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Interpretative Analysis of Adult Learners' Lived Experiences in a Uniquely Designed Higher Education Program

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Interpretative Analysis of Adult Learners' Lived Experiences in a
Uniquely Designed Higher Education Program

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the PhD in Leadership and Change Program of Antioch University

in partial fulfillment for the degree of

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This dissertation has been approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of PhD in Leadership and Change, Graduate School of Leadership and Change, Antioch University.

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- Jon F. Wergin, PhD, Committee Chair
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to three of the most important and phenomenal women in my life. They are the precious gems who set the foundation for me to become all that I am and will become. They reside in God's heavenly garden:

Phyllis Allen—mother

Ruth McCorry—maternal grandmother

Inez Allen—paternal grandmother

Abstract

The lived and collegiate experiences of adult learners, who are among the fastest growing student population in 21st century higher education, is the essence of this study. The study was conducted using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Fifteen baccalaureate level degree-seeking study participants consented to share their respective journeys. Twenty-one interviews were conducted for the study. Code-listed categories, themes and sub-themes emerged from two interview sessions, and member-checking sessions. Several themes were aligned to two research questions: In what ways, if any, are the distinctive needs and expectations of adult learners fulfilled through a baccalaureate level adult learner program; and, what does an adult learner do to address the challenges of meeting degree requirements in a timely manner? The diversity, character, and transparency of each study participant led to extensive interpretative analysis that validates how their needs and expectations were fulfilled, and the efforts made to conquer challenges that allowed them to persist in an accelerated adult learning program. This study further examines how met and unmet needs impact the desired optimum experience for adult learners. A model on *The Impact of Met and Unmet Needs for Adult Learners* was developed to introduce how certain influential factors can either decrease (unmet) or increase (met) confidence levels, degrees of expectation, and learning outcomes. The relationship of this study to existing adult learning theory and how the findings build upon the research on adult learners makes a significant contribution for future researchers, college leaders, organizations, and others invested in the experiences of adult learners in uniquely designed programs. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA: Antioch University Repository and Archive, <http://aura.antioch.edu/> and OhioLINK ETD Center, <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/>

Keywords: Adult Learner, Higher Education, Academic Advisor, Professor, University, Baccalaureate Degree, Leadership, Experience, Persistence, Retention, Graduation, Optimum, Confidence, Expectation, Influence, Need, Impact, Program Design, Qualitative Research, Phenomenology

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Chapter I: Introduction

Success in college is not simply a matter of students demonstrating academic ability and ultimately earning a degree. In addition, all students [traditional, non-traditional, and adult learners] must master the “college student” role in order to understand instructors’ expectations and apply their academic skills effectively to those expectations (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p. 425). Adult learners are defined and reported as college students over the age of 24, similar to other non-traditional students (i.e. military, special needs, foster care, secondary education), but not the same due to unique needs and characteristics. There are a multitude of statistical reports on higher education and the percent of all student types who persist, complete their degree requirements, and drop or stop-out. Gaining admission to a higher education institution is one thing, achieving academic success in a program of study is another thing (Sogunro, 2014, p. 22).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported in 2008 that 30% of college students dropped out in their first year, and 56% did not complete their degree requirements. According to National Student Clearinghouse researchers (2012), on average, 38% of all students, undergraduate, and graduate, in a fall term are adult learners. Although this is a sizable proportion of students, this group is easily overlooked next to traditional student cohorts. When speaking about adult learners in 2016, Jamie Merisotis, President and CEO of Lumina Foundation posed the question: “What percent of students in American higher education today graduated from high school and enrolled in college within a year to attend a four-year institution and live on campus? Most people would guess between forty and sixty percent,” he said, “whereas the correct answer is five percent” (as cited in Friedersdorf, 2016). He further argued that there is a “real disconnect in our understanding of who today’s students are. The

influencers—the policy makers, the business leaders, the media—have a very skewed view of who today’s students are” (as cited in Friedersdorf, 2016).

This causes concern for the researchers who have attempted to conduct studies and affect change through scholarly and non-scholarly literature related to the adult learner population. When assessing the statistical difference between the percent of traditional, non-traditional, and adult learners accepted into college compared to the percent who graduate, many questions are still waiting for answers to close the gap. From an adult learner perspective, who and what are the unknown influential factors associated with college completion? What is associated with the high percent of adult learners who withdraw from a four-year college, or struggle to graduate in a timely manner? Typically, researchers have focused on first-generation, low-income, minority, online, or under-prepared learners. Are uniquely designed adult learner programs prepared for the challenges that students bring with them to college? What does it take for mature learners to adapt to accelerated baccalaureate level programs? According to Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2011), college student departure poses a long-standing problem to colleges and universities that attracts the interest of both scholars and practitioners.

Adult learning theory began in 1833, when a German teacher named Alexander Kapp coined the term andragogy... in 1926 Eduard C. Lindeman wrote extensively about andragogy, and then in 1959, Malcolm Knowles expanded on the work of Lindeman (Ozuah, 2005).

Knowles’ tenets, relative to adult learning, included the following:

- 1) The Need to Know
- 2) The Learners Self-Concept
- 3) The Role of Experience
- 4) Readiness to Learn

5) Orientation to Learning

6) Motivation (Ozuah, 2005, p. 84)

While other theorist has expanded the definition of Knowles' andragogic tenets to include all student demographics, the tenets are still relevant to the adult learner experience and new scholarly research.

A study (Kimmel, Gaylor, & Hayes, 2016) examining age differences among adult learners, alluded to *Expectancy Theory* and indicated specific implications for administrators in higher education.

Expectancy, the perceived likelihood that effort will lead to performance, has contributing elements: self-efficacy, goal difficulty, and perceived control. Elements of expectancy that could influence an adult's motivation to enroll in a university degree program might include his belief in (and the encouragement of others about) his ability to perform well, the difficulty or ease of the subject matter, and his perception about his control of his schedule, ability, and performance. (Kimmel et al., 2016, pp. 20–21)

In this respect, to deep dive into the elements described above, an interpretative study could be conducted to extract more detail for analysis. This is one of the areas that represent the gap within existing research.

Due to the increase of adult learners, institutions of higher learning have developed recruiting and retention programs specifically for the student population over the age of 24. The degree of impact of uniquely designed adult learner programs and the student's experience is vital, particularly from the voice of the student. While quantitative study experts and researchers have provided enrollment, retention, and graduation data on adult learners, there is shallow qualitative scholarly evidence related to the degree of adaptability and the influence of a program's design to help students thrive in an often-traditional learning environment. This study suggests that the lived experience (phenomenology) is the expression of an authentic experience

worthy of exploring through scholarly research for the study of adult learners and programs in higher education.

The adult learners' college experience has a profound impact on the graduation rate, sustainability of an institution, and life beyond the curriculum. The challenge for the university is to discover the distinct needs and expectation of adult learners, and how to prepare and react in order to help adult learners thrive in higher education. Over the past 20-plus years, researchers have focused on the enrollment growth, learning behaviors, and graduation rates of the adult population at four-year institutions of higher learning. Studies often link adult learners to two-year community college data. There is a gap in the literature relative to adult learners and their ability to adapt to the expectations at four-year institutions of higher learning. This dissertation is attentive to the collegiate experience and the impact of uniquely designed adult learner programs and how students adapt to fulfill the graduation requirements.

The study—approved by my dissertation chairperson and committee—is centered on the collegiate experience of the adult learner within a uniquely designed program of study. With increased internal and external pressure for institutions of higher learning to become more transparent about learning outcomes for all students, the time has emerged for 21st century research on the adult learner. The undergraduate adult learner experience is inclusive of many learning expectations, as well as other activities that influence their experience. Lifeworld (Harrington, 2006) interpretative phenomenology was carefully chosen for this study because it is a venerable scholarly method applied to conduct qualitative research based on the experiences and any unknown common themes of the participants. While quantitative research provides statistical and comparative data on enrollment, retention, course completion, and graduation rates, it is qualitative research that illuminates the meaning behind complex matters. Creswell

(2014) stated that qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Adult learners have fears that are distinctly different from traditional college students. As revealed through public federal data, there are common challenges for all students. Most undergraduate studies focus on the 18–24 years of age student population; data on lived experiences of the distinct needs and expectations of the adult learner are shallow.

Therefore, the study engaged in research on adult learner programs and students at undergraduate level institutions. Additionally, an adult learner program was selected to further explore, and invite 12–18 participants for interviews. Fifteen adult learners consented to participate in the study, and a total of 21 interviews were completed. After transcribing and coding the interviews, the search for common or emerging themes was conducted to discover potential patterns among the participants and perhaps reveal unknown phenomena related to how (or if) their distinct needs and expectations were met.

An informal introduction was established with the former Director of Adult Education at Golden Mountain University (GOMU [pseudonym adopted for the study]). GOMU offers more than 70 bachelor's degree programs, and they established the Adult Education (AE) program to provide adult learners special options for degree completion. While GOMU is recognized nationally for its stellar adult learner program, their retention and graduation rates over the past several years are under national average. Their website shares overall and minority retention and graduation data. There is public data—with minimum depth—on the retention, persistence, and graduation of adult learners. GOMU student life highlights do not reflect adult learner achievements. These are surface level insights that captured my attention for GOMU to serve as the host institution for the study. After approval of the proposal and Antioch University's

Internal Review Board (IRB) request, I began formal research discussions with the interim director of AE [the former director retired]. GOMU did not require a separate IRB approval from their institution. Other adult learner programs or institutions with academic options for mature students explored to during the proposal stage include:

- Wilberforce University in Wilberforce, Ohio: Credentials for Leadership in Management and Business (CLIMB) – Online, in-class, and blended learning options
- Ohio University in Athens, Ohio: Online and blended learning options
- Indiana Wesleyan University in Marion, Indiana: Hybrid and blended learning options
- Franklin University in Columbus, Ohio: Hybrid and blended learning options
- The University of Toledo in Toledo, Ohio: Hybrid and blended learning options
- Case Western Reserve University: Hybrid and blended learning options
- Cedarville University in Cedarville, Ohio: Hybrid and blended learning options
- College of Mount St. Joseph in Cincinnati, Ohio: Hybrid and blended learning options
- Miami University in Oxford, Ohio: Hybrid and blended learning options
- University of Indianapolis in Indianapolis, Indiana: School of Adult Learning
- Rockford University in Rockford, Illinois: Accelerated Online Program
- Antioch University Midwest in Yellow Springs, Ohio: Range of instructional options for working adults

Researcher Positionality

An important component of the dissertation study process and research is to expose the position of the researcher and their link to the study. After serving over 17 years in a higher education environment, I've witnessed the experience between higher education leadership and student success or lack thereof for traditional, non-traditional, and adult learners. While serving as University Registrar and time in the classroom [with adult learners] as an adjunct professor, I

can attest through personal experience that there are tremendous challenges with retaining college students after their first term experience on campus. Some of the issues that adversely impact course completion and retention include study habits, financial aid challenges, campus life, judicial matters, family influence, and personal responsibilities (i.e., childcare and transportation needs). In addition to my professional experience, I obtained my bachelor's and master's degree as an adult learner—working full-time. Although my experience may appear as “insider advantage” with subjectivity, great effort to reduce researcher bias was made relative to the key themes and questions within the dissertation research process. The study was researched, organized, and written with objectivity from the position of the research literature, a select adult learner program, and the participants selected for the study.

The research related to the collegiate experience and learning outcomes is ongoing because higher education is changing at an unstoppable pace. Buller (2015) stated that since everyone knows there will inevitably be changes in demographics, technology, social values and priorities, opportunities for funding, and institutional leadership, it's foolish to assume that the decisions we make today won't be reevaluated tomorrow.

Research Questions

RQ1. In what ways, if any, are the distinctive needs and expectations of adult learners fulfilled through a baccalaureate level adult learner program?

RQ2. What does an adult learner do to address the challenges of meeting degree requirements in a timely manner?

Significance of the Study

Even though traditional, non-traditional, and adult learners enroll at the same institutions, there is a lack of perspective or insight from the adult learner on how they were motivated to

enter and persist at baccalaureate level institutions. This study seeks to understand how adult learners adapt and make sense of their academic experience, in addition to understanding what situations influenced their experience. The volunteer participants consented to individual semi-structured interviews that reveals the effectiveness of the adult learner program and deeper insight into their life and collegiate experiences. Acknowledging that there are existing statistics on historical and future enrollment projections for adult learners, there is a narrative from the adult learner that compels more exposure through scholarly research. Macedo wrote,

If students are not able to transform their lived experience into knowledge and to use the already acquired knowledge as a process to unveil new knowledge, they will never be able to participate rigorously in a dialogue as a process of learning and knowing. (as cited in Freire, 2000, p. 19)

Scholarly researchers and education leaders often utilize the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to access reliable aggregate data to provide relevant information for research and future planning. NSSE has a monumental impact on educational research. According to Kuh (2009), NSSE came on the scene just as the “perfect accountability storm was brewing” and was exceptionally well positioned to provide some of what institutions needed with regard to measuring the undergraduate student experience. Further, he states that institutions cannot change who students are when they start college. But with the right assessment tools, colleges can identify areas where improvement in teaching and learning will increase the chances that adult learners will attain their educational and personal goals.

As shown in Figure 1.1, NCES (2016) projects significant post-secondary enrollment increase in the 35+ years of age group in 2020 and 2025.

MENU IES NCES National Center for Education Statistics

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Table 303.40. Total fall enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by attendance status, sex, and age: Selected years, 1970 through 2025

[in thousands]

Attendance status, sex, and age	1970	1980	1990	2000	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	Projected			
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
All students	8,581	12,097	13,819	15,312	17,272	17,487	17,759	18,248	19,103	20,314	21,019	21,011	20,644	20,376	20,207	20,264	20,516	22,013	23,290
14 to 17 years old	263	257	153	131	166	187	184	200	195	215	202	221	242	256	257	251	256	271	287
18 and 19 years old	2,579	2,852	2,777	3,258	3,367	3,444	3,561	3,690	3,813	4,009	4,057	3,956	3,782	3,720	3,694	3,881	3,929	4,137	4,360
20 and 21 years old	1,885	2,395	2,593	3,005	3,516	3,563	3,573	3,570	3,649	3,916	4,103	4,269	4,235	4,183	4,074	4,292	4,279	4,527	4,689
22 to 24 years old	1,469	1,947	2,202	2,600	3,166	3,114	3,185	3,280	3,443	3,571	3,759	3,793	3,951	3,964	3,990	3,962	3,974	4,083	4,283
25 to 29 years old	1,091	1,843	2,083	2,044	2,418	2,469	2,506	2,651	2,840	3,082	3,254	3,272	3,155	3,050	3,016	2,955	3,066	3,372	3,426
30 to 34 years old	527	1,227	1,384	1,333	1,440	1,438	1,472	1,519	1,609	1,735	1,805	1,788	1,684	1,606	1,552	1,471	1,506	1,706	1,877
35 years old and over	767	1,577	2,627	2,942	3,199	3,272	3,277	3,339	3,554	3,785	3,840	3,712	3,597	3,597	3,625	3,453	3,506	3,917	4,367

Figure 1.1 NCES—Total Fall Enrollment 1970–2025. U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics (2016).

While NCSE and NSSE are highly utilized quantitative tools, the option to bridge quantitative and qualitative (i.e. interviews) methods of assessment could present a more holistic perspective to any study. Given the volume of quantitative research on adult learner enrollment, persistence and graduation rates, new research from a qualitative perspective would add value to the existing body of research. Therefore, it was deemed necessary to conduct a study that goes beyond the curriculum and quantitative data – to further explore the unknown through lived experiences.

The Four-Lens Model of Adult Learning is another contribution to scholarly research that induces significant value to the study. Kiely, Sandmann, and Truluck described their Four-Lens Model as a method for understanding adult learning theory (2004, p. 19). The four lenses include: learner, process, educator, and context. Some of the patterns and assumptions associated with the four lenses may be discovered through an interpretative phenomenological study on adult learners.

From my perspective, based upon the body of research reviewed, most of their elements are missing from existing qualitative and quantitative research studies on adult learning and the programs designed to cater to student needs for college success.

A traditional approach to attract adult learners is to offer online, evening, and weekend classes. While uniquely designed adult learner programs include the traditional approach, they also add support services, and offer credit for lifelong learning. Unfortunately, statistics (www.NCES.ed.gov; 2016) reveal that retention and graduation rates are still low, and often not reported for adult learners. In Table 1.1, a sample of higher education institutions that offer undergraduate level adult learner programs and services are listed with their respective retention and graduation rates.

Table 1.1

Select Colleges and Universities That Offer Adult Learner Programs and Services

Name/Location Website URL	Type / % of adult learners (over the age of 24 - fall 2015)	Program Design/Features	Retention (Full-time, first to second year – fall 2015) / Graduation rate (2007 cohort - 6 year)
Ashland University Ashland, Ohio www.ashland.edu/graduate-admissions/online-programs	Private Not-for-profit / 31%	Online degree program for adults Online orientation and advising	75% / 56%
Cambridge College Cambridge, Massachusetts www.cambridgecollege.edu/about-cambridge-college	Private Not-for-profit / 60%	Online and weekend course options for adult learners In-person orientation	60% / 2%
Florida International University Miami, Florida	Public / 28%	Web message: For adults looking to	88% / 52%

www.flu.edu/		continue their education, add to their credentials, or complete a certificate program, FIU is also flexible and practical. Online courses are offered over a six-week period.	
Golden Mountain University (<i>Pseudonym for host site of this study</i>)	Public / 21%	Web message: Adult Education (AE) is designed for working adult students. Study with colleagues in accelerated adult-centered education classes taught by seasoned faculty.	69% / 38%
Pepperdine University Malibu, California https://bschool.pepperdine.edu/undergraduate-programs/business-management/oncampus-online-bsm.htm	Private Not-for-profit / 7%	Online, weekend, and evening options. Cohort for online BSM degree	94% / 80%
Saint Joseph's University Philadelphia, Pennsylvania https://www.sju.edu/majors-programs/adult-learner	Private Not-for-profit / 8%	Web message: SJU has the distinction of being the oldest adult education program in the region. Offers select online degree programs, and in-class programs.	90% / 79%
Texas A & M University – Commerce Commerce, Texas www.tamuc.edu	Public / 34%	Web message: For adult learners the University offers great choice, convenient locations, affordable tuition (varies for in or out-of-state), and top-notch technology and	73% / 45%

facilities. There are many options at Texas A & M-Commerce; one example is the BAAS in Organizational Leadership. It is tailored for the adult learner with 7-week courses, a flat tuition, online, built in accelerated completion based on competency, and great partnerships with businesses.

Walden University Minneapolis, Minnesota www.waldenu.edu	Private For-profit /84%	All programs offered completely via Distance Education.	Full-time not reported – 18% part-time) / Graduation rate not reported
Wilberforce University Wilberforce, Ohio www.wilberforce.edu	Private Not-for-profit / 34%	Credentials for Leadership in Management and Business (CLIMB) Adult Learner program. Select degrees offered with online, in-class, and blended learning options.	72% / 24%

Data collection: U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, and institution webpages.

Many could ask what higher education is doing to prepare for adult learner growth. With adults constituting almost half of today's student body, it is important to consider whether the academy is prepared to serve this society of adult learners (Caruth, 2014). Caruth stated further that research on adult education, regrettably, has been fragmented and inconsistent. What research there is has not been translated into practice in higher education (Caruth, 2014, p. 24).

From this perspective, there is obviously a need for more scholarly research that could benefit the advancement of adult learning strategies and experiences.

Terminology

The key terms are provided below to convey the necessity for attention to important subjects within the Dissertation literature review. While the terms can be utilized in different ways to support the context, they can also bring a higher level of clarity to the analysis.

Adult learner—Students enrolled in college after the age of 24 (*also defined as mature learners*).

Accelerated learning—An intensive method of study employing techniques that enable material to be learned in a relatively short time.

Blended (hybrid) learning—A formal education program that integrates face-to-face learning with technology-based, digital instruction.

Nontraditional undergraduate—Nontraditional students pertain to choices and behaviors that may increase student risk of attrition and as such, are amenable to change or intervention at various stages in a student's school life. With this intention, three sets of criteria are used to identify nontraditional students: (1) enrollment patterns, (2) financial and family status, and (3) high school graduation status. (NCES, 1996)

Online learning—Courses designed for students who are not physically present but have access via personal computer.

Retention—The federal government defines retention as the percentage of a school's first-time, first-year undergraduate students who continue at that school the next year.

Persistence—According to the National Student Clearinghouse, the persistence rate is the percentage of students who return to college at any institution for their second year.

Student engagement—The ability to actively engage college students in academic and non-academic environments.

Student performance—Student achievement that can be measured by what students learn in a pre-determined amount of time.

Student-faculty interaction—Student engagement with faculty members and its relationship to learning. (Lundberg and Schreiner, 2004). The relationship building process can lead to student success.

Cognitive development—The ability to progress through cognitive instructional methods which improves learning skills.

College completion—Degree-seeking undergraduate students who complete graduation requirements in their respective field of study within an approved timeline.

Methodological Approach

The approach to the study involves the use of a qualitative method of research—interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). As the researcher for this study, I conducted an extensive literature review, in addition to the review of existing higher education data. The recruitment, interviews, data collection process, member-checking, debriefing, and data development steps are shared in Chapter III.

The purpose of the study required deeper comprehension through learning and reading at a scholarly level and analyzing articles to determine how to make sense of the data. According to Roberts (2010), “you are obliged to employ validation strategies such as triangulation, member checking, audit trail, peer debriefing, and external auditing to check the accuracy of data” (p. 38). Most of the strategies listed by Roberts, in addition to regular meetings with my dissertation

chair and committee were key strategies that contributed to the development and outcome of the dissertation.

In addition, the research plan included due diligence to acquire additional learning from existing scholarly research and engage in further research about the subject and its themes, including:

- Reading and analyzing articles and reviewing surveys related to the study.
- Reviewing quantitative and qualitative data from higher learning data centers and websites.
- Gaining additional insight on adult learning theory and existing programs by reading and analyzing articles, interviews, and research data.
- Reviewing data and reading articles on challenged and thriving college students.
- Research private and public colleges and universities—view websites, data, interviews, and read articles.

Overview of the Chapters

Chapter II: Review of the literature. Findings related to the literature are revealed in Chapter II of the dissertation. It examines existing research and perceptions about adult (mature) learners – which led to discovering the gaps in scholarly research worth pursuing for this study. The review of the literature is organized by author and themes related to the study. Peer-reviewed articles and books by major scholarly contributors were read to gain insight from their respective research on adult learner theory and uniquely designed programs. The research was synthesized for inclusion in this chapter of the study. The topics include the characteristics of adult learners, influential factors, persistence and retention, adult learning theory, and the design (components) of adult learner programs.

Gaining an understanding of the ethical considerations relative to literature reviews added value to my approach throughout the study. Machi and McEvoy (2012) stated that a researcher should present all sides of the question: “Do not be tempted to strengthen your case by omitting divergent evidence. You are searching for truth, not enforcing a personal opinion” (p. 8).

Chapter III: Methodology (qualitative)—phenomenology. The most trusted experience is a lived experience – which is the heart of phenomenology. A phenomenological (qualitative) study supports the summarization of findings of each participant [adult learner], while revealing their experiences and any evidence of challenges within their academic journey. It is a reliable methodological tool to capture one’s experience. According to Roberts (2010), researchers are interested in the meanings people attach to the activities and events in their world and are open to whatever emerges. This study explored the impact of adult learner programs and the collegiate experience through the voice of college students. This is the value of phenomenology – which illuminates personal narratives. IPA was adopted for this study because it is a useful method to conduct qualitative research based on the experiences and potential emerging themes from each study participant. This approach to the study presents non-structured insights that add value to new research on the adult learning experience. Hermeneutic phenomenology is focused on the subjective experience of individuals and groups. It is an attempt to unveil the world as experienced by the subject through their life world stories (Kafle, 2011, p. 186).

As stated earlier, 15 semi-structured interviews—during the first interview phase—supplied the data necessary to begin the analysis for the study. The second phase of interviews included six study participants who agreed to delve deeper in other areas related to their personal/lived and collegiate experience. A saturation of data from the interviews and

university data was necessary to begin the process of coding, theme identification, analyzing the data, and engaging in quality control efforts with the peer debriefing team. Starks and Trinidad (2007) opines that a semi-structured interview format can work well... in a phenomenological or grounded theory study the objective of the interview is to elicit the participant's story (p. 1375). Dedicating 17-plus professional years in higher education adds a significant contribution to my knowledge and experience in the field. However, to mitigate researcher bias, interviewees were selected in a non-personal manner. NVivo software was used for coding and thematic (seeking emerging categories) analysis. Interview summaries and codes by each participant were used to assess data. Valuable information for the coding process suggest:

If you have coded your data with only words or short phrases and feel that the resultant codes are elusive, transform the final set of codes or categories into longer-phrased themes [Themeing the data]. Themeing may allow you to draw out a code's truncated essence by elaborating on its meanings. (Saldaña, 2016, p. 231)

IPA, member-checking by the study participants, and feedback from the debriefing team uncovered the lived and collegiate experiences from the perspective of the adult learner. As revealed, there is more to their story than could be found in a survey or quantitative study. The scholarly research material and tools selected for this study provided the path for the depth of research and analysis necessary to conduct a concrete study that future researchers can add to their list of scholarly references. After coding, thematizing, and analyzing the data, the findings required for Chapter IV unveils the phenomenon.

Chapter IV: Research findings. The vision fulfilled in Chapter IV describes the relationship of the study and findings to the review of literature. This section is where the answers to the research question(s) are shaped in a meaningful way to build the momentum of the study. This chapter provided the opportunity to share how the study contributes or adds new phenomena to existing research. The intent was to share unique and common perspectives—that

not only answered the research questions, but also reveals a Venn diagram and a model that I envisioned from the findings of the study: *The Optimum Adult Learner Experience*, and *The Impact of Met and Unmet Needs for Adult Learners*. The triangulation of data was achieved to make meaning of the study from an adult learner's perspective.

Chapter V: Interpretation of findings discussion and future research. The final chapter, V, is the interpretative and discussion section written to provide an overview, share the implications for GOMU and other higher education institutions, connect the findings to theory and literature, and clearly state conclusions derived from the findings. Study limitations and recommendations for future research are also revealed in Chapter V. In addition to summarizing the methodology and findings, the researcher, in essence, becomes the thought-leader on emerging topics for discussion and future research.

Summary

The focus of the research for this dissertation is on fifteen (15) baccalaureate degree-seeking adult learners enrolled in a uniquely designed program. The significance of the study provides insight on how adult learners adapt and make sense of their academic experience—discovering if and how distinct needs are fulfilled. The study exposes the effective components of the GOMU–AE program, in addition to understanding the situations that influenced the study participant's common and unique experiences.

I am confident in the degree of transferability for study and the adopted methodology because the challenges for higher education in the 21st century warrants more research from the voice of adult learners and the growing relevance of uniquely designed adult learner programs. The human voice and experience is at the foundation of sustainability, and interpretative phenomenology – in my opinion – is deemed as an effective qualitative tool for this study.

