominantly more traditional students</td>
<td>Would be great if there were more older students Hard to expect predominantly more traditional students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>I wanted an opportunity to even make friends or just be around people who are excited on ideas. I wanted a place that was going to be understanding of my experiences and the reasons that I wanted to go back to school. I wanted to live on campus</td>
<td>Make friends Be around people who are excited about ideas Wanted understanding Live on campus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme: Goals**

Having reviewed participants’ life circumstances, motivations, the institution and various ways in which they perceive their relationship with it (i.e. affiliation, gratitude), it makes sense to
now explore how participants internalize all of their feelings and thoughts into personal expectations and goals while in college and beyond. Whether intrinsically or extrinsically motivated, the following section provides an overview of how their “identity-relevant” (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2011, p. 385) choices shape their behaviors and attitudes in order to achieve their goals. Informed by their values, their behaviors indicate their level of identity commitment, and they articulated these in their interview responses as follows.

Every participant described in some way what they expected from themselves while in college or afterward, acknowledging the level of commitment and hard work they would need to put forth in order to realize a near, or long-term dream. In his interview, Andre repeatedly spoke about the idea of “hard work”, “being focused”, and working through various “steps to achieve”. Even Frank, who had struggled when he first came to school, wrestling with technology issues, time management, and other areas, started to describe toward the end of his interview the future possibilities that were now achievable since improving his grades. He recalled thinking that a Bachelor’s degree would be the culmination of his education, needed simply in order to advance in his job. Yet he described that he was now “looking forward”, envisioning another career with a Master’s degree in psychology, and noting, with almost a sort of wonder, that a former professor had offered to hire him as an assistant once he earns his Master’s degree. Such a possibility was not even in his line of sight before he returned to school. In fact he had thought that he would simply retire.

Kay, Nina, Rose, Trevor and Virginia all spoke about having longer-term goals to aid others in some way. Nina, having earlier explained that she comes from a “medical family”, had originally wanted to go to medical school before enrolling at her institution, and described her short term goal of getting into a nursing program at a prestigious college after graduating with
her Bachelor’s degree. She then added that wanted “to be a world healer”. Kay, informed by her own background, feels strongly about working in inner-cities, assisting youth in learning how to organize, develop, and strengthen their communities. She described wanting to do “exceptional work”, leveraging her media studies and public relations training to positively influence others, a la “Oprah Winfrey”.

Virginia, having experienced domestic abuse and violence, has channeled her empathy and compassion for others experiencing the same, by having volunteered for the past three years at a crisis center. She described how she wanted to continue that work in the future to ideally do “something along the lines of” being “a shelter director” or doing some public policy work. She enthusiastically describes herself as “going to save the world or something like that”. Trevor, whose experience and satisfaction with the social aspect of college, is different than that of other participants (because he is more engaged with both the student and adult population), described several times throughout his interview, how much he enjoyed his interactions with the younger students. He spoke about how it felt for him to see the younger students engaged in the learning process. He described not only his passion for the philosophies but wanting to be a teacher. Hence, his shorter term goal of heading to law school, for which he was preparing by planning to attend a summer college program in New York City. His goal longer-term is to teach at law school in the philosophies.

While these participants expressed clear short and long-term goals, Rose stated that she was open to possibilities. She felt that her education, coupled with her varied past work experiences will provide her with a grounding that would enable her to go into “a lot of directions”, stating “I don’t really know what that will be”. Even so, for Rose, who is inspired when working with others, and whose creative activities feed her soul, fostering collaborations
with others is an important goal. Thus she is firm in her conviction that whatever direction she goes in, she will strive to “be a part of a community of artists, filmmakers that are inspired and making work together”.

As can be seen from this summary of their goals and the following table with illustrative quotes, the study participants are driven by their vision of the future. They have described what they expect from themselves as they work to achieve the short term goal of graduating with a bachelor’s degree and what they expect as they move forward in their journeys, with most participants articulating their longer-term, or dream goals. Their statements indicate an unwavering commitment to their goals. Thus, they may, in identity terms, be described as having an “identity achievement” status, one characterized by holding fast to the “important focuses in their lives” (Kroger, and Marcia, 2011, p. 35).

**Theme: Goals**

**Table 4.8**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Theme: Goals – Illustrative examples</th>
<th>Related In-Vivo Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andre</td>
<td>I have an expectation that I have to work very hard I want to be very focused If you want to accomplish the steps you got to take and we have to do in order to achieve. It’s based on the fact that you’ve seen different professors…you like at them as…I want to do that also. I want to be like that.</td>
<td>Work hard Focus Take steps to achieve Want to be like professors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>I’m learning, I’m looking forward to succeeding I’m going to look into a Master’s program, and if not a Master’s program, another Bachelor’s degree and another career, Psychology</td>
<td>Learning, succeeding Get a Master’s Another degree Another career - psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kay</td>
<td>Kay Booth – The new Oprah, media mogul Kay Booth does exceptional work in inner city communities, showing youth how to organize their communities</td>
<td>Media Exceptional work Inner city Youth Organize communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>Now, my next goal is to get into …School of Nursing. I guess I would want...to be a world</td>
<td>Nursing School Healer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Ideally, I’d love to be part of a community of artists, film makers that are inspired in making work together. Really participating in a collaborative conversation with the viewer and with other collaborators rather than just being on your own making things. It’s more about the community. There’s a lot of things, a lot of directions you could go in. I don’t really know what that will be.</td>
<td>Community of artists and filmmakers Working together Collaboration Conversations Community A lot of directions Open to possibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevor</td>
<td>In 10 years following the track that I’m going to be…I’ll be in a law firm paying off my debts and getting ready to go into a Ph.D. program...because I plan to go to law school, work in a law firm, go back and get a Ph.D. and hopefully teach at law school in philosophies.</td>
<td>Law firm Paying off debts Get a Ph.D. Teach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>Something along the lines of director of shelter, aids, policy-affecting million. I don’t know. I'm going to save the world or something like that.</td>
<td>Director of Shelter Policy work Affect millions Save the world</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme: Self-Concept**

The earlier section introduced the term, “identity achievement” (Kroger & Marcia, 2011, p. 35), one of four ways that researchers classify individuals according to their level of commitment to an identity. The four classifications are “identity achievement”, “foreclosure”, “moratoriums”, and “identity diffusions” (p. 34). These denote where individuals fall on the commitment scale. For example, those highly committed are classified as identity achievement, while those with no commitment are designated as identity diffusions, with foreclosure and moratoriums between.

Of these classifications, only the term identity achievement is relevant to this section, because participants’ statements relative to how they think about themselves, how they perceive themselves as seen, or how they would like to be seen by others, and related other factors (i.e. self-efficacy, self-esteem) all play a role in where one falls within these classifications. As such,
individuals’ beliefs, actions and behaviors are inspired by their “strongly held values and clearly focused goals” (Kroger & Marcia, 2011, p. 35). What this means is that, as long as their goals remain realistic, achievers will endure, for they are “not easily swayed by external influences and pressures in their chosen life directions” (p. 35).

According to Bandura, 1997 (in Vignoles, 2011) “people with higher self-efficacy beliefs tend to set higher goals for themselves, try harder, and persist more when faced with setbacks” (p. 418). Andre exemplifies this. In describing the changes that he has seen in himself since he started school, he states that he is “more knowledgeable”, more likely to “take the lead” and that now, he believes that he can be a “mentor” to others. Persisting in the face of setbacks was certainly the case for Frank, who despite his struggles with technology, the accelerated pace of his courses, and academic probation, believed he could do better, and worked hard to demonstrate it. Perhaps his self-confidence, greater in non-academic areas, enabled him to know that it was not that he could not perform, it was simply that (had he possessed the required knowledge and skills), he “would have performed better”. Therefore, he decided to reset, focus on the problems, make needed changes, and simply persist. Having done so, his spirits were high. Not only because he was able to be present on campus, to use the library, but because he had taken control of the problem. As a result, with his new schedule and feedback from his professors, he was feeling “a lot more confident” about school.

As stated earlier, self-concept is derived from a number of things, including actions, behaviors, values, beliefs, and one’s perceptions of how they view themselves and others view them. For Kay, a number of factors contributed to her self-concept. For example, she described feeling that others’ perceptions of her were a “hindrance” in her life and when she spoke about her desire to help poor communities, it seemed that she was alluding to her own background,
coming from a large family living in the city, having been in the military, and struggling with marriage and finances. Therefore when she speaks about how others perceive her, and how “perception is so vital for poor people”, she is saying that it plays a role in how those who are disadvantaged financially think about their ability to achieve. She goes on to explain that for her, spirituality “is a big part of who I am” explaining that she an “eternal optimist” who believes that she “can handle it, no big deal”.

Others perceptions’ as well as her own play a role in Nina’s concept of self. In her interview, she described herself as an “impulsive” person, who is “OCD”, and gets “stressed very easily”. These terms relate to her feelings about school and the importance of earning “A” grades, which in her past college life she had not. Yet now that she was back in college and earning them, needing to get into a good nursing program, she is singularly focused on continuing to receive them, and her classmates know it. For example, she recalls classmates saying something like, “you need to shut up, because you’re going to get A. You spaz out every time. Relax yourself”. This exchange in her own self-description as OCD and stressed provide clues as to how she sees herself and how others perceive her.

