

LIFE ISSUES LEADING TO SUCCESS IN  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE DEGREE SEEKERS

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Our nation's community colleges currently enroll over 2.5 million adult students, defined as those twenty-five years of age or older (Howell, 2001). For various reasons a multitude of adults, possessing a wide variety of social, physical and emotional characteristics, are returning to classrooms in search of better lives (Kim, 2002). Yet why are some of these students able to complete their programs of study and obtain associate degrees while others simply wilt and fall by the wayside? Do some succeed while others fail due to the poor management of what Kegan (2000) describes as "the hidden curriculum of adult life" (p. 45). This veiled curriculum often requires a balancing act as adult students try to navigate the burden of educational course work while dealing with real-life issues such as the emotional and physical loads of single parenting, blended families, and the care taking of longer-living elders (Kerka, 2001).

Adult or nontraditional students, the general terms given to students attending college who are over twenty-five years of age, constitute nearly 45% of higher education's total enrollment (Carlan, 2001). Work and family are often the primary motivation for adult students to enroll in college courses. Many adult students come back to school to finish a college education they began as a traditional-age student. These students may have dropped out of college for a myriad of reasons such as lack of money,

conflicting responsibilities, lack of commitment, immaturity, or inadequate motivation. Now during midlife they are driven back to the classroom by various life events. These events may include but are certainly not limited to their current relationships with their spouses, the adequate care of their children, appropriate support of elderly parents, and insecure jobs and financial concerns. It is a reaction to these life events that may be the single most important factor in motivating adult students to seek a college education (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992).

They may be seeking new ways to deal with changes that are taking place not only in the world around them but also with the emotional changes that are occurring as a result of making their decision to return for formal schooling. Often, along with all of this change comes a great deal of personal stress which adds to the strain placed on these individuals' lives (McArthur, 2005).

As Johnson, Schwartz, and Bower (2000) explain:

An adult's decision to return to a community college to expand his or her education is clearly a stress producing event. No matter how well prepared or eager a person may be, returning to the classroom is almost always a threatening experience. Some of the threat comes from fear of failure. Some comes from discomfort associated with an unfamiliar environment like the campus. Even mundane issues such as where to park can be challenging. Other fears may include fear of the unknown or fear of non-acceptance by other students or faculty. The greatest fear, of course, is fear of poor grades and, correspondingly, failure to succeed. (p. 290)

The compounding of these real-world problems with those inherent anxieties attributed to the return to an academic setting often results in a premature ending to adult students' new starts in life (Kerka, 1989). In 1999-2000, 63% of adult college students had dropped out of college after six years without obtaining an associate degree. This occurred despite the fact that most of these adults, who both worked and went to school

along with maintaining family responsibilities, felt that it was important to earn a formal credential (U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002).

Why are some adult community college students able to handle the added internal and external pressures of a return to school while others are not able to take on the extra load? As explained by Merriam and Caffarella (1999), one conceptual framework, which may lead to a better understanding of the answer to this question, is the Theory of Margin that was put forth by McClusky (1963, 1970). McClusky's theory addresses the issue of adult learners having power to deal with both the personal and situational characteristics of their lives.

According to the theory, the personal characteristics of adults' lives (self concept, goals, personal expectations) are considered to be internal load while situational characteristics (family, career, socio-economic status) are considered to be external load. A key factor for success in life is having the external power (resources, abilities, possessions, position, allies) and internal power (intelligence, prior education, health, motivation) to adequately carry the load. The degree in which power exceeds load is defined as margin. The formula clearly suggests that as the ratio of power to load (margin) increases the ability to face the increasing demands and pressures of life also increases. Since people do not have complete control of all that occurs in their lives, a reserve of power (margin) must be maintained in order to handle unexpected crises or problems (McClusky, 1970; Merriam and Caffarella 1999).

### *Problem Statement*

Harrison (2004) used McClusky's Theory of Margin as a framework to identify eleven key categories of life issues which had either a negative or positive effect on adult college student's margin in life. Those categories recognized as creating load were; 1) anxiety upon returning to school, 2) academic challenges encountered, 3) financial challenges, 4) and the challenge of balancing responsibilities. Those classified as providing power were; 1) motivation for returning, 2) persistence or determination to finish, 3) time management strategies, 4) support from family and friends, 5) support from self-care practices, 6) relationships with faculty and staff, 7) and relationships with fellow students.

Harrison (2004) concentrates on identifying the categories of life issues affecting adult students' margin. However, there is a need for descriptive research to better portray what these categories actually look like from the individual perspectives of high-load adult students (Kasworm, 2005). The anxiety upon returning to school as described by a battered housewife may appear quite different than a college president's view of the same anxiety. The academic challenges for a fifty-year-old janitor making his first return to a classroom may be viewed quite differently from those same academic challenges as viewed by a College Board Member. The financial challenges for a single parent mother supporting three young children may be of quite a different nature than those envisioned by a college professor. The balancing of outside of school responsibilities with academic responsibilities for an adult student with a parent on life-support may be described in a fashion not even imagined by a college staff member.



In order for community colleges to more effectively develop procedures, policies and programs to combat the life issues having a negative effect on adult student retention, it may be helpful to know what these issues look like through the eyes of their students (Gabriel, 2001). The best ones to provide this description may be the people who have lived through the experience themselves, but few attempts have been made to generate descriptive data about who these students are and the challenges they face to academic success (Miller, Pope, & Steinmann, 2005).

### *Purpose*

The purpose of this study was to build upon the Harrison (2004) work by describing the self-perceptions of power and load in the lives of high-load adult community college students. These life issues may have contributed to either their success or failure in obtaining associate degrees. For the purpose of this study, high-load adult students were defined as students over twenty-five years of age whose full or part-time community college experience coincided with the responsibilities of supporting and maintaining a household in which a dependent child or parent lived. These in-depth descriptions might lead to a better understanding of the phenomenon of adult students attending community colleges. This increased knowledge may result in more informed decisions being made on the future policies procedures, and programs concerned with improving adult student retention at these institutions.

### *Research Questions*

1. How do high-load adult students describe the life issues which affect their load while attending community college?
2. How do high-load adult students describe the life issues which affect their power while attending community college?
3. How can community colleges better serve high-load adult students?

### *Definitions*

The following recurrent terms are defined as they apply to this study.

*High-load adult students* - The students over twenty-five years of age whose full or part-time community college experience coincided with the responsibilities of maintaining a household in which a dependent parent or child lived.

*Completers* - The high-load adult students that succeeded in obtaining their Associate Degree.

*Life issues* – The circumstances incurred by living.

*Load* – the self and social demands required by a person to maintain a minimum level of autonomy.

*Margin* – The surplus of power over what is needed to meet life's various load requirements and emergencies.

*Non-completers* – The high-load adult students that dropped out of college before receiving their associate degree.

*Power* – The resources, abilities, possessions, position, allies, etc., which a person can command in coping with load.

The following literature review was undertaken in order to achieve a better understanding of the role of adult students in community colleges as well as to gain added insight into the Harrison (2004) categories of life issues having an effect on power and load. Literature concerning McClusky's Theory of Margin was examined in order to better understand the framework used in explaining the categories. This approach allowed for a direct comparison of the categories as explained in the literature with the descriptions of the same categories as given by the actual adult high-load students.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### *Adult Students and Community College*

While the missions of individual community colleges in terms of adult students have a history of evolving to meet the needs of the local community, their overall mission of making good on the promises of opportunity and equity in American life have remained intact (McClenney, 2004). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2004), the oldest existing two year college opened in Joliet, Illinois in 1901. During this time period, local communities began opening two-year institutions whose focus was primarily on providing post secondary liberal arts training which could later be transferred for academic credit at a traditional four-year college. This mission not only made available the benefit of local access to the start of a college education but also provided the larger, four-year institutions some relief from having to provide the first two years of post secondary instruction to an ever-growing student population.

Then, during the 1930s, community colleges added job-training programs to their adult mission as a way of easing the pain of catastrophic unemployment. After World War II, many of the military industries were converted into private enterprises which resulted in the creation of numerous new, higher skilled jobs. This change to a more technically oriented industrial society, along with the economic support provided by the

GI Bill, created an environment conducive for a large number of adults to return for postsecondary schooling. In order to fill this educational need, President Harry S. Truman established the Commission on Higher Education in 1947. In 1948 the commission met and recommended that the mission of community colleges be refocused to not only serve as a first step in route to a four-year institution but also to provide terminal training as well as certificate and degree programs to fill these higher skilled positions. This repositioning of institutional goals, and the tremendous enrollment growth provided by the baby boom generation's coming of age transformed the community colleges into a national network (Mellander, 1994).

According to Milliron and Wilson (2004) the United States is now home to more than 1,100 community colleges. Much of their continued growth is due to the ability to continue to individualize instruction and curriculum to meet the diverse, essential, economic, educational, and social needs of the adult students in each locality. Not only do the community colleges meet the varied needs of their adult students in today's world, but they also recognize the important role that lifelong learning will hold in the future. Increasingly, jobs are migrating from manufacturing to the knowledge sector. These jobs require not only more education in the short term but also – and just as importantly – continuing education to stay current with emerging technology and a world market.

The nation's community colleges annually enroll over 2.5 million adult students, defined as twenty-five years of age and older (Howell, 2001). As diverse as these individual students' lives are, many have a commonality in that they often work full-time, are heads of households and support dependents as single parents. The compounding of these real-world challenges with those inherent anxieties attributed to the return to an

academic setting often results in a premature ending to many adult students' new starts in life (Kerka, 1989).

The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics (2002) reports that in 1999-2000, 63% of adult college students had dropped out of college after six years without obtaining an associate degree. Timarong, Temaungil and Sukrad (2002) indicate that as adult enrollment increases in colleges both students and educators cite retention as a major issue. The two obvious barriers for these adult students are time and money. Many of these adult students are commuters who work full time and are raising children. This juggling of jobs, commuting time, household responsibilities, childcare responsibilities, and schoolwork can be a daunting task. Other barriers may include inability to obtain financial aid and poor handling of personal financial matters; a lack of motivation; not enough support from employers, friends and family; poor educational background; poor study skills: inability to handle stress; unavailability of counseling services; and rigid class schedules.

However, it is important to remember in any discussion of adult students' retention that some adult students are not seeking a degree. They may leave school because their personal goals have been met without earning a degree or due to simply realizing that earning a degree is no longer important to them (Hagedorn 2005). Kerka (1989) earlier recognized this fact by suggesting a change in perspective among educators and administrators when retention issues are being considered. Not only should educators and administrators change their idea of what success at the community college is for the adult students, but they must also gain an awareness of the diverse characteristics and life circumstances that affect these adult students' participation in education.

Gabriel (2001) concurs with the need for community colleges to gain a better understanding of their students' diverse characteristics and life circumstances that affect participation in education. The organizations need to find out who these students really are and what they are actually doing. He notes however that this increased understanding needs to come from the implementing of ongoing research concerning adult student behaviors, rather than just making assumptions or proffering theories. According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999) one theoretical framework, which may lead to a more accurate description of these adult students' needs, is McClusky's Theory of Margin.

#### *McClusky's Theory of Margin*

Howard Yale McClusky was one of the leading groundbreakers in the field of adult education. In 1951 he became the first elected president of the Adult Education Association. He was the 1956 recipient of the Delbert Clark Award in Adult Education. In 1957 he helped establish the Commission of Professors of Adult Education. In 1958 he was the recipient of the University of Michigan Faculty's Distinguished Achievement Award. In 1964 the United States Office of Education appointed him Senior Consultant in adult education. In 1969 he received a special award of recognition from the state of Michigan for service to the state. He was the 1975 Recipient of the Adult Education Association of the U.S.A.'s Pioneer award (Hiemstra, 2002).

While this plethora of awards serves to pay homage to McClusky's many contributions to the field of adult education, perhaps his most important contribution has been his ability to help people outside the world of adult education understand the field (Hiemstra, 1981). This understanding may be increased through one of his more

important legacies, the Theory of Margin, which “has its appeal in that it speaks to the everyday events and life that all adults encounter” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p.7).

According to the Theory of Margin, adulthood involves continuous growth, change, and integration, in which constant effort must be made to wisely use the energy available for meeting the normal responsibilities of living. However, because people have less than perfect control over many aspects of life, they must always be prepared to meet unexpected crisis or problems.

Margin was conceived as a formula expressing a ratio or relationship between ‘load’ (of living) and ‘power’ (to carry the load). According to McClusky (1970, p. 27), load is ‘the self and social demands required by a person to maintain a minimal level of autonomy.... [Power is] the resources, i.e. abilities, possessions, position, allies, etc., which a person can command in coping with *load*.’ In this formula for margin (M), he placed designations of load (L) in the numerator and designations of power (P) in the denominator ( $M=L/P$ ).

He further divided load into two groups of interacting elements, one external and the other internal. The external load consists of tasks involved in normal life requirements (such as family, work, and community responsibilities). Internal load consists of life expectancies developed by people (such as aspirations, desires, and future expectations). Power consists of a combination of such external resources and capacity as family support, social abilities, and economic abilities. It also includes various internally acquired or accumulated skills and experiences contributing to effective performance, such as resilience, coping skills, and personality.

Thus, a person’s performance is a function of various load dimensions and values, as well as a capacity to carry the load. Margin can be increased by reducing load or increasing power. McClusky (1963) suggested that surplus power is always needed to provide enough margin or cushion to meet various load requirements and life emergencies (Merriam, 1993, p. 42-43.)

While it seems quite appropriate to discuss power, load, and margin in terms of a ratio, the theory does not empirically define these components. Thus its validity in any forms of actual measurement is questionable. However, the theory’s use as a conceptual framework for research has been quite helpful in numerous studies (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Harrison (2004) used McClusky’s Theory of Margin as a framework for research in her work on the personal experiences of adult students in nursing education. She used the Stevenson (1982) Margin-in-Life Scale in conjunction with phenomenological



analysis in the identification of eleven issues that were categorized by the effect they had on the adult students' margin in life. The adult students' loads were increased by 1) anxiety upon returning to school, 2) academic challenges encountered, 3) financial challenges, 4) and challenges of balancing responsibilities. Their power was increased by 1) their motivation for returning to school, 2) persistence or determination to finish, 3) time management strategy, 4) support from family and friends, 5) support from self-care practices, 6) relationships with faculty and staff, 7) and relationships with fellow students.

### *The Load of Adult Students*

#### *Anxiety upon Returning to School*

The anxiety adult students feel in making a return to formal education is often the result of a lack of self-confidence. Ziegler, Elbert, and Henry (2003) researched the effect of personal anxiety issues on continued participation of adults in formal education. Two key stimulants of adult students' anxiety were identified as their sense of self and perceptions of their own individual learning abilities. They defined sense of self as the amount of ability one believes he or she has in controlling life events and found that those with a low sense of self would often find reasons external to themselves for not continuing in college. While the participants in the study displayed a wide range in their perceptions of their own learning abilities, it was generally found that a low self-perception of abilities to learn was also a deterrent to continued participation.

Anxiety is also an issue in younger students' retention rate but not to the degree it is in adult student participation. Ortiz (1995) explains that while younger students may

have to deal with some of the same issues as adult students, the adult students must deal with these issues on a much grander scale. Not only do their life roles often include family and work commitments, but their age may make them feel like they should know how to manage the college situation even though their break in formal education has left them completely disconnected with the college culture and environment. This perceived incompetence in the academic setting often results in the adult student's sense of identity being greatly shaken.

Kasworm (2005) discusses many adult students' thought process as they seek to decrease the anxiety caused by this shaken identity. This process involves a renegotiation of a personal acceptance and redefining of themselves. This renegotiation and redefining requires the elimination of society's age-related notion of college as a young adult place. While they continue to have conflicting feelings about their role as an adult in college, to improve their chances of being successful they must place a higher importance on their need to be there for the knowledge, the diploma and a brighter future for not only themselves but their families as well.

### *Academic Challenges Encountered*

Many adult students have a general need for academic remediation in order to meet course prerequisites or to just improve basic skills (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002). They are often first-generation college students who have never given any thought at all to postsecondary education or may not have even completed high school. Because of their limited academic preparation, they may feel what Brookfield (1999)

discusses as a feeling of impostership. Impostership is explained as feeling they do not have the ability or even the right to become college students.

These insecurities concerning their ability to meet the academic challenge of college may be increased by the often misguided beliefs of the students' and instructors' respective roles in a college setting. Adult students frequently come in with the mistaken idea that their instructors are all-knowing experts that will just pour knowledge into them. When they find this is not the case and that they must dig and scrape the information out for themselves; they often feel confused, frustrated and sometimes even cheated (Howell, 2001).