Personal and authentic interviews contributed to the development of a rich collection of narratives for the study, which also enhances the body of new research and program design relative to the adult learner experience.

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

The purpose of the study is to examine the experiences of adult learners (over the age of 24) in uniquely designed undergraduate programs and the impact on persistence and retention. The intent of this review of literature is to discover the gaps in existing studies and provide new research questions to pursue. Topics from the adult learning and learner literature review include studies that relate to: characteristics of adult learners, the influences or challenges they incur, persistence and retention of adult learners, theory, and the design and components of existing programs. The study of these topics provides insight on research that currently exists in adult learning literature.

More specifically, the sections of this review are organized accordingly: Section one addresses the characteristics of adult learners to gain clarity and understanding about adult learners from different researchers; section two provides insight on influential factors for adult learners; and, section three delves into research studies on persistence and retention. Sections one through three represent the broadest areas of research because there is still more to be discovered from scholarly research in these respective areas of study. The final two sections of the literature review will probe into existing studies on adult learning theory, and the design (specific components) of adult learner programs. Peer-reviewed design information is sparse; however, there are published data from select institutions, private higher education foundations, and organizations.

Characteristics of Adult Learners

In the United States, adult students (over the age of 24) are an important group because they comprise more than 50% of part-time enrollments, and more than 33% of total enrollment in higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Some return to college after a

gap of several years, requiring no remediation. Others may require developmental education, individualized programs of study, social support, and more (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014). It has also been indicated that relatively little is known about the ways in which age affects persistence. The balancing act (Bergman et al.) of managing family, work, community, and academic responsibilities can pose great challenges for adult students (p. 93). Phipps, Prieto, and Ndinguri (2013) mentioned in their study that adults may shun learning opportunities because they perceive that these opportunities involve activities that are too complicated for them to handle. To better understand adult learners' engagement in learning it is important to investigate their level of autonomy and self-determination (Rothes, Lemos, & Gonçalves, 2014, p. 941).

Many adult learners need more time to dedicate to their academic life than they have available. In these circumstances, the academic responsibilities shift to the bottom of the priority list, and the guilt and frustration related to this balancing act often lead to departure decisions. The competing demands of life make it very challenging for adult learners to strike a balance that helps them reach their academic goal of completing a baccalaureate degree. (Bergman et al., 2014, p. 93)

Adult students, also referred to in some research studies as “non-traditional” students, have life experiences and expectations that are totally different from traditional students. A research discussion topic by Dill and Henley (1998) that arguably may still apply today, insists that nontraditional students simply do not have the time to spend with friends and peers because they have other obligations. This idea is supported by the finding that the traditional students reported more vacations, trips, and summer breaks than the nontraditional students did (p. 30).

Empirical research exploring adult returner students' patterns of learning revealed from interviews that students expressed skepticism regarding peer interaction and wariness to engage (Anderson, Johnston, & McDonald, 2014). They do not perceive peer interaction as potentially

beneficial to their learning and would prefer to work alone or to seek the advice of family members regarding study skills (Anderson et al., 2014).

The juggling roles (Ross-Gordon, 2011) of adult learners may be assets, both through the social supports they provide and through the rich life experiences that may help adult learners make meaning of theoretical constructs that may be purely abstract to younger learners.

Using phenomenology (narrative stories) to explore the extent to which ambiguity can serve as a catalyst for adult learning, Nicolaides (2015), posed the questions, “How do adults with complex forms of knowing, doing, and being encounter ambiguity? Secondly, “Does any learning emerge?” (p. 8). The data showed,

...these distinct capacities for engaging ambiguity shape our willingness to learn within our experience of it and awaken our openness to letting it shape us through timely and intelligent action. The capacity to continuously learn from complexity demands a conscious acceptance of ambiguity and the roundabout nature of learning it may generate. (Nicolades, 2015, p. 15)

One of the findings suggests that ambiguity activates generative capacities of learning—to endure, to be in communion, and to awaken—a “figure-ground shift” that can catalyze a cascade of potential and spur intelligent action (2015, p. 15).

In a qualitative study utilizing semi-structured interviews, O’Donnell and Tobbell (2007) revealed that adult students perceived themselves to be peripheral participants in the community, university regulations and academic procedures sometimes undermined their feelings of legitimacy (p. 312). In addition, many of the participants revealed an understanding that university study requires independent study, rather than “spoon feeding,” which they may have been accustomed to at school or in previous college education (p. 320). The issue of belonging also emerged from the study. For many participants, this sense of belonging was complex. Although some felt that they belonged to a higher education community, others most definitely

did not, and still others felt as though they were just beginning to belong (p. 323). Within the conclusion of their study, the researchers shared that there is no shortcut to full participation in a community, and that this demonstrates that learning and participation are not events but rather processes that happen over time (p. 327). Another concern expressed at the end of the study was that it was not clear on the extent to which institutions are engaged in a process of change in response to students (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007, p. 326).

High expectations are set on adult learning (Knipprath & DeRick, 2014, p. 115). Further discussion suggests that policymakers and alike consider participation in adult learning to be beneficial for employability and social inclusion, in particular for specific target groups such as the low-qualified (Knipprath & DeRick, 2014). A key point that emerged from a longitudinal study on part-time working adults in higher education expressed that there is an emotional intensity attached to the experience of learning that is often overlooked (Askham, 2008). Language issues are another area of concern. Adult learners who lack English or workplace literacy have a difficult time transitioning to postsecondary education or gainful employment (Hector-Mason, Narlock, Muhsani, & Bhatt, 2017). Longitudinal studies that use objective assessments may face some difficulties for measuring changes in student outcomes. Furthermore, if students are not able to exert considerable effort, then the results of assessments may be questionable (Mayhew et al., 2016.)

Many of the characteristics described within the literature review lead to more questions and the need for future research on how character impacts persistence, and how adult learner programs address these challenges. According to Kuh (2008), decades of research showed that student development is a cumulative process shaped by many events and experiences, inside and outside the classroom. The basis for Kuh's opinion is that not enough had been learned from

NSSE and other sources to be confident about whether some educational programs and activities were more important to student success than others (p. 13). He further states that research on the relationships among student characteristics, engagement, and outcomes adds an additional layer of complexity to our understanding (2008, p. 13).

Academic persistence for the adult learner is a complex phenomenon (O'Neill & Thomson, 2013). The goals and motivations of adult learners are different from traditional students. Attention from advisors, instructors, and administrators would add value in determining the differences, and it would behoove all of them to respond accordingly. Data alone cannot resolve complex issues. Are colleges and universities adequately meeting the needs of the adult learners in and outside of the classroom (Caruth, 2014)? This is a valid question that institutions will need to address consistently with incoming students.

Finding statistical data on working adults who are also college students can be challenging for scholarly researchers. Kasworm (2014) shared that adult workers who are also undergraduate students are a difficult population to track. She further states that data from NCES provide selective understandings of the characteristics of undergraduates who work (as cited in Perna, 2010, p. 27). This is a major concern for both qualitative and quantitative research. Interviews and focus groups provide the opportunity to have a direct connection to study participants. Falasca (2011) stated, "The more we know about adult learners, the barriers they face and how these barriers interfere with their learning, the better we can structure classroom experiences that engage all learners and stimulate both personal growth and reflection" (p. 589).

Summary on the characteristics of adult learners. The review of literature presents significant evidence that the characteristics of adult learners has an impact on academic programs and student's ability to persist in higher education. Findings such as the legitimacy of

their feelings (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007), or the degree of ambiguity (Nicolaidis, 2015) among adult learners are complex issues that could benefit from new scholarly research and institutional intervention. As stated early in this section, the literature review leads to more questions related to characteristics and the adult learning experience. If adult students are unrecognizable within institutional, private, or government data reports, other methods of study—such as interpretative phenomenology—should be considered for seeking answers.

Influential Factors for Adult Learners

It has been found that the study of adult learners in higher education will continuously draw interest due to their different backgrounds and experiences while on college campuses as compared to their traditional counterparts (Bergman et al., 2014). Moreover, adult learners deal with institutional barriers including the level of content being taught, location, attendance, and potentially the re-entry policies (Petty & Thomas, 2014). A review from previous research on barriers that affect adult learners by Osam, Bergman, and Cumberland (2017) expounded on the following categorized barriers:

Institutional barriers are described as factors such as admission practices, financial aid, and types of curriculum services adopted that emanate from the institutions limiting participation in postsecondary education. *Situational* barriers were presented as constraints arising from family and community obligations and personal finances limiting access to postsecondary education. The *dispositional* barriers were noted as person specific characteristics, including fear of failure, attitude toward intellectual activity, and level of aspiration. (p. 55)

While barriers can trigger a negative tone, a study by Hostetler, Sweet, and Moen (2007) expressed that people who are married and have heavy work and family demands are more likely to return to college. Therefore, some situational barriers could be thought of as an interruption and not a solid barrier that only has negative bearings on college entry (Osam et al., 2017, p. 57). Kasworm conducted a study on the adult undergraduate student identity model (AUSI; as cited in

Perna, 2010). She explained that adult learners come with past successful and unsuccessful experiences with formal schooling (high school and college); these experiences influence their engagement; they might be open and interested learners or reluctant and resistant learners.

Falasca (2011) implied that a fundamental aspect of adult education is engaging adults in becoming lifelong learners. Often, this requires removing barriers to learning, especially those relating to the actual organizational or institutional learning process.

Data from a recent study examining age differences among adult learners and their motivations and barriers to higher education revealed that older respondents (35 years of age and older) are less likely than younger respondents to seek higher education due to the desire for pay increase, or the desire of respect from peers. The younger respondents were more likely to be motivated by their parents (Kimmel et al., 2016). Relative to this discovery, it aligns with McMorran, Ragupathi, and Luo (2017) that the aim of relieving stress among one group of students can increase the stress for others. This indicates that there are variances among the concerns of adult learners versus traditional students. Another group of researchers conducted a study on adult Norwegian students and the investment in basic skills development; and stated that adults are most likely more concerned with improving their day-to-day functioning than their performance on tests (Billington, Nissinen, & Gabrielsen, 2017).

As adults seek more opportunities to learn or obtain a college degree, researchers are becoming engaged in this population, but perhaps not enough. A study was conducted to investigate the influence of age, ability and self-efficacy on adults' intentions to learn (Phipps et al, 2013). They indicated that as adults grow older, their health sometimes falters; and, that healthy individuals should be better able to harness and use their mental and emotional capacities to act in a manner that is conducive to learning (p. 15). The outcome of their study revealed that

age, ability, and self-efficacy, and learning intentions play a central role in successful learning among adults. They further implied that future research should be geared toward uncovering additional motivational factors, especially external motivators (p. 22). Self-efficacy is belief or confidence in one's abilities to work through various situations (Allen & Wergin, 2009, p. 8).

A qualitative case study was developed to understand how Korean older adults' computer learning in a face-to-face classroom, situated in a social context, influences their identities. Based on the analysis of observation and interviews with ten adults, the conclusions revealed that within a situated activity, computer learning occurs in overlapping communities of practice. It also revealed that older adults' computer learning in a classroom influences learners' identities and their identity development are their processes of negotiating identities in a community of computer users (Kim & Merriam, 2010). This represents the influence of social interaction among underprepared students which is a challenge for many adult learners.

Howard and Davies (2013) conducted a mixed-method study to investigate the outcomes of two courses through the participants' (ages 21 to 60) constructed (deep or surface level) experiences and approaches to learning. Prior to the interview, the students' perception of learning centered on retaining information. Study findings indicated that the concept of independent study was a cause of concern and did not match the student's conception of learning and identity as a learner (2013, p. 779). The psychological context of their study also indicated that the social and cognitive risks of participating in higher education may become important for mature students (p. 770). They concluded that interventions designed to support mature students' entrance to higher education should aim to create a strong shared identity among students and to influence their approach to learning (p. 782). Due to the inability to freely access adult learner

program designs from U.S. institutions, it is a challenge to conduct research directly from their intervention plans and interpret how various plans impact the adult learner collegiate experience.

Another study utilizing regression analysis investigated the relationship among adult affective factors, engagement in science, and scientific competencies (Tsai, Li, & Cheng, 2017). The population of participants in the study included 504 Taiwanese adults between the ages of 18 and 70. Recommendations for future research from the study suggested that the factors affecting adult self-efficacy and engagement in science be explored further (Tsai et al., 2017). While this study added a significant contribution to adult learning research in the sciences, other programs or disciplines of study could also add value.

Adult learners may face emotional transitions within an ever-changing collegiate environment. Knowland and Thomas (2014) shared that changes in attention control also influence learning throughout the lifespan. A qualitative study involving a group of non-traditional UK students entering an elite university was designed to illustrate how being and becoming a university student is an intrinsically emotional process (H. Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008). A question was posed as to whether university culture supports or impedes learning. The results revealed that the move into the university disrupted their sense of being competent learners, because their learning environment was no longer familiar or negotiable. Instead, they experienced a crisis of confidence in a new context that felt unfathomable and alien to them (p. 572). Further, not knowing what standards were expected, or how to undertake every day activities were bewildering experiences because they no longer know how to participate successfully within the community (p. 572). From another perspective, this could indicate that their off-campus privileges no longer applied to the new collegiate experience and presented challenges when they attempted to (or not) adapt. People who are

constructed as ‘others’ within academic culture (Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003), and through socially prevalent discourses of higher education, can often internalize this definition of themselves. They might be deterred from entering the university altogether or go through the university feeling eternally ‘out of place’ (2003, p. 263). A different perspective is that motivation to obtain new knowledge, for adult learners, can be to assist the community, be better prepared to participate in community work or serve mankind (McDonough, 2013).

Adult learners are often limited by the types of degree programs offered in an available format or time (Kimmel et al., 2016). According to Wheelan (2016) adult students often have to balance home, work, and school simultaneously, making it difficult to concentrate on the rigors of academia or to take the traditional full-semester load (five classes) in order to complete their academic programs as quickly as they would like. Time management is a critical issue to adult learners. Wheelan also indicated that limited time and finances often make it necessary for students to extend the time it takes for them to graduate and to borrow money in order to pay for tuition (2016, p. 85)

According to Bowl (2001), from a non-traditional student’s perspective, life arrangements must be made before entry to the institution and there is an assumption that the institution has little interest in the life circumstances of non-traditional students (p. 157).

If students are given the motivation, the means and the knowledge necessary to critically assess, challenge and change their assumptions they will have the chance to become lifelong learners capable of acting for the best in a rapidly changing world (M. Christie, Carey, Robertson & Grainger, 2015.) Results from a quantitative study on the motivational profiles of adult learners specified the following:

Adults attend courses mainly because they find them interesting and important (autonomous motivation), but some do it also because of various types of pressure – by

others, by the need to get/keep a job, or by their own feelings of guilt and shame if they do not engage (controlled motivation). (Rothes, Lemos, & Gonçalves, 2017, p. 19)

The researchers suggested that future studies on the subject employ qualitative research methods for a more in-depth understanding of motivational processes in adult education (Rothes et al., 2017).

Summary on influential factors. The review of literature on influential factors illuminates motivations and barriers for adult learners. One of the most intriguing studies within the literature focused on identity (Howard & Davies, 2013) and its ability to influence learning. Kim and Merriam (2010) also research identity development and the ability to negotiate identities among other students in a computer class. These are studies that exposed social interactions and their influences on academic performance in adult learner settings. While there are many other internal and external influences on adult learners, the risk of ignoring any of them can be detrimental to student persistence, as well as the academic program or institution.

As shared by Wheelan (2016), when students must balance home, work, and school, it can be difficult to concentrate on the rigors of academia. If and how they do it can be discovered through a rich conversation with students about work/life/school balance while enrolled in an adult learner program.

Persistence and Retention of Adult Learners

Tinto (1993) defines persistence or retention as continuous or intermittent program attendance until learners reach their educational goals. According to Tinto's studies of traditional classroom institutions of higher education, the less integrated students are academically and socially, the more likely they are to depart (Müller, 2008). Among the most pressing concerns for colleges and universities in the United States is the challenge of student retention (Tinto, 2012). Kasworm (2014) opines that often persistence is labeled as a "pipeline" perspective from entry

freshman to senior year (p. 71). While most research on the topic has focused on traditional students, labor statistics show that adult degree programs, which have low retention rates, are an essential part of the stability and growth of the nation's economy (Bergman et al., 2014, p. 91). There are also multiple studies and national reports that indicate an increase in the number of adult learners who withdraw from institutions without completing degree requirements. It brings to question whether the reasons for adult student withdrawal are being tracked and addressed. Family support is important to persistence. This points to the importance of institutions reaching out to families and making all members of adult students' families feel invested in the institution and the process. This could potentially help increase familial encouragement and help students persist at higher rates (Bergman et al., 2014, p. 99).

O'Neill and Thomson (2013) found that students' initial motivation is sometimes short-lived as the academic load becomes more difficult and family, work or financial concerns arise. Persistence is what keeps them moving towards their goal despite hardship. Building a sense of academic self-efficacy is essential (O'Neill & Thomson, 2013, p. 166). In this study, there is no clarity on the effectiveness of the educational program or the degree of response to adult learner concerns. However, the study concluded by stating that becoming more effective is a never-ending process (p. 170).

A case study was conducted to examine non-traditional student engagement at the University of Memphis. Findings from the study indicate that nontraditional students felt that faculty respected them, whereas staff members treated them disrespectfully (Wyatt, 2011, p. 17). Based on the findings, recommendations for best practices to improve retention include:

1. Look at nontraditional student needs at various stages.
2. Provide tutoring labs and services.

3. Incorporate nontraditional student learning styles.
4. Hire and train counselors and advisors who understand nontraditional student issues.
5. Develop programs and events that appeal to nontraditional students and their families.
6. Increase campus communication.
7. Look at improvements on general education coursework. (Wyatt, 2011, p. 18)

A longitudinal study of first year students at a large research university revealed that the overall exposure to organized and clear classroom instruction may have positive effects on the probability of returning to an institution for the second year of college (Pascarella, Seifert, & Whitt, 2008). While the study focused on gender and race, Pascarella et al. (2008) reported that their findings lend support to the potential institutional benefits derived from the investment of resources in programs designed to enhance teaching effectiveness, particularly to the extent that these programs help faculty hone sound pedagogical skills such as instructional organization and clarity (p. 68).

Academic advising is a critical component that highly impacts persistence and retention. According to Sogunro (2014), effective academic advising practices help to stir adult learners in the right direction and open the window of opportunities that culminate in their success (p. 32). He further states that such motivation is often missing in many advising practices where facilitators lack the competence. Effective advising practices include working with students to select courses relevant to the area of study, developing a “Planned Program of Study” (i.e., a sequence of courses to be taken to graduate), and providing valuable information from time to time (2014, p. 32). Multiple studies indicate that academic advising satisfaction has a significant correlation with retention. No support is more important to student retention than academic support (Sogunro, 2014; Tinto, 2010).

DeLaRosby (2017) issued a Thriving Quotient survey to collect responses from undergraduate students at a private, liberal arts college in the Pacific Northwest. The focus of the study was the degree of satisfaction with academic advising. Results indicated statistically significant differences between students who live on campus and those who live off campus. Students who live on campus were shown to be less satisfied with their academic advising experience (p. 155). From a positive perspective, students were more satisfied with the amount of contact with faculty, and the quality of interactions with faculty (p. 155). DeLaRosby suggested that future research explore interactions that lead to greater satisfaction with academic advising; and, what do students consider to be quality interactions? Faculty who serve as academic advisors develop relationships with both residential and commuter students; therefore, a future study that includes commuters will likely address the academic advising issues for adult learners.

Financial support has a significant impact on student retention and persistence. The impact of financial support on retention is both direct and indirect (Tinto, 2010). Lower levels of financial support lead students to attend part-time and/or work while in college—both of which have the net consequence, other things being equal, of lowering the likelihood of persistence and completion (2010, p. 65). Tinto opines,

An environment rich in assessment of and feedback on information about student progress is another condition for student retention. Students are more likely to succeed in settings that provide faculty, staff, and students frequent feedback about their performance in ways that enable all parties to adjust their behaviors to better promote student success. (2010, p. 66)

Tinto's position is valid; however, future research or examination of behaviors, and its impact on persistence and retention, for specific groups (i.e., adult learners) is necessary as the environment continuously changes in higher education. There is a great degree of complexity when

generalizing “student success.” Research on withdrawal has been heavily influenced by Vincent Tinto’s American studies and later by UK researchers such as Mantz Yorke, Liz Thomas and Jocey Quinn. Although Tinto’s work is influential it is limited in terms of understanding why adult students leave as it focuses on middle-class younger students (Merrill, 2015, p. 1860). Another perspective is that adult students often experience external personal and structural problems, such as lack of finance or health problems, so that even if they are “students who learn” if the problems become too severe they may have to leave, although not out of choice (Merrill, 2015, p. 1860).

Failing a course is not only damaging to a student’s confidence level, it can also impact persistence. A study examining the reduction of course failure indicated that in addition to effort and strategy, other academic predictors such as age, gender, and past academic performance should be considered (Stewart et al., 2011). The researchers did not indicate whether adult learners were participants in the study. However, discussion of effort and strategy could be obtained through interviews or focus groups in future research. Examination of both successful and withdrawn students is a useful way to develop effective retention strategies (Bergman et al., 2014). Martin (2017) conducted a study by collecting and analyzing the stories of 144 college nonreturners (66% women and 34% men—ages were not reflected in the study) who shared written descriptions of their positive and negative experiences at home and on campus during their first year of college.

Nonreturning students wrote fewer stories about positive, school-related events than they did about negative, school-related events. Alarming, only 9% of all positive school-related events were related to campus involvement or engagement—55% of which were about participating in FU’s Greek system—indicating this cohort of students had little connection to the university. (Martin, 2017, p. 193)

Involvement produces positive benefits for college students, and students who more frequently engage in social and academic activities report higher levels of satisfaction with their college experience while earning higher grades (Martin, 2017; Weber, Krylow, & Zhang, 2013).

One of the findings from a mixed method study on the persistence of nontraditional students (Markle, 2015) indicated that women participants with higher levels of work-school and school-family conflict were more likely to consider withdrawing (p. 14). The study also shared that those more satisfied with the university were less likely to consider doing so. These factors were not significant for men (Markle, 2015, p. 14). Markle's (2015) explanation on the limitation of the study is, "The qualitative data were limited to participant responses to open-ended survey questions; it was not possible to ask participants to expand on their responses, as is possible in other methods of qualitative data collection, such as interviews." His recommendation for further research suggested that there should be focus more closely on the social context within which nontraditional students pursue to degrees. The ways in which system structures support barriers to degree completion should be made visible (2015, p. 16).

Pan, Guo, Alikonis, and Bai (2008) conducted a multilevel longitudinal quantitative study in a Midwest urban university to examine the effects of intervention programs on retention and students' academic performance. There were 1,305 first-time-full-time students who voluntarily participated in the following select programs:

- Success Challenge Programs—Advising Center
- Academic help programs—Tutorial, Co-op calculus, Engineering Aerospace Collaborative
- First Year Experience programs
- Social integration programs—Learning communities, and Faculty/Student activities

- General orientation programs (p. 93)

A key outcome from the Pan et al. (2008) study revealed that general orientation is necessary at the beginning of college life. It also indicated that for “better prepared” college students, universities may need programs that promote student social interactions with faculty, staff and their peers to help them return to their school. For the under prepared students, academic help is more needed (p. 97).

Another study conducted by Taylor and House (2010) shared the concerns of non-traditional students. They argued that a different approach to learning and teaching is required for less traditional students to encourage them to participate and engage in learning. Select comments from a summary of thematic analysis regarding the student participants concerns include:

- “Would staff be approachable?”
- “How much course work would there be?”
- “Will I succeed?”
- “Concerned about learning computers... yes – was a nightmare.”
- “Lack of lectures was my biggest fear...I find independent learning hard.”
- “I had to learn how to write essays again.” (Taylor & House, 2010, p. 54)

These are the concerns of non-traditional students who made a commitment to return to college despite their differences from traditional students and their fears.

While student performance is a major concern for all leaders—including administrators, faculty, and staff, it is evident that attention must be given to unique student populations and their needs to help them complete college courses and graduation requirements in a timely manner.

The focus on retention within science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs has increased over the years. A significant amount of research has focused on traditional STEM students in higher education. A quantitative study examining the factors that influence persistence in STEM and non-STEM students living on campus (Gansemer-Topf, Kollasch, & Sun, 2017) at a large, Midwestern, four-year public institution revealed interesting insights on the influence of precollegiate factors such as high school GPA and ACT scores (p. 215). Residential students who changed from non-STEM-related majors to STEM-related majors had higher average scores on degree aspirations. It was determined that male students of color were less likely to be retained. The researchers shared, “Although this quantitative study makes it difficult to ascertain *why* the differences in results between STEM and non-STEM students illustrate the importance of considering this factor in developing retention models and institutional success strategies” (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2017, p. 216). Additional research is necessary since retention rates across the United States have not significantly increased over the years for adult learners; and, seemingly more adult learners select non-STEM programs of study.

High total withdrawal or college dropout rates contribute to low graduation rates. Graduation rates below 50, 40, and even 30 percent are distressingly easy to find, even when the measure is the percentage of students graduating within six years (Hess, Schneider, Carey, & Kelly, 2009). When confronted with rock-bottom graduation numbers, many colleges point to their academic mission or blame students as culprits, citing poor high school preparation and the need to enroll a diverse array of undergraduates, not all of whom are equally ready to succeed (Hess et al., 2009, p. 3). This study does not address the reasons for withdrawal, which obviously contributes to low graduation rates. Their focus was on the graduation rates according to university “competition” levels (noncompetitive, less competitive, competitive, very competitive,

highly competitive, and most competitive)—which is detached from focusing on adult learners or other select student populations.

Retention in higher education, like access to higher education is complex, and it is widely acknowledged that there is an interaction between institutional and external factors (Thomas, 2002). Respect for adult learners needs to be demonstrated during the learning process, in particular, acknowledging the wealth of knowledge and experiences they bring to the learning situation (McDonough, 2013). Kasworm (2014) shared an opinion about student data reports disseminated from databases by NCES: "...statistical investigations of adult student patterns of leaving college and subsequently reentering for college completion are not clearly delineated within these college completion reports" (p. 68). This is a valid perspective because most student data reports mandated by government agencies are based on the traditional student population. Researchers often need approval from internal review boards to obtain adult learner data – if it is tracked at all at the respective institution.

Tinto (2010) stated, "Though we are increasingly able to explain why some students leave and others persist within an institution and have been able to point out some types of action that institutions can take to improve student retention, we have not yet been able to develop a comprehensive model of institutional action that would help institutions make substantial progress in helping students continue and complete their degree programs within the institution" (p. 51).

Summary on persistence and retention. When higher education persistence and retention rates are released, the focus areas are ethnic groups and gender. Although there are many programs for adult learners, their academic progress is often embedded in traditional student enrollment and performance data. The review of literature for this section reveals

consistently that there is growth in the adult learner population; yet, scholarly studies are inconsistent or have inconclusive results related to the reasons for adult learner drop-out or withdrawal rates. There is a gap in qualitative studies related to adult learner persistence and retention. Lack of motivation, job schedules, and financial issues are some of the common reasons for the delay in achieving educational goals; however, there are still unknown issues yet to be uncovered through the voice of adult students. In addition to adult learner enrollment growth, their performance and level of engagement deserves more attention by higher education institutions and the services offered to that particular student population.