Trevor in describing his perceptions of other students stated “they’re all brilliant and very mature” and “I’m kind of in awe of them” is able to acknowledge their strengths as compared to his own at that age, and still feel comfortable with them. Although initially worried about fitting in because he is “significantly older” then they, his own self-esteem seems not to be negatively affected. Rather, as we spoke, it seemed that he found their presence energizing and a source of his own motivation to someday teach. As one can see from these examples, perceptions can do play a role in one’s motivation, self-esteem and self-concept. Virginia’s self-esteem seems bolstered by the positive way her parents and friends perceive her. She glows, and is
almost in tears, when she states, “My parents are so proud of me. They didn’t really support me going back to school because I didn’t do very well before. They're so proud of me, adding “my friends are really proud of the things I've done”.

Perception however is not the only factor in self-concept. As stated above, one’s actions behaviors are also a large part of how self-concept is derived. Rose’s accounts of her many and varied work experiences, her having supported herself since she was 18, and her statement that her accomplishments have been “self-initiated” and “purposeful” indicate a self-concept that includes being someone who is self-sufficient, working-class, and having a broader perspective of the world from her life experiences. Like Kay, whose conception of her future self is as someone who will “help the downtrodden overcome”, Nina, Rose, Trevor and Virginia, also envision their future selves, Nina to heal the world, Rose to build community, Trevor to teach and Virginia to figure out how she can “help the most people”.

As was illustrated by the narrative above, self-concept is a complex construct that is comprised of a multitude of factors that reflect the ways that individuals know themselves including self-esteem, “self-image” and “self-feelings” (Oyserman, Elmore & Smith, 2011, p. 69) to name a few.
The table below listing participants’ statements about how they view themselves and others simply touches the surface.

Table 4.9:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Theme: Self-Concept – Illustrative examples</th>
<th>Related In-Vivo Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andre</td>
<td>My knowledge has grown where I became more feeling where I want more knowledge…looking for more clarification in certain stuff I might want to know how, did I perform…, maybe say be a leader like be like a mentor for someone. I would take the lead and try to lead by example.</td>
<td>More knowledgeable Seeking clarification Want to improve Take the lead Be a mentor Seen change in self More confidence I can achieve Just need opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>I'm also in academic probation, but this traditional class I like… I did have some health concerns. I did have some loss of hearing. I had some loss of hearing, some anxiety, I was also dealing with … which I have since addressed both of those issues Back then if I had a better … If I could master the technology better I would have performed better. I'm a lot more confident outside of my academic life than I am</td>
<td>Academic probation Health concerns Hearing loss Anxiety Addressed the issues I would have performed better More confident outside of academic life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kay</td>
<td>My spirituality has a … is a big part of who I am Me being the eternal optimist, I always think I can handle it, no big deal. I’ll come back tomorrow I feel like that’s what’s been my hindrance in life is the perception people have of me, Perception is so vital for poor people, poor communities to help get themselves … not just get themselves out of poverty, not just Band-Aid fixes. exceptional work in inner city communities showing youth how to organize their communities I would like to focus my life’s work…to help the downtrodden overcome</td>
<td>Spirituality Optimist Think I can handle it I keep coming back In a rush Other’s perceptions a hindrance Help poor communities No Band-Aid fixes Inner city communities Youth Life’s work Help downtrodden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>I’m a very impulsive person If I want to do something, I kind of have to do it. If I set my mind to do something I’m going to do it I am so OCD</td>
<td>Impulsive Have to do it Going to do it OCD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can’t handle last minute procrastination’</td>
<td>I get stressed very easily. Bring my expertise to people who need them around the world...to be a world healer</td>
<td>Not a procrastinator. Stressed easily. Share expertise. Be a world healer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>I’ve been supporting myself since I was 18 and the whole application processes, I didn’t have help from my parents. It was all self-initiated. There’s a certain sensibility that comes from being raised working class...more purposeful, a deeper reason to be here in some ways rather than to have a social experience or to do it because your parents want you to. It’s like you’re trying to prove yourself and you’re working with yourself. To be part of a community of artists, film makers that are inspired in making work together.</td>
<td>Supported self since 18. No help from parents. Self-initiative. Working class. Purposeful. Deep reason. Prove yourself. Be a part of community. Inspired in working together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevor</td>
<td>It’s a little weird because I was in a classroom with people who had been on high school 2 months ago, and they’re all brilliant and very mature and I’m kind of in awe of them because I wasn’t that way when I was in that age. I was a little worried that I wouldn’t fit in or like I'm significantly older by the time I graduate. I’ll be 28. I was really nervous. As it turns out, I get along really with everyone in there...almost everyone is 18 to 22. Get a Ph.D. and hopefully teach.</td>
<td>They were in high school 2 months ago. They’re all brilliant and mature. In awe of them. Worried about fitting in. I’m significantly older. I get along with everyone. Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>My friends are really proud of the things I've done. I meet different and new types of people. I think that’s just a complete and total world has opened up for me that was completely off limits before...Now, I'm just like, “I'm a student. I'm a normal person.” I feel normal again. Director of shelter, Aids policy, Affect Millions, Save the world. What can I do to help most people</td>
<td>Friends are proud. Meeting different people. Newly opened world. Student. Normal. Direct shelters. Aids Policy. Policies. People</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 4 – Summary

As explained earlier, the purpose of this narrative research study, was to learn how adult undergraduates described their experience as a nontraditional student at a traditional college. In order to find out, the researcher conducted semi structured interviews with seven participants attending private colleges that are traditionally oriented. All participants met the study criteria, consent forms were obtained, and face-to-face interviews were recorded and later transcribed using rev.com. Research data was then analyzed using manual and HyperRESEARCH software.

The first part of the chapter summarized the context of the study, reasons for the methodology, data collection and analysis methods, and offered narrative summaries to describe each participant. Eight themes that corresponded to two identity categories were derived. These are: Individual Context and Social Context. The themes that were grouped into one of these two were as follows: Circumstances, motivation, institution, gratitude, perceptions, affiliation, goals, and self-concept. Each theme was individually described in relation to participants’ statements, using language containing their own words and phrases. Tables showing illustrative quotes and their in vivo codes followed.

The following abstract, included at the top of the Themes section, summarizes findings, and also shows how findings link to the guiding research question for this study. RQ: How do adult undergraduates describe their experience as a nontraditional student at a traditional college?

Motivated by life circumstances, adult undergraduates at traditional private colleges are often grateful for the experience and opportunity to start over and develop affiliation and connections with others. Once there however, they may feel unsupported and marginalized by the institution, its members, and the environment. Possessing a strong sense of self, they persist in their goals, remaining hopeful of the future.
As can be deduced from the above, participants described their experiences through stories that corresponded to individual and relational processes. These were traced back to themes relating to their circumstances, motivation, institution, gratitude, perceptions, affiliation, goals, and self-concept. To provide further clarity of how the above findings described within themes correspond to the research questions and identity related concepts, the following table (4.10) offers a summarized view:
Table 4.10

Overarching Research Question:
“How do adult undergraduates describe their experience as a nontraditional student at a traditional college?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Key identity related concepts</th>
<th>Brief summary of findings that correspond to the questions and theoretical concepts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subquestion # 1: How do adult undergraduates describe identity?</td>
<td>Self is situational. People “act” out their ideal selves, to facilitate how they wish others to see them. They are “actors” performing multiple roles based on both societal expectations and their unique interpretation of the role(s). A hierarchy of factors, including role prominence, role support, and rewards/costs of the role, determine the role he/she deems as most important to enact. Related concept: reflected appraisal</td>
<td>Participants described their identity in terms of their roles outside of school, in terms of their activities and relationships prior to attending the current college. For example, Rose describes being financially self-sufficient, Kay and Virginia discuss their many life experiences (i.e. wife, mom, counselor). Each describes in some way, how these life roles and experiences have informed their expectations of how they wish to be treated, for example to have their “adultness” acknowledged, not ignored.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subquestion # 2: What characteristics and behaviors do adult students associate with the role of an adult college student?</td>
<td>People act out role identities based on the shared meanings that society ascribes to the role. Social structures and situational circumstances determine the role(s) that individuals perform based on their internalized expectations of the role(s). A hierarchy of factors; one’s commitment to the role, the number of persons who know him/her in the role, and the depth of his/her relationship with others while identified with that role determine role salience. The more salient the role identity, the more likely it is to be enacted across a variety of situations.</td>
<td>The characteristics and behaviors participants associate with being an adult student come primarily from their observations about their outside responsibilities, such as jobs, children, and spouse. Thus, the way they describe being an adult student is as someone who is juggling responsibilities, has little time to be on campus or to attend events, is giving back in some way (Rose, Nina, Virginia) and above all is persistent. They also describe being an adult student as someone who does not “fit” is outside the mainstream, and is not heard.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Subquestion # 3: How do adult undergraduates describe themselves as compared to the characteristics and behaviors they associate with being an adult student?

Meaning is associated with a particular role, and one’s own (and others’) perceptions of behavior expected of the role. Together, control measures (identity standard, perception, comparator, and behavior) highlight incongruence between role behavior and the identity standard. According to this view, individuals with high commitment to the identity will change their behavior in order to close the gap between the desired standard and their situation specific behavior.

When describing behaviors associated with their being an adult student, participants stated that they liked to sit in front of the room (Virginia), pay attention to the teacher (Andre’) and strive to get As (Nina). They state that they are here to learn, not wanting to part (been there, did that), and being appreciative of the experience as opposed to living some kind of fantasy life (Trevor), and also deriving benefits from the learning (Rose appreciating art, Trevor basking in philosophy, Andre’ and Frank, finding role models). Participants also expressed appreciation for the value of their life experiences before returning to college.