Whether the new information is poured into them by their instructors or if they have to dig and scrape it out for themselves, many adults believe they must commit to putting more effort and resources into their learning than younger students. For example, they feel they must be more dependable in class attendance and more engaged in active learning and class participation than younger students. They also tend to be more committed to the quality and completeness of their assignments while younger students will often do the minimum work required. Often adult students sense they are being judged by younger adults as being overachievers and too competitive in class, but they also feel this added commitment is needed in order to make up for the detrimental effects of aging on their academic abilities (Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Kasworm, 2005).

### *Financial Challenges*

The ability to meet financial challenges is a key element in adult students' efforts to reach their academic goals. Adult students often must find ways to cover tuition and

other related costs as well as replace lost wages while attending college. They must not only consider how they will personally handle the potential income gap they will face while attending college but also how it will affect the essential needs of their families. As a result of these concerns, a lack of financial support is one of the most cited reasons for nonparticipation (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

Another issue concerning financial challenges is that while standard financial aid programs make it possible for many low-income adults to bridge the income gap caused by attending classes, not all are available for assistance. Some students have more income than the qualifications for assistance allow but still do not have enough money to pay for the additional cost of attending college on their own. Some students have a poor credit record or have defaulted on past student loans and grants and thus are no longer available for any type of assistance (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002)

Another consideration is that in addition to tuition and related expenses, parents with young children often have to pay for the added expense of childcare while at work and in class. This economic burden is often increased during the summer when public schools are out of session and other means must be found to insure the proper supervision of the students' children. The extra time, effort, and worry used in trying to budget these extra expenses can place quite a strain on even the most dedicated individual. One thing is for sure, whatever the budgeting process might be; the basic needs of the family must be met first. Feeding the family and paying the rent or mortgage must take priority over educational expenses (Fairchild, 2003).

### *Challenge of Balancing of Responsibilities*

Adult students in the Matus-Grossman and Gooden (2002) study discussed the issues revolving around the balancing of work, family and college. Those items most often cited included problems with child care arrangements, a lack of empathy from instructors, family and peer relationships, financial problems, domestic violence and legal issues. Students lives were described as being fragile and a single event might lead them to take time off from school or drop out all together.

Fairchild (2003) contends that many adult students really do not understand the fragile nature of their successful return to formal schooling. They are often not fully aware of the difficulty of the challenge they are about to undertake. They may not fully anticipate the role overload they may be taking on in trying to balance their student, family, and job demands. Since their jobs usually have fixed hours, they are often used to working unpredictable family demands around work obligations. However, once the variable nature of the student demands are added to the mix, the load never seems to lighten. When role contagion is added in, due to guilt associated with competing roles, life often becomes overwhelming.

Ziegler, Ebert, and Henry (2003) suggest part of the adult students' problem of feeling overwhelmed may come from the terminology of "balancing of life's responsibilities." The term "balancing" suggests taking away from one thing and moving it to another in order to make them equal. Since taking care of their families is often the primary concern of adult students, the term balancing means taking away from their families in order to make their jobs and schooling of equal importance. Many adult students are not even willing to consider this concept and end up abandoning their academic endeavors.

In order to keep from falling prey to the limiting attitude of having to “balance” life’s demands, both Kegan (2000) and Secretan (2000) suggest using a strategy of not thinking about “balancing,” but instead “integrating” competing life responsibilities. They suggest that school, work and family be viewed as a single unit rather than as separate entities. The students must realize that rather than taking from one priority and adding to another they are just temporarily focusing on one aspect of improving their lives as a whole. By thinking differently, cognitive research suggests they may more adequately meet the demands of society as a whole.

### *The Power of Adult Students*

#### *Motivation for Returning to School*

Wlodkowski (1998) points out that one of the few things we know about motivation is that it is a hypothetical construct. Motivation cannot be measured or confirmed through physical or natural sciences. It is, however, an idea that helps the world to understand human behavior. “Our daily lives seem to constantly tell us that we work harder, study more and perform better when we are ‘motivated’” (p. 91).

Kasworm (2002) explains that while young students naturally enroll in college as the next step in life after high school, adults have more diverse motivations. “Adults enroll in college due to (a) personal transitions and changes, (b) proactive life planning, or (c) a mixture of both personal transition and proactive planning” (p. 23). The personal transitions and changes often either provide new understandings of the need to pursue further education or provide external pressures to obtain a college degree. While these

personal transitions and changes push many adults back to school, others are proactive learners who are purposefully seeking new opportunities. These adults are seeking out life choices that will provide them with greater benefits and rewards than their current lives. They are often seeking to escape what they consider to be dead-end jobs. The third group, those with the mixed motivations of personal transitions and proactive planning may have been driven back to school due to life changes, but their motivation is more complex than just a reaction to life's circumstances. Their motivation is more proactive and seems to drive them toward meeting social standards and navigating power relationships between themselves and those around them.

#### *Persistence or Determination to Finish*

Whether adult students' original motivations are proactive, a reaction to life's events or a combination of both, Fairchild (2003) contends their determination to finish is greatly increased by the desire to get a good return on their investment. They are planning on putting a lot of time, money, and effort into their academic endeavors and expect a reward upon its completion. In order to protect their investment, most of them attend class regularly and take academic work very seriously.

Kirby, Biever, Martinez, and Gomez (2004) explain that while the return on investment adult students are so determined to reap is usually discussed in monetary terms, they are often pushed on by other potential rewards. They may be seeking the gratifying feelings that come from a sense of achievement. Their benefit may come in the form of satisfying a general love of learning. Their payoff may be in acquiring more knowledge about a subject that they have a deep interest in. Perhaps their recompense

will appear in the workplace, not in the terms of promotion or financial reward but in having more confidence.

As many adult students determinedly work toward the potential rewards offered by a college degree they often must struggle with challenges beyond those of the typical traditional college student. The ability to overcome such adversity reveals much about the students' characters, motivations, capabilities, and resources. These students often endure losses, changes, hardships, and even tragedy, yet continue to push on to meet their goals while simultaneously fulfilling their obligations to both their jobs and families (Haggan 2000).

Although adult students often comment on the extra load created by employment and family obligations, Kirby et al. (2004) revealed these same obligations may also add power to the students' determination to complete degree aspirations. The students realized that they were now serving as role models for other family members and this added to their persistence to finish degree programs. In addition, the problem solving and time management skills learned in school were quite effective in helping to better run their home-lives. These same adult students also reflected that their return to school had resulted in increased understanding, improved esteem, and applicability of new knowledge to the work environment, and career enhancement.

### *Time Management Strategies*

The discomfort of constantly being busy may lead students to seek the relief that can be found in improved time management skills. This concern for using time wisely may add to the students' academic focus and result in grades that are better than students



with more free time on their hands. Students with more free time may tend to procrastinate to the last moment and then turn in less than their best work as they scramble to meet deadlines. Thus, time pressure may actually be a positive thing if it pushes the students to harness the power that may be found in good time management tactics (Ackerman & Gross, 2003).

According to Neville (2002) the first step adult students need to take in adding the time required for college into their often already busy daily schedules is to actually know the amount of time their academic pursuits will require. While this may sound rather simplistic, many beginning students make the mistake of only planning on the need of actual class time without factoring in the outside responsibilities required of the class. They may fail to consider the time involved in any mandatory attendance of lectures, laboratories or workshops. They may also not consider the amount of out of class reading time or the time required in completing writing assignments. They may also have to devote time to individual tutorials if they are struggling in a class.

Once a realistic estimate is made on the total time required by the adult students in meeting all class responsibilities, Yum, Kember, and Siaw (2005) recommend initiating coping mechanism to supply the needed time. These coping mechanisms include sacrifice, support, and negotiation. Sacrifice is giving something up for the sake of study. Support means finding an outside source to take on some of the tasks normally handled by the adult student. Negotiation is rearranging and prioritizing of life patterns in order to make time for studying. While there will of course be some overlapping, implementing these mechanisms within the important domains of self, work, family and

social life may ease the anxiety of adult students as they try to fit attending college into their often already busy lives.

### *Support from Family and Friends*

Gaining support from family and friends may be essential in adult students improving their chances for a successful return to formal education (Donaldson, 1999; Fairchild, 2003). These important relationships, along with other personal factors, guide the participants' choices and decisions. Some students garner a great deal of support from their family and friends while others feel very isolated. These feelings of isolation become even more detrimental as adult students encounter multiple deterrents in their attempts at degree completion. Some students may need help in learning how to develop a network of relationships that may supply the external power needed to overcome barriers to graduation (Ziegler, Ebert & Henry, 2003).

Community colleges may be able to play a helpful role in nurturing supportive relationships from the family and friends of their adult students. Kirby et al. (2004) contend that this added external boost may be increased by a number of proactive measures. They suggest including the student's family members in course orientations in order to increase the family's awareness of the new demands being placed on the students. They propose holding workshops on time management and stress management for both the students and their families in order that both parties may work together on these potential pitfalls to success. Finally they suggest increasing friend and family involvement through their inclusion in newsletters, appreciation luncheons and other

social evolvments. As Kasworm, Polson, and Fishback (2002) explain, “College should become a family affair, rather than focused on single young adults social needs” (p. 57).

### *Support from Self-Care Practices*

Adult students may return to school carrying the extra burden of the ill effects of poor health or life style choices. Students should be reminded of the negative repercussions of making poor choices concerning the use of alcohol and tobacco, diet, and weight. Brochures, videotapes, live programs, and other types of presentations on life habits and choices can help motivate students to improve their health practices and in turn increase student attendance and productivity. While the results of these types of programs may not appear immediately, the cause-and-effect relationship between health and academic success is strong (Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000).

“Good health is invisible and therefore not seen as a support for reaching one’s goals. Illness, on the other hand, is clearly a deterrent” (Ziegler, Ebert, & Henry, p. 23). Simply reminding or making visible the added power that may found in good self-care practices may lead to better lifestyle choices and increased chances of degree completion.

### *Relationships with Faculty and Staff*

Individual faculty and staff members are the adult students’ “front line” in the community college experience. These students’ successes or failures in their academic endeavors are shaped primarily by daily interactions with these college employees (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Dill & Henley, 1998; Donaldson, 1999). Policies concerning attendance, group versus individual assignments, curriculum, and the handling of late

assignments often dictate whether students will be able to complete courses. Faculty can also be a great deal of help or create more barriers to completion by the way they handle conflicts that arise between work or parenting demands and school responsibilities (Matus-Grossman & Gooden, 2002).

While positive campus relationships with faculty and staff may help to increase the adult students' chances of success in the classroom, the positive effects of these relationships may carry off campus as well. Coccia (1997) discusses how faculty may add power to the efforts of adult college students through largely growth promoting relationships. The inference is that many adult students have lacked positive role models in the past and for the first time in their lives, college personnel were setting a good example for them. Often the personnel represented a life very different from that with which the students were living, and this was the first occasion for a number of these students to be able to imagine just such a life. As the personnel provided a feeling of hopefulness to the adult students, this often served as a source of inspiration to the students which resulted in a stronger sense of confidence.

However, Kasworm (2005) suggests the positive inspiration passed on from instructors to adult students is also reciprocal in nature. Adult students often have positive relationships with instructors based on mutual respect. Their presence is valued as they not only often set an example for good student behavior but may also serve as somewhat of a mediator between the younger students and the instructors. It was noted that instructors often look to adult students to answer a posed question when there seems to be no response coming from the younger students. Instructors also often turned to the

adult students in class when wanting feedback on whether a lecture was being comprehended.

### *Relationships with Fellow Students*

Community colleges attract a significantly diverse group of adult students. Despite this diversity, many adult students develop implicit friendships with their adult classmates. Kasworm (2005) contributes this bonding to the students' perceptions of all working toward a common goal. With this common goal comes the belief that if they work as a team, they can open doors for one another. It is not like younger students who may feel the need for peer group approval but more of a camaraderie developed from working toward a united cause. Adults often view fellow adult students as colleagues who deserve credit and validation for their actions. These adult students know who they are and what they want.

While most adult students enjoy classroom friendships and the support they receive from them, they normally have a lack of time or interest to create out-of-class friendships with other students. In order to supply the added strength of positive relationships with cohorts, the classroom should become the fulcrum of the college experience for adult college students. Unlike traditional students who often add positive experiences to their educational efforts through non-class social activities and events, due to time commitments and real-life priorities such as work and family, many adult students must draw social involvements primarily from the classroom. The classroom unites adult students and provides their instructors with the opportunity to create a climate that allows them to connect both their prior and current learning and knowledge structures. Success

in making this connection often becomes a powerful force in increasing the adult students' retention (Donaldson, 1999; Gabriel, 2001, Imel 2001).

### *Summary*

Community colleges have a history of evolving to meet the needs of their students in an effort to offer more opportunity and equity in American life. The number of adult students enrolling in community colleges continues to grow each year. Although not all adult students enter college in order to get associate degrees, community colleges should work to help these students reach whatever their individual education goals may be.

Knowing who their adult students are and what problems they are facing may be the first step in providing this aid. Harrison (2004) used the work of McClusky (1963, 1970) as a framework to categorize the problematic life issues adult students face (load) and the life issues which serve as resources to deal with those problems (power). While the literature provides a great deal of information on these individual categories of power and load, there is still a need for more accurate descriptions of what these life issues look like from the adult students' perspectives. These first person descriptions may help community colleges to make better decisions concerning their adult student population. This research was done to provide those descriptions.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Design*

The research for this study was undertaken from an interpretivist theoretical perspective. The interpretivist perspective in explaining human and social reality “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social-life world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). This method is an attempt at trying to understand the multifaceted world of lived experience from the perspective of those who are living in that world. From this perspective, truth is not found but negotiated through an empathetic understanding of the individuals and the different lives in which they live.

This theoretical perspective engages the constructionist epistemology. The theory that espouses “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). Encompassed in this epistemology is the idea that there is no purely objective truth or purely subjective truth but a truth constructed by interaction with the world and objects within the world. Knowledge is not found but is made or appears to the individual through a contextual consciousness.

The constructionist epistemology of the study is grounded in the tenets of phenomenology. The phenomenological approach asks, “What is the participant’s experience like? The intent is to understand and describe an event from the point of view

of the participant ... the subjective experience is at the center of the inquiry” (Mertins, 1998, p. 169).

This study is of a descriptive, qualitative nature. “Qualitative research approaches are rooted in the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and history. These disciplines rely heavily on deep verbal descriptions and interpretations in their research, not statistics” (Gay & Airasian, 2000, p. 201).

### *The Researcher*

In a descriptive research study the researcher is present in every phase from selection of the topic, to choosing of the participants, to writing up the final report. The interpretation and reporting are particularly susceptible to the introduction of bias (Weiss, 1994, p. 213). This apparently inevitable subjectivity is however both a weakness and a strength. The more involved the researcher, the greater degree of subjectivity likely to creep into the study. However, the greater the involvement of the researcher, the greater the chances for acquiring in-depth understanding and insight (Gay & Airasian, 2000, p. 223).

My interest in studying adult students as they struggle to balance life’s responsibilities with obtaining a college degree stems from both my own experience as an adult student as well as with my work as an instructor of adult students. After working many years as a discount store manager, I decided to make a career change and took a job as a high school language arts teacher. Shortly after entering into my new profession, I decided to return to college (after a fifteen-year absence from formal schooling) in order to seek a Masters in Education degree. I worked full time and went to college in the



evenings. Soon after receiving my masters degree I started serving as an adjunct instructor at both Rogers State College and Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College while maintaining my fulltime job as a high school teacher and starting my pursuit of a Doctorate in Education degree.

The past ten years of serving as an adjunct college instructor have brought me into daily contact with many high-load adult college students. I have developed an admiration for many of them as they manage to handle their numerous non-school commitments along with furthering their education. All of this personal experience with high-load adult students has inevitably increased my subjectivity but has just as inevitably increased my understanding and insight into their situation.

### *Setting*

Northeastern Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College (NEO) is located in Miami, Oklahoma. The college is accredited by the state of Oklahoma and by the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. It offers the Associate in Arts degree, the Associate in Science degree, and the Associate of Applied Science degree, as well as numerous one and two-year certificate programs. The average enrollment for the past three years has been 2,058. The average number of adult students (age 25 and over) over the same time period has been 636 or thirty-one percent of the total student population.

According to the Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College Catalog (2004) the overall mission and purpose of the institution are as follows:

Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College is organized as a state supported comprehensive college offering associate degrees and or certificates while

remaining sensitive to the specialized educational needs of the local community. The basic curricula contain freshman and sophomore courses for students who intend to pursue a baccalaureate degree after leaving Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College. Occupational programs provide for furthering the cultural, occupational, recreational, and enrichment opportunities for those in the community desiring to study, with or without credit in specific areas of their interest. (p. 9)

### *Participants*

The participants of the study consisted of fifteen former high-load adult students of NEO. Adult students were defined as those over twenty-five years of age whose either full or part-time community college experience coincided with the responsibilities of maintaining a household in which a dependent parent or child lived. Ten of the former students had graduated with associate degrees from the college and the other five consisted of individuals who had been seeking associate degrees but dropped out of school before finishing.