Adult Learning Theory

In recent decades, several theoretical approaches to adult learning have served as useful lenses for research on adult learners; these frameworks help researchers think about practices across various contexts of adult learning, including the college classroom. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy is an interesting figure both as a pioneer in the use of the andragogy concept, and in connection with the development of adult pedagogy (Loeng, 2013). His works inspired influential adult educators in the inter-war and post-war period (p. 241). Andragogy is arguably the best-known of these theoretical approaches (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Malcolm Knowles and Eduard Lindeman are central figures within adult education, representing two different periods of adult education (Loeng, 2013, p. 247). In spite of all theoretical contributions, it is still difficult to arrive at a clear and simple definition of adults as learners, especially because of the complex and multi-faceted nature of their motives and orientation (Falasca, 2011, p. 585).

Andragogy. For many adult educators, andragogy is closely linked to the name of Malcolm Knowles. Known as a champion of andragogy, Knowles was the one who made the term andragogy known in the English-speaking world. Lindeman is referred to as “the spiritual

father of andragogy,” even if he never developed an independent theory in the name of andragogy (Loeng, 2013, p. 251). As a sociologist, Lindeman emphasized social and cultural roles in adult education, and many of his methodological ideas for adult education reached full fruition in Malcolm Knowles (Rachal, 2015).

According to andragogy theorist Malcolm Knowles, motivation in adult learners is both extrinsic and intrinsic. Institutions play an important role in motivating students by understanding intrinsic and extrinsic factors that motivate students to remain in college (Petty, 2014). Knowles argues that self-directed learning is closely related to the natural process of psychological development – where adults take on increased responsibility for their own lives and their own learning (McDonough, 2013). Caruth’s (2014) position is that andragogy is not without its critics. Although Caruth is an advocate of andragogy and educational outcomes for older students, her research suggests that andragogy lacks clarity and that Knowles assumptions are vague. Criticism of Knowles stems from the presumption that he ignored systems of oppression, politics, and cultural issues (Clapper, 2010; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Sandlin, 2005).

Assessment of adult learners has posed an additional challenge for educators who attempt to practice andragogy by becoming more of a “guide on the side” rather than a “sage on the stage” in the classroom. In Caruth’s examination of literature on andragogy and adult learning in higher education, there is slight emphasis on program design relative to andragogy, and more of evaluation and grading by faculty. Chan (2010) wrote that andragogy improves communication between the student and instructor; they work together as partners to design instructional content and methods to suit the learners’ needs. As a result, the principles promote trust between the student and the instructor and enhance self-awareness in students (p. 28).

Ozuah is a noted pediatrician who has conducted research in the field of education. After researching multiple learning theories, he was led to review the historical basis (2005) for pedagogical and andragogical paradigms.

Ozuah (2005) explained,

Andragogy is premised on several crucial assumptions about the nature and characteristics of adult learners. These assumptions are different from those that form the foundation of pedagogy, which are assumptions about child learners. Adult learning theory contends that as a person matures, his self-concept moves from dependency to self-directedness and autonomy. (p. 86)

Ozuah's summary (2005) of principles are derived from analyses and integration of all bodies of work in the field of learning and teaching. His principles include:

Adults learn best:

- When they want or need to learn something
- In a non-threatening environment
- When their individual learning style needs are met
- When their previous experience is valued and utilized
- When there are opportunities for them to have control over the learning process
- When there is active cognitive and psychomotor participation in the process
- When sufficient time is provided for assimilation of new information
- When there is an opportunity to practice and apply what they have learned
- When there is a focus on relevant problems and practical applications of concepts
- When there is feedback to assess progress towards their goals (2005, p. 86).

Historically, there is a slight degree of overlap among learning theories. I concur with Ozuah, as well as other contributors to this subject, that adult learning can flourish if the setting is within an appropriate learning environment. Although there is an age difference, according to some

research studies [or theorist], between pedagogical and andragogical approaches to learning, Ozuah's research leans more towards adult medical students. This represents a limitation to his study. Some of the principles are consistent with other adult learning theories and previous research; however, there is a gap between the principles and adult learner program design from the perspective of the learner in current scholarly research. According to Cercone (2008), there is no one theory that explains how adults learn, just as there is no one theory that explains all human learning (p. 142). Cercone has conducted extensive research on adult learning theory, characteristics of adult learners, and online learning design. A concern expressed by Cercone relative to andragogy is that

It is recognized that not all adults are self-directed and that some may need help to become more self-directed. Some students need some type of structure to assist them in becoming more self-directed. Doing this may cause some students to express negative opinions, especially students who would rather remain passive than to become actively involved in the learning process. (2008, p. 143)

The characteristics of adult learners are likely to be revealed through the application of various adult learning theories. My thoughts are aligned with Cercone's, which questions how adult learning characteristics are considered when designing a program or an instructional method. Although Cercone's study is related to online learning design, a commitment to determining adult learning needs is critical—yet unrevealed satisfactorily within scholarly studies.

Transformative learning theory (TL). All learning produces change of some kind, but transformational learning is responsible for personal change, the kind of change that is major and significant. Mezirow's goal (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009) is to understand how adults construct meaning from their experience and in his view, this is a complex cognitive process in which reason plays a dominant role (Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2013, p. 6). Knowledge about transformative learning has been constructed by a community of scholars working to explain how adults experience a deep shift in perspective that leads them to better justified and more

open frames of reference (Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2013, p. 53). Transformative learning (TL) has become one of the most prominent and debated theories in adult learning research (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Mezirow's theory, expressed in lay terms (M. Christie et al., 2015), argues that every individual has a particular view of the world. The particular worldview may or may not be well articulated, but it is usually based on a set of paradigmatic assumptions that derive from the individual's upbringing, life experience, culture or education (2015, p. 11). The researchers also opined that Mezirow's particular points of view become so ingrained that it takes a powerful human catalyst, a forceful argument or what he calls a disorienting dilemma to shake them (p. 11). Roberts (2013) examined the effects of disorienting dilemmas induced by adult educators on their learners. Adult educators induce disorienting dilemmas by exposing the limitations of the learners' current knowledge or approach, using metaphors, questioning learners' assumptions, and providing feedback (p. 101). Disorienting dilemmas lead to stress and anxiety (p. 101). The impact of disorienting dilemmas on the performance of international students may be even more severe... especially when English is not their first language (p. 103).

TL is thus portrayed as a process by which an adult discovers determinants of their thoughts, feelings, and actions that have been at work unconsciously. A key premise of TL is that this discovery is made possible through the dysfunction of assumptions that have been shaping an individual's experience, which is another example of Mezirow's "disorienting dilemma" (Hodge, 2014, pp. 172–173). If the positive effects of transformative learning is one of the goals of higher education curricula and specialized program designs, who is accountable and are the adult learners satisfied with the transforming results of their academic journey?

While exploring a revision of Mezirow's theory, Kitchenham (2008) wrote that "meaning is individualistic and found inside the learner and teacher rather than prescribed by external

influences such as written texts and speeches; however, that meaning becomes significant to the learner through critical discourse with others” (p. 113). Further expounding on Mezirow’s 11-phase model of TL theory, Kitchenham shared that when a person begins to interpret new meaning perspectives and meaning schemes, discussion with peers provides an ideal vehicle for learning (p. 113). TL theory has undergone modifications and incorporated new constructs as they are debated and tested and will, undoubtedly, continue to influence adult learning praxis across many disciplines (p. 120).

Along with value-laden course content is the application of intense experiential activities within the classroom. These activities help provoke meaning making among the participants by acting as triggers or disorienting dilemmas, provoking critical reflection, and facilitating transformative learning, allowing learners to experience learning more directly and holistically (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Implications for research suggested by Roberts are that more research is needed on facilitating transformation learning in a responsible learning environment so that learners can be motivated to increase their knowledge, improve their skills and adjust their attitudes as necessary (N. Roberts, 2013, p. 104).

Allen (2007) wrote extensively on behaviorism and cognitivism. He shared that behaviorists believe learning is driven by stimulus and response. Behaviorism takes a very mechanistic approach to learning and, at times, seems very cold—excluding feelings or anything that cannot be observed (p. 29). Behaviors exhibited within an existing learning model might be ignored if adult students are apprehensive about engaging with traditional peers—which means that behaviors can unintentionally be unrecognized. Unlike behaviorism, cognitivism focuses on the internal aspects of learning. Cognitivists view people as a part of their environment; having potential to influence the environment around them (Allen, 2007, p. 29). An intriguing thought is

how do adult learners influence their environment—whether on campus or through online learning?

Behaviorism and cognitivism are embedded in adult learner experiences; however, it is the institution that must discover the best practices to engage and retain their students. Scholarly literature and research has not gone beyond the surface of this issue. Merriam (2008) suggested:

Whether it be from non-Western epistemological systems or from our own Western perspective, it appears that adult learning research and theory building are expanding to include more than just an individual, cognitive understanding of learning. The mind, body, spirit, emotions, and society are not themselves simply sites of learning; learning occurs in their intersections with each other. (p. 97)

Expectancy theory. Another area of study that has been aligned with adult learners is ET. Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski (2011) shared that in recent years, motivational theories have been applied to the study of undergraduate retention. Vroom (1964) has been acknowledged as the developer of ET of motivation. Valance, expectancy, and instrumentality are three beliefs which influence motivation. Valance involves an individual's value of an expected outcome. Expectancy is one's belief in the likelihood that effort will lead to performance. Instrumentality is the belief that performance will lead to desired rewards (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). ET suggests that individuals will be motivated if they perceive they are capable of performing their work, if they believe their efforts will result in a certain outcome, and if they believe that the payoffs for doing their work are worthwhile (Kimmel et al., 2016). Expounding further, this would indicate that students have a need to envision their results or they may not find value or motivation. According to Kimmel et al. (2016), motivational force, the force directing specific behavioral alternatives, is a function of expectancy, instrumentality, and valence (p. 20). While ET is historically linked to organizations and job performance, there is some degree of evidence that ET is applicable is higher education and expectancy college

students. One way of discovering or discerning the connection is through an interpretative phenomenological study on adult learners.

Sandlin et al. (2013) argued that critically challenging the modernist narratives are still present within adult learning theories, such as andragogy, self-directed learning, and transformational learning, opens up transitional spaces within and outside those theories for adult education research and practice (p. 18). Sayeau (2013) stated that the evolution of modernist narrative forms and themes is in large part a matter of coming to new terms with old mandates. In my own view, 19th century modernist narratives emerged as a creative and alternative voice without boundaries for various platforms—including education. With adults constituting almost half of today's student body, it is important to consider whether the academy is prepared to serve this society of adult learners (Caruth, 2014). Because adult development theory has focused on more privileged learners, knowledge of how these adults experience learning is sparse, and strategies for supporting and challenging their development are lacking (Bridwell, 2013, p. 3). An and Carr (2017) concluded in their study that learning styles theories and research have a number of problems including the lack of a solid explanatory framework, poor reliability and validity of constructs, and a failure to link learning styles to achievement (p. 5).

Model of college outcomes. During the final stage of writing the findings from the research for this study, I became attentive to additional contributions to the study of adult learners. Donaldson (1999) conducted a review of six elements that relate to the adult collegiate experience. The elements—classified as *A Module of College Outcomes*—includes: (a) prior experience; (b) orienting frameworks: motivation, self-confidence, and value system; (c) adult's cognition; (d) the “connecting classroom” for social engagement; (e) the life-world environment and concurrent work, family, and community setting; and (f) different types of learning

outcomes. Although Donaldson's model is not empirically researched, it was useful as another source for validating a few key areas that overlap in this study relative to confidence, life-world environment (balancing acts), and social engagement (campus life and relationships).

Summary of adult learning theory. Adult learning models and theory have been explored for centuries. The review of literature for this study expounded on andragogy, TL, and ET. Motivation is one of the most commonly consistent themes among each of the theories—yet, they are unique depending on the culture and expectations of the institution. While the focus is on adults, there are advocates and critics who imply that theories such as andragogy can also apply to traditional college students. The debates introduce valid points, but they also contribute to existing gaps (because there is no concrete answer) within the research that seek to find the best components of an adult learner model. Thorough examinations of programs and models (typically not shared information by institutions) are necessary as the adult learning population continues to grow. Future studies are necessary because it would be detrimental to presume that one theory or model will satisfy all identified adult learner needs and expectations.

While it has been challenging to find scholarly research from four-year institutions of higher learning who ascribed to a particular adult learning theory to design their unique or specialized programs, the potential engagement in future research through internal review board approval is worth exploring.

Design and Components of Adult Learning Programs

Student satisfaction, institutional effectiveness, and adult program design are scarcely linked subjects in scholarly research. Yet, the future of higher education may depend on the success of these areas at most institutions. Students drop out as a result of the program not being

appropriate for them or simply because they were not oriented to the program and procedures (Petty & Thomas, 2014, p. 477). Specific programs are growing in popularity (Finch, 2016):

- Adult-specific orientations
- Andragogical teaching approaches
- Competency-based education (CBE)
- Flexible scheduling, accelerated courses, and online courses
- Interdisciplinary adult degree programs
- Life and career planning
- Marketing (directed specifically at adults)
- Partnerships with local businesses
- Prior learning assessment (PLA)
- Financial aid for adults

Programs like these are often uniquely developed or structured by institutions, and some designs are initiated by government mandates – particularly when state or federal financial aid is aligned with institutional programs of study. Adult degree completion programs share common characteristics including distance (online) options, evening course options, weekend course options, test-out options (e.g., College-Level Examination Program [CLEP] and DANTES Subject Standardized Tests [DSST]), and college credit for prior learning (Bergman et al., 2014, p. 91).

Orientation programs. Orientation can also assist administration, instructors, and other staff development program strategies that recognize barriers that hinder persistence and seek out strategies that can help students prevail over the barriers they face (Comings & Cuban, 2007). Adult students experience their own apprehension as they return to school and worry that they do

not have the skills, time, and information necessary to succeed. A comprehensive orientation program (Giancola, Munz, & Trares, 2008) that familiarizes them with the university and its systems and allows them to interact with peers and faculty is recommended (p. 13). More than often, traditional orientation programs are arranged for all incoming students without respect to their specific needs.

Planning the program. Eldaba (2016) proposed a model to advance international student engagement, academic and social experiences on campus. It was stated that most assessment programs rely heavily on student surveys (p. 173). Kuh (2001) wrote that surveys are an important vehicle for understanding the campus environment for learning, which explains why college students get bombarded with questionnaires. But so many surveys floating around campus dampen response rates in general (p. 17). While engaging students in well-structured conversations, a focus group can provide deeper understanding of students' experiences and needs on campus. Once needs are specified, planners move to the second step of identifying goals and objectives of the program (Eldaba, 2016, p. 173). This study does not specify the age of the student population; however, components of the design could be transferable with some adjustments based on the needs of adult learners. Eldaba stated that program planners ask: What personnel will be needed? Who do you need to collaborate with to implement the program? When is the best time to implement the program? How will the program be funded (p. 173)? Other standard components within Eldaba's design to develop a program included: goals and objectives, inputs, activities, outcomes, and evaluations.

Students' college satisfaction and participants' perceptions to the activities are measured during the evaluation stage to determine the overall success of the program. Eldaba (2016) posits

that at the institution level, universities may not write about or publicize their programs (p. 177). Many researchers would probably concur with this assessment.

Tracking and persistence. Petty and Thomas' (2014) research on approaches to successful adult education programs revealed that a tracking system would help instructors identify if students are utilizing services to increase retention. Other areas reviewed in their research included motivational theoretical approaches, instructors of adult learners, career development, and literacy components.

A study on distance learners shared the following:

When asked why they were taking online courses, nearly all distance learners (96%) cited the convenient schedule of these course offerings. A sizeable majority also indicated that they preferred to work at their own pace (77%) and learn on their own (70%). A third of the learners (35%) reported taking online courses because they did not live near enough to colleges that offer the desired courses. Others indicated that they were seeking less expensive college alternatives. (P. Chen, Gonyea, & Kuh, 2008)

The study also concluded that older students report greater gains and are more likely to engage in higher order mental activities such as analysis and synthesis as part of their studies. However, they are less involved in activities that depend on interacting with others (P. Chen et al., 2008). This is the type of analysis that could enhance the design of distance learning programs.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) developed the Principles of Effectiveness in serving adults and improve their adult learners' services. Colleges and universities have used the tools to develop strategic plans and to focus on adult learner needs (Shi, 2017). Relevance is the key concept. Making educational programs relevant to the learner by recognizing the unique background and incorporating adult learners' experience into education is important (p. 81). Although it is not often stated, relevancy should have a direct link to institutional goals, strategies, campus culture, and the student population. For an institution to truly succeed, its mission must inform all aspects of its operations, from its course delivery

formats and scheduling to its curriculum, resources, students services, and more (von Lehman, 2011).

Online learning and technology. Some colleges and universities have developed online courses that are designed to be accessible by anyone anywhere in the world with access to the Internet at no cost. These massive open online courses, known as MOOCs, were initially developed by prestigious universities in order to expose individuals to high-quality instruction at no cost (Wheelan, 2016). Abilene Christian University (ACU; Williams, 2012) faced challenges with designing its online degree program. Their only degree-completion program aimed at working adults struggled to get departments to offer courses at times convenient for adults to attend... the main attraction was the half-price tuition (p. 65). Increasing the budget and re-designing the reporting structure has reduced the challenges. Although there are advantages and disadvantages, the revised structure resulted in a centralized curriculum and faculty, and decentralized support services (p. 69). One of the shared disadvantages is that there is a tendency on the part of departments to want to design faculty workloads in more traditional ways (p. 70). The lingering question was whether the revised structure could withstand an expansion of new academic programs.

Interactions that are different from the residential living experience is the online learning experience. Jackson, Jones, and Rodriguez (2010) conducted a study utilizing descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations and multiple regressions which were used to identify faculty behaviors which affected the satisfaction of students enrolled in these courses (p. 78). Their research revealed:

A comparison of results from this study and other foundational studies support the premise that faculty actions influence student satisfaction in the online classroom across higher education institutions. Findings from this study are unique in that they not only validate the effect of faculty actions on student satisfaction in the online, community

college classroom, but they also identify concrete actions in which faculty may engage in the online classroom to positively influence student satisfaction. (Jackson et al., 2010, p. 92)

Another perspective related to online learning and its impact on teaching effectiveness and student ratings comes from Tipple (2010), who stated that in the student centric environment of online education, ‘customer’ feedback is critical to achieving a rewarding learning experience for students and ultimately in achieving the institutional mission of educational excellence.

Darden (2014) conducted a study to explore whether Knowles’ andragogy theory is relevant to distance education. The focus of his research included a review of distance learning, the andragogy model, teaching styles, and the relevance to today’s learning environment. There were no participants involved in the study; however, Darden’s research revealed that within the distance learning context, Knowles’ andragogy model optimizes the learning process to ensure that the adult learner acquires the information they will need in an ever-changing workforce. In addition, the study concluded that if the andragogical approach is used in a distance-learning design, teachers must be sure that Knowles assumptions are relevant and valid within the context of learning; else the intended benefit may become a detriment. Inconclusively, Darden’s research also discovered that other studies determined that andragogy was not appropriate for their programs due to the lack of self-confidence (p. 811).

Chyung (2007) suggests that further research on age and gender interaction effects on online behavior and metacognitive characteristics such as self-monitoring and self-evaluation, and academic achievement during online learning is recommended. Online learning will continue to grow in importance for adult learners. The challenge is for educators to learn how to provide a positive “social” environment for using an electronic medium (Cercone, 2008, p. 152). As online learning progresses, it may behoove adult learner program developers to give attention to the

behavior of online learners. Favor and Kulp (2015) conducted a study to provide insights into adult students' perception of long-functioning academic teams in accelerated online and on-campus degree programs. Independent sample *t* tests found no difference in student perceptions of their teams by degree level but significant differences by delivery modality in two areas: preference for teams and impact on learning (p. 156). Favor and Kulp's study revealed that 40% of the members were not confident their teams were aligned in performance expectations or shared the workload (p. 157). The outcome of the study can add value by informing other institutions' campus program designers with enhancing programs or by engaging their students with change initiatives. Student interaction within online and on-campus programs require different methods to develop team learning plans.

A teaching experiment (case study) conducted to help adult students with developmental mathematics (Garrett, 2013) provided a glimpse into internal barriers of conceptual misunderstandings that impact progress. Garrett shared,

In order to enhance students' success in development mathematics, their learning experiences must uncover and restructure internal representations that interfere with an understanding of standard mathematical representations. Research is needed into the curriculum, resources, pedagogy, and andragogy needed to help all students in this situation progress with efficiency and effectiveness. (2013, p. 28)

As the students become confident in the use of technology through one or more teacher led technological investigations, they will be more likely to use technology independently for their own learning needs (Garrett, 2013, p. 28).

Prior learning assessment. Two issues that need to be addressed differently between adult and child learners are the use of prior knowledge and life experiences and learner responsibility (McDonough, 2013). Institutions that offer credit for prior learning assessment (PLA) have an advantage in this area. Of particular importance to regional accreditation is the obligation to hold institutions accountable for the quality of the academic programs that they

offer, regardless of the method or pace of student learning (Wheelan, 2016, p. 91). Even more important are the results of the investment of a college education. Students should have their voices lifted relative to shaping their collegiate experience—more specifically through scholarly research.

Competency-based degree programs share a philosophy with PLA: that what individuals know is more important than where or how they acquired that knowledge. In addition, competency-based programs are a natural fit with many methods of PLA because they assess the outcomes of student learning in a rigorous way (Klein-Collins, & Wertheim, 2013, p. 54). By using PLA, students will not need to retake entire courses to have their previous learning fully recognized by the transfer institution (p. 55).

If the goal is to create understanding while increasing self-efficacy, learners must be set up for success, which necessitates that instruction be packaged to maximize understanding (Clapper, 2010, p. e13). M. Christie et al. (2015) opined that courses and workshops that are constructivist in nature can reveal the way in which all knowledge in all fields are social constructs and offer participants an opportunity to reconsider their own world view and critique the assumptions that underlie that view (p. 22).

Remediation. Using remedial, or developmental, classes is a tool for many colleges and universities trying to rectify academic deficiencies in students coming out of high school (DeNicco, Harrington, & Fogg, 2015). Previous research indicates that remedial classes are also necessary for adult learners due to the gap between high school and entering or returning to college. One of the concerns expressed in a study by DeNicco et al. (2015) is that remedial coursework may be diversionary in that it decreases the number of credits a student can take that count towards a degree or fulfilling requirements necessary to transfer to another institution. If

the most important factor in freshman retention is progress in accumulating credits towards those goals, then courses that detract from those goals are counterproductive (p. 8).

Hanover Research (2014) conducted a study on adult learner preferences and priorities for students enrolled in four-year institutions. The key findings from six “selective” institutions were:

- Among interviewed programs, the most popular areas of study among adult students were political science, organizational leadership, psychology, economics, creative writing, English, history, international relations, and engineering.
- Adult students at selective institutions may or may not have families.
- Adult learners who choose four-year institutions prioritize program offerings, financial assistance, cost, and impact on their current or future job.
- Adult learners tend to come into programs at selective four-year institutions with at least some transfer credits.
- Adult education programs at interviewed selective institutions take different approaches: some offer bachelor’s degrees in all majors, while others offer only a limited number of majors.
- Financial aid is available at all interviewed adult education programs. (pp. 3–4)

The case studies within the Hanover Research did not include research on persistence or retention; however, the individual institutional profiles did include degree completion statistics by age. The six participating institutions within the Hanover Research Report revealed the following about their respective program components:

- Offering return to college programs.
- Lack of night, weekend, or other flexible course options (revealed in one of the six).

- Online and on-campus programs. Transfer credits available for prior learning credit. Regular undergraduate programs for adults. Special scholarships for adult learners.
- Enrollment through special schools for adult and continuing learners. (i.e., School of Professional and Continuing Study).
- Non-traditional student schedules and formats.
- Peer mentors and residence halls for women (with or without families). (Hanover Research, 2014, pp. 9–16)

The report did not include any additional information or data on program design or evaluation measures. Degree programs for adult students will continue to mirror our complex, diverse society. As our culture becomes more technologically sophisticated, educational programs will follow suit (Pappas & Jerman, 2014, p. 95).

Comparison of Program Components

An overview of programs, services, and marketing strategies reflected common, shared, and unique differences related to institutional strategies to attract and retain the students they serve. The information was obtained by the researcher from baccalaureate level institution web pages. The age comparison shown in Table 2.1 represents a listing of program or marketing components that vary among higher education institutions. The *shared* section indicates that the listed components are available to both classifications of students. The *common* section indicates that these services and strategies are common within that particular age group—but may not be shared. The *unique* section indicates that the services and strategies are typically designed for the respective age groups and would not adequately serve the other group equally.

Table 2.1

Comparison of Components Within Four-Year Undergraduate Programs

Students:	Traditional (under 25)	Adult (over 24+)
<i>Shared</i>	Web advertising On-site and web recruiting Academic Advising Flexible scheduling Online classes Military recruitment and service centers Internships/Study Abroad	Web advertising On-site and web recruiting Academic Advising Flexible scheduling Online classes Military recruitment and service centers Internships/Study Abroad
<i>Common</i>	On-site and web advertising for traditional students Mentoring programs On-campus programs: Transfer students New student orientation Student organizations Hybrid and online course options Health services/counselors	On-site and web advertising for new adult learners and returning students (stop-outs) Hybrid and online course options Health services/counselors
<i>Unique</i>	Social media ads and announcements targeted for traditional students Multi-city recruiting tours Parent groups Dual enrollment (high school and college) Residential living programs and activities On campus study programs Learning communities for new freshman International student servicing Special on and off campus activities Transportation assistance	Cohort groups Social media ads and announcements targeted for adult students Commuter programs Credit or life-long learning Accelerated learning programs Corporate/Organizations recruitment

If the majority of academic programs or student services overlap in design (traditional vs. adult students), then how does this impact the adult learner experience? The answer was not available through the review of literature; however, the studies and theories examined reflected on some of the noted components.

Summary of design and components. It is evident from the review of literature on the components and design of adult learner programs that most of the features emerge from traditional student programs. An exception to this perspective is the offering of academic credit for PLA. Studies reveal that PLA provides an advantage for adult learners, but some students may not be aware that their life experiences are eligible for college credit; or, they may attend an institution that has not implemented the option for PLA credit.

As revealed in the literature review, orientation, remediation courses, and online learning programs are other available options for adult learners; however, it often requires special permission to conduct scholarly research or obtain institutional data on the design of existing higher education programs. The Hanover Research (2014) report highlighted the significant features of six institutions; yet, it lacked specific information relative to program design and student input. This is the area that warrants expanded research.