While the above table summarized at a high level, the relationship between the theoretical concepts and the findings, there is however, more to know about what this means for participants’ identity processes. Therefore, Chapter 5, which follows, describes the researcher’s interpretation of the findings shown in this chapter from the perspective of identity related concepts. It also offers conclusions drawn from the study, implications for theory and practice, suggests areas for future and continued research, and closes with the researcher’s reflections.
CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As stated above, this chapter describes the findings from the research (as discussed in Chapter 4) through the lens of Identity related concepts. It also offers conclusions drawn from the study, implications for practice, suggests areas for future research, and shares the researcher’s final reflective thoughts on this research journey.

This was a qualitative, narrative research study intended to learn how adult students described their experiences as nontraditional students at a traditional college. Qualitative narrative research was chosen as the most appropriate method to use for this study over quantitative means, such as those that use surveys or analyze data sets because such methods do not adequately capture participants’ recollections of their experiences. Furthermore, narrative was chosen over other qualitative measures (i.e. case study, phenomenology) because the data sought was in the form of participants’ stories and accounts. Personal stories provide ideal data for a study seeking to understand how individuals perceive and make sense of their experiences and “construct their worlds” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5) with education and health researchers, using this qualitative research method often.

To learn what they have to say, the researcher conducted semi structured interviews with seven adult students attending traditional colleges. Each participant met the criteria for the study which included being age 24 or older, attending full or part-time, and employed in some capacity. Furthermore they needed to be attending a four-year, private college that is primarily oriented to traditional age students under age 24. The researcher responded by email and phone to the potential participants who reached out to her via email, in response to a memo they had received regarding the study.
After the initial contact, where the researcher explained the study and its criteria, following with an email containing the consent form for their review, potential participants agreed to meet the researcher individually, and to bring the blank consent forms and any additional questions they might have about the study to that first meeting. It was agreed that if participants wish to participate in the study, they bring their signed consent forms to that first meeting, where demographic information would be requested, preliminary background questions asked, and interviews conducted. All interviews were conducted in person, face-to-face with each interview session lasting between 60 to 90 minutes in duration.

Once initial transcripts had been transcribed, the transcripts and the high-level themes that have been derived by the researcher up to that point, were reviewed with each participant in another face-to-face meeting. These final meetings were between 30-45 minutes in duration, resulting in some additional data collection in the form of field notes as the researcher and participant reviewed the transcripts, and clarifying thoughts were shared by participants. Afterward, the researcher left copies of the transcripts with participants requesting they contact her with any additional comments or corrections. None responded with corrections. This may be because the transcripts had been reviewed in detail with each one, or because participants became busy with the close of the spring semester.

The formulation of the guiding research question, how do adult undergraduates describe their experience as a nontraditional student at a traditional college, was informed by concepts drawn from Stryker’s identity theory (2008) and Turner’s (1979) self-categorization theory. Initial codes used for data analysis were derived from the identity literature (see Chapter 4 for more detail about this). In addition, the researcher coded data both manually and using qualitative software (HyperRESEARCH). Eight themes emerged from the first and second cycle
coding (circumstances, motivation, institution, gratitude, perceptions, affiliation, goals, and self-concept). These eight were then grouped into two identity related categories, Individual and Social. An interpretation of the findings is included in the following section.

**Interpretation of Themes**

As stated above, data was analyzed and reduced from the bottom up, from codes into themes, and then grouped into two categories (individual context, social context) which corresponded to identity processes. Motivation, resilience, and self-concept were several early themes that were common to all participants’ responses, however as data analysis continued, statements about resilience aligned more closely with themes of self-concept. As the process unfolded, newer themes also began to emerge.

Interpretation of the findings from this study yielded three conclusions that are supported by participants’ stories, highlights of which are described via their own statements in Chapter 4. The findings are also more clearly understood when considered from the perspective of identity theory concepts at the interpersonal and relational levels. These conclusions are:

1. **Nontraditional students need their adult identity validated**
2. **Nontraditional students seek affiliation from their college experience**
3. **Nontraditional students’ motivation is a factor in their ability to persevere**

**Conclusion 1 - Nontraditional students’ need their adult identity validated**

As was defined in the Key Terms section (Chapter 1), Identities are part of the larger “self”, comprised of the “set of meanings” (Burke and Stets, 2009. p. 3) that are attached to individuals, from the positions (roles) they hold in society. These positions are “the meanings one has as a group member, as a role-holder, or as a person” (Stets & Burke, 2003, p. 132). As such, participants’ adult identities are made up of the positions they both occupy and maintain in
the various facets of their lives, whether consumer, employee, student, or taxpayer. Individuals may identify more closely with some roles than others, and because some roles (i.e. being an adult) figure prominently in how one defines identity, are, as Burke and Stets suggest, inseparable from the larger self.

Close examination of the collected data for this study revealed that participants’ identified strongly with their adult identities, more so than that assigned by their position as undergraduate student within their college setting. In order to understand how one’s position as imposed by outside structures (i.e. school setting) relates to one’s behaviors while occupying a structurally designated role (i.e. student), it is important to know two terms; positional identity and relational identity, and what they mean in the context of this study. Therefore, what follows is a discussion of how, in the scholarly literature these two terms have been described.

**Positional Identity**

This study drew upon concepts from literature pertaining to Identity from a Symbolic Interactionist worldview. Thus, thus many of its definitions of identity come from the work of Sheldon Stryker (1980) and that of his colleagues (e.g. John Turner). Their work and that of others examine identity from fields such as communication, education, psychology and sociology. Within Stryker’s identity work, this researcher found no separate or distinct definition of the term positional identity; however the term position is used quite frequently when defining relational identity, or relational selves.

Perhaps Turner’s (2013) explanation below makes the term position, and (by extension, the idea of positional identity) clearer.

In Sheldon Stryker’s view, human social behavior is organized by symbolic designations of all aspects of the environment, both physical and social. Among
the most important of these designations are the symbols and associated meanings of the positions that people occupy in social structures. These positions carry with them shared expectations about how people are to enact roles and, in general, to comport themselves in relation to others. As individuals designate their own positions, they call forth in themselves expectations about how they are to behave, and as they designate the positions of others, they become cognizant of the expectations guiding the role behaviors of these others (p. 575).

As can be gleaned from the above passage, individuals are assigned and take on socially constructed positions, or designations, which they hold and wish to maintain. When they do, they also take on and enact the behaviors that come with that role. How they enact that role is informed by their understanding of the relationship of that position to another’s. This aspect is described below in the section on relational identity.

**Relational Identity**

From the broad expanse of identity literature, psychologists Vignoles, Schwartz, and Luyckx’s (2011) description of relational identity made sense for this researcher and study. They state that relational identity is one of “three different levels at which identity may be defined: individual, relational, and collective” (p. 3). While the individual level is concerned with one’s “self-definition” (p. 3), the relational level is concerned with one’s position (role) as it pertains to others. Examples of relational roles include, child to parent, employee to a boss, or husband to wife. From this, it is clear that relational identities are products of social constructions.

These identities are reinforced by recognition “by a social audience” (p. 3) and “defined and interpreted by the individuals who assume them” (p. 3). Relational identities however, would
not exist without the structural settings in which they are needed to define and order relationships. Thus, knowing the aforementioned definition of position, it is clear that positional identity is embedded as part of the relational identity, and includes one’s own identification with, and behaviors associated with the role, as well as others’ acceptance and reinforcement of that role.

**Positional and Relational Identity together**

The previous section described how position and relational identity are defined from a Symbolic Interactionist framework of Identity. Another disciplinary perspective is offered by Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998), in their anthropology based work, *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. They provide a similar but differently stated, and perhaps clearer view of positional and relational identities together. “Positional identities have to do with the day-to-day and on the ground relations of power, deference and entitlement, social affiliation and distance-with the social-interactional, social-relational structures of the lived world” (p. 127). To illustrate, Holland et al., (1998) describe positional identity as it relates to girls in their study of Hindu culture, stating, “positional identity is a person's apprehension of her social position in a lived world depending on the others present, of her greater or lesser access to spaces, activities, genres, and, through those genres, authoritative voices, or any voice at all” (pp. 127-128).

They also offer a definition for relational identity, stating that relational identities “ have to do with how one identifies one’s position relative to others, mediated through the ways one feels comfortable or constrained, for example to speak to another, to command another” (p. 127). From these definitions, one can see possible implications of positional identity as it relates to factors that may either promote or impede one’s navigation of the social structure, while at the same time recognizing the implications of relational identity on one’s “voice” (p. 127) and their ability to be heard by others within a particular socially constructed setting.
Like the Hindu girls (Holland et al, 1998), adult students too, are subject to the confines of what is expected from their positional role, and the larger, structural constraints of their college environment and organizational culture. How participants in this study perceived and described their positional and relational identities with the college and its members came through in a number of their interviews. Their accounts, describing how, and to what degree they perceive THEIR access to activities, spaces, or voice on campus as adult students, and not just students, emerged as being an important point of discussion for most of them. Thus, the first conclusion derived from the analysis of study data, was that nontraditional students need their adult identity validated.