The sampling strategy for the study was purposive in nature. “The primary focus in qualitative research is on identifying participants who can provide information about the particular topic and setting being studied, not participants who necessarily represent some larger population” (Gay & Airasian, 2000, p. 139). Current NEO instructors, counselors, administrators of student service programs, and students were queried to identify past adult students whose descriptions of their community college experience and simultaneous head of household roles might prove to be particularly informational.

Once these students were identified, they were contacted to see if they might be interested in volunteering to tell their story by participating in the study. It was explained that their help might improve the services of the community college for future adult students.

### *Development of the Interview Guide*

The interview questions were designed to elicit the subjects' personal, in-depth descriptions of the life issues that either created load or provided power for their lives while they were working toward their associate degree at NEO. The categories of life issues described evolved from the Harrison (2004) study which used McClusky's Theory of Margin as a framework. The questions were formulated and asked in such a manner as to illicit the participant's personal description of each of the categories but in a way as to not identify the specific category to the participant. This enhanced the internal validity of the study as the participants were not influenced by the preconceived categories. It was the hope of the researcher that this approach might not only result in accurate high-load adult students' descriptions of the categories but also help to create a situation where new categories of power and load in the lives of high-load adult students could possibly be identified.

The actual interview guide used in the research and the thought process behind each question is as follows:

1. Why did you decide to enroll at NEO?

(This was just an icebreaker question, but I also hoped the participant might volunteer some information on initial motivation for returning to school.)

2. How did your family and friends feel about your return to school?

(It was hoped that this question might provide descriptions of the challenge of managing life's responsibilities, motivation for returning to school, support for family and friends, determination to finish and financial challenges.)

3. How did you feel as you entered the classroom on the first day?

(This question was used to provoke descriptions of anxiety, previous academic experience, motivation for returning, and determination to finish.)

4. How would you describe your health while attending NEO?

(This question was an effort to not only obtain descriptions of good self-care practices but also those of anxiety and the balancing of life's responsibilities.)

5. What did the faculty or staff members do that was helpful to you while you were attending NEO?

(This question could have resulted in descriptions of anxiety, time management tactics, and balancing of life's responsibilities.)

6. What did the faculty or staff members do that caused problems for you when you were attending NEO?

(This question was designed to obtain descriptions of anxiety, time management tactics and determination to finish.)

7. What rules or policies helped you while you attended NEO?

(This question was asked in an effort to obtain descriptions of anxiety upon returning to school, academic challenges, financial challenges, balancing of life's responsibilities, time management tactics, and positive relationships with faculty and staff.)

8. What rules or policies caused problems for you while you attended NEO?

(This question was asked to provoke descriptions of anxiety upon returning to school, academic challenges, financial challenges, challenges of balancing life's responsibilities, determination to finish, time management tactics and support from family and friends.)

9. Did you meet other students that were either helpful or caused problems for you while attending NEO?

(This question was an effort to obtain descriptions of anxiety upon returning to school, balancing of life's responsibilities, time management tactics, and positive relationships with cohorts.)

10. What would have made your experience at NEO better?

(This question could have resulted in descriptions of any of Harrison's eleven life issues of load and power.)

11. Were there any particular hardships or challenges that occurred in your life while you were attending NEO and how were you able to get past them?

(This question was asked in an effort to get descriptions of extreme cases of load and power.)

The interview guide was piloted using two former NEO high-load adult students not involved in the actual study. One of these former students had completed her requirements for an associate degree. The other had initially sought an associate degree but ended up dropping out of school before the goal was met. According to Gay and Airasian (2000), this pre-testing of the interview procedure serves two purposes. The feedback from the pilot can be used to add, review or revise the questions and a determination can be made as to whether the resulting data can be analyzed in the manner intended.

While none of the original questions were changed due to the piloting phase of the research procedure, this phase did prove to be beneficial to the study. After getting feedback from the pilot participants, I made the decision to slow down the pace of the questioning and allow more time for the subjects to elaborate on their specific issues.

### *Procedures*

The face-to-face interviews took place in a private, office setting. All of the above interview questions were asked of all participants. However, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the participants to talk freely and expand upon those issues about which they felt the most passionate. Thus, each participant ultimately determined the length of time spent being interviewed. The participants were advised that their anonymity would be protected by referring to them by pseudonyms rather than

by their real names in the final report. The participants were advised that their remarks would be recorded via my handwritten notes and audio taping. They were also informed that the audiotapes would be destroyed upon completion of the project and that the handwritten notes would be stored in a secure place in my home.

The interviews were guided conversations rather than structured interrogations. This approach kept the study participants more at ease, and thus they were more likely to reveal a more in-depth personal accounting of their experiences. This interview tactic was consistent with the advice of Yin (2003) who explains the two major tasks of the interviewer throughout the interview process as being: “(a) to follow your own line of inquiry, as reflected by your case study protocol and (b) to ask your actual (conversational) questions in an unbiased manner that serves the needs of your line of inquiry” (p. 89).

Upon completion of each interview, I did a recap of the handwritten notes with the participant to verify the accuracy of the interpretation of his or her remarks. The participants were also informed that they would be mailed a report of the interview in a self-addressed, stamped envelop as soon as they were typed up. Upon the receipt of the reports of their individual comments, they were asked to check them for accuracy as well as add any additional comments they may have thought of after leaving the actual interview.

### *Data Analysis*

The individual units of analysis for the study were the responses from each former high-load adult student. According to Gay and Airasian (2000):

Qualitative data analysis is basically a process of breaking down the data into smaller units, determining the import of these units and putting the units together again in an interpreted form. The typical way qualitative data are broken down and organized is through the process of classifying, which means ordering field notes or transcriptions into categories that represent different aspects of the data. (p. 242)

The data were broken down by using the constant comparison method of analysis.

“The constant comparison method involves the constant comparison of identified topics and concepts to determine their distinctive characteristics so that they can be placed in appropriate categories” (Gay & Airasian, 2000, p. 243). The interview reports and audiotapes of each interview were respectively read and listened to several times. The data were then logically linked to the purpose of the study by placing them into the one of the eleven preordained categories of power and load. The categories previously identified by the Harrison (2004) study that used McClusky’s Theory of Margin as a framework are as follows:

Load –

- anxiety upon returning to school
- academic challenges encountered
- financial challenges
- challenges of balancing responsibilities

Power –

- motivation for returning to school
- Persistence or determination to finish
- time management strategies
- support from family and friends



- support from self-care practices
- Relationships with faculty and staff
- Relationship with fellow students

Once the data (individual responses) were placed in the appropriate category of power or load, I went back to the audio tapes and once again located the individual responses in order to record a word for word transcription. This measure was implemented as a phenomenological approach to provide a more accurate description of what the participant's experience was actually like.

These word for word participant descriptions were then reread and reexamined using the constant comparative method and conclusions were drawn which identified patterns and relationships.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### *The Participants*

The participant for this study consisted of fifteen former high-load adult students who in the past had enrolled at Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College (NEO) in an attempt to complete the classes needed to obtain an associate degree (Table 1). For the purpose of this study, high-load adult students were defined as students over twenty five years of age whose either full or part-time community college experience coincided with the responsibilities of supporting and maintaining a household in which a dependent child or parent lived. Ten of those participating had completed their programs and were holders of associate degrees. The other five had failed to complete the associate degree program at NEO. The participants were individually interviewed and asked to describe their experience at NEO and to explain the life issues that either contributed to or took away from their success.

#### *Profiles of Adult Students who Finished Degree Programs*

Marie is fifty-four years old and the mother of six grown children. She and her former husband had owned and operated a construction business where Marie took care of all of the office work. After twenty-five years of marriage they divorced and Marie

found herself in the position of having to “re-start” her life. Out of financial necessity, one of Marie’s first post-divorce actions was to seek gainful employment. She quickly found that her many years of professional experience as the co-owner of a successful construction business, but sans a college degree, left her in the position of only being able to obtain employment at jobs paying a minimum wage. It was then that she decided to return to formal schooling, after a thirty year absence, in pursuit of a college degree.

Heather is a single, thirty-year-old mother of two. She is currently the office manager for a manufacturing company. From the age of seventeen, she had been in several abusive relationships. While still in high school, she became involved with an older man and soon discovered she was pregnant. The school allowed her to test out of some of her classes early in order for her to get her diploma before the arrival of the baby. The father of the baby continued to physically and mentally abuse her for the next several years until she finally got out of the relationship at the age of twenty. She then gained employment as a graphic artist and later eventually went to work in a hospital where she met the father of her second child. Once again she found herself pregnant and in an abusive relationship. After suffering through a great deal of mental and physical abuse, she finally managed to escape the second disastrous relationship. It was then that she decided to enroll at NEO after a six year absence from formal schooling.

Robin is the 47 year-old-mother of eight children and the head of her household. She returned to formal schooling after a twenty-nine year absence and completed the requirements for an Associate Degree in Mass Communications/Journalism. She achieved this goal while carrying the tremendous load of being blind and also dealing with the deaths of two of her sons. In 1997 Robin was driving down the road with her little three-week-old granddaughter in the car and without warning, just lost her sight!

She was soon after diagnosed as being in the later stages of glaucoma. Then tragically, during her five semesters at NEO, she lost one son from the ravages of epilepsy and another whose death happened under some very questionable circumstances that were never fully explained.

Whitney is a divorced, thirty-three year old mother of three young children. During her three years at NEO she held a full-time position as a teacher for the Head Start Program. She obtained her Associate of Science degree from Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College in Early Childhood Development and she will soon enroll at Northeastern State University as she seeks her Bachelor of Science degree in secondary education. She made her return to formal schooling after an eleven-year absence and is the first college graduate in her family.

Tate is a 44-year-old former oil field worker who ended a seven year marriage fifteen years ago. Eight years later the car he was driving crashed into a tree. He shattered both ankles in the accident and will be disabled for the rest of his life. No longer able to do the physical labor that he was accustomed to doing, he began drawing a disability check and running a newspaper route in order to support himself and his father. He recently obtained an associate degree in business from NEO after a twenty-two year absence from formal schooling.

Sally is the 39-year-old single mother of two sons ages 8 and 17. She enrolled at NEO after a seventeen year absence from formal schooling and completed the requirements for an associate degree in Science. She plans on continuing her education in order to pursue a career in nursing. While attending college, Sally not only carried the load of a single parent raising two young boys but also a fragile emotional state that she attributes to the personal tragedies that have occurred in her life. As a young girl she

personally witnessed her father's death from a heart attack. Her first husband died from an illness directly related to alcohol abuse. Her second husband committed suicide by shooting himself. Her mother's health was permanently ravaged by the effects of a stroke. All of these personal misfortunes took their toll on Sally.

Cleo was 36 years old when she enrolled at NEO in her quest to obtain an Associate Degree in Nursing. She had been divorced for over two years and was the mother of three children ages 17, 13, and 7. Her own mother was 40 years old when Cleo was born and was the only one in the family to hold a college degree. None of Cleo's five siblings had completed college and now after an eighteen year absence from formal schooling, Cleo would become the first. This is a real source of pride for both Cleo and her mother but her primary motivation for returning to school was to be able to obtain a better job to support herself and her children.

Ted is a married 39-year-old father of five children. He has worked at the same small town community job for the past fifteen years. Even though he only had a high school education, three years ago Ted was promoted to an executive position with his employer. Along with this promotion came the flexibility in scheduling that Ted needed in order to return to college. After a seventeen-year absence from formal schooling, he enrolled at NEO and completed work on an Associate Degree in Business Administration. He plans on going ahead and also getting his bachelors degree in order to enhance his chances for further career advancement.

Gabby is a 35-year-old divorcee. She has four children ages 16, 9, 6, and 4. She has just received an Associate in Applied Science degree that she started working toward nine years ago. As a result of excessive partying she became pregnant and dropped out of high school at the age of 15. She contends that her life with an abusive father may

have contributed to the rebellious lifestyle she began at such an early age. At the age of 26 she made the decision to return to school. Upon passing her GED exam, she enrolled at NEO and had completed all but one semester of her degree requirements when her father suffered a brain aneurism. She dropped out of school in order to care for her father and started working as a waitress. Ultimately, six years later, she returned to NEO and completed her degree requirements.

Rose is 49 years old and the mother of two children ages 23 and 19. Fourteen years ago she and her husband obtained a divorce, which ended their marriage of seventeen years. She has been a teaching assistant in the public school system on and off for the past twenty years. A recently passed state law encourages all teaching assistants to have a minimum of an associate degree and so Rose had to return to school after a thirty-year absence in order to meet the new state requirements. While many of the state's experienced teaching assistants gave up their jobs rather than go back to school at their advanced ages, Rose took a different approach. She figured that since her job required her to go back anyway, she would not only get her associate degree but would continue on to a more advanced degree. She has just completed work on her associate degree at NEO and will be starting work on her bachelor degree this fall at Rogers State University.

#### *Profiles of Adult Students Not Finishing Degree Programs*

Abby is the thirty-two year old single mother of two children. She is currently serving as a part-time substitute teacher for a local elementary school system. Two years ago, after a twelve-year absence, she returned to formal schooling by enrolling at NEO. She planned on getting her Associates Degree in the field of nursing but ended up dropping out of college after completing just one semester. She has had an "on again, off

again” relationship with her ex-husband. He never physically abused her but is an alcoholic who often verbally abused her after he had been drinking. During the fourth year of their marriage, and after one of her husband’s drunken tirades, Abby made the decision that she was going to have to leave him and figure out a way to provide a living for both herself and her children. She had hoped that a college education would help to provide the self-sufficiency that she desperately needed.

Alisha is a 32-year-old mother of two children, ages 7 and 9. After a seven-year marriage, she divorced her husband two years ago. She has supported herself and her children primarily by working in the children’s daycare field. After a twelve-year absence from formal schooling, she enrolled at NEO and started pursuing her Associate Degree in early childhood education. She ended up dropping out after completing just one year of the program.

Hailey is a 40-year-old divorcee. Two years ago she and her second husband ended their marriage of eight years. She has two children ages 16 and 8. She had both worked at and managed a very profitable hair salon for the past eighteen years. Then she was involved in a car accident which left her with a permanent disability which makes it impossible for her to stand on her feet for long periods at a time. It was her hope that she might be able to obtain an associate degree in criminal justice from NEO that would allow her to obtain employment in the legal field. This was not to be, as she ended up losing all of her financial aid and having to drop out after completing just one year of the program. Hailey had been away from formal schooling for twenty-one years.

Mike is a married 43-year-old father of four children. He currently works as a heavy equipment operator for a railroad salvage and restoration company. Prior to starting to work in his present occupation, Mike worked as welder. He was laid off from

that job and decided it would be a good time to pursue a longtime desire to go to college and eventually become a veterinarian. This was after a twenty-three year absence from formal schooling. His plan went awry, and he ended up dropping out of NEO before finishing his program.

Isabella is the 32-year-old divorced mother of two boys ages 13 and 12. She and her second husband separated one year ago after three years of marriage. At the time of her enrollment at NEO in the early childhood education degree program, Isabella was working at a childcare center, and the state had just passed a law that encouraged further education. While hesitant to end a twelve-year absence from formal schooling, Isabella relented to the pressures of her workplace and the urging of a close friend and coworker who also had to return to school after a long absence. After finishing the first semester, Isabella dropped out of college and made a career change. She is currently working in an office position with a loan company.

*Summary of Demographic Information*

Table 1 - Summary of the participant’s demographic information:

**COMPLETERS**

NAME	AGE	NUMBER OF DEPENDENTS	YEARS AWAY FROM FORMAL SCHOOLING	MAJOR
Marie	54	2	30	Psychology
Heather	30	2	6	Bus. Admin.
Whitney	33	3	11	Early Ch. Educ.
Sally	39	2	17	Nursing / Sci.
Cleo	36	3	18	Nursing / Sci.



Gabby	35	4	6	Applied Sci.
Tate	44	1	22	Gen. Ed. / Bus.
Rose	47	1	30	History
Robin	47	3	29	Journalism
Ted	39	6	17	Gen. Ed. / Bus.

***NON-COMPLETERS***

Abby	32	2	12	Nursing / Sci.
Alisha	32	2	12	Early Ch. Educ.
Hailey	40	2	21	Crim. Justice
Mike	43	5	23	Vet. Medicine
Isabella	32	3	12	Early Ch. Educ.

*Descriptions of Load*

*Anxiety upon Returning to School*

Isabella discussed being overcome by fear as she made her return to school. She contributed this to her natural shyness when she is the focus of attention. She explained some of her shyness as being due to a fear of the other students questioning her intellectual ability. She also expressed her own concerns about being ready for the academic challenge.