Review of the Literature Summary

This literature review synthesizes research related to various areas that impact the collegiate experience for adult learners, and ultimately, the perceptions, programs, theories, and actions or level of engagement. Collectively, the literature review illuminates the influences and characteristics of adult learners, while the commentary expounds on the gaps. However, there are gaps in the literature relative to undergraduate-level adult learner programs and how they impact the students over the age of 24. What research there is has not been translated into practice in higher education (Caruth, 2014, p. 24). There are deeper stories to be extracted and examined to help determine the degree of adult learner program design effectiveness. The adult learner, rather than being an anomaly within higher education, could become its most important ally (Finch, 2016).

Although there are multiple adult learning theories, current literature does not reveal a dominant theory that has contributed to adult program development or student persistence. Even a blend of adult learning theories seems to have not impacted higher education persistence or retention. Therefore, how do universities holistically serve the adult students that they recruit? Even more important, once adult learners arrive (or login), are they satisfied? Grades alone cannot effectively tell the story. Most of the studies within the literature review have limitations that need further exploration related to the study of adult learners and programs. Concern remains among older students attending school with younger students, however, the nature of that concern is unidentified (Kimmel et al., 2016, p. 35).

The central claim from the review of literature is that there is shallow research on the lived experiences of undergraduate level adult learners and the uniquely designed programs that serve them. Findings, analyses, and conclusions drawn from the literature review provided clarity for the approach to the study. Overall, the review of literature poses more questions, such as:

- 1) How does adult learner programs satisfy the needs of students?
- 2) What are adult learner expectations at the beginning of the program?
- 3) What degree of academic engagement impacts persistence?
- 4) What are the unique issues between academic engagement and academic performance?

All of the above questions have the potential of addressing the gaps, and satisfying the purpose of the study, which is to examine the lived experiences of adult learners in a uniquely designed adult learning program.

Having a clear understanding about adult learning and the factors that affect their learning is fundamental to planning programs for adults (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013, p. 33). The

challenges for higher education in the 21st century warrants more research with results for a greater level of influence on the undergraduate adult learner experience and the institutions that will serve them.

Chapter III: Methodology

This study sought to understand how degree seeking adult (mature) learners enrolled at accredited institutions adapt and make sense of their academic experience, and to understand what situations influenced their experience. The semi-structured interviews and other interviewing techniques revealed the degree of effectiveness of an adult learner program and deeper insight into their life and collegiate experiences.

Research Questions

An extensive literature review helped to address the gaps in existing studies, which led to the following research questions:

RQ1. In what ways, if any, are the distinctive needs and expectations of adult learners fulfilled through a baccalaureate level adult learner program?

RQ2. What does an adult learner do to address the challenges of meeting degree requirements in a timely manner?

Host Study Site

The location for participant recruitment, conducting interviews, and data collection for the study was established with Golden Mountain University (GOMU [pseudonym used for the official study site]) in the upper Southern region of the United States. The approval of Antioch University's IRB application, and the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU; see Appendix A), opened the pathway for me and the GOMU Director of AE to meet on campus. GOMU offers more than 70 bachelor's degree programs, and they established an AE program to provide adult learners special options for degree completion. Twenty-one percent of the institution's total enrollment (12,643 total for fall 2016) represents undergraduate adult learners (both full and part-time). Specific enrollment data on the AE student population were not included online;

however, the AE administrative team provided institutional data per request by the researcher for the final dissertation. Information from the AE website indicated the following:

- AE offers year-round enrollment in 8-week accelerated classes
- AE personalizes degree plans
- AE provides easy access to campus, parking, and centralized classrooms
- AE classes meet once per week with convenient web-enhancement
- AE offers flexibility to take one or two courses per session (online classes included)

GOMU's website shares overall and minority retention and graduation data; yet, minimal public data are available on adult learners. The surface level insights drawn from their website and National Student Clearinghouse reports captured my attention to consider GOMU as a potential institution for the study on adult learners.

The purpose of AE is to offer a flexible uniquely designed degree program for adult learners. Their goal is to offer affordable options in the following bachelor's degree programs:

(Note: associate degree options are also available)

- B.S.—Business Administration
- B.S.—Business Informatics
- B.S.—Computer Information Technology
- B.S.—Integrative Studies
- B.A.—Organizational Leadership Studies

Other goals include ensuring that students develop a one-on-one relationship with professors, follow the AE four-year plan, and take advantage of AE's eight-week, year-round schedule to accelerate student progress. AE offers up to four years of academic planning, financing options, and web-enhanced instruction of online coursework. A customized plan is

offered to all AE students, even though students have the option of attending full-time or part-time. In addition, prior learning credit (non-college experience) is another option to help students accelerate their degree requirements. AE supports a statewide initiative to assist adult learners who have accumulated 70+ credit hours to return to finish their first bachelor's degree.

Qualitative Research Method

The structural development, concerns, discourse, and movements (traditional, modern, postmodern, etc.) of qualitative studies began in the early 19th century. The word *qualitative* implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on the processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10). Obviously, qualitative research—just as quantitative research—implies many things to many people. Galletta and Cross (2013) suggested that qualitative research offers both the researcher and participants a level of reciprocity and reflexivity (p. 193). In all probability, I may experience some degree of that while conducting research for the study. Being very mindful of the role of a researcher, Starks and Trinidad's (2007) description is worth consideration:

Qualitative analysis is inherently subjective because the researcher is the instrument for analysis. The researcher (or the research team) makes all the judgments about coding, categorizing, decontextualizing, and recontextualizing the data. (p. 1376)

If “subjective” is seen as “subject to bias,” then it must also be said that quantitative research is inherently subjective as well, in terms of decisions about statistical methods to be used, how results are to be interpreted, and so on.

There has been some resistance (seemingly much less now, than earlier years) to qualitative studies by some thought leaders who considered it a soft or subjective type of research in various disciplines. According to the observations by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), the opposition to positivist science by the post structuralists is seen, then, as an attack on reason and truth. At the same time, the positivist science attack on qualitative research is regarded as an attempt to legislate one version of truth over another (p. 8). Further, Boyatzis (1998) states, “qualitative methods have had a rough time gaining acceptance in the mainstream of social and behavioral science research” (p. vi).

According to Creswell (2014) qualitative research is especially useful when the researcher does not know the important variables to examine. He also shares

The problem comes from a void in the literature, and conflict in research results in the literature, topics that have been neglected in the literature; a need to lift up the voice of marginalized participants; and “real-life” problems found in the workplace, the home, the community, and so forth. (p. 20)

This study explores the lived and collegiate experiences of fifteen adult learners. The intent is not to test hypotheses through a quantitative study, but to capture the essence of emerging themes and commonality (if any) among the participants. Lived experiences have the capability of shaping future decisions. According to Lichtman (2012) qualitative research is a way of knowing that assumes that the researcher gathers, organizes, and interprets information with his or her eyes and ears as a filter.

Insights on Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a research strategy under the scholarly umbrella of qualitative studies. Cilesiz (2011) shares that the purposes of phenomenological study are to understand and describe a given phenomenon in-depth and arrive at the essence of humans’ lived experiences of that phenomenon (p. 495). He further states that participant selection, validity considerations,

and ethics are also among the important elements of research design in phenomenology and contribute to the rigor of a phenomenological study (p. 498). Ethics and codes of conduct require a high level of responsibility. The researcher and the participants must agree upon certain terms prior to proceeding with the study. Miller, Birch, and Mauthner (2012) advocate that ethically responsible research requires the researcher to negotiate participation at the outset of a research project and be sensitive to the dimensions that have been agreed (p. 94). Their premise is that good researchers form good relationships with the participants.

A nonexperimental study is one in which there is no control over what may influence subjects' responses. The investigator is interested in studying what occurred or occurs naturally. Nonexperimental studies are generally used to describe phenomena and uncover relationships (McMillan & Wergin, 2010, p. 4). From this perspective, the intent of the study is to discover emerging themes that may contribute to future research or decisions related to adult learners and higher education.

The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to the scientific explanations. Interview research may to some appear a simple and straightforward task...but it is hard to do well. (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009)

I concur with the above statement because when a researcher takes a deep-dive into another person's story in order to reveal phenomena unknown to others, it can be very uncomfortable during the interview and difficult to make meaning once the interview is complete. The give and take that defines a good interview is helped along by a stance of respect and openness to the participant's report. The reciprocal influence that is considered a source of error in other contexts thus becomes an area of connection and possibility (Pollio, Graves, & Arfken, 2006). Loureiro Alves Jurema, Correia Pimentel, Cordeiro, and Austregésilo Nepomuceno (2006) posited:

In the context of phenomenological research, we believe that an interpretative and systematized description, where one values lived experience and knowledge [re]searching to attribute meanings to reality, will certainly contribute significant insights. Through these means we believe we can re-mean reality as we look at it through new lenses. And, by setting free the meanings of discourse, we believe, is a way to improve quality in education. (p. 33)

IPA. After extensive research on qualitative methods, I decided to embrace interpretative phenomenological analysis for this study. IPA is not an easy option, but it does try to do something a little different from other qualitative methods, and research in its image can be very powerful when it is carried out with requisite care and commitment (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). The participants in the study are the owners of their lived experiences. Proponents of IPA (Larkin et al., 2006) indicate that the method is more than descriptive; it generates an insider's perspective, and utilization of IPA for this study is a sense-making activity that draws readers into the world of adult learners and the program in which they have invested their time and energy to obtain a baccalaureate degree at an accelerated pace.

Extracting themes from the data codes exposes the commonalities in the research data. According to Starks and Trinidad (2007), generally speaking, phenomenological analyses produce rich thematic descriptions that provide insight into the meaning of the lived experience. Phenomenologies are often written as anecdotes or thematic stories, drawing on elements reported from different narrators to create a blended story (p. 1376–1377). Additional research indicates that thematic analysis has many overlapping or alternate purposes. It can be used as:

1. A way of seeing
2. A way of making sense out of seemingly unrelated material
3. A way of analyzing qualitative information
4. A way of systematically observing a person, an interaction, a group, a situation, an organization, or a culture

5. A way of converting qualitative information into quantitative data (Boyatzis, 1998, pp. 4–5).

Thematic analysis is considered an added value when analyzing the unique narratives extracted from interviews. However, it was not a required element within the interpretative phenomenological analysis study.

Data Method and Analysis

Introductions and pre-arrangements were secured to conduct research on the adult learners at a public, co-educational university in the mid-South region of the United States. The campus is a growing university with more than 12,000 undergraduate level (fall 2016) students. A small percent of the student population is enrolled in the adult learner program, which is designed for working adults with specific needs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to assist in the discovery of lived experiences related to the research questions, and additional information that emerged - adding value to the research study focusing on adult learners.

IRB and informed consent. Critical to the process of preparing for interviews was to obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and develop a consent form for participants. The IRB applications vary among institutions, but they serve to ensure that all proposed studies are approved before conducting interviews and researching records prior to the study. Seidman (2013) shared that

Each local IRB will have its own application format, but basically IRBs ask researchers to describe briefly the aims of the research, the nature of their participants, their research methodology, the researchers' qualifications to do research, the risks and benefits involved in the research, and how the researchers will obtain informed consent from their potential participants. (p. 62)

An expedited review was requested because an informal introduction (during proposal development) was established with the host institution. In addition, the research posed minimal

risk for the population of adult study participants. The Manager of Research Compliance submitted a waiver letter indicating that an IRB application would not be required by the host institution. As requested, the waiver letter was shared with the Antioch University IRB Committee. Antioch University's IRB Committee also requested a copy of the recruitment flyer. They wanted to ensure that the proper language—relative to the purpose, contact information, and eligibility for the study—was distributed to potential participants. The following statement is embedded on the Informed Consent Letter (see Appendix B).

Participant selection: You are being selected as a potential participant based upon your enrollment in a bachelor's degree program for adult learners.

In addition, it is highly recommended, and in many cases required for ethical reasons, to read *The Belmont Report*, which was established by the U.S. Congress for the protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research in 1974 (Seidman, 2013, p. 61).

As a doctoral student, I was afforded the privilege of learning about The Belmont Report, and securing a Principal Investigator certificate. An IRB application was approved for the interpretative phenomenological analysis, as a method of study on adult learners in higher education.

Participants. Volunteer participants were selected from degree-seeking adult learning students enrolled at a baccalaureate level institution of higher learning. This represents a form of purposive sampling selection. As established by U. S. Department of Education, adult learners are over the age of 24. To be eligible for the study, students should have completed at least one full semester of course work in the adult learner program and are eligible to enroll in subsequent terms. Participation in the study is voluntary (without payment or coercion) and the Program Advisors served as the liaison for contact with the participants and access to institutional data.

The former Director retired and left instructions for another University Director and the Academic Advisors. The MOU was approved by legal counsel, the Provost, and it was signed by the Interim University Director.

Recruiting. The initial plan for recruiting study participants was to send email invitations with an attached flyer and wait for a response for potential participants. After consulting with the Adult Education team, it was recommended that I set up an information station on three dates to reach out to potential candidates in person. The response turned out to be a successful outreach method—garnering 18 students who added their name to the sign-up sheet. For eligibility checking purposes, students who were not listed on the enrollment document were verified by the Program Advisor. After informed consent, and participant selection, audio-recorded, face-to-face interviews were arranged and conducted at an agreed upon location. If there was a challenge with schedules or logistics, interviews through Skype or another type of tele-conferencing method was the second option.

Interviewing. Interviews within a phenomenological study are serious, information rich experiences for the data-gathering process. Depending on the purpose of the study, the number of participants or subjects can vary in range. The proposed range for the study was 12 to 15 participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants following their initial consent. Three out of 18 potential candidates cancelled their interview for various personal reasons. Semi-structured type interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) may include a guide with an outline of topics and suggested questions. For the study, topics included:

- Distinctive needs and expectations as an adult learner
- Addressing challenges
- Influential people and factors

- Confidence level
- Academic performance
- Relationships
- Making meaning of your experience

In addition, six additional interviews (from the 15 original participants) were conducted during the second interview phase of the study to further engage and explore more common areas of interest at a deeper level. The rationale for the second phase of interviews was because it garners more depth on select topics – building upon the first phase of interviews. The second phase of interviews added value by having the opportunity to engage in a deeper level of conversation and interpretation of the shared lived experiences, and by providing more insight for the research questions. Select study participants from phase one interviews were invited for a second interview. Six participants accepted the invitation and expounded on the following topics:

- The impact of a professor’s instructional style
- Insights on overcoming intimidation that are academic related
- Shaping the expectations for the next chapter of life
- Envisioning the rewards of investing in an adult learning program

According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) an interviewer should interview as many subjects necessary until a point of saturation has been reached. A researcher attempts to “saturate” (Creswell, 2007) to look for instances that represent the category and continue looking (and interviewing) until the new information obtained does not further provide insight into the category (p. 160). It is also important to secure willing participants instead of others who may feel obligated for various reasons. Findings from the interviews—which goes beyond the surface level of personal lived experiences—are revealed in Chapter IV.

Establishing criteria and recruiting for participants was strategically aligned for the study. Participants for the study were sent an invitation announcement via campus email and using Blackboard announcement platform—as approved by the Adult Education team. The team also honored my request to provide a list of all Adult Education students and their enrollment status (including major of study); then, eligibility was established by the researcher according to the criteria. The consent form (see Appendix B) provided information about eligibility to participate in the study, including options for participant selection.

After obtaining consent and confirming the logistics for the interview, I served as the interviewer and prepared to engage each participant in a rich conversation about their lived experience as a student in an adult learner program. An encouraging comfort level must be established to gain meaningful details from the participant. A significant goal was to have the interviewee share situations that have or had an influence on their experiences. As study participants used their authentic voice, it formed the essence of their unique narratives. Careful discussion tactics were adhered to such as not interrupting the participant so that they would not lose their train of thought, controlling my tone and facial expressions, or not pre-thinking about questions while the participant is talking. Being an effective listener is most important—particularly when probing with more questions. During each interview, questions flowed from reflecting on their comments or sense of emotion on certain topics. Disruption can cause discomfort; therefore, as the researcher/interviewer, I made an effort to avoid interview “thought” or “emotion” disruptions.

Interview Protocol

The opening protocol included thanking each participant for agreeing to share their story, time, and commitment to the study. Majority of the study participants were elated to contribute

to the study. The opening question was related to background information such as their field of study (or major) and what attracted them to the adult learner program. Demographic information was requested during select interviews (most often because there was no response via email). The discussion flowed into the area of the topics—which was shared in the welcome message (see Appendix C). As the interviewee’s (study participant) narrative began to unfold, the interviewer further engaged the discussion by remaining flexible with the flow, open-minded, and ethical to help foster a rich conversational experience. These are the types of approaches that helped the interviewer gain a deeper understanding of the unknown phenomenon. After the interview, the interviewer expressed gratitude to each participant and informed them about follow-up measures which allowed them the opportunity to review their input and engage in more discussion about their experiences. The initial interviews took 40 to 60+ minutes. The interviewer and interviewee reconnected after the first interview for purposes of member checking, clarifying, or expanding upon points raised in the first interview. Requests were honored to add new information or make corrections to the transcript.

The second phase of interviews expounded on fewer areas that added to deeper narratives and analysis. It provided an opportunity to reflect on the first interview and then re-visit topics to make meaning of the experience. All six of the participants spoke with more depth and passion about their thoughts and life/collegiate experiences within the adult learner program.

Participant research tracking chart. To manage the interview process, a tracking chart was developed to include participant research information. The field names for each column include:

- Participant full name and pseudonym (alias)
- Contact information (email and phone number)

- Consent Form (Y/N)
- First Interview (Date)
- Member Checking (Follow-up date)
- Follow-up reminder (Y/N)
- Second Phase Interview (Date)
- Transcription status (Not ready, In Progress, or Complete)
- Final follow-up/Thank you for participating (Y/N)
- Supportive Feedback/Comments/Reflection notes

The chart served as an effective planning and tracking tool. The benefits of the chart are to manage timelines, track accounts, and follow the progress of each participant until the conclusion of the study. This chart also included a field for recording my own observations of the interview, which adds context to the interview transcript and aid in meaning-making.

Analyzing the Data

To fully understand the lived experiences of each participant, and to seek answers to the research questions, a thorough data analysis process is crucial to the study. Inductive data analysis focuses on allowing meanings to emerge from the interviews. Narratives (Pollio et al., 2006) begin with the assumption that one way to learn something about a person, group, or culture is to consider the stories they tell. While this study utilizes the interpretative phenomenological analysis method, unique narratives from each interview illuminates the essence of the study. Specifically, this process entails examining statements from the interviews to understand the meanings (Reeves, Albert, Super, & Hodges, 2008.) The process is important for making a distinction between what is relevant and what is not. Relative to the critical evaluation of data, other researchers go further to state,

The researcher examines the constitution of the data and checks whether they are suitable for analysis. Data are positively evaluated to the extent that they are topically relevant, concretely expressive of the matter under investigation, and complete enough to enable the researcher to answer the research questions and to fulfill the goals of the research. (Wertz et al., 2011, pp. 368–369)

Reading each transcript, line by line, in search of relevant words, phrases, actions, opinions, personal researcher notes, and concepts are critical components of the evaluation and analysis process. Coding involves constructing short labels that describe, dissect, and distill the data while preserving their essential properties (Gubrium, 2012, p. 356). Of course, coding software is a time-saving tool, however in-depth manual analysis adds just as much value to developing the content for the study. Possessing an open mind and remaining cognitive of biases or irrelevant assumptions about the phenomena helps to adequately conceptualize or make meaning of the data. A debriefing team was established to review and add feedback on the researcher's interpretation of the data. Their feedback contributed to the reevaluation of select codes, categories and sub-categories within the study.

There are a multitude of options for coding data. For this study, NVivo software was the preferred method for coding. Self-training and a review of online material (NVivo for Windows Tutorials) provided the necessary tools for coding, mapping thoughts, and creating themes from the data (www.qsrinternational.com). It was anticipated that the degree of depth would increase from the richness of each narrative, and from the answers to the research questions that expose the phenomenon of the study.

Credibility and Validity

To protect the study against bias, several techniques and methods were used to ensure integrity and validity throughout the study. As the data collection phase unfolded, member

checking was conducted as a quality control method. Creswell and Miller (2000) described member checking as the validity procedure for shifting from researcher to participants in the study. They implied that the participants add credibility to the qualitative study by having a chance to react to both the data and the final narrative.

Each interviewee (study participant) was informed initially in their consent letter that they would have the opportunity to review their transcript. Member checking begins after the interview transcripts have been transcribed. Comments and corrections by the interviewee were submitted for necessary revisions. Enrollment and program data collected at the university were confirmed by the Program Advisors. Although offered during the informal introduction, further assistance from the Office of Institutional Research was not necessary for the study. Their approval and waiver letter contributed to recruiting, data collection, and quality control processes for the study.

Peer debriefing. Peer debriefing is another quality check component to the study. Peer debriefing can provide written feedback to researchers or simply serve as a sounding board for ideas. By seeking the assistance of peer debriefers, researchers add credibility to a study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Two (2) external individuals from Antioch University's Leadership and Change program were invited and selected to serve as peer debriefers. Both have expertise sufficient for a higher education study; the debriefers increase the degree of trustworthiness in the study. Each debriefing team member received instructions developed by the researcher and they signed Debriefing Consent forms. Shared documents, the coordination of virtual meetings, or other online meeting services were set for debriefing sessions. The role of the debriefing team is to review and submit feedback on the data and the researcher's interpretation of the data. Their review and suggestions add value, in addition to quality control for the study; however, I served

as the primary interpreter, and the determination of final decisions rested in my possession along with recommendations from my Dissertation Committee.

Documents, messages, meetings, and notes contributed to the quality control efforts throughout the study. In addition, the researcher's observation and reflection experience is shared in the reflection section of the study.

Process and data development steps included:

- 1) Developing a welcome interview message which included discussion topics (see Appendix C). The basic criteria to participate included: (1) Undergraduate adult (over 24) degree-seeking student, (2) Completed at least one semester or quarter of study, (3) Eligible to enroll in the subsequent term.
- 2) After an approved IRB (to ensure ethical procedures during the study), I contacted the director of the host institution to discuss ethical guidelines and permissions. It is imperative to seek and communicate with participants who meet the criteria and share instructions after obtaining a written consent (see Appendix B). It is also the responsibility of the researcher to ensure confidentiality for the host institution and each participant in the study.
- 3) Potential participants were asked to volunteer their time to participate in an interview. Interviewees were selected via purposive sampling. Maximizing differences (Creswell, 2007) is considered ideal for qualitative research. To maximize the diversity of the study, participants selected included bachelor's degree-seeking students who represented diversity in the following areas: age, ethnicity, gender, and residency status (in-state and out-of-state). An enrollment report without demographic data, provided by the Adult Education team, helped facilitate the selection process. The initial intent was to review

demographic data from the host institution's enrollment report. Due to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) following by the institution, the demographic data were excluded. The researcher/interviewer sent an email to all study participants to obtain demographic data. The demographic chart is shared in Chapter IV.

- 4) The Participant Research Tracking Chart was used to manage the interview process. Translation of the audio-recorded interview and obtaining approval or content from participants was included in the protocol. A review of the translated transcript by the interviewee is a process that contributed to the validity of the study.
- 5) Each transcript was transcribed and interpreted thoroughly. A follow-up session was scheduled for member checking with each interviewee to ensure validity of their contribution to the study. Peer debriefers provided feedback on the researcher's interpretation of the data (narrative stories). Listening to all interpretations of the data is a part of the debriefing process. Interpretations about the study may be challenged; however, it is imperative for the researcher and the challenger to respect the process and then seek another opinion or clarity from the interviewee. In addition, consultation with the Dissertation Chair is a critical component in the process.
- 6) Notes about observations and participant statements were used to help analyze the contents of each narrative for the study. Relevant comments and personal notes were added to the Participant Research Tracking Chart.
- 7) The context of the transcript was analyzed by clustering the data and creating a diagram (summary/synopsis table) that depicted interrelated and/or unrelated categories formulated from the interviews. The use of research coding software enabled me to

categorize the content from each interview. A code-list (shared in Chapter IV) was developed and more than forty (40) categories and themes emerged from the data.

- 8) Key codes were reviewed. Codes become emerging categories and themes. Emotion coding (Saldaña, 2015) added value to the analysis of the study by exposing passionate views or expressions stated by the participant (interviewee). Themes shape the phenomena about the subject and reveals answers to the research question(s).
- 9) Categories, themes, and sub-themes emerged from each interview. Unique narratives with a degree of commonality among experiences or concerns were revealed in the study.
- 10) Steps 4 through 9 were applied to each interview transcript. Transcripts were shared with the Dissertation Chair for approval to continue the data collection (interviewing) an analysis process. Findings are revealed in Chapter IV of the dissertation. In addition, peer debriefing is a necessary component for quality control purposes.
- 11) A table of findings (run via NVIVO) was developed from the data collection. This allows for preparation to write the outcome. Sufficient saturation is necessary for establishing and exposing the essence of the study. It was determined that data saturation had been reached due to the following:
 - Fifteen (15) rich narratives from one Adult Education program were conducted. Six (6) additional interviews added value to the data collection from phase one.
 - There were unique and shared experiences from all participants.
 - I did not have to solely depend upon university marketing or statistical data to confirm the narrative stories shared during the interview.

- A code-list of categories, sub-categories, and themes emerged, which contributed to multi-layers of data.
- Codes and categories reviewed by the Debriefing Team were deemed as “quality information” in the data collection. The Adult Education program is designed to serve students within a cohort. Majority of the participants in this study have shared classes (both online and face-to-face) with many of the same professors. After about a dozen interviews, the collegiate experiences begin to sound familiar—relative to certain courses and select professors. Also, their overall perception about the academic advisors and the program was positive.

12) Observe the context of all interviews to discover a connection to phenomena or more in-depth understanding of the participants’ experience and attempt to gain an understanding of the relevance of the adult learner program that they are enrolled in at the host institution.

13) Edit all chapters and present the research in a final report.

14) Share limitations and suggestions for future research.

15) Prepare to schedule a date for the oral defense of the dissertation.

Insights on Chapter IV

Through the qualitative method explained in this chapter, Chapter IV reveals the findings from the data collection (interviews) process and analysis. An interpretive phenomenological data analysis makes meaning of the lived experiences of the adult learners (study participants) at the selected institution for the study. A description of the process and how transcripts were coded, themed, and analyzed are included in the chapter. Input from the member checking

process, and peer debriefing feedback explains how the data collection process evolved through all quality control efforts. Each participant's contribution is reported in the chapter. The rich narrative stories from each participant and the answers to the research questions add meaning and depth to further scholarly research. It is anticipated that the study will reveal the "common essence" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 27) of the phenomena. The adult learner voice is the essence of the study. An overview of the findings from the program profile and central database at the host institution is shared within the study.

Summary of the Methodology

The in-depth analysis of qualitative studies—in particular, interpretive phenomenology, and the literature review has propelled my knowledge on this research method. Each unique narrative that shares lived experiences—and exposes the phenomena—interpreted from the institutional data, provided profound answers that are critical to make meaning for the study. Engaging a university with an established adult learner program as a partner in the study provided a direct link to participants who were given a scholarly platform to share their lived experiences, while readers and researchers will gain a deeper understanding from transparent and authentic voices.