The data that supports this first conclusion comes from participants’ own accounts of the ways in which their adult presence and adult status was acknowledged, or not, by the institution and its members (i.e. faculty, staff). Such accounts are primarily found in the themes of affiliation, perception, and institution, all of which are discussed in detail in chapter 4. A few are included here as a reminder. Kay, Nina, Rose and Virginia, each in their own way, described one or more of these: feeling or being treated differently, ignored, marginalized, as an outsider, or not being heard. None of these experiences were expected by them, and certainly not desired, especially since they had come from outside lives where they had been relating, sometimes for years, to others in adult ways. They had been treated as adults, with some semblance of authority or respect for their occupational or other roles. For example, Kay, a military veteran, wife and mother, observed that despite her status as a 32-year old adult, in college, she was being measured with the same yardstick as younger students. Even for Nina, whose positional and relational roles did acknowledge her adult status, and whose cohort based adults only program further reinforced it, there were ways in which the larger college environment resulted in her
feeling like an outsider. Yet regardless of their experience, for all study participants, validation of their adult status is important.

Validation of adult status however is only one aspect of identity work that is affected by their college experiences. In order to develop and maintain identities, individuals must feel a connection with others at an interpersonal or relational level. What this means is that they need to feel that they identify with others, and that their identity is reinforced through institutional means. One way to do this is through affiliation, a concept within Turner’s (1979) social identity theory, which affirms that “the groups to which people belong (e.g., political affiliation, Sierra Club member, nationality) can provide their members a definition of who they are” (DesRochers, Andreassi, & Thompson, 2004, p. 61).

**Conclusion 2 - nontraditional students seek affiliation from their college experience**

The data that supports this second conclusion is also drawn from participants’ accounts. Within the themes of affiliation, gratitude and institution, we “hear” what participants are saying about their desire for affiliation with and from their school, and with others who are like them. They expressed these when describing their first thoughts about the college from its institutional reputation, their desired connection with the college in both tangible and non-tangible ways (i.e. sweatshirts, sense of belonging) to their experiences with, and feelings about interactions with faculty, staff and others. Affiliation for study participants were expressed, or not, by individuals, groups and the college itself in a number of ways, including in the relational behaviors of those within the college, through the college’s communications and through the structure of the college, as in support staff, physical setting, etc.

An institution’s brand, or reputation, is an important factor in individuals desire to seek affiliation with that organization. It’s as simple as wanting to be associated with its
characteristics simply through connection, proximity, and perceived relationship with that person, group, or organization. This is no different than wanting to hang out with the cool kids in high school, and it speaks to that aspect of identity that comes from our own desire to present a desired “face” to the world. Vignoles (2011) states “people utilize a huge variety of strategies to claim or defend particular aspects of their identities” (p. 403). She provides specific examples of this to illustrate, including taking “credit for their successes” while also avoiding “blame for their failures”, or behaving in particular ways, regardless of how risky. Other examples include, making purchases that one may or may not be able to afford in order to “symbolize their desired identities”, or, “choose relationship partners who see them as they see themselves” (p. 404). Thus, it is no stretch to see how choice of school, particularly if it has a good reputation, enables one to not only aspire to a desired identity through affiliation, but perhaps also to reinforce one’s self conception as competent, or high achieving.

Just about every participant in the study, described wanting to be at their school because of its reputation or because of what they thought that experience might be like. For example, Andre provides a positive account of affiliation when he describes his learning setting which consists of only adult students, as does Nina when she explains the strong feeling of connection she has with her classmates, due to the common attributes (i.e. adult status) and the common experience (a cohort program), which they all share. Andre uses the word “we” in describing collective behavior, and motivations, and type. For example, "we’re focused", or, “were not around different type… the traditional students". In describing how she and others motivate one another, Nina repeatedly uses the term “family”, “we’re like a dysfunctional family”, and speaks with pride about the relationship she has developed with her classmates. In that sense, both she and Andre describe feeling a strong sense of affiliation with other students. Even Trevor, who
takes courses with primarily, traditional age students that are younger than he, there is a sense of affiliation from his accounts of being on campus. He not only feels connected with the younger students, and thus age, or adult student status seems not to affect his experience in a negative way. However as noted within chapter 4, Trevor’s affiliation needs seem to be satisfied through his life and experiences with the college as a life partner of someone who works at the college. In his interview he described how this aspect of his life provides him with the opportunity to be viewed as an adult by members of the campus community, and he acknowledged that perhaps things might be different for him otherwise.

Nina, who as described above, satisfies some affiliation needs (i.e. with other students through her adult only program), does however, feel the lack of affiliation with her school in other ways. Again, as described in Chapter 4, taking courses away from the main site, the inability to access services such as the bookstore, and just basically not getting the opportunity to enjoy the campus as traditional students do, are some ways that she perceives the institution as resurrecting barriers to her ability to truly be affiliated with the school as a student, not as a separate, unequal entity, the adult student. So it is not surprising that she points out the number of communications she receives from the school that are clearly targeted to the traditional age population and not adults. For example campus events, such as guest lecturers, campus career events with company recruiters, or even student led organizations through their written communications, demonstrate they are clearly for younger students, through the language used and through the days and times that events are scheduled.

One might say however that “speaking” primarily to younger students is to be expected at a traditional college. In fact, Trevor stated in his interview that because his school was a traditionally oriented one, he did not see how and what might change in order to promote greater
connection with adults. Yet the existence of traditional age student only events and services would not be a problem for individuals like Nina if the college also demonstrated its desire to connect with adult students through activities and events that considered their life circumstances, time and scheduling needs. So it is no wonder that individuals like Kay, Rose and Virginia, who within the institution theme expressed wanting to be a part of college life should find their inability to connect with like others, or even with the college as a source of disappointment. Even though they sought out the institution based on its merits, and their own intrinsic and external motivational needs, whether identity driven or simply to get a degree, once at school, they felt either marginalized, or invisible.

Despite these experiences and concerns however, most of the participants expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to be at the college. One might be able to draw from this that while affiliation is important to nontraditional students (which is why they seek affiliation before and after coming to the school), that individual relationships and interactions with others while in school can mitigate potential negative effects of their not feeling institutional affiliation. At an individual and relational level, participants described experiences for which they were grateful. Their accounts might be better understood from the perspective of the self-categorization aspect of social identity, which at an individual level explains “conceptions of the self in terms of one’s personal identity as a unique individual” or, at the relational levels, “through group based self-definitions” (Haslam & Ellemers, 2011, p. 729). Following this line of thinking, one can that conclude participants’ needs for affiliation, stem from a need to achieve both self-actualization and self-esteem.

Simply put, self-actualization is a need that appears at the top of Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs pyramid, just after self-esteem. The two may be satisfied once more
immediate, basic needs for survival, safety, and belonging are met. After they are met, individuals progress to self-esteem, a term that identity researchers Heppner and Kernis (2011) say is “difficult to define theoretically” (p. 330), because of the many competing and conflicting ways that theorists across many disciplines have defined it. For purposes of this discussion of identity however, and to paraphrase Maslow, self-esteem is first defined as an individual’s feeling that he or she belongs, is valued, and accepted by others. Secondarily, from an identity perspective it is achieved when individuals “focus on their authentic interests and values while pursuing goals or identity relevant choices” (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2011, p. 388). Following self-esteem is self-actualization, often characterized as the pinnacle of one’s needs. Self-actualization is an urge that individuals have that “is the driving force motivating all human behavior (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005, p. 30) and according to Maslow, “the ultimate aim of learning” (129).

Along with self-esteem, self-actualization, or factors in one’s growth and development. For example, when Andre noted “they really do care” in describing his professors, he was expressing a way that such interactions aided his positive self-esteem through his being treated in a way that made them feel accepted and valued. For Frank, that feeling of belonging came from his presence on campus for which he was simply grateful. Kay, who stated that she was “overjoyed” to be at her college was also responding to her feelings of being accepted and belonging on the campus, as was Nina, who appreciated the beauty of her campus. Rose achieved that self-esteem through the satisfaction she derived from her studies and the way it was contributing to her learning by connecting her with a greater appreciation for art.

Trevor was “proud” to be at his school, and certainly described many instances of feeling that he belonged, was accepted, and valued through his interactions as student and adult partner
to a college employee. Further adding to his self-esteem was the passion he felt for his philosophy studies, achieved “when people instead focus on their authentic interests and values while pursuing goals or identity relevant choices” (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2011, p. 389). As a result Trevor reported feeling that he was now on a “trajectory” that would lead to achieving his goal to be a lawyer, a future aspiration, and a self-actualization goal. Virginia too, through her expressions of gratitude when reflecting on the changes that she has experienced in terms of her own personal growth since being back at school, is also providing indicators of self-actualization (i.e. personal growth). As can be seen from these examples, and the additional ones described in more detail in Chapter 4, there is much support in participants’ stories to substantiate the study’s second conclusion, Nontraditional students seek affiliation from their college experience.

So far, in this chapter, I have interpreted (from an identity framework), the first two conclusions (findings) derived from this study: 1) nontraditional students need their adult identity validated, and 2) nontraditional students seek affiliation from their college experience. Each of these underscores how important the individual and relational aspects of identity are in nontraditional students’ experiences at a traditional college. What follows below is a discussion of my interpretation of findings that led me to the third conclusion from this study: nontraditional students’ motivation is an important factor in their ability to persevere.