I was scared to death! Didn't know what college would be like. I'd never been. [I am] afraid of public speaking. I guess I'm shy. I'm kind of known for being outgoing, but I guess if all eyes are on me it is different. I don't know if it is because when I'm going to have to do the work and everyone else thinks I'm stupid. I don't know. I was that way in high school too. If there was something I had to read out loud or it would be you know like I would be dropped a letter grade, I would drop a letter grade. As long as it kept me in the safe zone I would drop the letter grade. I didn't know what college would be like. I was also afraid that I was not ready for the work. I got pregnant my senior year in high school and probably did not get as much out of it as I should have. (32-year-old, non-completer)

Mike described being overwhelmed, impressed and feeling somewhat out of place on his first day back:

I was pretty much overwhelmed. It was pretty impressive. I always did fairly well in school but it was the idea of not working and going to school. You know, walking into a college setting and here all these kids are really pumped up. And you know, I'm playing catch up. I was going during the day so it was all the young kids. When somebody forty years plus goes back to school you get a lot of weird looks but everybody was pretty supportive. (43-year-old, non-completer)

Rose explained her initial nervousness about the age disparity between herself and the younger students. She then described how the receptive nature of the other students and their recognition of her academic ability eased her anxiety.

I was very nervous. I was like, oh no! Can I do this or not? What I took there were a lot of younger students but they were real nice about it. Two thirds of the students were just young kids, but they were all real nice about it. Later, after they found out that I was a better student, they would even ask me to study for tests with them sometimes. I had one boy who followed me through several classes and he would always say 'Oh No! Here comes the overachiever!' These younger kids did not have some of the basics. (49-year-old completer)

Sally also portrayed the nervousness she felt due to the age disparity between herself and the other students as well as her fear of not being academically prepared.

I was nervous. I kind of broke out into a sweat. All of the people around me were really young. I felt intimidated. Kind of excited but scared. I was eager too. You know, I was happy to be there but scared to death. I did not apply myself in high school. Even if I had, we didn't have college prep classes like they have now. (39-year-old completer)

Cleo depicted both the excitement and fear she felt as she made her return to school. She attributed part of the fear as emanating from the thought of leaving her old trade and entering into a field in which she was unfamiliar.

Well I was excited but I was also scared because I hadn't been to school in such a long time. Everybody looked so young. Even though I was only in my thirties, they looked like babies. I had done hair for probably almost twenty year before I started going to school. And then to change and learn a totally new trade and then be not as good at it as you had been at your old trade. You know you didn't have that comfort zone. (36-year-old completer)

Abby expressed nervousness at not being able to meet the high academic expectations of her instructor. She was also concerned that her unsettled home life and financial struggles might stand in the way of her ability to meet the academic needs of the class. She explained however, that the initial anxiety quickly dissipated as she started receiving high marks on her assignments.

I was very nervous. Because my first class that I walked into was [instructor's name] and you know his expectations and stuff like that it just scared me. Not that his expectations were too much but I hadn't been to college for so long. I hadn't written a paper in you know years. And it just, I was very nervous and it was 'Oh my Lord can I actually do this?' Because at the time, uh we he [husband's name] had actually filed for a divorce. So we weren't just separated, we were actually going to court and everything else and, and me juggling two children and him not paying me a penny to help and it was, I was very nervous. But as time went on and I was getting my papers back and they were coming back with "A's" and "B's" then I was able to relax because I was, I built a confidence in myself in a way that 'I can do this.' (32-year-old non-completer)

Whitney told of her feelings of anxiety and foolishness. She explained the anxiety as being related to her age difference from the other students. She also felt foolish that she made the mistake of not completing her education at a younger age.

Anxiety, because you know you are the oldest person in there! Algebra! That just sets me off [to think about it] because they all knew what they were doing in there. Oh it's awful! But I got an "A" in there. After two hours of homework every night I got an "A." You feel slightly foolish, having to go to get a basic degree and you see that your class is full of young kids who have just left high school. I should have completed it when I started it way back. (33-year-old completer)

Heather described simultaneously having feelings of nervousness, being apprehensive, insecure and ultimately emotionally and physically drained.

Oh man! Nervous, excited, apprehensive, anxious. You know, just all those. Just a slew of emotions. It's like, 'Wow! I'm really doing this! You know, and there was a little bit of self-doubt you know. When somebody tells you you're stupid and you can't do it you start believing them you know. And the negative always starts to out way the positive. It was um, a really unique day for me, but a very long day. Emotional too. You know all of those emotions. You know I'm

carrying books and I am back in school. And I'm like, 'Gosh, I feel like a kid again! And at the same time it's Whoa! I work and I go to school and I go home to the kids. So it was a long day. (30-year-old completer)

### *Academic Challenges Encountered*

Cleo explained that math and science turned out to be her biggest academic challenges. She attributes her difficulty in science as being due to a combination of not only the length of time she had been out of high school but also to not having had taken enough science classes while she was there. Initially she was very discouraged, but with the help of a tutor and a lot of hard work she ended up passing the classes.

Math was terribly hard for me, every class. Science, I hadn't had any science since high school and then it was only general science because back then we only had to have – I guess we only had to have one science credit to graduate, I don't know. But I only took general science and that was my freshman year and so I hadn't had any science in like twenty-five years. So first in zoology class I had to get a tutor because I couldn't even, you know when they start telling how the cell forms and all you gotta learn all of the insides and out of the cell and all of that working – I just about flipped out. I was like 'Oh my gosh! I can't do this!' Of course that was my very first semester so the whole thing was sort of flipping me out at that time. I had to get a little tutor. I even remember going to my advisor and telling her 'I don't know if I can pass that class. And she said 'Yes you can, we'll get you a tutor. I ended up making an "A" in that class. You know because I worked hard through the whole thing and it seemed to get a little bit easier as I went. Microbiology was a really hard class too. The advisor knew somebody on campus [to serve as a tutor} and I remember I had to pay her. I paid her like five dollars an hour or something like that but it was worth every penny. She got me through this first, probably the first half of the semester without freaking out and then one day she was like 'I don't think you need me any more you know. I think you're doing fine.' (36-year-old completer)

Tate discussed his path through the academic challenges: When he initially enrolled in college, just a couple years out of high school, he was required to take primarily noncredit courses. After dropping out during the first semester and returning to school twenty-two years later, he was no longer required to take the noncredit courses.

[My] grades weren't never that good in high school because I just got through you know. It wasn't that I didn't have the ability. Anyway when I came back here

[from Odessa], my brothers both went here. They played tennis. They were both on the tennis team. I was able to talk to that tennis coach and she said okay and she gave me that scholarship two days before school started. Because of my ACT [scores] and stuff, they had me in these lower level classes. That wasn't no good. I didn't make it through that semester. I never even seen a tennis ball. And then I moved back to Odessa. Since I was on that scholarship I pretty much had to take those classes they enrolled me in you know. And I don't know if I retested for some of those classes or I don't know what the deal was but the next time I picked back up I didn't have all of that, 'You have to take this class here and you have to take this class here.' Cause [for] some reason I didn't have all of that [non-credit courses]. And I got to take some credit classes. And I still don't know how that worked. Now there was a couple, like Algebra you know that I had to work up through you know, like intermediate, beginning and intermediate. From that point on when I was getting credit I did okay. I ain't bragging or nothing but I ended up with a 3.3 grade average here. (44-year-old completer)

Hailey depicted her feelings as she underwent the excitement of her return to school, the inability to meet the academic challenges, and ultimately the sense of failure as she dropped out. She primarily placed the blame for failing her algebra class on the instructor and on the college itself.

I felt so alive and confident! I just knew I could handle this. After all I was managing a hair salon that was doing \$30,000 a month in business. I could surely handle this. And that's where I went wrong. I just couldn't, I couldn't get Algebra, I could get a calculator and I could figure it out but my teachers wouldn't let me use a calculator to figure it out. And so I just never caught on to Algebra. I took Algebra two times, both semesters. And I'm not saying you know, the teacher has a right to let me use a calculator or not but I could just not comprehend it mentally. That is why I bombed at college. It wasn't any of the other classes. It was just Algebra. I got tutoring with [names of tutors]. And I could get it when I was in there with them because you know we went step by step. But for some reason when I got in the classroom, I mean I even did well on my homework because I could use a calculator. But I flunked every freaking test because I couldn't use a calculator. I couldn't learn it in my mind. I blame NEO because like my advisor, she didn't have time for me. In fact I heard from another student after it was too late about the Algebra way out here. They weren't doing well in it either. The first one I took was kind of like a beginning Algebra course, but it's like they go so fast. You, you learn one chapter but yet they're already in Chapter 3. I'm excellent in multiplication, subtraction, addition, division you know: I just couldn't pass the Algebra course. I mean, it's you know, I mean I'm not dumb by any means but it makes me feel like a low life because I was in college and I couldn't do it. Basically Algebra is what stopped my education. It was just like I felt so alive when I was in school. Now I just feel, even though I have accomplished so much. I have owned two salons, tanning and hair salons

that were very successful, I managed Smart Style [in two different towns]. Hey we're looking at thirty thousand dollars a month in Smart Styles that they pull in if not more, my bonuses I got everything and yet I can not even pass Algebra. (40-year-old non-completer)

Sally reflected on how the both the passage of time and the inadequacy of her earlier high school curriculum requirements increased the academic challenges she faced as she made her return to school.

I just wish I had done it out of high school. It is a lot harder to come back and do it now. That is what I try to tell my son. You know and like when I and like in 1985 they didn't require all of this (in high school) you know. Thank goodness they have advanced it. Their requirements for education since I was in school. Well we didn't have trigonometry and all of this stuff that they're having in high school now. I impress on my oldest son how important it is and how much it would help him to go out of high school and take this knowledge straight to college. Because once you wait so long you forget and you lose the knowledge. I just wish I had went a long time ago. (39-year-old completer)

### *Financial Challenges*

Marie was not overly distraught by the idea of having to work at a meagerly paying fulltime job while simultaneously putting in the many hours requisite of attending college fulltime. In her words, "I do not know, you just do what you gotta do. Finances were tough. Every hour going to school is an hour less making money." (54-year-old completer)

Cleo discussed the financial challenges incurred as a result of her return to school. Although at the time she was concerned that she was not adequately providing for her children, she now believes that her concerns may have been unwarranted. In fact the children even have fond memories of their struggles.

The money situation was the hardest part. You know trying to raise kids on little or nothing. But they look back at it now and they laugh because there was one night a week that I would let them get Dominoes pizza on the one night when I had late class. And they would like split a big drink and get a small pizza and that was their treat for the week. But they laugh about that now. You know, think it

was fun. They didn't feel too much of a hardship I don't think. They were never too busy about their, you know, they always had cute clothes and everything but they may not have been the name brand. But they never really complained about that too much. They were not into that a lot. Hardest part was keeping a car running. Buying a car cheap enough that you did not have payments on and then having one that would run for you. My brother finally ended up uh finding me a little Ford Festiva that I got to pay \$1,500 dollars for with a tax return. I guess they put two of these Ford Festivas together to make one good car. And that little thing ran the rest of the way through school. The kids used to call it the pregnant roller skate. (36-year-old completer)

Sally explained how meeting the financial challenges of attending college, while being the sole support for both herself and her children, left her deeply in debt. Although she knew the pitfalls of overusing credit cards, she felt that she was left with no other choice.

When my second husband died, the kid's social security benefits lowered what I was eligible for in Pell Grants. It put my finances up above where I could get insurance for the kids and I never had insurance for the longest. So with my little one that wears glasses, it was hard not having insurance with the kids. So that caused a problem. Well when they're sick, well I had to get a couple of loans. I have uh charged a lot of credit card bills now. I've never had credit cards until the last thirteen years of my life. I am now in debt up to my ears with credit card bills because at the end of the month when my kids needed food I took my credit card to Wal-Mart and I got groceries. If I needed gas to get to school, I had to charge it. If the kids gotta go to the doctor, I charged it. Like I had to buy glasses two times. Over two hundred dollars because my little one broke his glasses at school. It is really, really hard to get out from under that. I couldn't pay the credit cards down because even though I worked part-time and was able to get some student loans that was still not enough. (39-year-old completer)

In retrospect, Whitney viewed her means of easing the financial burden of her college experience as being a mistake. She made what she described as a "poor decision" by getting a job as an exotic dancer in order to finance her education. She went to school during the day and danced at night. She indicated that she did make plenty of tuition money at her unconventional occupation but the lifestyle that went along with it was not conducive to staying in school. She stopped out, eventually quit her job as a dancer and then returned to NEO to complete work on an associate degree.

I actually went to work in a bar as a dancer to make my way and that was what I was going to do. And I was going to make my way through school and you know you always hear 'She's just doing it to put herself through school,' but I really was one of those ignorant women. But you know working in that kind of a dump. Fast money, easy money is not realistic money. It goes just as quickly as it comes. Then I quit school and I kept dancing. You just get into a whole other life style. It becomes a whole other world for you. I am making less money now but at least I keep my clothes on. (Whitney 33-year-old completer)

### *Challenge of Balancing Responsibilities*

Isabella depicted her typical day as she tried to balance the responsibilities of family work and school.

I would get up probably around 6:30 do the shower, the whole bit. Get my sons up. Make sure they were ready for school. Then go to work. I think there was about an hour, an hour and a half between [work and school] and so I would go home and make sure they were there, settled in. Maybe grab something to eat and then it was up to the school. And then, if I remember right the class got out usually around 9:00. I would head home to do whatever homework I had and then go to bed. (32-year-old non-completer)

Abby told of the extra mental load that her ex-husband placed on her as she tried to balance life responsibilities.

I was going through a divorce. Financially he was not helping me with a penny. I had two children and I was carrying fifteen hours in school. I was working; it was part time here and there. It wasn't every day but still. Once I had a government test and I had [instructor's name] and I was scared to death, not of him but of the class because I'm not really into the government anyway you know. And I told [ex-husband's name], I said I am going to bed early because he called and talked to her [their daughter] every night and I have got to study for this big test. Well his insecurity kicked in. He called fifteen times. I would not answer the phone. The next thing I know I am getting a knock on the door. It's the police because he called the police from Bella Vista, Arkansas to come and check on me because he didn't believe I was studying for a test. Well you know stuff like that, it just really puts a strain on you and I mean like I have got phone calls from everybody else because he was calling everybody else looking for me. And I was just very honest and up front with him and saying I was studying. And so it made it pretty tough. I could have made it if not for him (her ex-husband). I knew I could have done it if I had his support. When I was trying to take care of the school's business, the kids business, my business and his business; it was just too much. And you know it was tough at times too you know for me to read [homework] because at the end of the day you know I am exhausted. And then come eight



o'clock, that is when I get to studying and that is at the end of the day and I am just ready to go to bed you know. (32-year-old non-completer)

Hailey discussed being overwhelmed by the multiple responsibilities of her life.

I usually got to class about 8:20 in the morning and I usually just went from class to class to class. And then when you are done with classes you had a couple of hours of tutoring and you know it's like a full time job. And then going home and trying to study. Likely the kids were in school and I could be out of here by 2:30 or three and I could be out of here by the time they got home from school. But you still got to cook supper, make sure they have their baths you know. You've got to help them with their homework and for me, and I'm not saying it's like this for everybody but I just took on more than I could handle. You know I was trying to manage Smart Style in [name of town] and to be honest with you I couldn't handle it and I just walked off the job one day. And that was one of the biggest mistakes I ever did, because I don't believe in burning bridges. But I couldn't handle it. Going to school, child custody issues, divorce. Everything was just so overwhelming on me. And it just breaks my heart because I have to look at my children and say "Mom wasn't smart enough to make it through school." You know that's basically the truth. (40-year-old-noncompleter)

Alisha described the physical strain that she felt after a long day of trying to balance life's responsibilities.

Get up every morning at 6:30 so I could get ready thirty minutes before I wake my kids up. Because if they are up, I don't get a chance to get ready. Um, get them breakfast, get their stuff ready for school, send them to school. Had them to school by 8:10 so I could be there [work] by 8:30. Uh, depending on the particular day, most days I was off work by 4:30 or 4:45, able to pick up my children, get them something to eat and then take them by my friend's house to watch them while I went to school. I would have a 6:00 class and then get them picked up. Usually they were sleeping and I would have to wake them up and put them into the bath or shower because if not they would have to get up extra early in the morning, which would not only be hard for them but was also not good for me. Because you know when they start their day off not in a good mood it makes it tough on me. So send them to shower and then put them in bed and then do homework. By then it was about 11:00 or 11:30 and that is when I would just say, "I'm going to bed myself." I had more of a desire to study than I did in high school because this was a choice, my going to school. But the energy wasn't there. Like life takes so much out of you now. By the time I did get the chance to study, I just wanted to sleep. (32-year-old non-completer)

Gabby revealed that it was not the extra strain of school that caused the most difficulty in her balancing of life's responsibility. She contributed her high stress level to

the guilt felt at not spending more time with her newborn baby and the anxiety of dealing with a confrontational ex-boyfriend.