The phenomenological approach to this study is an effort to unfold the influential and motivational factors that impact adult (mature) learners. Phenomenology provided the opportunity to uncover the influential factors from the adult learner's perspective. There is more to their story than a survey or other quantitative methods can reveal. The scholarly research material and tools selected for this study provided the path for the depth of research and analysis necessary to conduct a concrete study that future researchers and higher education institutions can add to their repertoire of scholarly references.

Chapter IV: Research Findings

Chapter IV opens with an introduction to the host site—Golden Mountain University, Adult Education program—and the study participants (including demographic details). Next, it reveals the findings from the data collection and analysis. An interpretive phenomenological data analysis was the method chosen to make meaning of the lived experiences of the adult learners at the selected institution. The process of coding, analyzing, and categorizing data from the interviews (process shared in Chapter III) contributed to the findings included in the chapter. Input from the member checking process, and peer debriefing feedback provided another level of mining the data to ensure effective quality control efforts. Select excerpts from each participant’s contribution are reported in this chapter. Excerpts from captivating narratives (see Appendix D) from each participant and applicable answers to the research questions add meaning and depth to the outcome. As anticipated, the study reveals the “common essence” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 27) of the phenomena. The research questions for the study include the following:

RQ1. In what ways, if any, are the distinctive needs and expectations of adult learners fulfilled through a baccalaureate level adult learner program?

RQ2. What does an adult learner do to address the challenges of meeting degree requirements in a timely manner?

Following the findings from the study and specific themes related to the research questions and additional research findings, I present a model of the adult learner experience including the factors that either facilitate or inhibit that experience.

Host Site Engagement—Recruiting Participants

The first official meeting with the host site team was a productive experience because they were willing to assist in any manner based upon shared information from the previous Adult

Education Director, who retired two months before the data collection stage. A student enrollment list and a recruiting display table was offered to help attract study participants while they were en route to class. While most of the students received email and Blackboard notifications about my appearance, there were questions about the study and the amount of time it would take to participate.

It was obvious that the students led busy lives, and they guarded their time while considering participation in this type of project. One student who seemed apprehensive about the study stated, “I don’t think that my life is interesting enough for this study, but I think it’s important and I wish you the best.” Another student whole-heartedly supported the opportunity to participate, and she made an announcement in her class (without any influence or coercion from me) that she signed up and they should too because one day, they might be seeking a doctorate degree, and they will need study participants. Two of her classmates came to the recruiting table immediately after “peer” persuasion. Asking students to lift their voice for a study that could positively impact future decisions about adult learners and adult learning programs in higher education yielded unexpected results.

Description of Study Participant Volunteers

The design of the study sought 12 to 15 volunteer participants who met the following criteria at the host site:

- Adult learner, over the age of 24
- Degree seeking student in a bachelor’s degree program
- Completion of at least one academic term
- Eligible to enroll in the subsequent term

Out of eighteen (18) students who expressed interest, fifteen (15) of the students in the AE program at GOMU committed through official consent to fully participate in one or two interviews, in addition to the member checking process. The diverse population of study participants showcased in the demographic chart (see Table 4.1) represent both professional and home-based backgrounds. While the participants held in common their pursuit of a bachelor's degree, each came to the program for reasons that are unique and deeply connected to their own life journey.

Demographic Details

The demographics of a diverse population of 15 students who participated in the study are listed in the Table 4.1. All students commute to campus from their respective places of residence. The participant numbers were assigned according to the order of signing up for the study during the recruiting phase. Study participants with an asterisk (*) by their number also contributed to the second phase of interviews.

Table 4.1

Adult Learner Demographics Chart

Study Participant # Major	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Marital Status	Child(ren)	Employed / Full-time or Part-time	In or Out of State
SP1 Organizational Leadership	Male	31	White/Caucasian	Married	Yes 1 child	Yes / FT	In
SP2 Organizational Leadership	Female	44	White/Caucasian	Single	Yes 2 children	Yes / FT	In
SP4 Organizational Leadership	Female	36	White/Caucasian	Married	Yes	Yes / FT	In
SP7* Organizational Leadership	Female	38	White/Caucasian	Single	No	Yes / FT	Out
SP8* Organizational Leadership	Female	42	African American/ Black	Single	Yes	Yes / FT	Out

SP9* Organizational Leadership	Female	38	White/Caucasian	Married	Yes	No	In
SP10* Organizational Leadership	Male	55	African American/ Black	Married	Yes 2 adults – 2 grandchildren	Yes / FT	Out
SP11* Organizational Leadership	Male	28	African American/ Black	Single	No	Yes / FT	Out native/In (dual residence)
SP12 Organizational Leadership	Female	43	White/Caucasian	Married	Yes	Yes / FT	In
SP13 Business Informatics	Female	Nd	White/Caucasian	Married	No	No / Laid off	In
SP14 Computer Info Technology	Male	27	White/Caucasian	Single	No	Yes / FT	In
SP15 Organizational Leadership	Male	51	African American/ Black	Married	Yes	Yes / FT	Out
SP16 Organizational Leadership	Female	40	Nd	Single	Yes	Yes / FT	In
SP17* Bus Admin	Male	34	White/Caucasian	Married	Yes 2 children	Yes / FT	Out
SP18 Organizational Leadership	Female	Nd	African American/ Black	Nd	Nd	Yes / FT	Out

Note: Nd = Not disclosed

Findings through IPA

Spending time with adult learners opened the opportunity to observe and study their lived and collegiate experiences during several visits on campus. IPA is the qualitative research method chosen to engage in a deeper level of discovery (through multiple interviews) than what was observed at the host site. From the first phase of interviews, this section of the study reveals findings on some of the decisions, reflections on ownership, learning strategies, and the ability to control challenges as expressed by some of the study participants. Insights from the second phase of interviews are shared later in the chapter.

Decisions for returning to college. The interviews opened by asking each participant what led them to apply and enroll in an adult learner program. Most of the participants shared their journey with a sense of ownership in the reason(s) for their delayed return to higher education. Ownership as articulated within the narratives relates to taking personal responsibility for unproductive mindsets and unfortunate situations in the past, while making a commitment to change to ultimately earn a college degree. The desire to advance within careers or restarting the college path after stopping out or officially withdrawing due to early family planning represents some of the decisions to make another attempt to earn a bachelor's degree. SP4 shared that she "felt like a fraud" when telling her child about the importance of education – which resulted in a personal commitment to go back and complete her studies. SP11 expressed the desire to "do something different." I found that all the reasons shared were rooted in a desire to finish what they started.

The narratives also revealed that self-growth, the desire for better leadership skills, or coming to realize that "things are changing," were more reasons for making an inner commitment for returning to college. SP10 alluded to life ambition after serving time in the military. Although SP15 is near retirement, he experienced the denial of becoming the Fire Chief in his city because he did not have a college degree. Aside from career changes or "obsolete" positions, medical and financial family status took its toll on the academic journey of SP17, who was a great student while studying fine arts – but changed to business in the latter years as an adult learner.

This portion of the study presents the narratives shared relative to why adults stopped out of college and then returned to complete their respective journeys. For this study, these are the

life experiences that led participants to GOMU. Other meaningful contributions about college decisions and life prior to the Adult Education program are reflected in the following excerpts:

Well, my job as a medical transcriptionist was becoming obsolete. (SP13)

I actually was thinking about leaving my current employer. And they actually offered me a raise but told me as a stipulation, I'd need to go back and get a bachelor's. So here I am. (SP1)

I knew I wanted to stay here but I knew I wanted to advance so I figured the AE program was right for me. (SP2)

The AE program was very intriguing if you will because I could get my degree in a year and a half. They honored all of my old classes and I only had to take one prerequisite class...it was a no-brainer... (SP8)

After reading their interview transcripts and analyzing specific details on the topic of college decision making, multiple themes emerged. Conscience-driven decisions that stem from personal and family commitment is a prevalent theme within the study. Another theme that surfaced is the ability to advance in careers. As SP9 stated, she wanted to do more than serve as a "volunteer," or as stated by SP12, she wants to "go on" from the job that she is currently possessing. Other insights were related to self-growth and discovery, the potential to lead a person where they need to be or what they want to do. Finally, a sense of guilt – for various reasons – seemed to rest upon study participants 4 and 17. Not finishing the first time may psychologically linger until they complete their academic goals during this phase of their life.

All participants exhibited their passion about being enrolled in the Adult Education program. Their decision is obviously a confidence booster that equips them with the ability to achieve their goals. The overarching areas identified is that the AE program fit their schedule, the location was acceptable, and the program of study suited their needs. Because most of them started college immediately after high school, they eventually discovered that without finishing they could only go so far within their respective careers. A former fine arts major changed to business; two former education majors changed to organizational leadership. They believe that

their decisions are going to help change their lives. The change of majors also reflects the changes in life and greater expectations for the future.

Owning personal experiences. An inquiry and extensive conversation emerged during the debriefing session relative to whether there was a distinction between “ownership” and “self-motivation,” and how they are defined for this study. From my perspective and analysis, ownership is perceived within the study as acceptance of the past, mentally moving forward, and understanding what needs to be done to re-engage and obtain a degree. Self-motivation is encouraging oneself to overcome challenges and utilizing tactics (or the assistance of others) to improve academic performance and successfully complete courses required for graduation. In essence, I contend that self-motivation is considered more strategic, while personal ownership of former experiences can lead to self-motivation strategies for a new academic direction.

The study participants acknowledged that they know what it takes to do better. SP12 believes that despite all her responsibilities, obtaining a degree is still “doable.” Owning personal life experiences and bringing them to the AE program will apparently lead to the motivation necessary to meet graduation requirements for the program. Several study participants disclosed self-motivating experiences or beliefs about what they were doing to achieve success in their classes or their level of commitment to study time.

I’ve gotten better at starting ahead of time. (SP13)

And even being on pain medicine and stuff and having to type with one hand with my left hand and I’m right-handed, I still managed to get an A minus in the class. (SP17)

Dealing with long commutes, reaching out for help and staying on campus beyond class time are sacrifices and strategies shared by SP7 to dedicate more time to study. Her story involves self-motivation to finish and “make it happen.” What surfaced during a conversation with SP8 is the realization that she could have applied herself more [academically] during the

traditional path of college life. She also acknowledged that she was “qualified... but not certified.” This meant that a degree is necessary to move forward in her career. SP14 admitted to transitioning from “making good money” to understanding the need to “finish strong.” Some of the thoughts and experiences shared by study participants reveal the degree of personal responsibility – no matter what it takes to complete the program. Because going to school as a traditional student or taking traditional classes was not a good match for SP16, she embarked upon the AE program and decided, “Yes, I can do it.” In addition to personal ownership, the expression from SP16 also represents self-efficacy and commitment to the academic journey. Experiencing the AE program with other peers was also reported as a motivating factor. Ownership and self-motivation are identifiable themes within the study derived from the narratives shared above.

Learning awareness and strategies. Recognizing personal deficiencies and developing strategies to overcome barriers to learning are expressed in this topic area. SP13 shared her personal intervention plan for getting through assignments. Also, witnessing the learning experience of peers can bring a sense a relief when a student is more aware of their learning style and what is needed to assist them—as expressed by SP16. Select detailed explanations include:

I’ve learned to judge what’s going to take me longer. I know it’s going to take me three days to write that paper, research that, or answer these questions...I plan more time, spend more time on it, and I’ve managed to get everything done. (SP13)

With the adult learning, I’m with a lot of people my age, my peers, and so it’s a different outlook on life. It’s a different responsibility. I’m more so wanting to learn, I want to get all the information that I could possibly get versus being a traditional student where I just didn’t quite have that drive that I have now in the adult learning program. (SP16)

Emerging themes from this portion of the study also reflect environmental fit, peer-influence, a sense of belonging, and learning awareness. These are areas where a student may

self-evaluate to determine if they made the right decision and whether they are taking the right approach to learning. I didn't sense that any of the study participants wanted to leave the program; however, all are subject to self-doubt – particularly if they experience declining GPAs or learning outcomes, or if their confidence level begins to decrease. Self-awareness relative to personal learning styles seemed important to the study participants.

Controlling challenges. While it is known that all college students encounter life and collegiate challenges, this study illuminates the type of challenges experienced by adult learners. Missing time with children and grandchildren, having a hard time remembering things, feeling “old,” next steps with career changes, or as one study participant stated, “readjusting to a student mindset.” Some of the findings related to challenges included the inability to focus after medical issues and making compromises and sacrifices that were necessary to ensure productive study time. SP4 shared that a collaborative effort among family members was necessary, and she established “healthy boundaries” (learning to say “No”) to carve space to complete school assignments. Financial challenges were shared by SP7 and SP15, which led to further discussion about intrinsic motivation, sacrifices, and family commitment.

Right now, my biggest challenge to get started was the financial part, and they've been flexible with me...School is stressful but once I get through, and I know that I can do well in the classes, I'll be reimbursed, and they'll pay for themselves. (SP7)

I might have to slow down just for financial reasons. I'm paying for this out-of-pocket. Well, my work reimburses part of it, but then the other part is out-of-pocket. And yesterday my furnace when out, so that was \$5,000 I could have used for something else. (SP15)

I found it uncomfortable to learn that one of the most confident among the study participants was physically assaulted and almost lost her life. She was able to make a firm decision to sever a toxic relationship that could have prevented her ability to pursue her academic journey. SP9 discovered that she could significantly reduce her struggle with writing

papers by utilizing an online grammar tool. SP15 indicated that he had a very challenging professor which led him to research how to study so that he could be successful in the class. Another story shared related to professors by SP16, posited that professors understand when adult learners have challenges and “they kind of take that into consideration with the courses.” It’s possible that many of the students have different relationships or encounters with professors that may be challenging at times. Managing those challenges may require individualized solutions.

Emerging themes from narratives that exposed personal challenges include time management, financial matters, support systems, spiritual engagement, and overcoming procrastination. The themes were addressed by study participants who found ways of overcoming their personal challenges. While all share different methods of managing their challenges, a few acknowledged that at some point along their educational journey, they felt overwhelmed, and needed some degree of support. The most valuable support came from family, academic advisors, and some of the professors. More extensive excerpts on the themes in this section of the study can be explored in Appendix D.

Findings Related to the Research Questions

While coding and analyzing the data from the transcripts and discussing themes (and sub-themes) with the debriefing team, the ability to synthesize some of the findings emerged and revealed links to the research questions. Two phases of interviews, and quality control methods, contributed to the trustworthiness of the data. Categorical codes and themes (and sub-themes) within the study are classified as personal/life experiences and collegiate/life experiences. Both types of experiences, as shared from two interview sessions, yield new insights related to the adult learner experience.

RQ1. In what ways, if any, are the distinctive needs and expectations of adult learners fulfilled through a baccalaureate level adult learner program?

Academic advisors. The role of advising is a significant subject throughout the study. The narratives shared by some of the study participants validate the importance of an advisor-student relationship and other administrative responsibilities required by the program. Ensuring that a student is on-track and not “wasting time taking classes you don’t need,” was articulated by SP7. The AE advisor for SP1 is considered “phenomenal” because “she’ll literally do whatever it takes.” SP17 stated, “in my opinion – one of the shining stars about the AE program is the advisors they have.” Some of the accolades for the academic advisors may indicate a form of professional “hand holding” within higher education. Unquestionably, many of the adult learners in this study appreciate this type of service.

It was the hybrid program that took care of all my registration. That was big for me because at the community college that I worked at or that I went to before, registration was a headache, trying to get all the classes in. This class was only offered in the spring, and it's only offered once a year, and all that stuff. This program, in particular, had a plan mapped out, over two years. So, you knew exactly what classes you were going to be in and when you would graduate and all that stuff. So that was big for me. (SP1)

The way that the courses are formatted in the adult learning program, is that when you go back, and you have your path of classes to take, your academic advisor is absolutely influential. I feel like when I was there, before, as a traditional student, I could never meet with my advisor. She just never had time. But now coming back as an adult learner, my advisor is just so into early registration, inputting classes actually in your cart that you have to register for, and just coming up with-- it's like a matrix or a plan that says, "These are the classes you'll take at this semester. If you can take four here, you should take four." They're just absolutely so influential. (SP4)

Support. Spouses, children, and parents are recognized as supportive family members for most of the study participants. SP8 stated that if she could not attend her child’s awards ceremony, her parents were there. SP16 shared how she and her teenagers do their homework together—which “inspires them to do well in school.” Self-criticism appeared to weigh upon

SP19 until his wife pointed out his accomplishments despite other priorities in his life. Study participants who have children not only acknowledged family support, but in some cases, shared how the family values education at all levels. Others who do not have children still have important people in their lives to lend support. None of the study participants indicated that they have job support challenges relative to flexible schedules, or back-up assistance if necessary.

That's the beauty about being in this program. Because the classes are one to two times a week and there's some online classes, it really helps me with my lifestyle. So, I know when my classes are, so I can arrange my job schedule and my children, who are much older, around that schedule. So, they know that one day a week, I'll be in class, so it's just really easier to navigate and handle schoolwork in that program. Time management is very important. (SP16)

My direct supervisor says, "Yes, do it. Yes, let's go. Let's get it. (SP8)

For some of the adult learners, the ability to focus on the AE program required the support of family members including parents, grandparents, the spouse, and the children.

My wife is a stay-at-home mom. She's just recently a stay-at-home mom, and she understands. She knows that it's to better her family and hopefully, I can make a little bit more money with the degree. Its long days for her too, with an infant for that long, so she's suffering through it. But it's like I said, hopefully, it'll pay for itself in the long run, and she knows that. And she's been awesome. (SP1)

I've gotten married and I have two other children now. So, all three of my children, and my husband have been so supportive the whole way, and my parents. Everyone just kind of pitched in to help out with giving the kids a ride or getting them where they needed to be, so I could really focus on school. (SP4)

I'm really blessed to have both my parents still here. I'm not married, I'm not currently in a relationship. So, it's me, my son, my mom, and my dad. We all live together, which makes life for me almost stress free. I don't have to worry about a sitter. (SP8)

I have a wonderful husband who thankfully is the one who does all the cooking anyway, so it's not like they're missing me in terms of mom making meals and things like that. He really just picks up the slack for me and I couldn't do it without him honestly. (SP12)

Each adult learner brings unique experiences to the university because family needs and expectations are different. In many ways, the narratives seem to represent "the family" more so

than the student when analyzing lived experiences—particularly if the student is the main supporter of the family and adjustments had to be made when they became adult learners. Family members are often beneficiaries of a supporting family member who completes college—as shared by a few study participants. Support from family and the job not only reflects the experiences, but also the expectations of adult learners. They understand and are committed to the academic requirements necessary to complete the program.

Professors. The findings indicate that there is an appreciation for professors who understand that adult learners lead full lives—according to SP13. Further, SP13 believes most professors like teaching adults because they “do better.” Another perspective shared by SP14 proclaims that one of the online professors worded instructions (via syllabus) for the adult learners in the same manner toward the professor’s “regular classes,” meaning traditional students. SP14 perceived this situation as telling adult students in the AE program, “You’re my side-gig.” A “bad” experience was shared by SP9 relative to an AE administrative worker who taught their first class in the AE program.

He is the best. I got him a thank-you card... (SP8)

...they’re just really into you as a person. (SP4)

He’s made it enjoyable and fun. (SP2)

She always gives feedback... making sure that everybody understands everything. (SP9)

They teach us, and they don’t look down on us. (SP13)

Being 50 years old and in the position I’m in, I’m outspoken. I always contribute to class and always give my opinion, but I always do it in a respectful way [laughter]. And a lot of the professors appreciate that. (SP15)

They're always willing to work with you if you have any problems. They understand that we're in a different position than a 19-year-old or a 20-year-old. We have families, and jobs, and lives. (SP13)

I enjoy professors who understand the fact that they're not teaching a traditional student class. That they understand that the people that are coming here and are sitting there for three hours in an evening, when they've already worked an eight to 10-hour day and probably have kids or family at home, that they're sacrificing time with them, they understand that that's a different circumstance. And they teach differently, they can appreciate what people are sacrificing to go to school. And so, they teach differently, they approach the classroom differently. They don't have to have super strict rules because it's not a room of teenagers. (SP17)

SP17 also expounded on why he wants his “money’s worth” from professors. He expects more and appreciates professors who provide “relatable” and “relevant” information in class.

SP18 stressed that professors are aware that adult learners work full-time... have kids and busy lives. The narratives imply that a professor’s demeanor towards an adult learner is just as important as their delivery method. The need for sense of care and respect are a part of the adult learner’s academic experience. The comparison of how professors engage with adult learners versus traditional learners is reflected in selective narratives. This seems to indicate that there is a desire for distinct approaches when teaching adults. Additional comments about professors can be read in Appendix D.

Adult education at GOMU. Former experience at a community college compared to the AE program is described as “polar opposites” according to SP1. His claim is related to administrative challenges more so than academic experience. A collective view from the study reveals that the academic advisors contribute to the high level of satisfaction in the AE program. From different perspectives, the findings are not as favorable if appointments are only available during the traditional student time schedule, or if there are not enough degree programs at night for an adult learner.

The diversity of instructors (SP15), eight-week accelerated classes, and a curriculum map that provides the path to completion of the program, are some of the elements that led to positive experiences within the AE program. SP12 opined that the program was reasonably priced, while

many others did not talk about the impact of tuition costs in detail. Professors who are involved in an adult learner's success, leadership courses (SP7), and the use of textbooks (SP8) were some of the unique academic related topics shared by the study participants.

SP17 shared his disappointment related to bookstore hours and his frustration with GOMU's approach to the AE program. He also shared concerns about the degree of "care of the AE program." Other statements related to how GOMU-AE meets the needs of adult learners include:

We get all those benefits that traditional students get, but we also get this added layer of professional respect and understanding that we are adults. We do have real-world work experience. So, it's really the best of both worlds... (SP4)

Teachers are more patient and understanding of the transition that's needed. So, yeah, I would promote adult learning by all means. (SP10)

...this degree program is laid out for you, and you know what you were going to take from semester to semester, rather than waiting until assignment time and having to fight three other students for the same class. You kind of know what's coming up ahead. And there's none of where they're just trying to throw you in any kind of class just because they're trying to get rid of you because... (SP18)

The perceptions of the adult learner program clearly indicate that the study participants have gained a sense of fulfillment in the program and would recommend it highly to prospective students. Much of their experience is influenced by advisors and faculty which brings to question the role of other administrators on campus. Although a few study participants shared experiences with other campus divisions, there was scarce information related to the impact, influence, or service of other divisions.

Campus life. At a university as large as GOMU, there are abundant opportunities to engage in campus life and special events. For adult learners, as revealed in the study, it is not convenient for most students to accept campus invitations. Some of the events are targeted for traditional students, such as the career fair that was mentioned by one of the study participants.

You're working, and all the classes are in the evening, but I don't know that a lot of things are of interest other than things like career fair. (SP13)

“If I was younger” or “I had the college buzz before...” are the sentiments shared by SP7 and SP10 related to engaging in campus activities as an adult learner. SP11 expressed interest in utilizing the gym on campus, and SP13 talked about her interest in attending *Business Week*, but the sessions were not scheduled during convenient times for adult learners. SP16 has resolved that transitioning from a traditional student to an adult learner is “just a different mindset” when considering invitations to campus events.

Campus life and the mindset of the adult learner are interrelated according the perspective of some of the study participants. The feelings of “the past” juxtaposed to the concerns of targeted audiences are different, yet legitimate claims. The findings from this study indicate that there is a need to re-examine campus life for adult learners. I surmise that career moves and leadership skills were primary areas of interest for most of the study participants.

Rewards. During the second phase of interviews (see Appendix D for detailed excerpts), discussions emerged about the rewards of investing in an adult learner program. This topic built upon the first phase of interviews where some of the study participants did not know initially what to expect when deciding to return to college, a few alluded to financial challenges and family-related sacrifices, and yet most have progressed with high expectations and rewards connected to their collegiate experiences and future life plans.

Knowing that once I complete my program, my job opportunities and salary will improve is very motivating. (SP7)

I think just the importance of education was reiterated, and that is definitely a reward. (SP9)

I see that in the future, what I feel has been dropped into my destiny, for my own purpose... it's just there's a lot of things lining up. (SP11)

The rewards of higher education are often related to increased salary potential, while the growing criticism is the cost of earning a college degree. I discovered from the study participants that their expected gains or rewards from their investment are also linked to an appreciation of becoming academically equipped to add value as greater contributors to society and providers for their respective families.

RQ2. What does an adult learner do to address the challenges of meeting degree requirements in a timely manner?

After analyzing meaningful categories from the data, and statements that were not coded, information unfolded in interrelated areas. Personal effective study methods and tools, use of class time, working with others, influences on study time, the “balancing act,” and spiritual guidance, emerged related to academic performance, challenges, and meeting degree requirements. Recognizing that each study participant has unique opinions about what works relative to meeting their needs, I appreciate the diverse perspectives for this qualitative study. As the researcher, I considered these topics to be some of the essential areas for achieving academic success despite all challenges encountered while pursuing a college degree within an accelerated adult learning program.

Academic performance. The fluctuation of grades, course repeats, and mental exhaustion are some of the experiences shared within the study. These are areas that impact academic performance. SP4 was pleased with her level of academic readiness because she did not have to take remedial courses. Most of the study participants did not have to take remedial courses—a few were placed in math or statistics, which gave them a challenge. It was necessary for SP11 to drop a class because he had a challenge with the material—not the instructor. Despite that particular situation, he shared that his performance is now at its highest level.

The ability to focus can also be related to the instructional method as shared by SP16:

I prefer in class face-to-face, although online is very convenient. However, if you are not focused and motivated and very organized, you can get left behind quite quickly. (SP16)

Good writing skills has worked well for SP12 because she believes that “a lot of this program is about writing.” SP14 understands that there are times when he can only put in 90% effort if he is exhausted or stressed out. Not overcoming challenges could mean repeating a class as expressed by SP10. This also represents self-motivation and a commitment to succeed at an accelerated pace.

A couple of classes I've had to take over. And the thing about it is, is that both classes that I had to take over I was interested in. (SP10)

Another way to impact academic performance and the ability to focus is through spiritual practices and relationships. While others shared less about their spiritual engagement as it relates to life as an adult learner, SP11 provided more personal insight:

But like I said, once I disciplined myself and get myself together, for me, my faith is praying, it takes a lot of fasting, talking through it to the Lord. But then there's being ministered to and getting the Word, which could be an outside source or someone to call or something like that. Just picking up the Bible and reading scripture. That makes all the difference. And then that helps boost me and focus my goals that I'm trying to achieve. (SP11)

College level reading can be a challenge for many students, particularly if it hasn't been done consistently for many years. Two statements about reading are:

I try to read material before my class. Reading material before a lecture is beneficial because it allows you to process information before it is presented to you for the first time. (SP7)

Talking into recorders, or just really writing more of the information so I can retain it as opposed to just reading it. But writing it down I think will probably help me a little better. (SP10)

Each unique perspective about academic performance reveals how adult learners are committed to do what it takes to maintain or improve grades and ultimately complete the AE

program. The level of support, the ability to focus, and the delivery of instruction are directly linked to the needs of the adult learners in this study. If there were any unmet needs (not many were shared in this study) related to academic performance, the assistance from advisors and professors was most likely the remedy for any challenges or concerns.