**Conclusion 3 - nontraditional students’ motivation is an important factor in their ability to persevere**

There seems to be no universal definition of motivation in the identity literature, although motivation is a factor in identity, to achieve for example, belonging, self-efficacy, or other desired individual or relational states that, include self-evaluation, self-verification, or the taking on of new, or maintenance of, existing identities. Motivation enables individuals to achieve
academic, personal and work related goals, engage in self-discovery or achieve self-actualization and is a factor in, for example, self-esteem (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). These examples are just a few of the multitude of ways in which motivation influences how individuals think and interact with others as they go about the daily business of enacting identities. For purposes of this discussion, motivation is all of those factors that influence one’s willingness and ability to accomplish a particular goal or task.

In their interviews, study participants described their motivation in a number of ways. They shared accounts of the life circumstances that brought them back to school at this particular time in their lives, in their discussion of their goals while in school and for the future, in their descriptions of their own strengths and capabilities, and finally, in expressing their present and future academic and other aspirations. Therefore, support for this third and final conclusion from this study was found in the themes of Circumstances, Goals, Motivation, and Self-Concept. These themes are described in much more detail in Chapter 4 where specific illustrative quotes are shown along with a narrative description of the themes.

Life circumstances were in play for every participant whether it was to return to school in order to improve job prospects, or to achieve a long-standing goal of earning a degree, while at the same time doing it in a way that enable flexibility so the individual could work or manage a family. This was certainly the case for Andre’ and Frank, who both worked full time, and desire to move ahead in their respective careers. Interestingly, Andre and Frank represented both ends of the age spectrum for participants. While Andre was not the youngest at age 27, he did fall into the Young Adult Millennial generational category, while Frank is the oldest participant at age 56, represented the Baby Boomer constituent. Yet each was motivated by the same concern, need to earn an undergraduate degree in order to keep, or secure a job or position.
Managing the family was Nina’s goal, for she had put off completing her degree until such time that her children were older and she was able to make time, as she described it to “do this for me”. Others were contending with life situations that were unsatisfactory, Kay, who also has children was dealing with a “marriage that was going downhill”, and Virginia was needing to turn around a life style that was no longer acceptable to her. Rose and Trevor had academic goals, but at the same time needed to consider a family member’s situation, in the form of a health concern pertaining to a relative, and as a job related relocation for Trevor’s life partner. As is typical with adult lives, their life circumstances ranged from the innocuous to more serious events, including abuse, divorce, and poverty. Yet the life circumstances, as described here were only one of the factors that motivated participants to return, and once there, persist in school.

Individual attributes also influenced their motivation. The theme motivation discussed in Chapter 4 shows illustrative examples of self-described characteristics that fuel participant’ attitudes and behaviors when it comes to their persisting at their endeavors, including college, despite some of the experiences that failed to reinforce their need for identity validation and affiliation. In their own words, participants described themselves and how they respond to life and school related challenges.

Examples of these statements include Andre, Frank, Kay and Nina’s declarations that they will not only pursue, but will persist in their goals, hence the phrases, “never stop”, “going to get”, “can do anything”, and “I have to do this”. In using these terms, they are essentially saying that they are determined and focused, resolute in their efforts to complete school. Characterizing themselves in this way expresses their personal identity as individuals who have the ability to surmount obstacles whatever they may be, while at the same time offering that
identity for others’ who may incorporate that understanding into their relational behaviors and interactions with them.

So whether one is “passionate” about philosophy like Trevor, or “put in a great deal of time into this”, as Rose does with her studies, or, are motivated by fear as Virginia initially was, before she “had to do a lot of my own work” to achieve self-growth, one is essentially saying that he or she is intrinsically driven and highly committed to school, regardless of whether the first two needs, identity validation or affiliation are ever satisfied. This is an attitude that basically says, even though I am not getting what I thought I wanted from this experience, I’m going to stick with it because that is who I am. I’m not a quitter, I am motivated by much more than what this institution is willing to give me as an adult student, however what it does offer to everyone, I will take, and I will be happy about it, because in the end I am going to gain more from this experience than I had ever thought, and that, in large part, will be due to my own abilities, my own motivations, and my own resilience.

This type of thinking, just described, can only be achieved if one has a strong sense of self, as in self-concept. As a reminder, self-concept refers to how individuals see themselves and how they perceive that others see them. It is a factor in identity formation (Burke & Stets, 1980) but at the same time, is also comprised of one’s various identities (Oyserman, et.al, 2012). Study participants provided numerous examples of self-concept, including discussions of desires and capabilities, as in Andre’s wanting to “improve” and take on leadership roles, as well as his acknowledgment that his “knowledge has grown”. For Frank, academic and health concerns, and a disability status, were factors in his self-concept, but seemingly did not affect his feelings of being able to achieve as long as he had the opportunity and the tools.
Kay’s self-concept was informed by her spirituality and self-characterization that she is “eternal optimist” who always thinks she “can handle it”. Nina described herself as “impulsive”, easily stressed, and “so OCD”, despite the possible negative implications of these handles, submitting to possessing these attributes, may be one way of demonstrating someone with a burning desire to achieve, who cannot simply relax when there is much to accomplish. Also, as discussed in detail in Chapter 4, the self-concept of Rose, Trevor, and Virginia also come from how they describe themselves, Rose as capable and self-supporting, Trevor as an affable individual who gets along with both younger students and adults, and Virginia who can be described as having rehabilitated her personal circumstances and life through her own sheer determination, initiative and drive. As is evident, from the examples provided in this section self-concept is another way in which individuals demonstrate their motivation to persist in school, despite not receiving everything they expected, to the degree they had hoped from their experience? In this section I have described three of the factors that make their perseverance possible, circumstances, motivation, and self-concept. The final theme that influences their motivation is goals. Every participant expressed having immediate or longer-term goals that in conjunction with the various factors associated with circumstance motivation and self-concept, allowed them to resolutely stick to their goals. Participants describe their goals by describing what they will do, or hope to do, to achieve them.

For example Andre’ simply had an expectation that he would have to work hard and be focused in order to learn, and become like his professors. Frank too, was focused on learning and succeeding, in hopes of developing a new career. Nina too had an immediate goal, to get into nursing school. Kay however, expressed a longer-term goal, to work with inner-city youth and to be the “new Oprah”, as did Rose, Trevor, and Virginia, who all wanted to get back in some way,
whether to individuals through his teaching (Trevor), to her community of artists (Rose) and at a larger, more global level, to be a part of developing policy that would affect millions, and “save the world” (Virginia). As with the other themes, correlations between identity theory concepts, at individual and relational levels, are riddled throughout participants’ interviews in response to semi structured interview questions designed to elicit their responses to the overarching research question, how do adult undergraduates describe their experience as a nontraditional student at a traditional college?

The preceding section described each of three conclusions derived from analysis of the findings from this qualitative, narrative research study. Conclusions were as follows:

1. Nontraditional students need their adult identity validated
2. Nontraditional students seek affiliation from their college experience
3. Nontraditional students’ motivation is a factor in their ability to persevere

These conclusions were interpreted through the lens of Identity theories from Stryker and Turner, using concepts embedded within these theories, such as the construct of self, individual and relational identity processes, and other characteristics (i.e. self-esteem, self-efficacy, identity status and roles).

The overarching research question for this study was “How do adult undergraduates describe their experience at a traditional college” As was seen from the data analysis, in the findings, and in this chapter’s interpretation of study conclusions, adult undergraduates describe their identity in a number of ways that encompass their past and current roles outside of college. They also describe identity in individual (i.e. self-concept), positional (i.e. consumer paying for college) and relational (student to faculty) ways. Within their statements were substantial supporting statements for each of the conclusions.
Having substantiated and described findings, and made correlations between the conclusions, the overarching research question, and the theoretical framework of identity, the discussion will now move on to implications for theory and practice based on the study’s findings.

**Implications to theory and practice**

**Implications to Theory**

This section first describes what implications study findings and conclusions might have for theory. It then does the same for their practical implications. Regarding theory, as explained throughout this document, identity theory concepts as informed by a social constructivist and symbolic interactionism worldview (Stryker, 1980; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provide explanations for identity processes at individual, relational and group identification levels. The interpretation of data and findings from this study drew on specific identity concepts and ideas, many of which are defined in the key terms index provided at the end of Chapter 1.

Regarding implications for theory, it should be reiterated that the goal of this study did not include generating a new theory, or modification of an existing one. Although the researcher used inductive methods for data analysis, this was not a grounded theory study. Nor was the study meant to test an existing theory of identity. Yet, the way in which this exploratory study needed to fulfill its purpose to learn how adult undergraduates describe their experiences at a traditional college, was to use identity concepts as lens.

For example, in order to understand individual reasons and motivations adults had for returning to school, I needed to consider their statements in terms of their understanding of self, and their self-concept. Also, in order to understand the effects of their institutional experiences, I needed to reflect on their accounts as it related to self-esteem, self-actualization, and affiliation.
These are two examples of ways that identity theory provided me with the tools I needed to understand what their college experiences meant to participants and how that affected their thinking about who they are and how others perceive them. Chapter 5 provides even more detail about the workings of identity as it pertains to adult undergraduates. In conjunction with chapter 4, chapter 5 offers ample evidence of the correlation between the theories, the data, and the findings, demonstrating the effectiveness of identity concepts at and layering participants’ accounts of their experiences, and uncovering the individual and relational processes that inform participants thinking and behaviors in the social structure that is their college.