I went to school full time and then I'd have to go to work. By the time got home, cooked dinner, spent time with the kids and studied it was often 1:30 or 2:00 before I got to bed. My daughter was born, was born just a little while before I went back to school. I knew that she was so little and really needed me to be around. That was really hard. My ex-boyfriend kept causing problems and that did not help either. Those things added to my stress. The personal things in my life were wearing me down, not the school. I love school. I love to learn new things. I still have all my books and all my notes. I'm a real packrat when it comes to knowledge. (35-year-old completer)

Whitney explained how a philandering husband and a car break-in added to her challenge of balancing life's responsibilities. She discovered that her husband had been having an extramarital affair with woman in another state. She divorced him and he was ultimately incarcerated for illegal drug usage. After his release from jail, he moved off to another state. Not long after all of this occurred, her car was also broken into.

When I first discovered my husband's extra curricular side life. Um, it was right at the beginning of my third or fourth semester and I ended up dropping all of those classes before I even got started. Because I could not – my emotional state – there was no way I could take three or four classes and focus and deal with everything else that was going on with that. He was having an affair for almost a year that I didn't know about. He traveled on the road. He was seeing a woman. She lives in Pennsylvania. It was a complete shock to my system I tell you. But after that one semester, I got it together and came on back. What made it more difficult [after the divorce] was you know; now the money was on me, the loans were on me, and the time was on me. And you know my time is very valuable to me. Because if I am not spending it with my kids I have got to be doing something worthwhile. If it takes time away from them, it's got to be - it's got to be representing something worthwhile. And then of course their issues. You know I don't have little kids. I have kids that are in school too and I have to help them with their homework and I have to help them with their issues. If I could have cloned myself it would have been just fantastic because I could have been at the soccer field, and at class, and at work all at the same time. Of course it may have cost me [the cloning] and then I would have had to get a third job. And then you know, when you added in just regular life stuff. Like for example, I was working a double on a Sunday. I only worked at Rib Crib on the weekends, the nights weekends. I was working a double on Sunday and my car, where we had to park uh at the back of the um lot, of the Wal-Mart lot. My car was, in the middle of the day, broke into. Um, my purse was under the front seat because we weren't

allowed to take our purses into work because there were no lockers for them. My purse was stolen and of course my credit cards, and my check book and my debit card were all in it. And then I had to, everything I made basically that weekend had to go toward my window being fixed and they used my debit card and so I had to figure out how to cover that and of course nothing was returned to me. Just those kind of things that happened to you that set you back about ten paces. (33-year-old completer)

Robin described the challenges of balancing life's responsibilities while attending college, dealing with being blind, and grieving over the deaths of two of her sons. In 1997 Robin was driving down the road with her little three week old granddaughter in the car and without warning she just lost her sight!

I literally ran out in front of a semi. I didn't see it. I had my little granddaughter; she was only three weeks old. I had her in the car with me and my husband, he was there and he yelled at me 'What are you doing! You idiot!' you know like most men would. Just boom! My sight was gone! And I didn't have any warning, it was gone.

She was later diagnosed as being in the later stages of glaucoma. Then, during her five semesters at NEO, she lost one son from the ravages of epilepsy and another whose death happened under some very questionable circumstances which were never fully explained.

According to the records it is an unexplained accident. He was kicked by a horse in the abdomen. Uh, but he had a terror of horses. There is still a lot of unanswered questions. He was supposedly saddling the horse but he was kicked from the rear though so you know you don't saddle a horse from the back. On the lower abdomen, on his right side in his groin area, he had a 2.5 six meter cut on the inside of his intestines. And although they had x-rayed him and uh this was noticeable it was of no concern. He had a respiration of 4, a blood pressure that could not be registered; um he was seizing, uh and several other things. They'd given him I think two doses of morphine and two doses of Demerol in a six hour period but [he] was released from the hospital. Then he basically bled to death. And uh, we didn't know anything about it. Me and the kids was at home and uh we didn't know. He was twenty-seven. But he left me two wonderful grandchildren. But what, but what I think really hurt the most was when I came back on campus I started to hear these whispers about how and why my son was killed and [people saying] 'Why he was doing drugs or he was killed in a car wreck.' You know just one thing or another and well I was a journalism major you know and so I asked my journalism instructor if I could put something in the

paper about it. And she said sure and so there was a piece in the paper. In the October 25<sup>th</sup> issue it came out you know and after that everything went a lot better. That whole semester was really tough on me, especially with the holidays coming up. (47-year-old-completer)

### *Descriptions of Power*

#### *Motivation for Returning to School*

Ted's family was very supportive of his return to school and he commented on how setting a good example for his children served as a motivation to do well.

My father, he was probably the first out of my family that went all the way through school. Goodrich had shut down and he went back to school here. My mother, she went to NEO out here. She's a nurse. So education is valued in my family. And that is what I am trying to instill in my family. If they saw that I could do it then they would know that they could do it too. I tell them to take the time and give all of the initiative you can put into it and do it now. It will pay off later. You know I strived to get an 'A' in every class where years ago I didn't even really care. My son he wasn't ever interested in college. He thought, 'I might go to tech school but college is not for me.' Then he seen me do it and he's like, 'No I want to do both.' He wanted to go to college and do tech school too. Which I'm proud of him for that. (39-year-old completer)

Cleo revealed that being able to achieve financial security after her divorce, pleasing her mother, and setting a good example for her children all served as motivation for her return to school.

My divorce actually probably pushed me to help me go to school. Because I worked two years being divorced and having the kids to worry about. I didn't have any benefits and I knew that if we were to ever have anything, I was going to have to go to school and get a degree. So it probably helped. I probably would have never went to school if I had stayed married. And I found out in a lot of my classes there was lots of people in class that were divorced, especially women coming back to school after they were divorced. I also think part of it was to make my mom proud. She was so happy you know that I was going back to school. And she was such a good student. She was the salutatorian of her senior class, so it was like you had some heavy competition there. I also think going to college was probably the best example I could set for [daughter's name]. Even though she went a couple of semesters and quit. I think she knows in her heart, to ever get anywhere or in order to make any kind of money, she's going to have to have

a college degree. And she knows that. So I think that she was, that was probably the best example for her. Because she saw how hard I worked and you know how hard it was. And I always tell her and I always tell the boys too but her especially, '[daughter's name] go to school when you are young.' Don't wait until you are married and have kids and then try to go back because it is so much harder than when you're young and unattached and don't have any kids. You know you can just go. (36-year-old completer)

When asked why she decided to return to school, Sally discussed a need for financial security for both herself and her children as being her major motivation.

Both of my kids were receiving social security survivor benefits and this along with my work as a hotel maid provided enough for us to scrape by but we did not have any health insurance. Their dollar value of their benefits made them ineligible for Sooner Care. Also their social security benefits stop when they turn eighteen and then I am just going to be on my own. I knew I was going to need a college education to get a better job. I have always wanted to be a nurse. I guess I get self gratification from helping others. (39-year-old completer)

Hailey was motivated to get a college degree by the necessity to change careers after incurring a physical disability which kept her from working in her previous occupation. She had worked as a hairdresser for eighteen years. Then she was involved in a car accident that left her unable to stand on her feet for long periods at a time. It was her hopes that she might be able to obtain an associate degree in criminal justice from NEO that would qualify her for an office position in the legal field.

I was in a car wreck and didn't walk for nine months and I needed another career option because I couldn't be on my leg and back. That happened in April 2002 but after that I didn't walk for nine months. And I've always wanted to work with the law. But I wish I had just went to their school to get what I needed to get because I wouldn't have to even take this English and this U.S. History you know. You know anything working with the law would be right up my alley. Another reason I wanted to study pre-law is that I am tired of us poor people getting screwed and having to hire high priced attorneys. (40-year-old non-completer)

Tate is a 44-year-old former oil field worker who was also motivated by the necessity to change careers as the result of permanent injuries suffered in a car accident. He shattered both ankles in the accident and will be disabled for the rest of his life. No

longer able to do the physical labor that he was accustomed to doing, Tate enrolled at NEO in an effort to get a college degree and qualify himself for a job he can physically handle.

I'm on disability from a car accident – Voc. Rehab. I just slammed into I think it was a Pin Oak. No it wasn't a Pin Oak because it was ah well you know whatever it was, it was a tree. It didn't rattle the leaves on that tree. The air bag got my chin. Both my ankles are fused. This right knee here, it just shattered that knee and twisted that tibia or tibula, whichever one it is. It came right out the, it just twisted it. There's a scar where it just, yeah its pretty nasty. Hackberry, that's what it was, a Hackberry tree. I'd like to just get off this disability. (44-year-old completer)

The onset of a physical disability, blindness, provided the necessity for Robin to enroll in college but the faith of her young granddaughter was her primary motivation.

For a long time after that (the onset of blindness) I just sat around the house saying, 'Oh poor me.' Then one day my little granddaughter, now two years old, was having her birthday. She lived across the street and she came over to me and said, 'Come on Grandma, come and look at my birthday cake!' I said, 'No honey, I can't get across the street.' And then she took my hand and said, 'Don't worry Grandma. I won't let no cars hit you.' And then I thought, 'Well you dummy! If this little ole girl has this much faith in you, why don't you have some in yourself?' From then on I thought 'I can stumble and I can fall, but if I don't get up and go on nobody is going to carry me.' And so after that I got hooked up with visual services. I had to learn how to do everything all over again. I had to learn how to walk, how to dress myself, how to do my laundry, how to cook, and how to clean my house. So in the world of the blind I am nine years old again. And then I told my visual services counselor that I wanted to go to work and he said I needed to go to school and get an education in order to get a job. I have to prove, with my disability, I have to prove to society and to the world in general that I can do this. And if I make a 'C' on my transcript I just beat myself up over it. (47-year-old completer)

Heather explained that her motivation to enroll in college came from within. She made it her personal goal to become independent and to never to have to depend on a man for support. She literally challenged herself to get an education.

It was a personal goal. It was something I needed to do for myself, from where I had come from. Um, I had a pretty rough [life] from eighteen on and it was something I had to prove to myself. That I could do it. That it was a challenge. I had ended up in an abusive relationship, very abusive, while I was in high school. And I ended up pregnant at seventeen. So I had a baby in high school. And I went ahead and graduated high school. And after that I went from one fight to the

next with her [daughter's] dad. and ended up in the hospital a few times, about dead. Um didn't know stuff. I didn't go to college. I had a kid. And the interracial thing, that was even more pressure. I finally, after four years, decided not to give up. But at twenty I got out of that. One day after enough and I was just tired of getting beat up. I had a daughter at that point and I just had enough. So, I went up and I got a job as a graphics artist at newspaper. And then well that was when he started calling and I switched jobs just to get away from that whole thing. I did fairly well and then I met my second daughter's dad and kind of did a repeat. And I got beat up and pregnant again. I came home to where my parents lived. I stayed home with her [the second daughter] until she was thirteen months old. And then I said 'There will never be a thing a man can do for me that I can't do for myself. There was a point in time, a point in time where I said there is not anything that I can't do for me and my children. And that's whenever it became my personal goal [a college degree]. I challenged myself and that really helped me to get more grounded and find who I was again. (30-year-old completer)

Marie told of how after a divorce with her husband of twenty-five years, it became a necessity to seek gainful employment. She quickly found that her many years of professional experience as the co owner of a successful construction business, but sans a college degree, left her in the position of only being able to obtain work at jobs paying a minimum wage. It was then that she decided to return to formal schooling, after a thirty-year absence, in pursuit of a college degree. Marie's initial motivation for returning to school was for financial security. However, shortly after beginning classes she reassessed her priorities and changed majors to a field which might make her less financially secure but would allow her to work in an area that offered more personal fulfillment.

I had run our construction business and had done all the books, the taxes; you know the payroll, all of that stuff. I had done administrative stuff, had worked for the census for three years and had you know done administrative stuff. Um, when I got out there you know after the divorce, needing a real job, the highest paying job I could get, you know without a degree, was at Get N Go. Thirty years of experience but only a high school degree. There was a point when I was unemployed and looking and trying to decide a direction. I knew I could have just sat on the couch and let depression just eat me up. And you know so I had to get up and do something. So I started to get a business degree. And uh, after I took a couple business classes I decided that wasn't what I really wanted to do. I

had been a peer counselor for over twenty years. [I had worked] at crisis pregnancy center, at church with counseling, working with women and children. If I've got to put this much into it at this late stage I'm going to do what I'm going to enjoy. (54-year-old completer)

Rose revealed that her motivation to return to school was initially the result of a law encouraging more education for those working at her position as a teacher's aid. Soon after enrolling however, she became motivated to change careers.

I don't know. I was just raising my girls and this law passed that if I wanted to keep working at the school I would have to get a degree. So I thought I would give it a try. I did not think that I could get financial aid or anything. And then I applied and they were just very helpful. I have always wanted to work as an historian or in a museum or something. (49-year-old completer)

Abby expressed how her motivation was different from the younger students around her. She acknowledged this was not always the case as she had in the past suffered from the same lack of motivation as some of the young students.

As an adult I, I was much more into making sure I earned it [her degree). They just didn't care [the younger students] and I, I cared. You know and they would just look at me like, 'Shut up! Quit asking questions so we can leave!' You know. I, I was there to learn it because I thought 'You know what, my livelihood depends on this. You guys may not care, later on in life you will. But right now you don't. I know because I was there. I was in school at Wichita State and I was like, ah I'll do whatever I want. (32-year-old non-completer)

Whitney portrayed her motivation for returning to school as being twofold. She wanted to serve as a role model and set a good example for her children. She also wanted to establish her own independence.

You gravitate toward what you know and, and realizing now that I don't want for my own children [a bad life] is why I have gone the way I have. Because I don't want my children to suffer or to hurt and I know they're going to have to. Because everybody has to go through their own life lessons. But if they can learn anything by watching me struggle, I've done something to raise them too. I mean at least they'll get out there and have some ambition and won't look for something for nothing. I guarantee you that even if I were to meet the equivalent of Donald Trump tomorrow and he would want to whisk me away and take care of me and my kids for the rest of my life, I wouldn't do it because that's just not me. I'm not ever going to be put in that position where I'm going to have to be



dependent on someone else to make a way for me. And that's what drove me to get this degree and even a degree in education is something I can fall back on. (33-year-old completer)

### *Persistence or Determination to Finish*

Heather rated her overall experience at NEO as being a very good one but commented on the determination she had to call on to survive the bad times.

Sometimes my youngest daughter's father would show up at my door threatening me at 1:00 in the morning and I knew I had to be up to start the day in just a few hours. But I knew I had to keep going. Two little girls were counting on me. I was determined. I had two little girls that were counting on me and if not for me, for them and that was the way I was through everything. If I did not want to do it for myself, I would do it for them. My girls already have enough against them. They don't have dads, they're biracial in a very racist community, and you know I need to do something to make it a little bit better. And I don't get child support and so they depend entirely on me. (30-year-old completer)

Gabby described her resolve to get her degree and break a cycle of bad decisions. She was determined to break this cycle and knew that it would require leaving behind the entire life that she was living.

I love school. I always have. I've always been very good at it. That may be part of the reason that I dropped out of high school. I just was not challenged. I could skip all my classes and just show up for the tests and ace them. The reason it took me so long to come back after my dad's aneurism was that I just got comfortable in my job as a waitress. I really enjoyed it and I was good at it. I got to meet a lot of new people and I made good money. I always feel uncomfortable in an office, but put me in a restaurant and I feel right at home. In fact, someday I might like to open my own restaurant. It's hard to leave a job and a world that you are comfortable in but I knew that I had to make some changes in my life. I always knew that I had more potential than what I was living. I kept making bad decisions and I knew that I had to break the cycle which led me to them. I had developed a marijuana problem and I had become involved with a man who was both physically and mentally abusive to me. Even though he kept beating me down, I knew I could do better. I had to change. In order to start making better decisions, I knew I had to leave the life that I was living. I left my home. I left my friends. I alienated part of my family. I have had to move three times because my ex-boyfriend keeps following me. He's still stalking me. In fact I couldn't even walk in the graduation ceremony because I thought he'd be there and start some trouble. It was just not worth it. My kids are really proud of me.

They are now saying they want to go to college too. They have seen what I have done and they want to copy it. Maybe my kids will not wait until they have kids of their own before they get their education. I may have broken the cycle of bad decisions. (35-year-old completer)

Ted discussed his determination to do well in school and set a good example for his teenage son. He explained how he did not want him to wait until late in life to get a college education. His resolve to do well led Ted to an organized approach in facing his academic challenges. He surveyed the list of required classes and tried to anticipate where gaps in his knowledge might occur. He then developed a plan to compensate for those academic shortcomings by taking some non-credit courses. He also felt that after his long absence from school, seventeen years, he really just needed to get into the habit of going to school again. With this in mind, he took a couple of classes that were not in his program of study, but that he found of interest and that he knew would get him reoriented into going to school.