Curriculum mapping. Tracking academic progress is a critical tool for college students and their academic advisors. The AE program provides a curriculum mapping document (by major) to assist adult learners and it seems even more valuable for transfer students who need to know in advance about the articulation of transfer credits. It keeps them from taking unnecessary courses. Select study participants shared their experience with utilizing a curriculum map. SP18 describes it as a “light at the end of the tunnel.” The timeline presented to complete courses satisfies the journey toward completion. According to SP4, it’s a “great snapshot in time.” As revealed in the theme on academic advising, most study participants appreciated the personal attention given to them while planning their coursework with AE advisors. According to SP7, the curriculum map “gives you a little something to anticipate.”

Group projects. Within GOMU-AE’s accelerated programs such as organizational leadership or business administration, it is likely that group projects will be assigned to adult learners in various courses. The findings from a significant number of participants is that group projects “add to stress,” “can be problematic,” or “it’s hard because everybody has jobs.” Scheduling is an overarching issue, as expressed by SP8, SP12, and SP16. Social anxiety was mentioned by SP14—who shared that he was a “control freak” and yet, he also indicated that it was “enjoyable.” The camaraderie or bonding experience was described by some as “valuable” during group projects.

Multiple conversations emerged on the topic of group projects within an online learning environment. SP7 indicated that “it’s hard to communicate” and SP13 stated that it’s “harder to get people together” when engaged with online groups. SP11 was mindful of character types that impact the learning experience. He alluded to allowing others to go forward (taking the lead) if they were aggressive or assertive. The narratives related to group projects revealed how trust, control, schedules, and online classes contributes to the adult learning experience. Through the challenges of group projects, trust issues, and the desire to work alone, a few of the study participants indicated that overall it worked out—it just wasn’t their preference.

Balancing act. “How much is too much,” articulated by SP1, represents his sentiment about work, family, and study commitments. Adult learners find it necessary to mentally and physically carve out time and space to fulfill personal expectations and academic goals. While SP16 uses a planner to assist with time management, SP9 gets school work done “when no one’s around.” The sacrifice of missing events or working more than 40 hours a week while taking classes seemed to necessitate a great deal of work/life/school balance amongst most of the study participants.

That was just our routine because my husband travels for work and things like that. But it was a challenge, but we just kind of talked about it, and just kind of established some healthy boundaries surrounding my school time, and my own work time, and that was important, too. So, it was a challenge at first, but they quickly understood that it's important to me, and it became important to them as well. (SP4)

From the narratives, it seems that time management and the consideration of work and family obligations are at the center of an adult learner’s life, and an emerging theme from select participants reveals the importance of developing and maintaining a balancing act. This type of action could assist adult learners with meeting the requirements of their degree program and other competing interests aside from their academic journey.

Relevance to research questions. The research questions emerged from observed gaps in qualitative scholarly literature relative to adult learners who are seeking a bachelor's degree. The findings in this study inform and advance the discussion about adult learner needs and challenges from lived and collegiate experiences. Sense-making from interpretations for the study provide answers to the research questions (see Table 4.2). Carefully analyzed statements from multiple categories and themes reveal unique and detailed answers related to the study.

Table 4.2

Interpretation of Findings Related to the Research Questions

Research Question #1: In what ways, if any, are the distinctive needs and expectations of adult learners fulfilled through a baccalaureate level adult learner program?

RQ1 - Primary Themes	Distinctive Needs	Expectations
<i>Academic advisors</i>	Dedicated academic advising and registration	Greater degree of support, understanding, and respect for adult learners from the University
<i>Support Professors</i>	Family and job support (time and space)	Professors' instructional approach or style should be "relevant" for adult learners
<i>Adult Education Program at GOMU</i>	Professors and adjuncts who are able distinguish the differences between adult and traditional learners	Activities and services are designed to include adult learners (i.e. Book store, Financial Aid, Career Fairs)
<i>Campus Life Rewards</i>		Financial costs and impending rewards are worth the time and investment

Research Question #2: What does an adult learner do to address the challenges of meeting degree requirements in a timely manner?

RQ2 - Primary Themes	How adult learners address challenges
<i>Academic performance</i>	Utilize techniques and tools to assist with "focused" study methods (i.e. music, Grammarly, family study time)

<i>Curriculum mapping</i>	Utilize in-class time allowed for group projects
<i>Group projects</i>	Commitment to more reading time
<i>Balancing Act</i>	Utilize the curriculum map provided by the program advisors
	Establish healthy boundaries (life adjustments/decisions without guilt)
	Adjust work/career schedules
	Self-motivation to achieve success at an accelerated pace.
	Spiritual guidance/mentors

Exploration of Lived Experiences

At the core of decisions to return to college are influencers, supporters, relationships, and other personal factors that weigh on the minds of adult learners. The study participants were very transparent about how they were personally affected by deciding to re-invest in themselves to earn a bachelor's degree. Career adjustments, family and life expectations, fears, and serving as a role model are some of the narratives shared in this section. The interviews reveal that the desire to obtain a degree later in life is a tough decision that requires major life adjustments. This section reflects other categories and themes discovered through interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Career. The AE program does not offer a broad range of degree options for adult learners. The majority of the study participants selected Organizational Leadership as the best program for enhancing their career goals. Even though SP13 shared that her major doesn't relate to her current position, she wants to move away from the medical field. SP1 shared that he wanted an engineering degree, but "most adult programs don't have any engineering program," so he opted for leadership. Two of study participants indicated that the AE program would help

them in the field of human resources, while another shared that “coaching” to enrich the lives of others would be more suitable after completing the program. These narratives represent the options that adult learners seek to fulfill future goals.

Career options and leadership roles come forth as appropriate themes from this selection of narratives. New and enhanced career options are expressed as one of the motives for pursuing a bachelor’s degree with the goal of helping others. As implied by SP18, “You won’t be stuck working in one specific place.” This statement clarifies what a degree in organizational leadership can do for him.

Confidence level. According to SP1, successful course completion at the beginning of the program significantly increased his confidence level. SP15 attributes great feedback from each class constantly builds his confidence level. Co-workers have told him that his leadership skills are developing in a great manner. SP18 indicated that even though her math class was not good for her nerves—she recognized that it wasn’t her strongest study area—knowing what to expect and becoming familiar with writing papers contributed to the increase in her confidence level. Self-discovery and growing within a career are other narratives shared relative to building confidence.

The ability to take pride in academic accomplishments and having the support of program administrators and professors brings forth themes in this area relating to increased confidence, self-discovery, and leadership skills. In all probability, these narratives could demonstrate how confidence levels are linked to academic and career performance.

Conquering fear. Aside from being out of college for a long period of time, there were several descriptions of fear shared in the study. SP18 shared that finding out that she didn’t need to take remedial classes encouraged her to return to college. The initial thought of taking

remedial courses was one of the reasons that she delayed returning to college. Presentations and talking in big groups seems to be a fear factor for SP12, even though she disclosed that she is not an introvert. To be in the company of others like oneself (in the AE program) is what helped many study participants overcome fear.

A few of the study participants addressed their personal experiences with conquering fear. This is an obvious theme drawn from each narrative. They seemed aware that it is natural for an adult learner to be “scared” or afraid in a college setting; yet they also experienced the ability to overcome their fears in various ways. SP9 conveyed the love of arriving on campus and knowing that everyone in the AE building is there to learn. Commonality represents another way of conquering fear. All of the study participants displayed or shared their ability to progress in the AE program with confidence – based on determination, self-motivation, and support.

Expectations. The ability to apply what was learned is one of the expectations for SP13. She also attended a career fair on campus and unfortunately discovered that there seemed to be a preference to recruit traditional or younger students. She posited that “maybe they need a different career center or career person just for older people trying to get jobs.” Upon arrival to the AE program, SP1 wasn’t sure what to expect due to different experiences at a community college. SP8 and SP11 articulated that the AE program exceeded their expectations—for different reasons. As an African-American female, SP8 experienced a welcoming and non-isolating environment; whereas, SP11 appreciates the opportunity to attend class, do the work, and leave “without anything extra.” Good grades and earning a degree are other expectations that are more common among college students. Expectations vary among each participant, but the desire to excel is common. Knowing what those expectations are is a challenge for universities to uncover.

SP17 shared his disappointment about professors who haven't "given as much of themselves," as he expected. Overall, the expectations for himself and being more disciplined "... is considered a good thing." SP18 admitted to not having expectations going into the program, and then coming to the realization that the program was a better fit at this time of her life.

From not knowing what to think or experience to being satisfied with the adult learning process appears to represent a range of ideas about academic and personal expectations from the study participants. The narratives reflect how the experiences with advisors and professors have a significant role in ways that expectations are shaped for adult learners.

Influencers. Many types of influential people and situations impact the lives of college students. SP12 reached a point where she considered quitting school, and it was her husband who convinced her by saying, "No, I want you to get your degree." Friends, co-workers, and management demonstrated support for adults by influencing their decision to move forward on earning their degree. SP17 shared that his boss said that he was "topping out of his potential because he didn't have a degree." In addition to his wife's influence, his boss also had an influence on his decision to go back to college. SP18 had a desire to be in a leadership role, and she observed the differences between good and bad leadership.

Parents and grandparents were mentioned by SP8, SP9, SP11, and SP14 as influential people in their lives who supported their decision to pursue a bachelor's degree. These are men and women between the ages of 27 and 42 who still value the support and influence of their parents and grandparents. SP2 emphasized how she was influenced by her daughters, friends, and co-workers who have been very encouraging. Professors and advisors are among the influencers who feed the adult learners' desire to succeed.

Most prevalent throughout the narratives shared above is the importance of positive influence from family and non-family members. The study participants experienced encouragement and motivation to persist despite the balancing roles they adhere to each day of their lives. I did not discover any level of external discouragement or negative influences from the participants in this study.

Needs—Met and Unmet. AE at GOMU promotes an accelerated adult-centered program with personalized degree options. During the first interview phase, the discussion about met and unmet needs surfaced among several of the participants. Some shared that their needs were met through good class experiences and a variety of approaches to learning. The personal attention from advisors also contributed to needs being met within the program.

For SP7 and SP13, there were comments about the need for better technology in the computer lab, and the need for someone who specializes in career opportunities for older adults. SP14 stated that he would consider initiating a petition if the adult learning students were required to take more online classes. From his perspective, online classes are not meeting his expectations. He favors the “camaraderie” of a traditional classroom setting.

The importance of keeping students engaged was expressed by SP9. This is also important to SP2 because she has been diagnosed with having attention-deficit disorder (ADD), which means distractions could present problems. These issues among others can determine whether adult learners’ needs are met or unmet. I surmise that this theme represents both personal and academic experiences and perspectives. Unmet needs impact academic performance, persistence, retention and graduation rates. These are issues that an adult learner and institutions of higher learning do not want to encounter.

Relationships—Peer. Within the higher education learning environment, various types of relationships will likely develop among students and their professors. The study participants who spoke about relationships within the AE program elaborated on the impact of listening and engaging with others. SP2 admitted to the preference of working on her own, and SP18 noted the difference on how students get to know one another in traditional class settings versus online classes. Conversations about peer relationships reflected a positive experience for most of the adult learners. SP15 appreciated the fact that there is some degree of commonality across the age range in the program. Another perspective relative to age range was shared:

We had a couple of people who are younger than 30 in my class, and it's—I mean, it's interesting listening to their point of view. They are still in a similar situation even though we're far apart in age... (SP15)

There were some exceptions relative to group projects or assignments, which shifts to the subject of trust in my analysis. In group projects, there is more tolerance over acceptance, which has an impact on developing peer relationships. This could represent a lack of mutual trust based on earning grades as a group or the inability to recognize learning styles among peers prior to the project—particularly in an accelerated program because there is less time to develop relationships. Despite trust issues or diverse perceptions about group projects, most of the study participants acknowledged the value of peer relationships.

Relationships—Professor. The findings indicate that there is an appreciation for professors who understand that adult learners lead full lives. SP15 said that he had established a good relationship with all of his professors. Whether quiet or outspoken, the study participants seemed to find value in professor-student relationships. Here is another assessment about professors shared by a study participant:

I would say that the relationships and the professors are phenomenal. The one main thing I loved about the AE program is that every single professor I had was different, in a good

way, but they all had the same bottom line principles. I loved the fact that they were all so different. One would be funny and maybe not as organized, but then one is very young but very organized. But I felt like it was a lot of not telling me what I should think or feel, and I really got a lot of that when I was back prior. (SP9)

Ethics and integrity among student-professor relationships are extremely important in education.

None of the study participants alluded to lack of integrity even though there were various opinions about the relationship—or lack thereof—with their respective professors. More individual narratives about relationships can be found in Appendix D.

Transformational experiences. According to SP18, life experiences led to a greater level of academic preparedness that wasn't there when she was 18 years of age. The AE program has elevated the understanding of leadership roles for SP16. SP1 and SP4 expounded on how they've learned to deal with people from a diversity perspective. Growth and development from classes in the AE program have transformed personal and professional experiences for most of the adult learners.

Prominent themes from this collection of narratives is transformation and application. The study participants have already begun to recognize and utilize what they've learned from select courses in the program. By the time they graduate, there is greater potential for more transformational experiences. Some of the study participants expounded upon how they intend to positively impact the lives of others—aside from their current and future career path.

Exploration of Academic Program Experiences

The collection of narratives about the AE program elicited more positive than negative responses. There was only one reference to “disappointments” with the University related to care about the AE program. Experiences, advice, and opinions about the adult learner program exposed how respect for adults, serving needs, and insights on opportunities for improvement affect majority of the study participants. While some of the responses demonstrated a sense of

appreciative hand-holding—meaning that doing everything (administratively) for them adds value to their experience—I surmise that some of the shared experiences in this section related to online classes or other instructional methods, math and statistics, or determining if an adult can adjust to studying on a traditional campus are factors that can impact persistence, retention, academic performance, and graduation rates for adult learners. Additional comments from the study participants can be found in Appendix D. The same factors could also have an impact on the sustainability of higher education programs that seek to attract adult learners.

Multiple categories within the study emerged from the narrative stories about the adult learning program. It's a broad topic with integrated elements that deeply contributed to the experience of adult learners. Study participants spoke extensively about their experience with academic advisors, repeating classes, experiences with online learning and group projects, as well as thoughts about professors and traditional students. Although majority of the study participants are pursuing a bachelor's degree in organizational leadership, Statistics was the course several students mentioned relative to challenges and instructional efforts to help them succeed.

Instructional preference. The AE program markets the opportunity to take hybrid and online classes. In addition to various types of instruction, study participants elaborated on delivery methods such as lecturing, web-based communication, and other types of professor-driven online experiences.

I think there have been a couple instructors that are really good at lecturing and bring a little bit more out in the curriculum. Some of the classes I feel like I could've taken online, and I would've gotten the same amount out of. But there have been a couple classes where I thought that I got a little bit out of the actual lecture part of it, just because they elaborated on some things that confused me. (SP1)

SP8 and SP13 stated their preference for in-class, face-to-face delivery methods, while SP12 felt that online classes are much easier. SP10 shared that he needs to be around people. Getting “left behind” was a concern for SP16. Clearly, the findings favor human interaction relative to instructional preference.

Math and statistics. Interview conversations analyzed about being prepared to return to college and courses that challenged the student led to a significant emphasis on math and statistics. Most of the study participants were not placed in remedial classes. Some had to take college level math or statistics. SP18 shared her preference for a 16-week statistics class because she processes math at a slower pace than other students. SP1, SP4, and SP12 acknowledged that math was not one of their strong subject areas. The statistics class was necessary for learning to conduct research. While a few students liked research, they did experience challenges in the statistics course.

SP7 dealt with challenges in math classes at a younger age, but now enjoys math classes. Adult learners who return to college after many years may find math or English as two of the most challenging general education courses. There is also the question posed by SP13—“who does algebra in their life?” This may only be answered through self-engagement and discovery.

Online classes. The online class delivery method is a growing option for students. Study participants in the AE program at GOMU were not overwhelmingly in favor of online classes. The convenience was acknowledged; yet, there was also the admittance of “anxiety” from SP8. Statements about online classes include:

I was kind of nervous. (SP1)

Online classes can be just as tough. (SP7)

It’s not as personable. (SP10)

It's just not my favorite. (SP15)

Despite some of the opposition about online classes, a professor could make the difference. There were some study participants who appreciated the convenience of online classes relative to time flexibility; however, instructional styles brought forth different opinions. SP9 stated that one of her professors “did so many things to make it wonderful.” From my observation, the online class discussions brought forth emotions of comfort and discomfort. Unquestionably, an adult’s level of comfort is a major component of the academic experience in a uniquely designed adult learning program.

Traditional students. Feeling like an “old guy” among traditional students is an experience shared by SP1. From his perspective, the adult learners in AE classes are there to “further their career.” The life experiences of a traditional student are generationally different from adult students—some topics or matters are relatable, while others may not seem relatable. SP10 conveyed that even within the AE program (which has a wide age range over 24), taking a class with someone 30 years younger is different to him. SP15 felt that going to school as an adult learner with others who have the same viewpoint “cuts down on a lot of nonsense.” SP12 mentioned campus email and activities that are “geared toward traditional students” and not the grandmothers, or grandfathers with kids and jobs.

The narratives that reflect sentiments about adult learners and traditional age students does not imply overall opposition to sharing learning space, but it does represent a need to be in an environment with like-minded people who represent most of the class.

Making meaning of the adult learner experience. Near the end of the conversation during the first interview most of the study participants shared how they make meaning of their collegiate experience as an adult learner. The life events, experiences, relationships, and

comments shared revealed a deeper sense of meaning about the program and their journey through higher education. Excerpts by two of the participants are:

I feel like the experience makes meaning for itself, just the knowledge that I've been able to access. And what's amazing about this program is it talks a lot about transformational leaders and transformation in general. And it's really transformed me. It's taught me so much, not only about dealing with other people, but things about myself, like prejudices that I may have carried or developed over time to be able to realize that. (SP4)

It's very fulfilling to be able to understand everything that organizational leadership involves, and being able, again, to help other people. And more intelligently, work through things in certain organizations. (SP7)

Increasing levels of confidence, higher expectations, and broadening their cultural and worldview are just a few areas acknowledged that can potentially contribute to their ability to affect change for themselves, family, and society at large.

Identification of Categories and Themes

Through the selection of key words and phrases from the interviews, a thorough analysis of each transcript developed into a code list of emerging categories and themes listed in Table 4.3. Maintaining a code list (Saldaña, 2016) helps organize categories and subcategories because codes accumulate quickly—especially when there are multiple participant interviews and transcripts that are coded individually. The list includes the primary themes that are also linked to the research questions as shown in Table 4.2. The number of sources indicates how many study participants shared information in each of the categories.

Table 4.3

Code List of Categories and Themes From the Interviews

Category Themes	# of Study Participants	Category Themes	# of Study Participants
Decision to return to college Themes:	14	Exploration of lived experiences Themes:	14
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conscience-driven decisions • Ability to advance in careers • Self-growth and discovery • Sense of guilt 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balancing act • Career and leadership • Confidence and skill self-discovery • Conquering fear • Expectations • Support • Influencers • Needs—Met and Unmet • Relationships—Peer • Relationships—Professor • Transformational experiences 	
Owning personal experiences Themes:	8	Exploration of academic program experiences Themes:	15
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ownership 			

- Self-motivation
- Adult education at GOMU
- Academic advisors
- Academic performance
- Campus life
 - Adult mindset
- Curriculum mapping
- Group projects
- Instructional preference
- Math and statistics
- Professors
- Traditional students
- Making Meaning of the Adult Learner's Experience

Learning awareness and strategies 2

Themes:

- Environmental fit
- Peer influence
- Sense of belonging
- Learning awareness

Controlling Challenges 12

Themes:

- Time management
- Financial matters
- Support systems
- Spiritual engagement
- Overcoming procrastination

Second Phase Interview 6
Categories:

- Professors' Instructional styles
- Confidence and overcoming intimidation
- Envisioning the rewards of investing in an adult learning program
- Shaping expectations for the next chapter of life

Insights from Second Phase Interviews

The acceptance of the invitation to further engage on topics that contribute to sense-making about the adult learners lived, and collegiate experiences was an opportunity to build upon (or engage at a deeper level) the data collected from the first phase of interviews. Six study participants shared their perspective on the impact of instructional styles, how they built confidence and circumvented any degree of intimidation. They also shared personal thoughts about shaping new expectations and envisioning the rewards of investing in an adult learning program. The intent of the second interview was to explore four topics (see excerpts in Appendix

D) at a deeper level with select study participants. The knowledge gained on the four topics during the first interview were surface in content yet intriguing enough to further explore with select participants who could build upon their contributions from the first interview. While not all invited participants elected to participate, those that accepted shared meaningful experiences worth adding and analyzing for the study. The findings reveal that some of the contributions are similar to the first interview. Other personal insights garner more specific details which revealed the passion and commitment about the student participant's respective journey to complete the degree program. The second interview drew upon important details and more personal perspectives about the adult learner experience and future expectations. I opine that the second interview goal was achieved according to each participant's contribution and degree of comfort on the topics.

The identification of emerging code phrases and distinct perspectives from the first phase of interviews led to four areas that I considered worthy of discussion through the interview process. Six out of eleven (11) study participant invitations were accepted to discuss:

- Professors' Instructional styles
- Confidence and overcoming intimidation
- Envisioning the rewards of investing in an adult learning program
- Shaping expectations for the next chapter of life

The inclination to explore deeper in these areas was to re-engage participants about meaning-making experiences for adult learners based upon context from the first interview. Analyzing and revealing the outcomes from this phase of interviews strategically magnifies the phenomena of the study about the adult learner's experience in a uniquely designed program.

Professors' instructional style. The expansion of discussions about professors and their instructional styles stems from the first phase of interviews. Study participants shared opinions and experiences about the professors in the AE program. The second interview analysis drew upon experiences of support, deeper engagement, patience, differences, and even balance, and relevance. These are some of the key elements of instructional style shared by six study participants. Adult learners—as found in this study—are captivated by good instruction, and professors have the opportunity to shape and develop these experiences through their own unique style of teaching. As noted by SP7, the instructional style can be “motivating or demotivating” based on perception and outlook.

Giving adult learners' class time to work on group projects—as shared by SP8—can help meet the needs of students with busy and complex life experiences. SP10 complimented an “amazing” professor who encouraged him to read before class time—something he considered a major accomplishment. This is seemingly a personal shortcoming that he was able to conquer through the teaching style and influence of a professor. The differences between full-time and part-time faculty resurfaced. SP11 articulated that part-time faculty were more lenient than full-time faculty. SP17 enjoys professors who “teach adults” and not “traditional students” in an AE class. Adult learners develop expectations about their professors, and the stories revealed within the study reflect that most of the study participants' needs are being met within in the program.

Confidence and overcoming intimidation. Arriving early to class and talking to people is how SP9 overcame intimidation during the early stage of returning to college. Easing fears with fellow cohort members was professed as a good approach to confidence building. SP7 and SP11 shared similar sentiments about observing, asking questions, and talking to other students.

Location was a key factor for SP17. He expressed how taking classes with other adult learners in a building dedicated to the AE program kept him from feeling “out of place.” SP8, who presented herself as one of the most confident among the study participants, indicated that she made up her mind about what she was to do in the AE program, and resolved that she would not be intimidated.

The findings expose how the ability to build confidence and overcome intimidation can come from associating with others willing to help, holding oneself accountable for getting the work done, and making time to stay focused.

Envisioning the rewards of investing in an adult learning program. The goal of earning a bachelor’s degree is a palpable reward. The study participants shared other benefits that represents their value of higher education. Some of the findings reveal what they believe will manifest as rewards from the AE program. SP10 indicated that he was not interested in participating in the graduation ceremony, but one of the rewards for him was to do it for his children and family, and to “be an example to others that it can be done.” Other shared thoughts on rewards include:

...looking forward to what that has to yield. (SP11)

...I realized that with certification, with that degree, nobody’s going to be able to tell me no. (SP8)

One of the rewards would be to help me think outside the box... (SP9)

And you can’t really fully lead unless you close some of the gaps of knowledge. And so, that is really what this journey has been about. (SP17)

The rewards spoken about from the interviews are very personal and self-gratifying reflections because the study participants are experienced leaders and professional workers seeking an

undergraduate degree to help catapult them to the next chapter of their lives. More importantly, they are investing in themselves for the betterment of others—known and unknown.

Shaping expectations for the next chapter of life. Becoming a better communicator and learning the importance of differences was conveyed by SP9, who is a stay-at-home mom, desiring a flexible work schedule when she re-enters the workforce. AE courses that included “adapting to change” were valuable to SP10 because he wants to help others with “change issues.” Although SP11 is uncertain about what the next chapter of life looks like, he believes that the AE program gives “proper direction.” Progressing up the corporate ladder is a “driving force” for SP17, who is pursuing a business degree. Shaping expectations could mean exploring entrepreneurship for SP8, recognizing that “responsibilities increase.”

The study participants seem to realize that they will have more career options after completing the AE program to help meet their needs and the needs of others. The findings from the first phase of interviews indicated that several study participants did not know what to expect at the beginning of the AE program. As many of them get closer to completion, the thought of new expectations has begun to develop with more focus on the outcomes of their respective journeys in life.

The context of the first round of interviews with each study participant provided information about all of their respective personal lived experiences. Through intense analysis of the first phase, the opportunity to explore deeper through the second phase of interviews prompted the desire for another exchange with select participants. The second interview process sought to gain more depth on select topics from each study participant. As shared earlier, some of the outcomes of the conversation were like the first interview; yet, there were experiences and thoughts shared on the topics of intimidation and shaping expectations that yielded more depth.

Final insights on the second phase interviews. Overcoming intimidation can elevate confidence levels and build relationships. A few of the study participants shared extensively, and with more depth, how they connected with one another to assist with personal weaknesses or share common concerns. This revelation is different from the first phase of interviews which revealed how group projects were not a popular relationship-builder due to academic trust issues. This also reveals how there are various reasons for developing peer relationships when necessary – or to assist with overcoming intimidation. Shaping expectations led to extended conversations about life beyond the AE program and how some of the participants plan to engage in leadership roles or become more engaged in entrepreneurial endeavors. There was more clarity and a sense of personal higher expectations which they attributed to some of the classes and learning outcomes from the AE program.

The Optimum Experience

Most of the study participants expressed a sense of gratitude for the service and instructional methods provided by AE at GOMU. I have visualized—through the development of a Venn diagram—the interpretation of their experiences (see Figure 4.1) as *The Optimum Adult Learner Experience* which means that overall, the adult learning program exceeded expectations and met the needs of the students who participated in this study and they are self-motivated to achieve their goals with greater expectation—while in the program and after graduation.