Identity however, is a broad topic and the number of theories that fall within the identity literature is mind-boggling, yet despite the plethora of research on identity in its various forms and contexts, there were few studies in the higher education, identity, or adult learning literature that investigated adult undergraduates’ experiences of identity. The singular exception to this is the work of Dr. Carol Kasworm, Emeritus Professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Her research of adult undergraduate identity spans over three decades. Hers is the first journal article to turn up in a Google Scholar search using the term adult student identity, and numerous other researchers who investigate topics such as, adult learning, adult undergraduates, older undergraduates, mature learners, or nontraditional students cite Dr. Kasworm’s work (Chao & Good, 2004; Deggs, 2011; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Giles, 2012; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Norris, 2011; Samuels, Beach & Palmer, 2011).

Whether seeking to understand the older undergraduate (1980) or focusing on the more general topic of lifelong learning in higher education (2012) Dr. Kasworm has continued to focus on adult learners. Additional work on the topic of identity and adult undergraduates include (but are not limited to) her examination of adult, community college students co-constructing
positional and relational identities in an intergenerational classroom (2005), adult student identity at a research university (2010), adult learner’s emotional challenges (2008), their meaning making (2003), and the effect of accelerated programs (2003, 2001). There is also a review of past research perspectives on adult undergraduates in higher education (1990). Where others have focused on variations of student identity (i.e. athlete, learner) or other identity aspects (i.e. ethnic, gender) for traditional age students, Dr. Kasworm seems to be the most prolific on the subject of adult student identity.

During the time this researcher was developing her research proposal, she had the opportunity to meet and speak with Dr. Kasworm at the 2013 annual conference of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) regarding my proposed research and my concern that research on adult undergraduate identity was scarce. From that conversation, it became somewhat clearer as to why there was little published research on the subject of adult undergraduate identity within the scholarly literature. Simply put, it seemed there were few beyond what could be found in the occasional doctoral thesis.

It is this researcher’s hope however, that through this doctoral thesis, and through future endeavors that she may contribute to advancing knowledge in this area. Perhaps if more individuals promote investigations such as this one, it will add to the little that is already known. It may serve to encourage others who share this interest in this topic to conduct their own research to expand the field. Yet, the most likely way that this doctoral study, when published in ProQuest, will affect research, is as a small contribution, a tiny pebble in the large expanse of identity literature, but hopefully a more noticeable one in higher education research. Thus it may prove useful to higher education practices and policies, and one hopes, promote changes in the attitudes and behaviors of those who can effect change in higher education.
Implications and Recommendations for Practice

This section describes and explains the ways that findings from this research may be useful in higher education and include six recommendations for practice. As a refresher, final conclusions from this study were, nontraditional students need their adult identity validated, nontraditional students seek affiliation from their college experience, and nontraditional students’ motivation is a factor in their ability to persevere. These conclusions however were drawn from a small study of participants, who met the criteria of being over age 24, attended college part or full time while working at some form of job outside of school, and were enrolled at a traditionally oriented private four-year institution. Given the small number of participants and their unique shared characteristics, these results are not generalizable to a larger population across other types of schools. Nor should they be, however the conclusions are relevant for private colleges seeking to improve the ways that they recruit, enroll, retain, and influence adult undergraduates while in school and who wish to stay connected with them for a lifetime.

Recruitment, enrollment and other college-wide collaborations

The ways that this study’s findings could be useful in recruitment and enrollment include better identification of prospects’ needs and more effective communication of such information to academic advisors who work with students in developing degree plans and scheduling enrollment in courses. Academic advisors can be important as advocates for adult, nontraditional students and often can assist students in developing a strategy when faced with impediments to their academic success. Hardin (2008) describes the institutional barriers that come in the form of college “policies, procedures, and red tape that hinder the progress of adult students” (p. 51), adding that “often, without realizing it, an institution creates obstacles to students’ progress. She indicates that such barriers can present themselves at any point, whether prior to enrollment or
after the student graduates. Therefore she notes that “Careful academic advisement is essential for adult students” (p. 51) and recommends that advisers “be selected on the basis of knowledge about and interest in the adult learner” (p. 51).

Therefore, the first recommendation emerging from this study is that colleges create a separate advising department for adult students, staffed by those who are trained to specifically work with adult learners. Individuals who staff the department should be accessible by telephone, email or in-person during times when adult students are on campus (i.e. evening or weekends). These individuals can help adult students navigate the administrative and bureaucratic maze that is college during times when they are needed. This may be a welcome service for non-residential adult students, who work or have family or other obligations outside of school, and who have little time to spend on campus. Academic advisors can be available at times more convenient for adult students, directing them to support services, which hopefully, also have adult friendly office hours, and can assist them in managing various challenges, whether disability, skills or technology related. For example, thinking back to the statements included in chapter 4 of this document, we recall that Rose described not being able to attend orientation because of her work schedule, or Virginia described chasing after faculty in order to get sign off on a course registration form. These are just a few of the numerous examples included in chapters 4 and 5.

The second recommendation is that before enrolling adult students, college staff assesses adult students’ readiness, both academically and with the technology capabilities needed to complete coursework, use learning platforms, and engage in accelerated courses. Frank provides an apt example of the adult, nontraditional student that could have benefitted from this up-front assessment. From his interview, it seemed that his decision to enroll was made quickly, and there seemed to be no time, or effort to probe and learn his capabilities including, ability to use
technology, writing aptitude, or about any disability related problems (i.e. hearing loss).

According to Frank, deficits in these areas played a role in his struggles to succeed in an accelerated format program, that required facility with technology, solid writing skills, and the ability to work at an accelerated pace. It took the prospect of academic dismissal, and valiant efforts by advisor and academic advising staff to give him a chance to improve his academic performance.

At the time of his interview, Frank explained that he had transferred to an on ground program, was working with instructional technology staff, a writing tutor, and his academic advisor to remain focused on his strategy to remain in school, yet, despite his positive attitude and upbeat view of the future, there was some evidence that school was an ongoing struggle. To help students avoid Frank’s experience, admissions staff might partner with registrar and student services (or vice-versa) to develop adult orientation and registration sessions, or even conduct pre-enrollment sessions that describe technology and other skills needed before enrollment.

Recognizing that adult undergraduates are comprised of individuals with diverse levels of competence in technology, they may work with information or instructional technology departments in order to develop appropriate tutorials for students with various skill levels, courses they can take prior to enrolling in courses.

What is suggested in this section, is a partnership between many parties, including admissions, (whose job it is to recruit, and frankly, to drive revenue, even for a nonprofit), adult student academic advisors, and other college wide student services (i.e., disability services, instructional technology) in order to improve nontraditional student experience and satisfaction.

What may be lacking in traditionally oriented institutions is an understanding that adult students, although personally motivated, return to college, with gaps in skills and knowledge that must be
addressed if the student is to be successful and graduate. If their needs are not acknowledged and addressed, they may be likely to withdraw, or fail.

Dissatisfaction with their experience, as students and perhaps even more importantly, as consumers of education, will also be a factor in their decision to stay or go. As described in Chapter 1, and as is illustrated by this study’s participants, today’s adult, nontraditional student is comprised of individuals whose professional and life experiences are varied, and as such, they often regard their relationship with their college as much more than that of student and college. They regard higher education institutions as companies that provide educational services and expect to receive satisfaction. It is no wonder then, that they will not hesitate to sever the relationship when dissatisfied. Hardin (2008) explains, stating that “when faced with university imposed barriers; adult students were less tolerant than traditional students and often discontinued their education rather than adding stress to their lives” (p. 51).

Regarding affiliation with their college, it is useful to recall that in their interviews, study participants spoke about their reasons for choosing their schools. While life circumstances played a large role, participants held positive views (another important factor) about their college even before they stepped on campus. From this, one can surmise that participants’ institutions have done a good job of attracting prospective students and promoting the brand, selling itself through its name and through recognition of its reputation as a “good” or “very good” school, one which participants are happy to be associated. Yet it is important that colleges do more to ensure that adult students, once on campus, maintain that positive feeling about their school.

Therefore, a third recommendation (that may foster their feelings of affiliation with the college and connectedness with others) is for colleges to establish an adult student only campus space. There, they may convene and get to know others, like them, who share the adult student
experience, and perhaps avail themselves of college activities (i.e. lectures) offered within this venue and designed for adults. This may help alleviate the concerns that were expressed by participants in this study, who after arriving on campus, found their initial feelings of excitement replaced by nervousness, fear, or even disappointment, and a clearer picture of their day-to-day experience as an adult student emerged. For once on campus, they found their adult student status was unknown or ignored, their past experiences irrelevant, and few others like them seen on campus. As a result, some participants expressed feeling alone, disconnected, marginalized, and as an outsider (for reasons I have already described above and also described more fully in chapter 4).

A fourth recommendation is for disability and other student services offices (library, writing center, and even career services) to make their presence and available services known earlier in the recruitment and enrollment process so students like Frank, might be comfortable disclosing their needs, and utilizing their services sooner. It would be useful for individual services departments to take a systems oriented approach in how adult students may be served, considering their needs from recruitment, enrollment, to graduation and beyond.

Skill development needs however, are not the only needs expressed by participants. As adults, older students are seeking networking and other supportive relationships, including mentoring. Therefore the fifth recommendation is to pair adult students with mentors, either staff/faculty, alumni, or other adult students that may assist them with their needs in navigating campus life, developing academic skills, learning ways to incorporate learning with their own professional practice, or to position themselves for new career directions. In her interview, Kay clearly stated that she would have liked a mentoring relationship with her professors. Virginia also stated that there should be a point person for adult students to go to with their needs. Here,
participants’ needs varied, with those enrolled in adult only programs feeling more satisfied about being treated as an adult, while others enrolled in traditionally oriented programs feeling that they were invisible and their adult student status irrelevant. Perhaps institutions that go out of their way to enroll returning students, or veterans back to college might expand their efforts to address the student experience once these individuals arrive at college.