When I went to college this time it was a whole different perspective than when I first went. It was funny. I could see the kids that was going to school all around me making the same mistakes that I made when I first went. My nineteen-year-old son starts this fall out here at NEO and I've been preaching to him about the benefits of getting his education and not make the mistakes. It's not like high school. Probably attending class is one of the biggest things. Cause I seen where I made the mistake of having things to do and not putting class work first. I put it first this time and I never missed a day. I was always there. Probably the biggest kicker is having little kids at home. Wanting you to go out and play ball and you've got to do homework. You've got to make time for them and yet still get that homework done. A lot of late night lamp oil burning. I knew what I had to do. I looked at all my classes I needed to take and what ones was I going to have you know the most difficulty with and what did I need to do to overcome that. And it was back to the algebra and finishing that and I was like you know, and the so the first thing I did was enroll in pre-algebra class and got back into the swing of things and just kept going up from that. That probably, that was the best thing I ever done. That got me back into the swing of the homework and keeping on track of everything. I took a few classes that I wasn't required to take and things. I took psychology and philosophy you know just to get into and see what it was like. And you know I really enjoyed it. You know I learned a lot. (39-year-old completer)

Whitney revealed that all of her hardships as an adult student only served to increase her determination to finish. She also expressed the view that in an age of instant gratification, hard work and determination offered its own rewards.

I learned to go on less sleep. You have to. Don't get me wrong, I would have loved to have gone to school without all of the personal issues but it has made me stronger. Having to work so hard for what I am getting is making it even more valued. I decided that I was going to put myself in a position where I did not ever have to depend on a man to take care of myself or my kids. If you are coming to school at my age just to flake off, you're really foolish. There's a bar right down the road that a million people my age can hang out at and have just as much fun as they do here [college]. We live in such a society where we want it for nothing and we want it now. But that's what it seems like most people are looking for. Some people get it that way but most uh normal people have got to work at it. Um, like casinos they're going hit it rich and you know but you wonder how much did you spend before you got there you know. Its just you know you're working hard. Even if I never make it rich, working hard to get where I'm at and knowing I did it on my own sweat, tears and blood is going to be worth more to me than anything. Because I earned it. It wasn't just given me. And sometimes it is just easier to go, 'I don't want to work. Can't you just give it to me?' (33-year-old completer)

Heather described the determination it took to literally fight through the pain to attend classes as her physical well being took a downward turn. She was diagnosed with cervical cancer and had to undergo several eradication treatments during her college tenure. The treatments left her in a great deal of pain, which accompanied her to the classroom.

I wouldn't take lunch and I would have like an eleven or twelve o'clock class you know. Or sometimes a nine or ten [class] and so I wouldn't go in until later and then I'd make up for it later on. I fixed it up to where you know my boss would say, 'Okay, I'll let you do that.' So it was just a mixture. And I actually was going through cervical cancer while I was going to school. So that was like, I fought through it all. I had three procedures done while I was going to school. I would just go and they would cut off part of my growths and I would just come back and go to work and then to school. It hurt; I'm not going to lie. It was pain but to me it was too important not to succeed. (30-year-old completer)

Marie's description of determination dealt with her struggles with college algebra. She had already heard many personal anecdotes from family, friends, and acquaintances

on the difficulties of trying to navigate the math curriculum. She described how she gave it an “all or nothing approach.”

I took a do or die semester. I was on unemployment and I knew I could get financial aid. I took four classes in summer school. And College Algebra was one of them. My girls [daughters who also attended NEO] were so fearful of passing algebra; they saved it to the last class. And I said, ‘If I can’t pass it then there is no sense in me going.’ That was my ‘do or die’ class. Many have flunked it. And it was the only ‘C’ in my whole life that I have ever been proud of. The first two weeks I had to find an Intermediate Algebra book at a garage sale, because at the college level there was no review. The formulas were not there. You were supposed to know these already. I felt like I was pulling stuff up from the bottom of the well. My wheels would keep turning and I thought, ‘I know I know this. You know what is this? What’s the formula?’ And when we got into powers and when do you multiply and when you divide and you know it was opposite and that and you know I couldn’t remember. I knew enough to really hurt myself. And I just felt like, ‘Boy! I am pulling some from so far!’ you know. I was up until midnight, many a night doing homework. (54-year-old completer)

### *Time Management Strategies*

Cleo described her efforts at time management as being in the form of always planning ahead and multitasking. She also attributed the purchase of a home computer as adding to the time available with her children.

Well I just think I was always really organized. So I tried to plan ahead and you know make sure I was going to be where you know like I still tried to be active in what the kids were doing. I used to take my uh school books with me especially when they were in sports. And I would take them with me and I would either sit in the car and study and especially when they played baseball or ran track and they would run up to the car and say ‘Mom, its time for me’ and so I would put my book down and come over and watch them bat or watch them run that race or whatever. So it seems like I always had my books with me. But they were okay with that as long as I put them down long enough to watch what they were doing. And one of the best investments I did was to buy a computer so that I could do my studying at home and not have to go to the college and take time away from the kids. You know at least I would be there in the house. (36-year-old completer)

Whitney depicted that her preferred time saving method was task elimination. She explained how some of the things done in her previous daily routine may not be as important as she had originally thought. They were tasks that were nice to do, but really not necessary to do. A curtailing of her social life also allowed for more time to use on items of a higher priority.

I have been pretty organized. Now I am not going to say my house is always the cleanest and my laundry is always the foldist. Sometimes in the morning the kids will be looking for socks and I will say 'Go over there and look in the pile against the wall. Find a match and stick them on. Heck I don't even care if they match – just put them on.' I mean those kind of things, something's got to give at some point. Something's got to give and matching socks is one of them at my house. But like I said you know, you learn to go on less sleep. And you learn to go on less outside influences. I can't just stop, drop and roll with friends when they want to go. And of course now being single and having three kids and going to school and working two jobs It becomes very difficult to have any me time or social life and so I just – don't. (33-year-old completer)

### *Support from Family and Friends*

Rose revealed her family's support for her return to college was not instantaneous. However, when they found out she was serious about what she was they fully supported her.

My daughters were skeptical at first. They thought that I could never handle it after being away from school so long. But, once they found out that I was serious about it, they really got behind me. They both helped me with Algebra. When I was in high school you only needed one math class. I took bookkeeping instead of Algebra. (49-year-old completer)

Gabby came from a somewhat dysfunctional family and explained how she felt she would have to separate herself from some of their bad influences. Nevertheless, she was grateful for the support of those she knew she could depend on.

The family and friends that I did not leave behind were very supportive of my return to school. They said they were glad I was doing it and that I was smart enough and should have done it years ago. I wish I had started when I was

younger but I was too busy having kids. I remember how great I felt when I walked into the classroom on the first day. (35-year-old completer)

Cleo discussed how everyone in her immediate circle of family and friends was supportive of her effort. One of the first things she did was to group the children together and explain to them what her plans were and how she would need their help.

I remember I sat down and told them that I was going to. That I wanted to go to school and that I thought it was important and I think they were just fine with it. The kids seem to understand that I needed to set the time aside, to you know do that [study]. I always say [my son] reminded me of that little boy. Have you ever seen the commercial where the little boy goes and makes his mom the peanut-butter sandwich? Takes it to her. I always about cry when I see that commercial because I was like that's how [my son] was when he was little. You know he didn't ever want to bother you. He would always ask if you are studying. 'Are you studying?' [mimicked in a small child's voice.] (36-year-old completer)

Heather depicted the constant support offered by her parents as being very important in her completion of college.

You know my parents never, they never backpedaled. I mean they, even through all of that [her abusive relationships]. They, and I have even told them, 'The only mistake I ever made was not listening to you guys. Not having my kids you know, [but] not listening to them cause they were older and wiser despite of what I thought I knew. So they helped out a lot. (30-year-old completer)

Abby described the constant support that she received from her mother as well as her place of employment.

I was like I have just got to get a schedule written out. I just can't do this. But Mom goes, 'But Abby you are doing this. You're being successful. Abby you have 'A's in all of your classes. So you know I don't know why you're stressing. Whatever you're doing, just keep doing it.' And I just felt like it was total chaos at the time. Then I sat back and I thought 'Okay, if I just don't stress and worry about [it]' And also while [daughter's name] was in school and I was out of class if I was exhausted and I was at my mom and dad's and Mom would keep an eye on [other daughter] so I could take an hour nap during the day. If I wasn't working you know to where I could. And the nice thing also, at [place of employment] they let me take [daughter's name] where I didn't have to have daycare. It was either she was with me at work or my mom had her. So that really helped out also financially. (32-year-old non-completer)

Ted used word “pushed” in explaining his wife’s support of his return to school. He told of the necessity of having both her and their children’s backing during his academic endeavor.

My wife kind of pushed me the most. She was always the one that you know, ‘Make sure you get your homework done.’ Before we went to bed at night she would go ‘Did you get your homework done?’ Because a lot of time she would go to bed and I would still be up doing my homework. If you were a single person, you know, no kids; it would be a different story. But, when you’re married and you have children you’ve got your part to do and then. You have to have that support there. If you don’t it would be detrimental to try to complete it. Course my little kids, my seven-year-old son he thought it was really neat. He would say ‘Dad is going to school too!’ And then I would drop him off at school and then I would head straight to school. He thought that was pretty neat. (39-year-old completer).

Robin described the support she had received from her children, her friends at church, and her ex-daughter-in-law. This support was shown not only for her return to school but also for overcoming the obstacles she had encountered after becoming blind.

I have three teenagers at home. They are my biggest fans. And they are great to show it. ‘If my momma can do it blind, I can do it.’ And they are always talking, ‘My momma is blind. She does this, she does that and yeah you know they say [to other people] ‘She’s blind! And the church family they include me in on everything. Because if I’ve got my dog with me I can go just about anywhere anybody else goes. I think my biggest encouragement came from my ex-daughter-in-law who became one of my best friends. She is my biggest fan now. (47-year-old completer)

### *Support from Self-Care Practices*

Cleo and Gabby were the only two participants in the study to take proactive steps to help insure their good health while attending NEO. The general response by the majority of the students when asked about specific health programs was that with all they had going on, maintaining their own health received very little attention. Of the two that had consistent programs, one was the direct result of taking a health class and dealt with

physical health. The other dealt with mental health and the awareness that the elimination of a self-destructive drug habit would be required to reach her life goals.

Cleo had good health throughout her tenure at NEO and attributes much of this to a cardio circuit course she enrolled in during the first semester and ended up continuing throughout her tenure at NEO.

I was pretty healthy the whole time, thank goodness because I didn't have any insurance because I was you know divorced. So thank goodness I was healthy. I did the cardio circuit routine. Took a class as one of my electives. So I was in really good shape the whole time I was going to school. That probably helped with my health a lot. They used to always tease me in nursing class that they thought that that caused me to have less stress. [It] was like a forty-five minute workout where you warmed up and then you went in and they had an actual room that was set up with different nautilus machines. It's like every thirty seconds you are doing a nautilus machine and then you stop and do an aerobic activity on a mat or step-board. And the music tells you when to switch. I did it the whole time. I took several courses of that. That's the way to do it. Especially if you sign up for a grade and you are getting financial aid. You have to do it for a grade. So you have to go do it! At least three times a week. They average it out three times a week over the semester and if like you miss too many, you have to start catching up at the end of the semester and you are going every day. (36-year-old completer)

Gabby was concerned with the added mental stress caused by the load of college responsibilities to her often chaotic home life. She had a very strong marijuana addiction in the past and revealed that she had actively sought out an alternative health choice that involved substituting meditation for medication.

I started dealing with some of the non-school stress by smoking pot but then I decided I wasn't going to let my new life slide away. I wasn't going to give up my life for some drug. I replaced the pot with meditation. After that, one doctor tried to prescribe Valium for me and I wouldn't let him do it. There's no way I'm going to let anyone stop me from achieving what I want to achieve. (35-year-old completer)



### *Relationships with Faculty and Staff*

Abby revealed how her instructors helped her to overcome the insecurities she felt at not only being an older adult in a classroom of younger students, but also trying to maintain the high academic standards previously set by her younger sister. She went on to describe the positive effects of her instructors' periodic praise.

My psychology [instructor], she was very uplifting. [Sister's name], she was "Miss Straight 'A'." She never had to study in her whole life. She had had [instructor's name] as well. And I let [instructor's name] know right off that I was not the smart one in the family. And so she would write on my test, 'Number 1 in class! You have the highest grade on the test!' She would write on my papers, 'You out did your sister!' You know just little stuff to encourage me. I think the biggest thing, when I came back, not one person in teaching me made me feel stupid. They never once made me feel like I was ridiculous for asking a question. Or if I got the answer wrong, they didn't make me think 'Oh great, I'm never talking again.' You know they were very encouraging in saying 'Oh that's a good idea' or 'that's a good way of looking at it, but that's not what I am looking for.' You know, very encouraging. That really helps. It helps keep me and my self-esteem up there where I can accomplish what I needed to accomplish. My first paper it was uh pre-writing. It was our uh critical thinking where we just had to get our thoughts down and it came back with just a "C" and I thought 'Oh dear Jesus! I just can't do this!' I got dinged write off the bat. But then my next paper was a "B" and then he (the instructor) took me aside and said 'You're doing great. I just want you to know that you have the highest 'A' in the class. There is only one other "A". So you don't have anything to worry about.' Because I think he could sense that I am just like, you know my face was in the book and I was trying to go overboard and not really suck up but trying to make sure I really knew what was going on and stay on top of it. I was working very hard at it because I thought 'I can't flunk at thirty or almost thirty years of age. Everybody will look at me like an idiot. (32-year-old non-completer)

Rose told of her positive relationship with the NEO faculty on both non-academic and academic matters:

All of them were very helpful. If I ever had a question, it was very easy to get to them and talk to them. One of them was very encouraging, very supportive. with extra help in her classes. I had a sister-in-law pass away one semester and she was very um, supportive. Whenever I needed to talk, she would just let me come in and talk. There was um a couple that really challenged me. They were like 'I know you can do this!' I would turn in a paper and they would write all over it. I was like 'Ow! What are you doing this for?' It made me mad at the time but I really appreciate it now. (49-year-old completer)

Heather also had a positive connection with the NEO faculty on both academic and non-academic issues but her discussion accentuated the need to beware of giving the appearance of an inappropriate association. She developed a very strong rapport with her instructors and formed several friendships that have continued since her graduation. She not only formed a student to teacher relationship with some of her instructors but also, due to the closeness of their ages, more of a cohort relationship.

All of the professors here were helpful. Uh, I mean if I ever had any questions. I'm friends with a lot of them now. I have lunch with them. I, you know they were very helpful. When it came to the classroom though, they did not mix the two. The professional and you know. So but if I ever needed anything you know. Now I will say something about that. I had a rumor. It was mid-term and we had our, our test but and I was friends with this teacher and they thought she was just giving me the grade until they reviewed my transcripts and realized 'No way! Wait a second!' you know. Because it was snowing out and they said I had to come, and you know I had to walk to get in here. Because of one of the office people, I had to walk to take the test to make sure there wouldn't be no cheating. And I had to do it with them, with the office people standing over my shoulder. I was a little perturbed. Yea I was a little upset, but you know. So there can be [an appearance of impropriety]. But I had a paper trail, you know all of my papers, so she could have easily proved but you know. The professor when she found out she was furious. And so you know there can be that line. But it was easy to come to class here. You know, you wanted to come to class. It was fun, you learned, you socialized. I know the main thing about going to college is learning but especially older students, you're going to be more willing to come if you have a relationship with your professor and you know your professor. (30-year-old completer)

Gabby revealed the positive effect the NEO faculties enthusiasm for their subject matter had on her college experience.

I had some great teachers at NEO. History had always been a boring subject for me but one of my teachers at NEO brought history to life. I learned more in his class in history than I did in my whole high school years. I had an accounting teacher that was excellent. One government teacher just inspired me by his love for his subject. He enjoyed his subject and he got excited about it even though I am sure he knew that a lot of the students thought it was boring. He believed in what he was telling us. One of my literature teachers was known to be very tough and he didn't compliment anybody. So I thought it was great when he asked me

to tutor some of the other students. I've always felt confident in the classroom but that even added to it. (35-year-old completer)

Alisha praised the faculty for their support of her setting her family as a higher priority than her schoolwork; even if it meant bringing her children along with her to class.