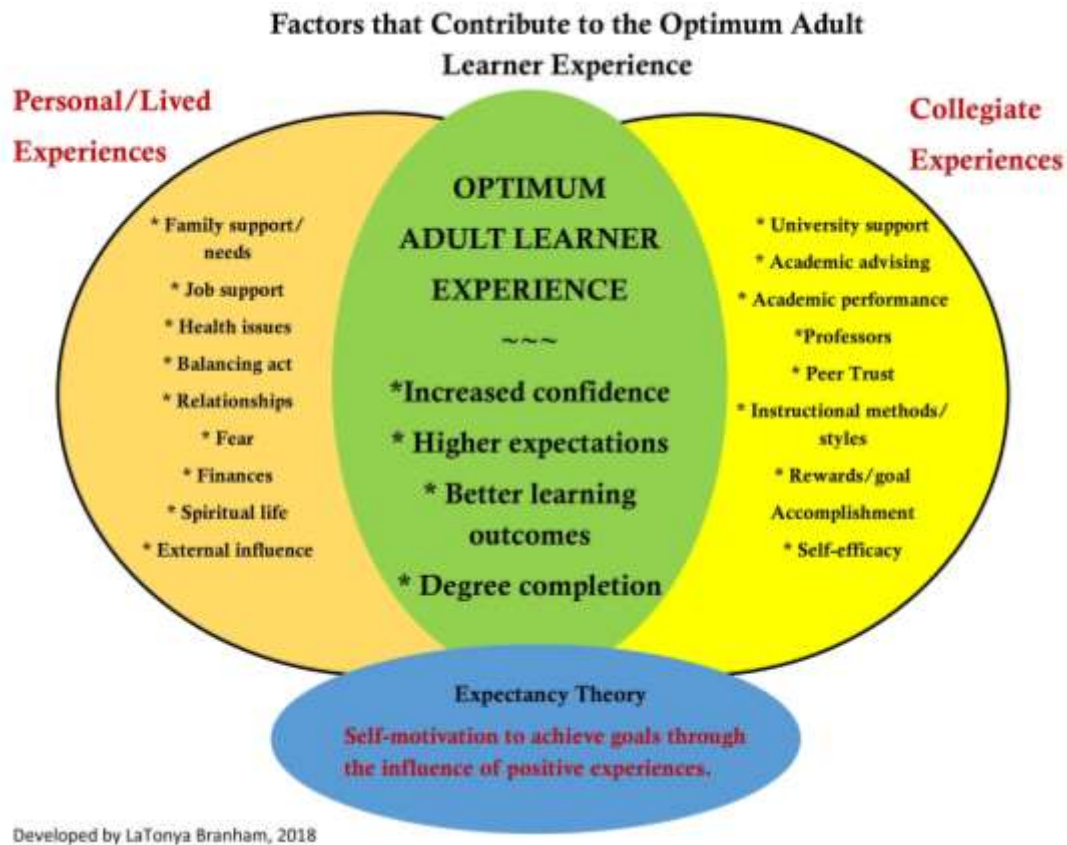
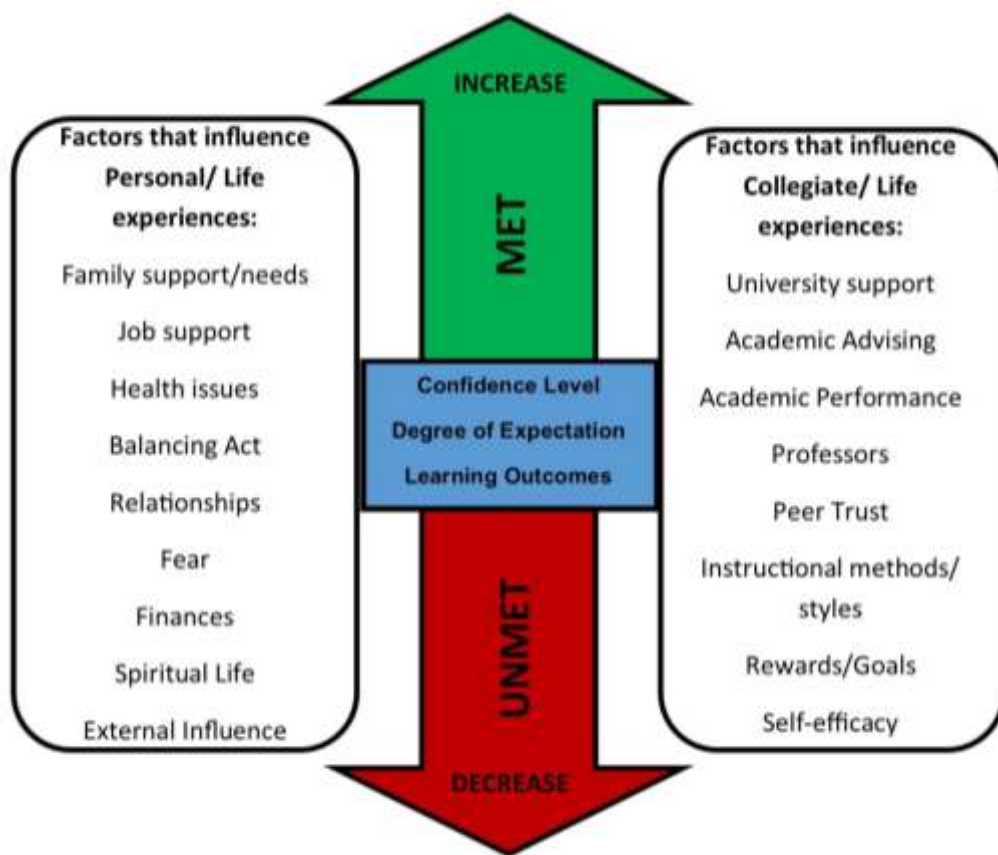


Figure 4.1. The Optimum Adult Learner Experience

The impact of met and unmet needs. Through further analysis of factors that could contribute to The Optimum Adult Learner Experience as shared in Figure 4.1, a new model emerged to reveal how met and unmet adult learner needs impact confidence levels, their degree of expectation, and learning outcomes. In Figure 4.2, *The Impact of Met and Unmet Needs for Adult Learners* exposes factors in both personal/life and collegiate/life experiences that have a significant influence on adult learners.



Developed by LaTonya Branham, 2018

Figure 4.2. The Impact of Met and Unmet Needs for Adult Learners

The factors were derived from the reflection on all interviews, observations at the host site during meetings with the administrators, recruiting, and the coding and analysis of data from the study. A thorough exploration and explanation of the phenomena within the study exposes lived experiences that led to the design of a model that expounds on the impact of met and unmet needs. More detail about what each factor represents includes:

Personal/Life Experiences (*Adult experiences often taken with them into their collegiate experience*)

Family support/needs—Adult learners may need to attend to spouse/partner, children, or parent needs while working and attending college. Support of family is

important for filling the gap when necessary and to establish the understanding of the commitment required to complete a degree program. Family support can influence higher education decisions.

Job support—Adult learners may return to college for career advancement reasons or they may seek tuition assistance from employers. Some tuition remission or reimbursement programs have academic performance, work schedule, and timeline to completion requirements. Management and co-worker support can influence adult learner decisions about returning to college.

Health issues—Personal challenges with health (i.e., ADHD, lupus, unexpected surgery, or a family member with Alzheimer’s disease) could cause attendance or attention (ability to focus) problems that impact study time.

Balancing act—Commitment to family, jobs, organizations, projects, or school that impact personal schedules can also impact decisions to attend college or learning outcomes while in college.

Relationships—Existing relationships that require time and commitment, or the lack of a desire to build new relationships within higher education may have an impact (or influence) on academic performance and other life decisions.

Fear—Fear has an impact on confidence or determining whether the time is right to re-enter college. Pondering on whether one would fit in a special or unique program for adults in a specific environment. The ability to find a degree of comfort while comparing oneself to others. Fear can lead to intimidation or cause a student to withdraw from college.

Finances—Examining options to finance higher education can be stressful. The decision to invest in obtaining a college degree may come with or without support which impacts life experiences. Financial support can relieve personal stress and future decisions to persist and graduate.

Spiritual life—Support beyond family, friends, and other associates may often manifest within a spiritual relationship that helps one overcome challenges. Spiritual mentors or leaders, and activities (religion-based) can have a significant impact on personal and collegiate decisions. Some students find it necessary to exercise their faith (and/or prayer) to carry them through their academic and life journey.

External influences—People and situations in life that have both positive and negative impact are oftentimes considered key influencers relative to decisions, actions, and whether needs are met throughout the journey of life.

Collegiate/life experiences (*College/University can influence these areas*)

University support—Exercising the ability to assist a diverse body of students and being available to them in a timely manner. This involves the entire campus community (administrators, faculty, staff, and the Board of Trustees).

Academic advising—Planning and assisting students with managing and completing academic responsibilities and requirements for graduation. The ability to help students navigate the higher education system is a major task. The lack of professional or faculty advising could unnecessarily prolong the academic experience.

Academic performance—Concerns about passing or failing classes impacts learning outcomes, GPAs, persistence, retention, and graduation rates.

Professors—Various types of professors (fulltime, tenured, term, visiting professors, and adjuncts) may or may not establish an engaging academic relationship with a student, or meet with students beyond class time. Professors are considered some of the most important people that a student will encounter (and perhaps depend upon) throughout their academic journey.

Peer trust—The reliance upon other students in a class or cohort can be met with resistance due to performance expectations that impact grades or learning outcomes. There are students who embrace the opportunity to build new relationships with peers for academic reasons, and others who find no reason to engage with or depend upon other students.

Instructional methods/styles—The variety of instructional methods (i.e. traditional face-to-face, online, or hybrid settings) and styles (i.e. full lecture, project-based, class discussion, or self-directed) have an impact on learning outcomes. The execution of effective methods and styles are important for shaping the adult learning experience.

Rewards/goals—Rewards represent the benefits and value of higher education. Rewards are expected to yield greater results and catapult the next chapter of life. This factor also has an impact on income, careers, and meaningful contributions to society. Personal and professional goals are established based upon the ability to utilize the knowledge, skills (i.e. leadership potential), and other learning outcomes from the academic experience.

Self-efficacy—The motivation to learn and to believe in oneself based on past and current experiences can positively impact academic performance and confidence. Self-

efficacy shapes behavior and the ability to persist. The learning environment and academic experience has influence on self-efficacy.

All factors from The Impact of Met and Unmet Needs model—derived from themes in the study—can influence the adult learning experience which includes the increase or decrease of confidence levels, degree of expectation, and learning outcomes. The goal is to create an optimum adult learning experience by recognizing the needs of students and to add value to their experience through an alignment of policies and practices that met the needs of adult learners.

Summary of the Research Findings

A diverse group of fifteen adult learners enrolled in an Adult Education program at a public university (as displayed in the demographic chart) consented to lifting their voices for this qualitative study. The data and findings from the study shared in Chapter IV contribute to a meaningful interpretative phenomenological analysis of both personal/lived and collegiate experiences. In addition to the study participant's decisions for returning to college, learning strategies, and personal challenges, it is also revealed in Chapter IV how the findings are related to two specific research questions—which address the areas of distinct needs, expectations, and how study participants meet degree requirements in a timely manner.

A code list of emerging categories, themes, and sub-themes are shared to reflect the analysis and sense-making of rich, trustworthy narratives from two phases of interviews, member-checking, and debriefing. Outcomes from the first phase of interviews (15) and the second phase (6) expound upon multiple influential factors that has shaped their experiences. The exploration of each lived and collegiate experience led to the development of a Venn diagram which illustrates critical components for creating an optimum adult learner experience, and a model projecting the impact of met and unmet needs for adult learners. As stated by study

participant 17, “I’m an immediate alum, why wouldn’t you want to make my experience the best possible?” Further discussion on the findings and recommendations are shared in Chapter V.

Chapter V: Interpretation of the Findings Discussion

Our lives are full, and they understand that. (SP13)

Overview

This study sought to interpret and make meaning of the lived and collegiate experiences of adult learners pursuing a bachelor's degree. This final chapter includes the re-introduction to two research questions, discussion and summary of the findings, the relationship to adult learning theory, an examination of the study's limitations, and the implications and recommendations for future practice and research. Personal reflections about the study are shared at the conclusion of this chapter.

The outcomes from the study unveil how the interpretative phenomenological qualitative design selected for the study discovers and uncovers an unknown phenomenon that not only connects to the research questions, but also illuminates the unique needs of degree seeking adult learners. Each unique life and collegiate experience that helped the study participant make meaning adds scholarly value to the study of adult learners.

The essence of the study includes 15 first phase interviews and six second phase interviews that elicited personal lived and collegiate experiences from students over the age of 24 who are enrolled in an AE degree program at GOMU. Demographic diversity was achieved through volunteer recruiting efforts supported by the host institution. Genuine contributions to the study provided significant insight and revelations about adults in college—taking classes at an accelerated pace—and the faculty and administrators who serve them. Each category (including sub-categories) gleaned from the spoken narratives—such as advising, ability to focus, confidence levels, challenges, influencers, instructional styles, and expectations—build upon theories and scholarly research related to adult learners.

Phenomenological Bracketing

As the researcher of this study, attending undergraduate level college as an adult learner, and serving as a university administrator, I elected to use phenomenological bracketing. This ensured that my personal beliefs and experiences in higher education would minimize disabling bias while conducting research and analyzing the data. If a familiar adult learning experience surfaced during the interviews, such as challenges with transportation, conquering statistics, or finances, I would acknowledge the experience without overshadowing the discussion with my personal reflections. In that respect, the momentum of the study participant's explanation of their lived experience was not broken by the interviewer.

The decision to utilize interpretive phenomenological data analysis as the chosen method to make meaning of the lived experiences of the adult learners (participants) brought forth a deeper level of insight through scholarly research. The narratives also further broadened my vision of what factors contribute most to an optimum adult learning experience from the study participant's personal perspective and expectations about an effective adult education program.

Summary of the Findings

The primary themes related to the first research question include: Academic advisors, support, professors, AE program at GOMU, campus life, and rewards.

Research Questions

RQ1. In what ways, if any, are the distinctive needs and expectations of adult learners fulfilled through a baccalaureate level adult learner program?

The distinctive needs and expectations fulfilled include:

- Dedicated academic advising and registration for adult learners
- Family and job support—allowing more time and space for study

- Professors' and adjuncts' ability to distinguish between adult and traditional age learners
- Greater degree of support, understanding, and respect for adult learners from University administrators and staff
- Activities and services promoted to the adult learning community

The primary themes related to the second research question include: Academic performance, curriculum mapping, group projects, and balancing act.

RQ2. What does an adult learner do to address the challenges of meeting degree requirements in a timely manner?

Challenges are addressed by:

- Utilizing tactics, techniques, or tools to assist with more focused study methods (i.e. music videos, Grammarly, family/group study time)
- Utilizing in-class time allow for more productive group projects.
- Making a commitment to more reading time
- Utilizing the curriculum map shared and explained by the program advisors
- Establishing healthy boundaries (particularly for external influences that impact study time)
- Adjusting work/career/family schedules
- Building self-motivation to achieve success at an accelerated pace
- Seeking spiritual guidance and mentors

This study also validates the assertion that adults can learn best when their previous experience is valued and utilized (Ozuah, 2005) during lectures and project assignments. The notion of making the course “relevant” or having the ability to become the topic expert—as shared by two study participants—contributes to the optimum adult learning experience within the AE program.

The research study consisted of conducting 15 interviews and six second phase interviews with volunteer participants seeking a bachelor's degree in the AE program at GOMU. Audio recordings, notes, institutional data, updating the participant research tracking chart, and transcription of the interviews were a part of the initial steps of interpretative phenomenological analysis. The flow of open-ended conversations and probing questions collectively produced 45 categories and themes from the first phase of interviews, and six (6) categories from the second phase of interviews. Quality control methods utilized for the study included member-checking and peer debriefing. As expressed in the consent letter and re-introduced at the conclusion of the interviews, all study participants were extended the opportunity to read their respective transcript and request changes or correction. All requests were honored. To increase the degree of trustworthiness in the study, two higher education professionals and members from Antioch University's Leadership and Change program were invited and served as peer debriefers. They reviewed coded data, submitted feedback, and met with me to discuss the analysis of data. Their inquiries and input were insightful and valuable to the study.

Phenomenology is a valid methodological tool to explore lived experiences. I concur with Roberts (2010) that quality research embraces the meanings that people attach to their world and is open to emerging revelations. Because I introduced myself to each participant, in person, during the recruiting phase, participants were able to identify as someone very much like them. While all study participants shared information about their influencers, academic and personal challenges, and their respective opinions about the Adult Education program, the majority expect to advance in their career after earning a bachelor's degree. Most intriguing were the discussions about their confidence level, being treated like adults, and how they make meaning of their

experience as adult learners. Engaging in purposeful conversations about each of their lived and collegiate experiences contributed to the essence of the study.

First phase interviews. After discovering what led each study participant to the AE program, both personal/life and collegiate experiences were shared. Their personal stories are related to family, job support, confidence, financial decisions, influential factors, health and medical issues, and their educational endeavors at a traditional age prior to their decision to return to higher education. Serving as the interviewer—without a list of pre-questions—I took the opportunity to further engage interviewees by asking probing questions that were related to their respective narrative.

Scholarly research shared in the literature review for this study reveals that self-efficacy (Allen & Wergin, 2009; Phipps et al., 2013) is linked to confidence and successful learning outcomes in higher education. One of the study participants shared her experience with ADD. Although she did not disclose her mental health condition to receive special treatment with an instructor, she was able to successfully complete the class. The study participant shared that her needs were met because the instructor acknowledged the existence of distractions in class and the student was not singled-out. She was able to find the most effective method to stay focused in the class.

The thought of returning to college later in life was revealed by a few study participants as being intimidating or it brought on the assumption that the adult learner is “too old” to pursue a bachelor’s degree. However, self-motivation and external influence made a significant impact on overcoming intimidation.

Narratives shared about successfully completing challenging classes and “favorite” professors indicate that engaged learning has occurred. Despite the preference for various

instructional methods and the number of weeks to deliver the course, flexible options can reduce institutional barriers for adult learners.

Other factors shared in this study that can be attributed to institutional barriers (Osam et al., 2017) include comments about book store hours, and the career fair that is seemingly designed for traditional students. Most of the study participants indicated that campus life and activities is not a priority for them. This presents another area that adult program administrators can evaluate before extending invitations to students who are not included in the design of the event.

Although one study participant indicated that personal finances and family illness could cause a decision to withdraw from the program, the remaining study participants are persisting without interruption. This brings to question as to whether institutions offer options (financial, course methods, or stop-out commitments) to assist students when there are circumstances beyond their control (i.e., family illness) that could cause them to leave the program. Retention strategies that are more robust and inclusive of adult learner concerns are likely to reduce the withdrawal rate. Two recommendations that could assist with adult learner retention include: (1) a special needs-based grant or scholarship fund (Grabowski, Rush, Ragen, Fayard, & Watkins-Lewis, 2016) for adult learners, and (2) offering independent study courses for at least one term to help provide a short-term remedy for unforeseen circumstances that would cause a student to withdraw from the program. This type of approach could have a positive impact on persistence and retention.

A relevant discovery from the first phase of interviews is that most of the participants acknowledged the key investors (supporters) in their adult learning experience:

- Academic advisors who handled “everything.”

- Professors who “respected” the students as adults, and “wanted them to succeed.”
- Family members who supported them and “filled the gap” when the parent was studying.

One student expressed the opinion that the University was not as invested in the Adult Education program as it could be. While this study indicates that there is an overall high degree of satisfaction with GOMU and AE, if an adult learner expresses a perceived disconnect between the AE program and GOMU relative to enhanced support for the AE program or personal academic-related requests, it warrants attention from university leaders. From this perspective, if or when there are unmet needs, adult learners could lose the benefit of an optimum adult learning experience. It may also bring to question as to whether institutions view themselves as “investors” in student success at both traditional and adult learning levels.

Through the first phase of the research interview process, the participants further explained how they make meaning of their experience in the AE program. A study participant shared that “It’s interesting how real-life experiences on the job helps students (adult learners) make meaning of their lived and collegiate experiences.” This indicates that the student has discovered the link between career and educational learning outcomes based on his experience in the AE program.

Second phase interviews. Six participants from the original group of 15 shared their experiences and thoughts on instructional styles, confidence and intimidation, the rewards of investing in an adult learning program, and shaping expectations for the next chapter of their lives. The conversations were robust relative to exploring their lives from a deeper perspective and sharing more details about situations associated with professors and peers in the classroom.

The preferred instructional style was related to the ability to engage students, provide clarity on expectations, and being a “hands-on” type of professor. There were also varying

perspectives on full-time versus adjunct professors. It was obvious that students could determine the difference through instructional styles. High quality faculty are important to any institution of higher learning. In my experience, the continuity of full-time faculty demonstrates competence in distinct fields of study, and adjunct professors or non-tenure track faculty often fill the gap when the demand for an increased number of classes are necessary—or there are not enough full-time faculty available to teach. Adjuncts can bring real-world experience, which is often appreciated, as indicated in the findings of this study. When relatable content is not available for an adult learning class, this opens the opportunity to invite relatable guest speakers on a regular basis to help engage students with enhanced course content.

A profound statement was made that “there’s nobody taking you on as a mentor. And to be honest, I don’t think that you can.” This opinion surfaced from the assumption that an accelerated program may not permit “mentor” time with students. This is one of the subjects where emotion coding for qualitative research emerged. The discussion on the lack of mentoring was a heartfelt opinion about a perceived missing value in the AE program, although it was understood by the study participant that time may not allow a mentoring relationship to develop in an accelerated program. Unquestionably, it’s a subject worth further exploration in relation to faculty-student relationships in accelerated adult learner programs. Mentoring is offered at various levels within traditional academic settings.

The degree of confidence and intimidation stems from being away from academic or campus life for so many years that it takes various ways to rebuild confidence as a strategy to re-engage as an adult student learner. Talking to peers for advice, arriving early, emulating someone who is doing well, and having faith were some of the narratives shared related to confidence building. One of the participants shared that he “allowed time to interfere” with his

studies; yet, he was not intimidated—but just needed more focus time. The study participant who shared this sentiment has a military background and had been away from college for many years. Despite the number of years gone by, low confidence and intimidation were not issues for him.

The quest for meaningful expectations and rewards was divulged from a sense of gratification such as “proving that I am capable,” “walking in commencement... to be an example” for family, graduating with honors, improved salaries and career options. Becoming an effective communicator, and “learning the importance of differences” were ways of shaping expectations for the next chapter of life.

The second phase of interviews allowed for an expansion of discussions and the ability to better organize the context in select areas as a follow-up from the first phase of interviews. Building upon the subjects of confidence, intimidation, professors, and expectations brought forth unique perspectives on the phenomenon of the adult experience.

The Impact of Met and Unmet Needs

Interpretations of the experiences expressed by all study participants led me to surmise that when student needs are met through personal/life and collegiate experiences, their confidence level, degree of expectation, and learning outcomes increase. The impact of met and unmet needs for adult learners shared in Chapter IV indicates that if adult learner needs are unmet, these outcomes will decrease—which presents an unfortunate position for the student and the adult learning program. As the model in Chapter IV demonstrates, confidence levels, expectations, and learning outcomes are elevated when needs are met. Understanding personal experiences enhances the opportunity to create an optimum adult learning experience. The Impact of Met and Unmet Needs model can also be utilized to enhance the practices at any other institution of higher learning that has adult learning programs.

Implications for Golden Mountain University

Six study participants shared their perspective on the rewards of investing in adult learning programs. Their decision to invest their time, finances, and academic energy—while making sacrifices—at GOMU and remain in the program speaks to the significant degree of needs met within the AE program. Academic advising, assistance with registration, location, and the supportive nature of some of the professors were expressed as stellar features of the AE program by most of the 15 study participants. A personal observation—in addition to commentary from the findings in the study—is that academic advisors carry an extensive weight of responsibility for the AE program. Study participants appreciate their service and consider it very effective; but, is it efficient? An institutional study on the effectiveness of the AE program and its components could reveal whether there is a positive alignment of resources and support for the AE program at the university level. Unfavorable remarks about GOMU are related to services and activities designed for traditional students—i.e., bookstore and the Office of Financial Aid hours, better technology in the computer lab, and the Career Fair. It was noted that the Career Fair favored traditional age students. If this perception bears truth, there is a need for a more diversified structure that includes adult learners who seek career changes. While most of the study participants acknowledged that they are not engaged in campus life at GOMU, there are still service hour expectations that could be addressed and improved upon for future adult learners. The enrollment outreach for more adult learners often requires the expansion of services to help meet their needs. Unmet needs can adversely impact persistence and retention. It was mentioned by a few study participants that GOMU should consider offering more major options for adult learners. If GOMU seeks to grow its adult populations, the expansion of majors in demand is worth consideration.

Another area that garnered a significant degree of input was the online learning experience. As a hybrid program, the preferred method of study was face-to-face classroom experience. For those who appreciated the convenience of online learning, there was concern expressed about the instructional style and the experience with online group projects. GOMU could consider enhancing faculty development sessions for full-time professors and adjuncts on understanding the character and needs of adult learners, and how to build relationships within an online environment for group projects or online discussions. This will assist with the issues of peer trust and student engagement. Cultivating an environment at the University level that enhances the adult learner experience—especially with online classes—is a critical area of concern.

Degrees offered. Three of the study participants indicated that GOMU–AE should consider an expansion of degree programs offered for adult learners. SP1 stated that he would have preferred an engineering degree but opted for organizational leadership because engineering is not the type of major found in accelerated adult learning programs—based on his search of program options. The review of literature revealed that adult learners are often limited by the types of degree programs offered (Hanover Research, 2014; Kimmel et al., 2016). The findings from this study validates this assessment on limited degree options.

Online learning. The AE program offers hybrid options for instructional delivery methods. The narratives expressed in the study related to online classes revealed mixed opinions. Study participants shared both positive and negative experiences relative to the convenience (flexible schedule) of online classes versus the instructional style and expectations (group projects and syllabi) about online classes. This represents a diverse range of opinions about their experiences. The review of literature on this subject acknowledges the challenges (Williams,

2012) with online course design and delivery methods. Tipple (2010) opined that online education is a student centric environment and feedback is critical to fostering a rewarding experience. The discussion on rewards in this study provided valuable insight during the second phase of the interviewing process. The AE program has a plan to expand online course offerings and to reduce the number of weeks of study from eight to seven. I concur with Cercone (2008) that the challenge is to provide a positive social environment for this type of instructional delivery method. The suggestion by Chyung (2007) regarding the need for further research on age and gender and its effect on online behavior warrants exploration.

Transfer credit and remedial classes. Hanover Research (2014) disclosed results from their study that adult learners often come to four-year programs with transfer credits. This is true for most of the participants in this study. While this is also common—since most adult learners stopped out of college at an early age—what is uncommon is that most of the study participants were not required to take remedial classes. At the early stage of reviewing scholarly literature for this study, I opined, as the researcher, that adult learners may need remedial courses. This did not prove to be the case for participants in this study. In addition, the decision to bypass remedial classes may be a part of the design of the AE program—meaning the option to waive remedial classes and place students in other college-level courses to refresh their memory of necessary content for other courses. Another scholarly perspective is that remedial coursework is counterproductive (DeNicco et al., 2015). One of the study participants shared that they were glad that they were academically prepared to begin the AE program—beyond the remedial level.