The sixth and final recommendation is for colleges to develop formal faculty training in adult oriented instructional strategies and course design to promote adult students’ ability to gain new experiences, and incorporate life and professional experiences with their coursework. As noted in Chapter 1, adult students come from diverse backgrounds and they are back in school for reasons that include needing to gain new skills and/or forge new careers. Thus, examples of the types of learning activities that may benefit them and might be explored include study abroad experiences, professional internships, or service learning opportunities within the community. As discussed in Chapter 4, some participants within this study described how in some of their courses, assignments and instructional methods enabled their ability to implement practical applications from, and as a result of their coursework, while others described being frustrated by teaching approaches that seemed geared to only one audience, the traditional age student.

To recap, I have provided six recommendations for practice stemming from this study’s findings. These include, creating a separate advising department for adult students, assessing adult student readiness prior to enrollment, establishing adult student only campus spaces, implementing a systems oriented approach to adult students needs from recruitment to beyond graduation, pairing adult students with mentors, and focusing on training faculty so they are better equipped at both teaching and course design geared for adults.
Addressing the types of concerns I have described above, and working in partnership with other departments to develop and implement policies and procedures to promote adult student engagement, participation, and success might also improve student retention, another potential implication resulting from an understanding of this study’s findings. With adult student oriented improvements made to processes ranging from recruitment to enrollment, and through graduation, higher education institutions may begin to satisfy nontraditional students’ identity related needs, which according to this study’s findings, are: to have their adult status validated, to feel a greater affiliation with their college, and to persist through motivation (derived from self-concept, and the need for self-actualization).

Perhaps this sounds like a tall order, however it might be useful for college administrators, faculty and staff to remember that adult students, particularly those who returned to college after a period of time may already be embedded in, serving in roles within their community that might be leveraged to mutual benefit if adult students would come away from their undergraduate experience having felt a strong tie to the institution. Strong ties however, are only possible if the individuals feel that they are valued by the institution. It is important that colleges (whether private, nonprofit institutions like the ones attended by study participants, or larger institutions already serving adult students’ needs) understand that older students are not simply students, but adult students who to have their adult status recognized and wish to be treated like adults.

We must not forget that older undergraduate students may already be in positions of authority in their jobs and simply needing a degree to move on to a managerial or supervisory position. Even if they are not, they may know others interested in returning to school at the undergraduate or graduate level, or they may have children or relatives nearing college-age that would be interested in attending their school if reports were favorable. Longer-term and from a
financial point of view, nontraditional students who are highly satisfied with their undergraduate experience may also, one day, be inclined to look favorably on the inevitable mailings and phone calls from College Advancement seeking alumni donations.

Establishing a successful, satisfying, and long-term relationship with adults who return to college for their undergraduate degrees can only serve to help the institution build goodwill within the communities and spaces that adults occupy. Knowing that nontraditional students come to the experience needing validation of their adult identity, needing affiliation with their school, and that they are highly motivated to persevere, may help those who work in higher education to foster a positive and transformational relationship that rises above the typical transactional one described by many of the study’s participants narratives.

**Summary and Reflections**

To recap, the purpose of this study was to learn how adult undergraduates describe their experience as nontraditional students have a traditional college. Data analysis revealed three findings from the study: Nontraditional students need their adult identity validated, Nontraditional students seek affiliation from their college experience, and Nontraditional students’ motivation is a factor in their ability to persevere. These conclusions were supported by participants own accounts of their experiences and substantiated by specific identity related concepts as shown in chapters 4 and at the top of chapter 5.

To close, I will discuss motivations for conducting the study and offer reflective thoughts. The motivation for conducting the study came from both a personal desire to know more about nontraditional students’ experiences, a professional desire to understand nontraditional students’ better, and from an academic curiosity standpoint. The personal motivation comes from the researcher’s own journey back to community college at age 32 and then, on to a private, four-
year school to earn an undergraduate degree at age 36. As a working adult the researcher had many of the same motivating reasons for returning including job-related ones, like that shared by study participants. She felt many of the same constraints and disappointments from her college experience that were expressed by the participants in the study. Like them, the researcher struggled with identity issues, wanting to be heard, feeling that despite her accomplishments outside of school, that she was perceived by others as “less than”. The researcher shared her reflective thoughts about this in chapter three, describing a pivotal event from when she was in college.

The researcher’s second motivation for conducting this study was to satisfy a professional interest. As someone who teaches adult students, in a department within her college that is focused on the adult, nontraditional student, her professional interest in this topic feels natural. The brief passage from the researcher’s reflective journal (show in Chapter 3) describes the daily circumstances that feed her professional interest in seeking to understand adult undergraduate identity processes. It is the researcher’s goal to use her findings from her research, whether from this study or others, to help shape higher education institutions’ strategic direction for their adult student initiatives.

The researcher’s third motivation for embarking on this study was simply to satisfy an academic curiosity. Having been an adult student for over two decades, the researcher’s intellectual curiosities about the topic of adult students, their identity and other related factors (i.e. resilience) has like, narrative, been shaped and reshaped through each subsequent experience. Thus, her interest in the topic is of long standing, informed in large part by her own experience of having evolved from student to academic. Like the participants in this study, the researcher returned to school highly motivated, yet with fears of self-efficacy, and like they, each
experience, adds to positive feelings of self-worth. For this researcher, the experience of conducting doctoral research was especially gratifying for it fed her innate interest in wanting to know. Thus the researcher’s thought about the research process, her love of research, and her desire to instill that same curiosity in her own students is described in an excerpt (shown in Chapter 3) from the researcher’s reflective journal about this particular motivation.

In reviewing the above described passage from the researcher’s reflective journal, it becomes clear that in order to feed her academic curiosities and to stay “fresh”, that the researcher will need to participate actively in academic conferences both within the discipline of education and in related fields, such as human communication, organizational leadership, and management. From having reviewed a wide range of articles and books about identity, it seems there are many opportunities to connect with others interested in identity and in adults (whether they are students or employees in the workplace).

The possible extensions of this work include cross disciplinary collaboration and cross industry ones. This is a wonderful time to be exploring adult learning, not just in a higher education context but also as a form of continuing, and lifelong learning. What we learn from research in this broad area of adult education could have useful implications for organizations and training departments of all types, including in community settings. As with any passage from one’s personal journal, the language and ideas expressed were unedited and although in later reading, the researcher thinks that an outside reader might think the account as rambling and incoherent, they serve as a window into the researcher’s mind and thinking.

Finally, as with any passage from one’s personal journal, the language and ideas expressed are unedited. Thus, in later reading of the passages included in this document, the researcher cringes slightly, understanding if an outside reader finds the excerpts ambling and
somewhat incoherent. Yet, reflective accounts of how researchers engage with their data throughout the analysis process are necessary. Merriam (2009) clarifies, stating, “It is important to capture reflections and thoughts about you as a researcher, about data collection issues, and about interpretations of the data” (p. 27). The journal entries described here, and included in detail in Chapter 4, provide clues as to this researcher’s thinking about her participants, about the topic of inquiry and about the research process itself. It is hoped that readers of this document will appreciate this peek into the window of the researcher’s mind.

In closing, although this study was exploratory in nature (as it must be) it is additive to the few studies that deal specifically with identity and adult students. It also adds, in a small way, to the abundance of literature on identity in general. Also, while the three findings derived from the analysis are useful, there may be additional reasons to explore one or more of them more closely, using alternative research methods in order to find out, the role of identity in adult students’ college experiences, whatever they may be, in institutions large or small, or in online, on-ground, or other formats.

For example, it may be interesting to explore affiliation in more detail as it pertains to older students. How can findings influence marketing, or recruitment efforts? How might what is learned, be factored into advancement and donor strategies? In what way can partnerships between businesses and corporations be developed through the presence of adult students in one of these spaces? Are there opportunities for adult internship programs that come from adult students or adult alumni affiliation with their college? I would like to think of each of these ideas as possibilities, however as with any possible future application that might result from research; these must be examined more closely in relationship to studies that precede them.
In closing, this study was focused on learning how adult students understood their identity through their experiences attending a traditional private, college. The findings support the idea that adult students’ identity, their sense of motivation, and their relationship with their college are important factors in the way they make sense of and derive satisfaction from their higher education experience. Traditional private colleges will want to do more to pay attention to this group. This is not just my dream, but that of many of the researchers whose works are included in the literature review chapter of this paper. Rowan-Kenyon, Swan, Deutsch, and Gansneder (2010) however, state it most clearly:

Working adult students are becoming the norm and institutions must adapt accordingly. Organizational structures that predominantly cater to residential student’s ages 18 to 22 must change to engage and support adult learners who are earning their degrees at night, on the weekends and online (p. 110).
References


di:1080/07377363.2011.568813


http://dspace.stir.ac.uk/bitstream/1893/3221/1/2010%20scutrea%20jf%20nmk%20storre.pdf


Kasworm, C. E. (2003a). From the adult student’s perspective: Accelerated degree programs. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education. 97*, 11


Appendix A: Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Institution: Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies,

Investigators: Viviane S. Lopuch - Doctoral Student, Dr. Margaret Gorman Kirchoff – Principal Investigator

Title of Project: Adult students enrolled at traditional private colleges: A narrative study of older undergraduates’ identity

I invite you to take part in a qualitative research study focused on adult undergraduates. The purpose of the study is to explore how older undergraduate students make sense of their experience at a traditional private college, where the majority of undergraduates are residential students between 18-22 years of age. Statistics show that there are an increasing number of adults, aged 25 and over on college campuses, a number that will continue to grow over the next decade. Yet, many colleges, particularly those that are traditionally oriented, have little experience with adult students who are managing multiple life roles. The goal of this study is to understand how adults, who are also students, think about and respond to their undergraduate experience while navigating the social and cultural environment of a traditionally oriented private college.