All of the instructors were very helpful. They realized that even though I was a student, my kids still had to come first. Their schoolwork had to come before my schoolwork. Any of their needs had to be taken care of before my needs. An example of how understanding my instructors were came up when I could not find anybody to watch my kids one night. [My instructor] actually let me take my kids to school one night. We were watching a video that night and she just said, 'They can watch it with us.' That was just you know, I came in to tell her you know I can't come to class. I am so sorry. And she said, 'No they can just sit and draw and watch it with us.' That was an awesome thing she did. And my kids still talk about that video we watched. They even told everybody, 'I went to college with Mom last night!' (32-year-old non-completer)

Marie described the difference between having and not having a strong rapport with one's instructors. She stated that she enjoyed the classes at the satellite campus in Grove more than the classes she took on the main campus in Miami. She attributed this to having a more positive relationship with the Grove faculty than the Miami faculty.

It makes all of the difference in the world. The last semester I had to go full time to the main campus. Here [the satellite campus] there's fifty percent traditional-nontraditional students. I think the teachers, I find the teachers actually, I don't know. They teach knowing they're teaching heavy loaded nontraditional students. They don't give you a lot of busy work, but they make sure you get the information and the knowledge. I dropped one Comp II class. All of the busy work she had. You know it's fine when you have these full time kids living on campus but it did not make me know my material any better. That is probably one of the best examples. But you know in some ways this school was probably the least stressful part of my life. You know you get to interact with other adults without everybody demanding something from you. Also it is a creative outlet. You know, you get to spend time thinking and writing. I guess I just enjoy having a creative outlet and you can justify your time and money for it by saying you are doing it to work toward your degree. (54-year-old completer)

Sally talked about how impressed she was with the faculty and staff's concern with not only her wellbeing in the classroom, but also with what was going on with her

life outside the classroom. She explained how their moral support helped to give her the confidence she needed to succeed.

I just fell in love with some of them. They all were really patient but and I could talk to them you know. And they could tell I was really nervous or whatever and so they were really patient with me and they were just really nice. Uh, like no matter what. It did not matter if it was in class or not if something was wrong and they could tell they would just (say) like ‘Are you okay?’ you know. They gave me confidence that I could be the best and they gave me support, moral support. They refused to give up on me. They wouldn’t let me quit. (39-year-old completer)

Cleo also revealed how the support of her instructors added to her confidence.

I just think there’s lots of encouragement. I can remember wanting to drop out of –uh- math one summer and [the teacher] almost refused to sign my drop sheet because he thought I was smart enough to be able to stay into that class. Until I begged him and told him I was trying to work at night and you know I thought the class was just too much during the summer and he finally signed the slip. But he never had any doubt that I could do it. And my nursing instructors, they were all very supportive. (36-year-old completer)

Robin described how the faculty and staff were determined to help her reach her academic goals, but were at first somewhat at a loss as to how to go about it. As far as she knew, they had never taught a blind student. By the time the first semester was over however, they had developed the knowledge to teach her and had created a relationship with her that was very supportive throughout the completion of her degree program.

At first I think I overwhelmed the Neo staff. Here this blind woman is and I came in here and said ‘Here I am. Teach me.’ And none of them to my knowledge had ever taught a blind person. And uh, so it was an experience for me and an experience for them. And so that first semester I think we just used each other for guinea pigs. And one of the women out here in the offices was recruiting for student support services and I asked her about what it was. And so she told me, kind of offhandedly, what it was. And I thought, ‘Okay.’ And I tell you what; I don’t think I could have got through NEO without student support services. They were there to read tests for me. Most of my instructors were really great about it if I needed to have a little extra time. Some of them even let me take a test early if I needed to, but I tried not to do it. Because I wanted to take the test at the same time as the rest of my class was doing it. If they were doing it at 10 a.m., I wanted to do it at 10 a.m. So you know it wouldn’t upset anything. They were

real good about working with me. If they didn't have anybody there to read it to me [the test], you know a student or something, they would read it to me themselves. I took a general physical science class the first semester. The teacher was just awesome about the labs and things. And another teacher went as far as to make models for me when I got into biology. She made a model of a grasshopper and a model of a crawdad out of clay and pipe cleaners so I could feel what the other students were seeing through the microscopes. And for my newspaper class, so I would know how the paper was laid out, he used push pins and yarn on a corkboard. So this is where my feature article is or whatever and you know there is a photo that goes here. And that is how he did it. ((47-year-old completer)

### *Relationships with Fellow Students*

Rose discussed the extra dimension that a strong social relationship with cohorts gives to the college experience.

I was very involved in student campus activities. I think that is what a lot of younger students don't do. If I hadn't done that I think I would have missed out on a lot. I was in the Spanish Club. I was in the History Club and the Phi Theta Kappa Club. I was a judge at the History Day Contest. A lot of the adult students did not get involved in the college's activities. They really miss out. I know going to all of this stuff takes a lot of time, but it is worth it. (49-year old completer)

Isabella described how her fellow students helped her to bridge some academic and technology gaps.

I had two friends in class that helped me out a lot. Like if I did not quite understand something. Like on my research paper. You know between the index cards and how this was supposed to be laid out and that was supposed to be laid out, you know. They even had to help me with the library. I couldn't even figure out the library. I went to get a book and I didn't know where to go and you know they're like "Oh the computer!" and that is not such an easy thing. You know, I don't know anything about computers. (32-year-old completer)

Cleo revealed how her positive relationship with student cohorts was not only beneficial to her success in the classroom but also developed into longer lasting bonds.

I made lots of friends while I was in school. I still have friends now that I went through school with at NEO. Course when you get in such a tight knit group as a nursing class, where every class you take is the same, then you really have a bond by the time that you're done. I have several close friends out of that class that I

still keep in touch with. We used to study over at the house. I mean even the kids, my kids got close to some of the people that I were in class with. Cause you know I was uh the responsible one I guess. That was older and with the kids that everybody came to my house to study. We used to meet during evenings uh to study and then we even had like you know a Christmas party and things like that together. And we would go out and celebrate together after we had a big test. We just really did a lot of things together. (36-year-old completer)

Alisha also discussed how positive cohort relationship can carry on past the college experience and touched on how easily they can be formed.

I was extremely nervous. I thought I would be the oldest person in the class but that was not the case. There were a lot of people there just as old as me and just as nervous. I have actually met quite a few people who we have become friends because of NEO. I actually made friends with one of my daughter's friends' mom. Her daughter and my daughter were in the same class and her and I ended up being in the same class. That was funny. Most of the time we would just see each other in class but at times we would see each other at activities and stuff. Sometimes we would meet at Pizza Hut after class and study. (32-year-old completer)

Tate depicted how impromptu relationships with fellow students developed that were helpful to him in his studies.

A lot of times we would just meet over there in the library you know. I'd go to the library to study and I would see the same people over there. And after awhile you had three or four of us over there at a time you know, study or whatever. It was just like people looking for help too, study partners you know and we would get over there and some people would study better by themselves you know and some would do better together. (44-year-old completer)

Robin's comments on her cohort relationships described how they were not only enjoyable but also mutually beneficial to both parties involved. She explained how she acquired some extra help from her fellow students in navigating from one class to the other and at the same time set a good example for them as to what one can do if he or she is determined enough.

One of my friends, a young man from Jamaica, would often see me somewhere on the campus and would always offer his arm and say 'Miss Robin may I help you?' Then we would just walk along and have a good conversation. I had another

special friend that was always around and we would often go and eat lunch together. Sometimes we would have too much fun in class and would get into trouble for talking too much. I have always tried to use my blindness not as a crutch but as a positive thing. I think what I do in the classroom can serve as motivation for other students. When they see that I can do it when I am blind then surely they can do it having sight. I always tell them there are only three things I can't do; brain surgery, drive a car and fly a plane. (47-year-old completer)

Marie told of enjoying her relationships with fellow students, but added that the time available to spend with them was limited to some degree because of her other responsibilities in life.

Several of students would just you know form study groups and help each other. The first one that I started working algebra with was a young girl and then a couple of others joined us. And you know, yeah there were a couple of other classes where we had study groups. Biology and Geology I remember. Last semester with the Psych club you know, we went canoeing. It was fun. I hadn't been in forever and I kept promising these kids, you know the younger ones, that I would go. And so I took my grandson with me. He's twelve. And we did wonderful. Actually we were the second ones to come in. And it was in October and we made it all of the way! And toward the end he said 'Okay Grandma!' And he ended up tipping me after we land! It was cold! It was Cold! Good grief! It was such a neat memory between my grandson and I. I did a couple of Psych Club and Sociology Club things for my resume, mostly for scholarships but you know you don't have a lot of time if you know you wanted to [be more involved]. (54-year-old completer)

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### *Summary*

The purpose of this study was to obtain descriptions of the life issues which may have lead to the success or failure of the degree aspirations of former high-load adult community college students. High-load adult students were defined as students over twenty-five years of age whose either full or part time community college experience coincided with the responsibilities of supporting and maintaining a household in which a dependent child or parent lived.

This study builds upon the Harrison (2004) work that used McClusky's Theory of Margin as a framework to identify eleven categories of life issues that had either a negative or positive effect on adult college students' margins in life. Harrison's work concentrates on identifying the categories. This study was designed to provide descriptions of the life issues from the students' points of views. These descriptions might help community colleges to better serve future high-load adult students.

The descriptions were obtained through face-to-face interviews. The participants in the study consisted of fifteen former high-load adult students who attended Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College. Ten of the former students had graduated with associate degrees from the college and the other five consisted of individuals who had



been seeking associate degrees but dropped out of school before graduating. The sampling strategy for the study was purposive in nature. Current NEO instructors, counselors, administrators of student service programs, and students were queried to identify past adult students whose descriptions of their community college experience and simultaneous head of household roles might prove to be particularly informational.

Participants described feeling anxiety due to a fear of being looked down upon by the faculty and the younger students, not being prepared for the work, speaking in public, having forgotten the academic basics acquired so long ago, and fear of failure. One of them discussed how when he entered the classroom everyone, both the instructor and the younger students, seemed to be staring at him as if thinking, “What is wrong with this person that it took him so long to go to college?” Several were very concerned about not doing enough while they were in high school to prepare them for the work. For years one of them had not had to speak in public and now she was afraid that she was going to have to. Most of them voiced concern over how much they had forgotten of what they had learned in their high school years. Some were afraid of failing and the effect that it would have on themselves and others in their lives. But some were not anxious at all. They were just excited to finally be back. All of them commented on how the anxiety disappeared very quickly once they got back into the routine of the classroom.

Math and science seemed to be the biggest academic challenges for the majority of those interviewed. Most of them met these challenges by taking noncredit preparatory courses, obtaining tutors, working in study groups, and extending their time spent studying. One student described her inability to pass an algebra class and the resulting feeling of failure. Some of the participants’ teenage children were currently taking some of the same types of courses in high school that their parent was taking and thus were an

added source for help. Some described a strategy of putting off the more difficult classes until the end of their programs in order to give them time to readjust to the academic workload. One student discussed an all or nothing approach by taking what she considered to be the most difficult classes as soon as possible. She felt that if she was going to fail anyway, she might as well get it over with. Most of those interviewed commented on how they ended up having higher grade point averages than their traditional aged student cohorts.

The descriptions of financial issues and the dealing of a shortage of money seemed to carry a common theme. This common approach to most of those interviewed did not involve any specific type of budgeting strategy but a “you just do what you gotta do” attitude that was applied to each financial difficulty as it arose. One participant discussed an unsuccessful attempt to finance her education through a part-time job as an exotic dancer and indicated that it was just one of the many bad choices she had made in her life. Another participant reflected upon how her kids laugh now about her driving a “very” used compact car that they lovingly referred to as the “pregnant roller skate” throughout her college career. One student relied primarily on credit cards to make it through financial difficulties and ending up graduating but deeply in debt.

The balancing of outside responsibilities with school responsibilities was a major load to carry for all of those interviewed. Most of them described an exhausting schedule of waking early, getting themselves and their children ready for school, going to school, working, spending a little time with their children, staying up to the wee hours of the morning working on their homework, going to bed and then getting up early and starting all over again. In addition to all of this, others described the added effect of a stalker for

an ex-husband, custody battles, child-support arguments, and children trying to deal with the domestic problems created by a divorce.

While the participants often discussed their children as being part of their load they also described them as being a great source of motivation. These parents looked at themselves as a role model for their children and went to great lengths not to disappoint them. One participant was motivated by the thought of pleasing her mother by becoming the first one of her siblings to complete college. Another was motivated by the knowledge that a college degree would give her the opportunity to work in a field where she was helping others. Escaping from an abusive husband and the goal of “never having to depend on a man again” was the driving force behind several of those interviewed. Several were suffering from some type of physical disability and described being motivated by the idea that a college degree would allow them to maintain their independence despite their disabilities.

The interviews often contained an overlapping in the descriptions of motivation and determination. Some of the same issues such as being a strong role model for their children and achieving independence not only provided the motivation for returning to school but also the determination to keep them going under adverse conditions. One participant described her determination to break a cycle of bad decisions. Another discussed how she was determined to prove herself academically in order increase her sense of self-worth. Several participants discussed their determination not to give in to physical disabilities and ailments.

The descriptions of time management methods as a source of power fell into multitasking, task integration, and task elimination. Several participants discussed taking their homework with them to their children’s extracurricular activities as a form of

multitasking. One participant explained task integration as consolidating “those thing I have to do with those things I need to do.” As an example she said she had to go to work and she needed to get exercise. Since she did not have time for an exercise program she started walking to work. The task elimination discussion involved taking an inventory of what one is doing in life and then eliminating some of those tasks that were not essential.

One participant discussed how support from family and friends was not instantaneous for her. They did not think she was serious about her return to school, but after they saw the effort she was putting into it, they became a great source of added power. One participant discussed how she had to separate herself from family and friends that were non-supportive in order to keep them from dragging her back into a dysfunctional lifestyle. Another participant said that she knew how important it was to get the help of her family and called a meeting and asked for their support before enrolling.

Only two of the participants indicated they had made a concentrated effort to institute good self-care practices as a source of power while attending school. One participant began working out on nautilus equipment as part of a required class during the first semester and continued the program until she graduated. The other participant consistently participated in meditation in order to deal with the added stress of going to college without slipping back into a previous drug abuse problem.

All but two of the participants described having a positive relationship with the NEO faculty and staff. Several participants were very insecure when they started their college careers and praise from their instructors served as a real source of power to bolster their self-confidence. One participant described an incident in which a faculty member offered her support outside of the classroom to deal with the death of a loved

one. Several mentioned that they developed friendships with their instructors that have continued since their graduation. The staff of the “Support Services” program received a great deal of praise from many of the participants pertaining to their helpfulness with both academic and personal problems. The two participants who had negative things to say about the faculty consisted of one completer and one non-completer. One of the negative relationships dealt with a faculty member having a negative attitude toward adult students in general. The other had to do with a faculty member who was described as not caring anything at all about the welfare of his students.

All of those interviewed indicated they had maintained a positive relationship with their cohorts. One participant described the enjoyment she received from participating in many of the on campus activities and lamented at how many adult students miss out on the “college experience.” Most of those interviewed indicated that their initial interactions with cohorts dealt primarily with classroom matters. Later on however, these informal study groups both before and after class developed into friendships that continued beyond school matters.

### *Conclusions*

The value in this study comes from the adult students’ descriptions of life’s load and power issues, which may have influenced their success or failure in community college. These real-world student perspectives may serve as an expedient to further evaluate the current literature on adult student retention as well as add new insight to community colleges when making policy decisions. The following conclusions evolved from a comparison of the literature on the eleven categories of life issues identified by

Harrison (2004) (which used McClusky's Theory of margin as a research framework) with the students' descriptions.

Ziegler, Elbert and Henry (2003) discuss the two key stimulants of adult students' anxiety as a sense of self and the perceptions of their own learning abilities. They defined sense of self as the amount of ability one believes he or she has in controlling life events. They concluded that a low sense of self or a low sense of learning abilities was a deterrent to continued participation. While the results of this study concur with the beliefs that much of the anxiety is caused by a low sense of self or a low sense of learning ability, it does not support the idea that anxiety is a detriment to continued participation. The students who felt anxiety in their return to the classroom described it as fleeting in nature. It was an initial response but quickly disappeared. This study also supports the idea that not all adult students feel anxiety upon returning to the classroom. The word excitement, not anxiety, was used as descriptor of the first day back in the classroom several times.

The literature discusses how academic challenges that contribute to lowering retention rates for adult students may be exacerbated by poor instructional practices in some colleges. Good adult oriented instructional practices are touted as those that allow the students to be proactive in their learning. Some specific examples cited as being good teaching practices are those that fulfill the adult students' needs to be self directed, to be active learners, to tie the learning to practical situations, and to put the new learning to immediate use (Knowles, 1980; Nesbitt, 1998; Sachs, 2001). The responses of the participants in this study supported the benefits of these teaching methods. However, while the majority of those interviewed displayed a high regard for their instructors, they credited themselves with doing the things necessary to clear their academic hurdles.

When it came to describing how they met these academic challenges, most of those interviewed described being clearly proactive. They voluntarily took noncredit courses, obtained tutors, formed study groups, and worked many extra hours. One student even searched the rummage sales in town for math books to support her cause.