This letter will explain what participation in the study means, but if you have further questions, please ask. Your participation is voluntary and you do not have to participate if you do not want to. After you have read this document, and made a decision, please advise me. If you choose to participate, I will ask you to sign this statement. I will provide you a fully signed copy for your records.

I am asking you to be in this study because you meet the following criteria:

- You are age 24 and over
- You are financially independent
- You are currently an undergraduate student at a traditional, private college
- You are in good academic standing
- You are employed part, or full-time while attending school
- You provide support to dependents

If you decide to take part in this study, I will ask you to participate in a 1-2 hour oral interview, conducted either in person, via a teleconferencing medium using video and audio
elements (e.g. Skype, Face-Time) or via a standard telephone interview. If we are meeting face-to-face, the interview will take place at a public meeting location that is comfortable for you. If by teleconference or telephone, I will ask you to choose a quiet location, where you are comfortable and can speak freely, uninterrupted during the interview. I will record the interview digitally using an audio recording device and save it to MP3 format for later transcription. Once a text transcript is made of the recorded interview, I will provide a copy to you so you may review and add any additional comments.

The following actions will maintain confidentiality of your responses:

- Pseudonyms will be used
- A locked filing cabinet will house all data from the interview
- A separate, locked file cabinet (in a different location) will hold the list of participants’ names, their pseudonyms, and their signed consent forms
- At the conclusion of the study all digital recordings of the interviews will be destroyed

The possible risk, harm, discomfort, or inconvenience to you from participating in this study is minimal. Personal reflection, when thinking about and answering interview questions about the experience of college may cause some slight discomfort. Your personal identity as a participant in this study is unknown. Your part in this study will be confidential, and only the researcher on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. You may refuse to answer any question. There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study; however, the information learned from this study may aid higher education administrators and policy makers in better planning for the needs of the growing adult student population on college campuses.

If you have questions or problems, please contact Viviane Lopuch at 845-249-6215 (voice mail is confidential) or by email at lopuch.v@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Margaret Gorman Kirchoff at M.kirchoff@neu.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern
University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Sincerely Yours,

Viviane S. Lopuch

If you agree to participate in this study, please read, initial directly below and sign at the bottom of the page.

**Documentation of Informed Consent**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Read the statements that follow and place your initials in the box to the right of the statement, then proceed to the signature area further below</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I understand the information presented on this form.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have discussed this study, its risks and potential benefits, and other options with the researcher, Viviane Lopuch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have received answers to the questions I have asked up to this point.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My signature below indicates my willingness to participate in this study. My signature below affirms my understanding that I can withdraw from the study at any time.

---

Signature of participant  
Date

---

Printed name of person above

---

Signature of person obtaining consent  
Date

---

Printed name of person above
Appendix B – Interview Guide

In this initial conversation, the researcher will introduce herself, establish rapport, describe the study, and answer participant questions. After he or she has signed the Informed Consent Form (Appendix A), the researcher will thank the participant for agreeing to take part in the study, then, ask the participant to do the following:

- Fill out a demographic information sheet (Appendix D)
- Choose a pseudonym to use for the study
- Agree to logistical details for the formal interview

Script

My name is Viviane Lopuch. I am a doctoral candidate in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University. I am also an instructor of adult undergraduates at the traditional, private college I once attended as an adult student.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this dissertation research. The purpose of my research is to understand how adult undergraduates attending a four-year private college perceive their college experience. This interview will focus on your experiences as an adult student. I am hoping the study will provide me greater insight as to what college means for adult students.

All information is (and will be kept) anonymous and confidential, with no personally identifying information used. Throughout the interviews, I will refer to you by your chosen pseudonym. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time.

With your permission, I will record this session. Afterward, I will provide you a copy of the transcript for your review. May I proceed?

After obtaining the participant’s agreement to continue, the researcher will address the participant by his or her pseudonym, beginning the formal interview process as follows:
**Background Questions:**

We will not start the actual interview just yet; however, I would like to start by asking you for some background information that will help me understand your experiences. This part should take no more than 5-8 minutes, so please provide brief answers.

- Did you attend college previously, prior to coming here?
- How long was the period between your last college experience (if applicable) and this one?
- Describe your educational experience before coming here
- When did you enroll at this college?
- Did you have any significant life experiences that influenced your decision to attend college at this time?
- What is your class year (freshman, senior?)
- What is your major (if applicable)
- When do you expect to graduate?

After asking the background (warm-up) questions, the researcher will begin the formal interview, stating the participant’s pseudonym when describing with whom the conversation (interview) is taking place. In an introductory statement, the researcher will:

- Explain that the interview is part of a study of adult undergraduates’ experiences at a traditional private college.
- Thank the participant for being a part of the study, and explain that the researcher will a) make a recording of the conversation in order to accurately capture participant’s accounts, and b) take written notes.

After securing the participant’s agreement to the aforementioned, the researcher will reiterate that all responses are confidential, and will ask if the participant has any remaining questions before starting with formal interview questions.

**Interview Questions**

The research questions for the study, as shown in the closing of Chapter 2 (pp. 24-25) are:

1. How do adult undergraduates describe identity?
2. What characteristics and behaviors do adult students associate with the role of an adult college student?
3. How do adult undergraduates describe themselves as compared to the characteristics and
behaviors they associate with being an adult student?

Thus, the following questions, per their design, aim at eliciting responses that can aid the researcher in answering these research questions. In keeping with Seidman’s (2006) advice to “explore, not probe” (p. 83) there are no pre-established “probe” questions listed below the following questions.

- Q1. Can you describe how you came to the decision to return to college?
- Q2. Describe how it felt to be taking a course here for the first time (as an adult student).
- Q4. Can you describe the relationship, if any, between your job role and your decision to attend college?
- Q5. When you think beyond graduation, how do you describe what you will be doing?
- Q5. How, in ten years will you describe what being in college has meant to you?
- Q6. Do you have any other final thoughts you would like to share?

Thank you for participating. I will send you copy of the text transcript of this interview and will contact you afterward to obtain additional information as needed and to verify that my interpretations of the interview data accurately portrays your story.

Viviane S. Lopuch
Appendix C - Email to Possible Participants

My name is Viviane Lopuch. I am a student at Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, where I am completing requirements for a Doctor of Education degree. I am seeking participants for my qualitative study of adult undergraduates enrolled at traditional, private colleges. The purpose of my research is to understand how adult undergraduates perceive their college experience. My interest in this topic comes from my own background having been an adult undergraduate student at a traditional private college where I now also teach adult undergraduates. Therefore, this topic is of personal and professional interest to me.

Participation in this narrative study will be in the form of two interviews. The first interview is preliminary, up to 30 minutes in duration, conducted in person, or by telephone, whichever is more convenient for you. This will be our opportunity to get to know each other briefly and to establish your understanding about participation. I will answer any questions you might have and ask for some general demographic information. For example, how long you have been enrolled at the college, or whether you are employed part or full-time. Another interview will follow, this time lasting one to two hours (1-2 hours) in duration. Subsequent communication thereafter, to verify the accuracy of my data, will be via email.

Participation is voluntary, confidential, and there will be no personally identifying information about you in the study. Even if you agree to participate, you may withdraw at any time. If you decide to participate (and I hope you do!) please send an email to me . If you have any questions about my study, or would like further information, please do not hesitate to contact me. I look forward to hearing from you,

Sincerely Yours,

Viviane S. Lopuch
Email: lopuch.v@husky.neu.edu
Telephone: 845-249-2843
Appendix D – Background Questions

- Current Work Role – (what is your response when asked, “What do you do?”. If more than one job, please describe each role)
- Race/Ethnicity (e.g. what category would you choose on Census or other survey)
- Gender (e.g. how do you self-identify your gender?)
- Country of Birth
- Marital/Family Status (e.g. married, divorced, children and number of)
- What is your first language?
- What is your current job?
Appendix E - Follow Up emails to participants

Follow-up Email (to be sent 72 hours of interview)

Dear _______

Thank you for sharing your experiences with me on _____. I appreciate your taking the time to do so. As discussed, I am contacting you now so you may provide me with any additional thoughts, ideas, or reflections you have had since we conducted the interview.

Please respond to this email, or call me with anything you would like to add. My email address is lopuch.v@husky.neu.edu or you may call me at 845-249-2843.

Sincerely Yours,

Viviane S. Lopuch

Final Email to Participants with transcript

Dear _______

Thank you for participating in my study. I appreciate the time you spent with me to describe your experiences. Your participation is invaluable. Attached to the email you will find a summary of your statements from your interview session and the follow-on comments you later made.

Please review the attached for its accuracy and contact me with any additional thoughts, ideas, or reflections you may have. Please respond via email to me at lopuch.v@husky.neu.edu or call me at 845-249-2843.

Sincerely Yours,

Viviane S. Lopuch