Only one of the fifteen students interviewed cited financial problems as being a reason for dropping out of school. However, this one student conceded that his family could have financially survived his college stint if only he had asked it of them. He attributes his dropping out as being the result of having too much pride as “the breadwinner” to ask his family to do with fewer material things. It appears that community colleges are meeting their goal of equal access and that between available financial aide, the ability to cut back on living expenses, and a willingness to work a full or part-time job; almost anyone can afford to go to a community college.

When describing the load of trying to balance outside responsibilities with school responsibilities, it was the emotional aspects of their lives that the participants most often discussed. They worried that they were not spending enough time with their children. They worried that their children may have not been being adequately cared for while they were at school. They were concerned that an abusive ex-spouse might reappear in their life at any time. They were afraid that they might slip back into an old destructive habit or dysfunctional lifestyle that they were trying to escape. While there was also plenty of discussion of the physical load required of the long hours of running a household and attending school, it was the discussion of the emotional strain that took a precedence. From these descriptions, one might conclude that the major threat to adult student retention may be an inability to carry the mental load.

Kirby, Biever, Martinez, and Gomez (2004) point out that when it comes to finding the power to handle the added responsibilities inherent with a return to school, the adult students' obligation to their family can serve as a motivating force. Participants' descriptions of their own motivation often concurred with this assessment. While acknowledging the extra load caused by trying to deal with all of the responsibilities required of raising children while simultaneously attending classes, almost all of the participants cited their major source of motivation as having a chance to set a good example for their children. Sadly, this response was usually followed by a comment such as "I do not want them to have to live the lousy life I have lived." One might conclude from these participants' responses that they have given up on their own chances for a happy life but still have hopes for their children's success.

The participant's discussion of their determination to succeed despite all obstacles was congruent to the Haggan (2000) observation that these students often endure losses, changes, and hardships yet rarely grieve over anything outside of tragedy. It is akin to the old adage of "What does not kill you makes you stronger!" As one listens to the participants tell of their determination to succeed, it is obvious that all of their struggles have had at least one positive effect on their lives. It has given them extra strength.

Two of what Harrison (2004) recognized as life issue categories that supplied power to adult college students received very little comment from the participants involved in this study. Only three of the fifteen participants offered up any specific descriptions of their time management techniques or good self-care practices. Most of the participants discussed time management as just something they did naturally in the course of their lives and they did not step back and make a specific plan. As far as describing any efforts to implement good health care practices, the participants had not



given it much thought one way or the other or they had thought about starting a health program but could not work it into their busy schedule. From these responses, one might conclude that to the majority of the participants' good time management comes naturally and good health-care practices are not high on the priority list when trying to manage the tremendous load many of them were carrying. They may have looked at it as trying to arrange the deck chairs on the *Titanic* as it was sinking.

The majority of the participants praised the support they received from family and friends as they made their return to school and commented on how it did help to lighten the load they were carrying. One participant discussed how this support grew the longer she was in school. It was as if she had to prove to her friends and family that she was serious about getting a degree. Another called a family meeting in order to illicit the help of her children before she ever enrolled. However one student, who dropped out before getting her degree, described the support from her family as being primarily "lip service." They were one hundred percent behind her until she needed them for something and then they would just disappear. Kirby et al. (2004) recommends that colleges institute programs that promote family, friend and work's support in the adult students' educational efforts. The results of this study concur with their recommendation.

Coccia (1997) discusses the notion of a positive relationship with faculty as adding power to adult students by providing a positive role model which many of these students may have been missing throughout their lives. The participants in this study were full of praise for the NEO faculty and staff but the phrase "positive role model" never came up. These students' descriptions of the positive relationships with their instructors described more of a cohort relationship than one of looking up to the instructor. This calls into question Coccia's observation and makes one wonder if a role

model is what an adult student is looking for. A college student right out of high school may be seeking this but a forty-five year old student just getting off an eight hour shift at work probably is not.

Donaldson (1999) and Gabriel (2001) discuss that in order to supply the added strength of positive relationships with cohorts, the classroom should become the fulcrum of the college experience for adult college students. Unlike traditional students who often add positive experiences to their educational efforts through non-class social activities and events, due to time commitments and real life priorities such as work and family, many adult students must draw social involvements primarily from the classroom experience. The majority of the participants in this study did not agree with this assessment. They indicated that they often formed close bonds with their student cohorts and would meet before and after class for informal study sessions. They also would get together at various places off campus as well as each other's homes. Some of these sessions were college related and others were purely recreational. They not only enjoyed these relationships while in college but also continued them after ending their college experience. Part of his continued interaction after class may be explained by NEO being located in a small rural town in which interaction is inevitable.

#### *Differences in Descriptions between Completers and Non-completers*

The descriptions of life's power and load issues while attending college were quite similar between those that completed their degree aspirations and those that did not. The few exceptions occurred in the descriptions of the loads of anxiety upon returning to school, academic challenges encountered, and financial challenges.

Most of the completers and non-completers described being very anxious on the first day of their respective returns to school but said this discomfort quickly disappeared. Both groups discussed this anxiety as being replaced by feelings of excitement. One non-completer stated that although she lost her anxiety of attending classes, she never did become comfortable when called upon to speak in class. She also indicated that this had been the case throughout her school career and thus was more of a personal issue than having anything to do with the college itself.

Completers and non-completers alike discussed the great academic challenges they had to face due to both poor high school preparation and the large amount of information they had forgotten over the years since they had last been in a classroom. The completers contributed their determination to succeed and willingness to put in a lot of hard work as their keys to success. One non-completer indicated that she had simply lost interest in obtaining her degree and so studying was no longer a priority. Another non-completer attributed her failure as being due to the ineptness of the college instructors and a lack of proper guidance from her academic adviser.

Both the completers and non-completers indicated that they just did whatever was necessary to get by financially while in college. Both groups indicated there was some guilt attributed to the fact that their attendance in college was temporarily causing their families to survive on a very limited income. One non-completer said this guilt was a large factor in his decision to quit attending classes.

### *Relationship to Adult Learning Theory*

New technology and the society that generates it are in a state of continual change. Thus, life long learning is quickly becoming a need rather than a choice. Adults

learn new things on a daily basis and yet it was not until the early part of the twentieth century that adult learning was studied seriously. Adult education became a professional field of practice in the 1920's, and since that time much research has been conducted in how adults learn (Merriam, 2001). A key theory that has evolved from adult education research and relates to this study is transformational learning.

Transformational learning involves a basic change in the way individuals view themselves and the world in which they live. This type of learning centers on the cognitive process of learning which involves the mental construction of experience, what that experience means to the individual, and then reflection on that experience. Through this validation process adults either accept or reject knowledge and create meaning. This meaning is exclusive to the individual and internalized. Thus, a person's reality is his or her own current understanding and revision (Mezirow, 1991).

Each individual brings into adulthood certain beliefs, feelings, values, or attitudes, which may be referred to as meaning schemes. However, at times these meaning schemes are challenged by a disturbing event in a person's life. Transformational learning theory calls this event a disorienting dilemma. A disorienting dilemma could be a life event such as the death of a loved one, a major illness, disability, or some type of a crisis in the adult's life. After the occurrence of the person's disorienting dilemma, the adult's previous problem-solving strategies are no longer helpful in his or her current situation. Then the adult begins a self examination or a critical assessment of assumptions about life in general and may start to recognize that others may have gone through the same type of painful situation. It is at this time that the adult starts to explore options for forming new relationships or roles in his or her life or develop a plan to make sense of what has happened. This plan of action may range anywhere from making a

simple rationale decision to taking a much more radical path. Whatever the choice, the adult reemerges back into life with a new and transformed perspective (Mezirow, 1991).

As the adult students in this study described life issues affecting their margins in life while going to college, they simultaneously revealed stories which supported the theory of transformational learning. The participants revealed the meaning schemes they brought into adulthood. In these meaning schemes other priorities, either voluntary or involuntary, had taken precedence over receiving a college education. These priorities included work, partying, marriage, and pregnancy. Then most of them discussed having some type of disorienting dilemma in their lives. The disorienting dilemmas described by the participants included topics such as spousal abuse (both mental and physical), adultery, permanently disabling injuries or illnesses, and the abrupt loss of employment. They also spoke of how after their personal disorienting dilemmas; they rethought how they had arrived at their roles in life, what these roles actually meant to them and then reflected on what they could have done differently. This reflection resulted in their decisions to enroll in a community college in order to try to better their current lives.

Transformational learning often leads to useful, enduring change. Transformational learning strategies are utilized to make sense of life's experiences and beliefs about these experiences. It is a natural extension of adult learning as the adults learn to think things out for themselves rather than relying on others. Adults are constantly changing by learning more about themselves, the world they live in, and how to make sense of what has happened. Adults have the ability to reflect upon their past and change their future (Kidd, 1973). The participants of this study confirmed this process.

### *Recommendations for Community College Practice*

The purpose of this study was to build upon the Harrison (2004) work by obtaining descriptions from former high-load adult students of eleven key categories of life issues that had either a negative or positive effect on their margins in life while attending community college. Due to its design, this study was not intended to prove any type of cause and effect relationship but rather to provide a deeper understanding of these issues through the people's perspective who have experienced them. The deeper understanding, provided by this study and others like it, might help community colleges to more effectively develop procedures, policies and programs to combat the life issues having a negative effect on adult student retention.

As the participants in this study discussed their first day upon returning to college after such a long absence, the emotion of excitement was described along with that of anxiety. Anxiety should continue to be a topic to be addressed in adult student orientation procedures, but an emphasis should also be put on the excitement of returning to college. College administrators, faculty and staff should be reminded that these adult students are not only entering a classroom, they are entering the start of a new life. They should emphasize their adult student's excitement and encourage them to continue to use it as a source of power. They might periodically tell of past adult student's success stories throughout the semester in order to rekindle the current student's initial excitement.

As the participants discussed financial issues, they described a sense of pride at being able to provide for their families and yet still attend college. Community college financial aid departments need to keep this in mind and not unknowingly belittle adult students as they try to help them. When problems arise with financial aid distributions, they need to be resolved with an attitude of "We are giving you a hand up, not a hand

out.” Adult students need to be occasionally reminded that their dependence on financial aid is just a temporary situation and they will soon be making their way on their own.

Adult student orientation procedures should include a discussion on both time management strategies and good self-care practices. The participants in this study consistently stated that they had not given much thought to these two potential sources of power. The feelings given in relation to these issues tended to indicate that at their ages good time management just came naturally and whatever good health care practices they had used in the past would suffice in their current situations.

When implementing student service programs, community colleges should be aware that the psychological load carried by adult student might far outweigh either the physical or academic load. As these adults enter the classroom they are trying to literally set aside their other lives. Whatever they have going on in the world, they are putting it on hold. This is a source of power for some students because it allows them some “me” time. The majority of students in this study however tended to describe the guilt they felt in taking advantage of this time to escape. They felt they were guilty of neglecting their children. They felt guilty for sitting in a classroom rather being at work making money for their families. On campus daycare programs might be able to provide services that would ease the guilt of students spending so much of their time away from their children. The colleges also need to continually promote the long term financial benefits the adult students will provide for their dependants through obtaining a better education.

The majority of the students in the study commented on how they were motivated by setting a good example for their children. Their children saw firsthand how difficult it was to return to college as an adult opposed to getting a degree right out of high school. Due to this, their children had changed their attitudes about the value of college.

Community colleges should consider a mentor program in which some of the adult students could advise some of the traditionally aged students on the value of making it through college the first time.

Several of the adult students commented on how early academic success and the resulting praise from their instructors provided a real boost to their confidence. As instructors are planning their curriculum it might be beneficial to intentionally work in a few projects that might be conducive to success early in the semester. This could be accomplished without lessening the academic rigor of the course by making adjustments later in the semester when the adult students are more adjusted to the academic environment.

The students in the study commented several times about inadequate availability to the library on the weekends and problems with parking. Due to other life commitments, many adult students must do the majority of their studying on the weekends and holidays. NEO and other community colleges often limit the hours they are open on these days in order for their employees to spend more time with their families. NEO and other colleges sell parking stickers and issue tickets for parking violations to offenders. While this provides added income for the college, the students often resent the fact that they have to pay to park to attend classes that they have also paid for. While community college policies on both of these issues have merit, they should be reexamined to see if the cost may just outweigh the benefits. If after this reexamination it is deemed that changes do not need to be made in these policies, the college may want to consider starting some type of marketing campaign in which they can explain their side of the issues and thus possibly make them more palatable to the students.



### *Recommendations for Further Research*

This study concentrated on obtaining descriptions from high-load adult students of the eleven categories of life issues identified by Harrison (2004) as having a positive or negative effect on their margins in life. More descriptive studies of this nature on other topics would be beneficial to both community colleges and the field of adult education as a whole. The old adage of “If you want the truth you need to get it straight from the horse’s mouth,” has a lot of merit when it comes to the value of information obtained on a subject as complex as the human condition.

While pride is usually discussed as being a source of power when referring to adult students’ efforts to complete college, this study contained a couple of statements that put it in a negative light. One participant discussed how he was supposed to be the “bread winner” in his family and he dropped out of school rather than letting his family do without certain material things. Another mentioned dealing with the financial aid department as being demeaning to her pride. A study on the positive and negative effects of pride in adult students could be a good addition to the literature.

Several participants in this study achieved their goal of obtaining their degrees despite suffering from severe physical handicaps. Although recent federal laws have forced educational institutions to make equal access available to all students, these participants indicated that much more needs to be done in this area. A study on where the nation’s colleges are on this issue, obtained from the disabled students themselves, would be a good addition to the adult education literature.

Implementation of the above mentioned recommendations for community colleges and further adult education research might eventually result in raising the retention rate of high-load adult students. If this happens, fewer students will be

experiencing the pain of failure. This is the pain that Hailey felt as she described the ending of her dream of a better life for herself and her children. “It makes me feel like a real lowlife. I never felt so stupid. It is a disgrace. It breaks my heart because I had to go back to my children and say Mom was not smart enough to make it through college!”

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## Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: Wednesday, March 22, 2006  
IRB Application No ED06109  
Proposal Title: Life Issues Leading to Success in Community College Degree Seekers

Reviewed and Exempt  
Processed as:

**Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved Protocol Expires: 3/21/2007**

Principal Investigator(s)

Billy Joe Pearish  
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Grove, OK 74344

Robert Nolan  
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The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.


The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period of one calendar year. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of this research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Beth McTernan in 415 Whitehurst (phone: 405-744-5700, beth.mcternan@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,



Sue C. Jacobs, Chair  
Institutional Review Board

VITA

Billy Joe Pearish

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Thesis: LIFE ISSUES LEADING TO SUCCESS IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
DEGREE SEEKERS

Major Field: Occupational and Adult Education

Biographical:

Personal Data:      Date of Birth: February 26, 1955  
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Date of Degree: December 2006

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Title of Study: LIFE ISSUES LEADING TO SUCCESS IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
DEGREE SEEKERS

Pages in Study: 102

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Science

Scope and Method of Study: The purpose of this qualitative study was to obtain the in-depth descriptions of the life issues which either contributed to the success or failure of high-load adult students in obtaining associate degrees. The sampling strategy for the study was purposive in nature. Participants in the study were fifteen former high load adult students of a community college located in Oklahoma. High-load adult students were defined as those over twenty-five years of age whose community college experience coincided with the responsibilities of supporting and maintaining a household in which a dependent child or parent lived. Current community college instructors, counselors, administrators of student service programs, and students were queried to identify past students whose descriptions of their community college experience and head of household roles might prove to be particularly informational. Ten of the students had been successful in obtaining their associate degrees while five failed to complete their programs. A phenomenological approach of individual interviews was used to gather the data from each of the former students. The data were then logically linked to one of eleven preordained categories of life issues identified by the Harrison (2004) study which used McClusky's Theory of Margin as a framework.

Findings and Conclusions: The participants described not only an initial anxiety upon returning to school but also an overriding feeling of excitement. Math and science were cited as providing the most daunting academic challenges. A "you just do what you gotta do" attitude was described in dealing with the balancing of outside responsibilities and economic challenges incurred while maintaining their dual head of household and student roles. Serving as a role model for their children was described as being a key element of their motivation to return to school as well as their determination to finish. The descriptions of good time management methods consisted primarily of multitasking, task integration and task elimination. Only two of the participants indicated that they made any concentrated effort to institute improved self-care practices while in school. Support from family and friends as well as positive relationships with the college faculty, staff and fellow students were described as being helpful in allowing the students to complete their programs. The major value in this study comes from the high-load adult students' descriptions of life's load and power issues, which may have influenced their success or failure in community college. These real-world student perspectives may serve as an expedient to further evaluate the current literature on adult student retention as well as add new insight to community colleges when making policy decisions.

Advisor's Approval: Dr. Robert E. Nolan