Adult learning programs. This study focused on the experiences and interpretative analysis of 15 adult learners at one host institution of higher learning. They shared extensively on the components (design) and value of the AE program. Finch (2006) shared a list of popular

design components in adult learning programs. One of these is life and career planning. Unfortunately, this was not deemed as a strong component for GOMU–AE because the focus of career planning was described as designed for traditional students. Although adult learners are invited to career events, it was shared that recruiters often seek “younger” job candidates. According to Petty and Thomas (2014), students drop out as a result of a program not being appropriate for them. While none of the study participants alluded to the possibility of dropping out for “program component” reasons, there were concerns expressed about campus life and career events targeted for traditional students.

Adult learners talk among themselves about the program or other issues. This presents an opportunity to develop to an Adult Learners’ Advisory Council. Rotating members of the council could assist GOMU administrators with new ideas, concerns, and with building long-term relationships beyond graduation. A council serves as a platform for the active voice of adult learners to be heard by program and University leaders. This study implies that some areas need attention to sustain the satisfaction and future growth of the AE program at GOMU.

Eldaba (2016) posits that universities may not publicly share evaluations or information about their special programs. As the researcher for this study, I concur with Eldaba’s assessment because program review documents or surveys directly related to the adult learning program were not provided for the study. There is a wealth of information about GOMU–AE within this study, and it would behoove the University to examine the study and form the Adult Learners’ Advisory Council to build a partnership (that will address met and unmet needs) to enhance their program. The AE program administrators and most of the study participants expressed that they look forward to the outcome of the study. From my perspective, the authentic narratives illuminate some of the components and personal evaluations of the AE program—which includes

the advising structure, instructional methods/styles, campus life, relationships with peers and professors, courses that were most meaningful, perspectives on online learning, and opinions about limited degree program options.

Implications for Institutions Serving Adult Learners

Addressing the challenges of adult learners is critical for serving adult learners. Their reasons for returning to college vary, as well as their expected outcomes or rewards. The implications shared for GOMU can also apply to other intuitions with adult learning programs. It would behoove an institution to find out what those reasons and expectations are upon arrival—recognizing that the institution also shares a role in shaping the outcomes and future expectations for students they serve. Personal deficiencies and overcoming barriers for adult learners are not the same as for traditional students. Institutions of higher learning must go beyond accelerated, flexible schedules online, at night, and on the weekends to make their claim as adult-centered programs. This could include adult-focused webinars or seminars on the effective use of tech-related study tools, math and English mentors during the early start of the program, developing effective teams for study projects, adult-focused career development, adult-oriented (for recruiting purposes) site visits to industries that complement the degree programs offered, and offering engaging family-oriented events to establish extended relationships with the university.

As reflected in this study, both personal and collegiate factors impact the adult learning experience. Multiple overlapping services and programs between traditional and adult learners could reduce the degree of effectiveness if expanded services are not offered to the adult learner. As stated for GOMU, utilizing the model shared on The Impact of Met and Unmet Needs (shared in Chapter IV, Figure 4.2) is a starting point for enhancing programs and the adult learner

experience. The factors revealed in the model introduce guiding components designed to address adult learner needs in various areas of their collegiate and personal lives. Many of the areas (i.e., family support, job support, finances, academic performance, and professors) can influence higher education decisions. Universities that utilize the model can enhance the adult learner experience through improved strategies, policies, and practices. Helping adult learners meet their needs beyond basic flexible course offerings can also assist the university with achieving its goals related to retention, persistence, graduation, and reputation.

Personal experiences in the model include:

Family support/needs, job support, health issues, balancing act, relationships, fear, finances, spiritual life, and external influences.

Collegiate experiences in the model include:

University support, academic advising, academic performance, professors, peer trust, instructional methods/styles, rewards/goals, and self-efficacy.

The design of the model represents a collective effort between the student and the administration, which is necessary for cultivating an optimum adult learner experience. The intent is to identify and address weak areas that could cause an adult learners experience to decrease, resulting in unmet needs. I opine that higher education institutions should further examine ways to positively influence collegiate experiences for adult learners and help them meet their needs, as they manage their personal life experiences. There will be a fluctuation of experiences throughout the academic journey. The opportunity to create the optimum adult learner experience is to recognize the needs and move toward resolution where necessary. The result will likely increase confidence levels, their degree of expectation to succeed and affect positive change for others, and the learning outcomes necessary to fulfill the degree requirements.

How are faculty demonstrating that they want adult learners to succeed? The level of engagement and instructional styles as shared within the study are key determinants of how faculty can serve as better key investors or supporters of their students. What are the alternatives to remedial education courses for students who have been away from college for many years? The design of an adult learner program could offer webinars on remedial subjects, subject coaches who would be available on a flexible evening or weekend schedule (i.e., Math Coach), graduate assistants who focus on remedial support, and the establishment of an Adult Education Center for Assessment and Learning.

How do institutions contribute to boosting the confidence level of adult learners who have writing and math challenges? This should be addressed at both traditional and adult levels. These are the type of questions that when addressed can help meet the needs of adult learners—creating an optimum adult learner experience.

Findings and Theory on Adult Learners

Lived authentic experiences extracted through interpretative phenomenological analysis for this study are narratives that illuminate the connection to existing theory on adult learners. Through the exploration of literature reviews, observations, and the analysis of the narratives and institutional data, I discovered scholarly research that relates to the findings in this study. Institutions of higher learning that serve adult students must address and accommodate their needs to create an optimum adult learning experience—while concurrently contributing to the growth and sustainability of the institution. The ways in which this study is aligned and contributed to adult learning theories are shared below.

Darden (2014) shared the following statement on the Andragogy Model:

Knowles' andragogy model is based on four assumptions related to the concept that adult learners have the ability, need, and desire to control and be responsible for their learning.

Their self-concepts move from dependency to independency or self-directedness. They accumulate a reservoir of experiences from which to draw new knowledge and skills. Their readiness to learn increases with the developmental tasks of social roles. Their time and curricular perspectives change from postponed to immediate application and from subject-centeredness to performance-centeredness. (p. 810)

The alignment between the four assumptions on andragogy and this study are related to the needs and desires expressed by the study participants. Academic performance, peer trust, and instructional methods/styles are key factors that influence collegiate/life experiences. The Impact of Met and Unmet Needs for Adult Learners model further expounds on the personal/life experiences—giving a holistic perspective on the needs and desires of adult learners. The andragogic assumption that indicates movement from dependency to self-directedness is valid for various types of adult learner programs that offer different options for instructional methods. Select study participants shared a degree of independence at various levels related to learning outcomes, online learning, and group projects. The narratives unveiled their ability to learn in a new environment and engage as adult learners. One of the challenges dealt with peer trust (i.e., group projects) which could bring forth the need for some degree of control when it's related to dependence on others and earned grades. The abundance of influencers and experiences shared within the study are linked and contributes to the research models on adult learners.

If an institution is engaged and discovers more about their adult learning students, it is quite possible that they can become transformational influencers or partners in the adult learning experience. From the review of literature, TL (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009) shares how a person begins to interpret new meaning. While TL remains a highly debated theory with new layers of interpretation, the study participants for this body of research had the opportunity to reflect upon their past experience in higher education and make sense of why they returned to obtain a college degree. Disorienting dilemmas (Roberts, 2013) may have impacted their decision to re-focus with a greater sense of purpose as an adult learner. Without knowing what to expect, the

participants seemingly escaped the notion of experiencing disorienting dilemmas (Roberts, 2013) and they acknowledged satisfaction with their adult learning journey at the host institution, and during the second phase of interviews, six (6) of the participants shared future expectations. This reflects a transformative moment upon entry into the GOMU–AE program and greater plans for their future. The outcomes of this study and the assumptions about TL and other adult learning theories affirms that there will be a need for future research studies to examine how institutions are serving adult learners because the growing population, generational differences, and institutional structures will change over time.

The design of the AE program at GOMU is not totally self-directed; however, I would acknowledge that andragogic theorists (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2014; McDonough, 2013) make a valid point that adults have increased the responsibility (ownership) of their lives and learning outcomes. Taking ownership is not void of academic or peer support, as acknowledged within the narratives in this study; therefore, I would not suggest that the AE program move toward a more self-directed learning approach, which could be more challenging for the students. Self-directed programs should market their respective adult learner programs as such so that adults will understand the type of program they elected to complete a bachelor's degree. From my exploration, this is not the case for GOMU–AE. Several study participants indicated that they did not know what to expect upon entry into the program and valued the support of others.

Self-disclosed success (high GPA) in challenging courses (i.e., statistics) or with instructional methods (i.e. online learning or group projects) reflects how the curriculum or level of course content—along with the professor and peer support—influenced better learning outcomes. All of the study participants were in good academic standing at the time of the study,

and most of them acknowledged the support of advisors, faculty, and peers. Also, the presence of trust (Chan, 2010) in the AE program and the professors is very prevalent in this study.

It was revealed in the first phase of interviews that some of the adult learners did not know what to expect at the beginning of the program; however, that degree of uncertainty shifted relative to their experience in class and their satisfaction with academic performance. For some, confidence levels catapulted after achieving success in their respective classes (some very challenging) and as one participant stated, “I began to see the light at the end of the tunnel.” This aligns partially with ET (Kimmel et al., 2016) relative to the belief that students find motivation and envision the value of their results through ET. Belief that effort will lead to performance (Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011) which results in certain outcomes and payoffs (rewards)—will make the investment worthwhile. This is the essence of Expectancy Theory. The findings in this study reflect ET because study participants spoke extensively during the second phase of interviews on envisioning rewards from the AE program, and their anticipation of further shaping expectations for the next chapter of their lives. IPA opened the path of discovery on ET for adult learners as demonstrated in the study. Even though ET was originally associated with organizations, I concur with other scholarly researchers (Y. Chen, Gupta, & Hoshower, 2006; Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Kimmel et al., 2016) that ET is also linked to higher education.

Ryan and Deci (2000) released an empirical study on self-determination theory (SDT) and intrinsic motivation. With intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, and psychological need fulfillment at the foundation of their study, they posit that the fullest representations of humanity show people to be curious, vital, and self-motivated. At their best, they are agentic and inspired,

striving to learn; extend themselves, master new skills; and apply their talents responsibly (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68).

The most compelling revelation about their statement is that in certain aspects it describes the adult learning participants in this study who are self-motivated (even with influence by key investors) and pro-actively engaged in their quest to earn a bachelor's degree at an accelerated pace. Considering how SDT and intrinsic motivation could relate to the role of college professors and administrators, Ryan and Deci (2000) argue in their findings that it is of great significance for individuals who wish to motivate others in a way that engenders commitment, effort, and high-quality performance. This study reveals how adult learners are motivated by others at GOMU–AE and how other institutions can contribute to the needs of college students—specifically those enrolled in a uniquely designed program.

Donaldson (1999) conducted a review of literature on six elements that relate to the adult collegiate experience. The components in his model—noted as *A Module of College Outcomes for Adult Students*—includes: (a) prior experience; (b) orienting frameworks: motivation, self-confidence, and value system; (c) adult's cognition; (d) the “connecting classroom” for social engagement; (e) the life-world environment and concurrent work, family, and community setting; and (f) different types of learning outcomes. It has been more than 19 years since the model was developed and a few of the areas in Donaldson's review and this study overlap relative to confidence, life-world environment (deemed as “balancing act” in this study), and social engagement (deemed as “relationships” in this study). Other key areas that this study builds upon is instructional styles, campus life, the student perspective of an adult learner program, and the impact of met and unmet needs. In addition, the narratives reveal the importance of technically advanced study tools, and how adult learners are shaping expectations

for their future. Donaldson (1999) also posed two questions for future research: (1) What are the barriers to involvement in campus activities; and (2) What do adults see as the most powerful influences on their learning? Participants in this study shared concerns about targeted audiences at campus sponsored events, non-flexible time schedules for events, and the overall focus on traditional students when it relates to campus activities. This implies that even in 2018, adult learners are still invited to college events that are not tailored or designed according to their interests. In terms of the most influential people in the lives of adult students, the study participants spoke about their spouses, children, advisors, professors, bosses, co-workers, and self-determination as some of the influences that impact their academic journey. While Donaldson's model was classified as a review of scholarly literature, and not empirically researched, it was useful as another source for validating some of the findings in this study, as well as discovering new phenomena.

Relevance (Shi, 2017) and course delivery (von Lehman, 2011) are two existing areas of research shared in the review of literature related to the design of adult learner programs. Making course content more relevant for adult learners is a more engaging and preferred experience—as expressed by two of the study participants—in addition to being appropriate for any major area of study. This study provides qualitative perspectives (through personal narratives) on instructional preferences and styles that meet the needs of adult learners in the AE program. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis for this study, I opine that the ability to sustain a good assessment of instruction is directly linked to the instructional method and delivery style of the professor.

This study builds upon existing theory—with a strong focus on met and unmet needs—and opens the opportunity to fuel a new perspective on the adult learner experience.

Identifying and understanding the distinct needs, and then reshaping or designing unique programs for a growing population of adult learners is a viable direction for improving the adult learning experience in higher education.

Study Limitations

The limitations of the adult learners' lived experiences study are:

- (1) The study is not generalizable because a qualitative research method was used, and it was limited to one host institution. However, researchers and practitioners may find some degree of transferability from the findings revealed in the study.
- (2) Adult associate degree seeking students in the AE program were not eligible to participate. The focus was on baccalaureate level adult learners.
- (3) The researcher served as the sole interviewer and primary interpreter of the data.

Member-checking and peer debriefing minimized bias in the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Listening to study participants, interpreting the lived experiences of adult learners, and analyzing the information shared about the host institution that will be conferring their bachelor's degree, expanded my view about future research on adult learners. Responses to the opening question during the first interview – What led you to an adult learner program? – adds value to efforts to optimize the recruitment of adult learners. The answers to research questions serve as a gateway to understanding some of the distinct needs and expectations of adult learners and how those needs are fulfilled. As shared in Chapter IV, the model on The Impact of Met and Unmet Needs (see Figure 4.2) lists personal and collegiate experiences that impact confidence levels, expectations, and learning outcomes. The factors listed can contribute to future research because they represent authentic lived experiences. There are over 40 categories and themes

within this study that future scholarly researchers can address through a multitude of methodological research options. This study reveals prodigious narratives from 15 study participants and provides key elements for creating the optimum adult learner experience. New and existing adult learning programs, administrators, and faculty can draw upon this study and future research on how to enhance the adult learner experience. The knowledge obtained from this study can also add value to future research on the design of a new adult program—which can help shape the culture and environment from the initial stage of development. The study also provides insights on potential remedies for higher education challenges with adult learner programs. More specific recommendations for future scholarly research include:

- a longitudinal study on a larger population of adult learners from recruitment to graduation—which would include an analysis of ethnic and gender differences
- a comparative analysis of two or more adult learning institutions on the effectiveness of their respective accelerated programs for adults
- an examination of the alignment of strategic goals and academic outcomes within a university and its adult learner program
- a study on the interpretation and support of undisclosed needs for adult learners in higher education (i.e., attention-deficit disorder)
- a multiple-case study on faculty development and the adult learning population
- an action research study on mentoring (faculty–student) in an accelerated adult program

Adult learners are the fastest growing population of college students (J. Chen, 2014). The opportunity to build upon this study and other gaps in current literature—both qualitatively and through mixed-method study—opens numerous new areas to explore.

Researcher Reflections

“Qualified, but not certified” is an expression shared by Study Participant 8. This sentiment could be deemed true for most adult learners, including myself—particularly during the early adult years of pursuing a bachelor’s degree. Our life experiences and selected institutions are different, but our decision to pursue higher education is the same. Serving as the researcher and interviewer for this study elevated my sense of purpose to effect change in higher education on behalf of adult learners, through continual analysis and interpretation of lived experiences.

Experience with host site administrators. GOMU has the potential to become a leading higher education institution for adult learners. By utilizing the findings from this study to address and further engage more students, GOMU could consider enhancing their AE program with input from the students that they currently serve, in addition to engaging alumni. During the official meeting and follow-up conversations with the host administrative team, a deep level of commitment was demonstrated and later confirmed by the study participants through each spoken narrative contributed to the study. The host team expressed their respect for my study and looked forward to the outcome, which I plan to share.

Observations during the recruitment phase. It was through the recommendation of the host administrative team that I set up a recruiting table to introduce, explain, and recruit volunteers for the study. Several dates were established and published, and the response exceeded my expectations. Being on campus provided an opportunity for me to observe the students. It was a humbling experience to reflect upon the days when I was a bachelor’s degree-seeking evening student. They had the “busy and focused” rush look on their faces, and obviously not engaged in a “traditional” student style. To attract interest in the research, great

effort was made to respect the value of their study time. It was important to engage the adult learners in an expeditious and purposeful manner. I am forever grateful for the opportunity to introduce my study on behalf of adult learners.

Interaction with study participants. I am most proud of the opportunity to meet and engage in conversation with every volunteer study participant in-person, prior to the first interview. They are a diverse population of adult learners who trusted the process for lifting their voice about their personal experiences for the study. I am confident that I was able to help establish a respectable degree of comfort with each participant—allowing our conversations to flow at their pace without any coercion or thought interruptions. People who read the study will find genuine and transparent conversations that I value immensely.

Experience with the debriefing team. Working with the debriefing team (Dr. Maria Dezenberg and Professor Hays Moulton from the Antioch University PhD in Leadership and Change program) not only contributed to ethical and quality control efforts for the study, it also provided an opportunity to discuss other elements of the study process with a sense of support and trust. Their experience in higher education added value and diversity of thought to the process. Embracing different views or interpretations is a healthy experience. During the research process, I was assured that a reliable debriefing team was selected, and that they would provide the vital feedback necessary to complete and advance the study.

Conclusion

The use of interpretative phenomenological qualitative design elevated the voice of adult learners and unveiled unknown phenomena that not only provide answers to the research questions, but also illuminated the unique needs of degree seeking adult learners. Each unique life and collegiate experience that helped the study participants make meaning of their

experience adds scholarly value to the study of adult learners. The adult learner voice and their respective experiences signify the essence of the study. The research and findings provides an opportunity for faculty, staff and administrators to recognize that students' lived experiences comes with their tuition. While institutions may not fully understand the life experiences that students will bring with them, this study lifts the voice of students to introduce new phenomena affiliated with adult learners. Managing and enhancing their collegiate experience in an acceptable manner impacts persistence, retention, and ultimately graduation. This study reveals that the participating adult learners at GOMU are pursuing their academic goals with an increased level of confidence and life expectations.

Through the interpretation and guidance of this study, the lived experiences of potential adult learners are less likely to be disregarded when an institution of higher education decides to design or enhance a program that seeks to recruit and graduate a growing population of people, over the age of 24, who dream of earning a bachelor's degree. The diversity, character, and transparency of each study participant led to extensive interpretative analysis that validates how their needs and expectations were fulfilled, and how they've conquered challenges that allowed them to persist in the AE program. The concerns addressed by select study participants provides an opportunity for the university to revisit the design and services associated with sustaining the program. The impact of dedicated academic advisors and professors, as expressed by most of the participants, are among the investors in adult student success.

With over 40 categories related to personal/lived and collegiate experiences, key ingredients for an optimum adult learning experience has been identified and elevated beyond traditional practices. The adult learner experience begins with the design of the program. It will only end if there is a less than optimum experience—meaning that adults withdrew or survived

their respective academic journey but did not thrive. Creating an optimum experience that will last beyond graduation is a shared and fertile understanding between the adult learner and the institutions that served them. One of the goals of this study is to advance the conversation on what adult learners are experiencing and how to create the optimum experience. The model shared on The Impact of Met and Unmet Needs can be utilized to help create the optimum adult learning experience which means increasing confidence levels, expectations, and learning outcomes.

As institutions immerse themselves in the competitive market of attracting adult learners to their “unique” programs, it would behoove them to explore ways to make meaning of adult lived experiences. The essence (what they bring with them) of a student is not determined by the institution. While the ability to control lived experiences is owned by the student, the institution has the opportunity to examine their role in developing and implementing an adult program and learning culture that embraces the adult learner and provides them with the best collegiate experience to achieve optimum results for the student and the institution. Academically and financially, adult learners are investors in their own experience; therefore, their expectations should not go unnoticed. The ability to thrive derives from a respected and trusted experience.

It's costing me a lot of money going to GOMU, but you feel like you are getting back what you're putting in. I feel like the experience I'm having right now is almost priceless. (SP8)

Appendices

Appendix A: Memorandum of Understanding

Appendix B: Informed Consent Letter and Interviewee/Participant Consent Form

Appendix C: Message to Participants

Appendix D: Study Participant Excerpts

Appendix A: Memorandum of Understanding

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)

Study: Interpretation of Adult Learners' Lived Experiences in a Uniquely Designed Higher Education Program

LaTonya Branham (Principal Investigator/Researcher), is a doctoral candidate at Antioch University in Yellow Springs, Ohio. She is pursuing a Ph.D. in Leadership and Change with research interest in adult learners in higher education. The study will be conducted at _____Name of host Institution/ Program_____. The institution representative is _____Name_____. The study involves data collection, and personal interviews for the ensuing doctoral dissertation research. This MOU will serve as an agreement to begin the study on _____date_____.

Purpose of the research study: My research study consists of interviewing participants, member checking, and extensive data analysis, using an inductive research technique. The focus of the interview will be related to the adult (mature) learning experience in higher education. The data from the interviews will be analyzed thoroughly to make meaning of the narratives. It is anticipated that the interviews will help develop a rich and reliable collection of narratives for the study. If necessary, focus groups will be added to the data collection process.

Participant selection: Eligible participants will be selected based upon age and enrollment in a bachelor's level program of study.

Participation Information: Participation will consist of distributing a welcome message to all eligible adult learners in the program and select participants (up to 15) to interview with the principle investigator. The topics will include influential and motivation factors relative to the collegiate experience within the program. Participation in this research project is voluntary. Confidentiality: The researcher will take notes and audio recordings for research purposes only. An audio recording and written notes will be kept anonymously. Identification details will be removed before submitting the research results to the dissertation committee. During the research process, the notes and recordings of the interviews will be kept in a locked, and secured location. Participants in the study may request that any comments made be off the record or stricken from the notes. Interviews may be stopped at any time by the interviewee and all of the interview data notes or reports will be destroyed. The results of the study may be included in future scholarly presentations and publications.

Risks: Participants of this research study may be made uncomfortable by certain topics or revelations from the interview. Participants do not have to comment or answer any question that is deemed uncomfortable. This is a voluntary participant study.

Benefits: There are no gifts or monetary benefits for the participants.

Expenses/Reimbursements: There will be no compensation for participation. The principal investigator will cover expenses if necessary during scheduled meetings.

Questions: If there are any further questions regarding this research please contact, LaTonya Branham, at [REDACTED], [REDACTED]. The Dissertation Chair, should there be any additional questions, is Dr. Jon Wergin, [REDACTED]. The study, as well as the content of this MOU, have been reviewed by the Antioch University Institutional Review Board (IRB) which is a committee whose members are tasked with ensuring that research participants are protected. If you have comments or questions about the IRB, please contact Dr. Lisa Kreeger at [REDACTED].

All efforts to ensure reliability and validity throughout the study are appreciated.

Institution Representative:
(Print)

Principal Investigator/Researcher:
(Print)

Director, Adult Education Programs

LaTonya Branham

[REDACTED] University

Ph.D. Candidate

Antioch University

Address _____

900 Dayton Street

Yellow Springs, OH 45387

Phone: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Email: [REDACTED]

Signatures:

Date: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B: Informed Consent Letter and Form

Informed Consent Letter

This informed consent form is for individuals invited to participate as an interviewee in a research study entitled “Interpretation of Adult Learners’ Lived Experiences in a Uniquely Designed Higher Education Program.”

Researcher/Principle Investigator: LaTonya Branham

Name of Institution and Program: Antioch University PhD in Leadership and Change Program

Name of Study: Interpretation of Adult Learners’ Lived Experiences in a Uniquely Designed Higher Education Program

Dear Participant:

My name is LaTonya Branham, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Antioch University Leadership and Change Program. I am conducting a study that explores the adult learners lived experience in a uniquely designed undergraduate degree program. This letter contains information about the research and an invitation for your participation, which is completely voluntary.

Purpose of the research study: The study seeks to understand and capture the essence of how adult learners adapt and make sense of their academic experience. The study will be centered on the collegiate and lived experiences of adult learners within a uniquely designed program of study. The intent is to illuminate the mature voice that could add a significant contribution to theory, practice, and the impact of adult learner programs. Your participation is important because of your decision to enroll in college to fulfill your academic goals. My research study consists of interviewing and extensive data analysis, which is an inductive research technique. In this approach, it is anticipated that the interviews will help develop a rich collection of narratives for the study.

Participant selection: You are being selected as a potential participant based upon your enrollment in a bachelor’s degree program for adult learners.

Participation Information: Participation will consist of a 60+ minute interview with me. The topics will include influential and motivational factors relative to your experience as an adult learner in college. As a follow-up after the first interview, you will have the opportunity to engage in a follow-up interview session that includes member checking to review your initial input into the study. Again, participation in this research study is strictly voluntary.

Confidentiality: I will take notes and audio recordings as we meet for research purposes only. I will keep the audio recording and written notes anonymous and any identifying details will be removed before I submit the project to my faculty. Neither your name nor any other information that might identify you will appear in the dissertation. During the study, the notes and recordings of the interviews will be kept in a locked, secured location. If you participate in the study, you may request that any comment you make be off the record or stricken from my notes. You may also choose to stop the interview at any time and have any of the interview data destroyed. The interview data will be destroyed after the final report of the research study. The results of the study may be included in future scholarly presentations and publications.

Risks: Participants of this research study may be made uncomfortable by certain topics or revelations from the interview. You do not have to comment or answer any question that you deem uncomfortable.

Benefits: There are no gifts or monetary benefits for the participants; however, your participation will contribute to effective and valuable research for the dissertation.

Expenses/Reimbursements: There will be no compensation for participation. I will cover expenses if necessary during scheduled meetings.

Questions: If you have any questions regarding this research that you have not asked as part of this informed consent process, please contact me, LaTonya, at [REDACTED], [REDACTED]. My Dissertation Chair, should you have additional questions, is Dr. Jon Wergin, [REDACTED]. The study, as well as the content of this informed consent letter, have been reviewed by the Antioch University Institutional Review Board (IRB) which is a committee whose members are tasked with ensuring that research participants are protected. If you have comments or questions about the IRB, please contact Dr. Lisa Kreeger at [REDACTED].

Your assistance is greatly appreciated.

LaTonya Branham
Ph.D. Candidate
Antioch University – Ph.D. in Leadership & Change

Interviewee/Participant Consent

STUDY: Interpretation of Adult Learners' Lived Experiences in a Uniquely Designed Higher Education Program

Participant information:

Your signature on this consent form indicates your agreement to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep, whether you agree to participate or not. The second signed consent form will be kept by the researcher.

Participant:

I understand that I do not have to participate in this research study. I have read the consent form and all of my questions about the study have been answered. I agree to participate in this study.

Printed Name of Participant:

Signature of Participant:

Date: _____

To be completed by the Researcher:

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the research study and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving; the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Printed Name of Researcher:

Signature of Researcher:

Date: _____

Appendix C: Message to Participants

Greetings _____ (name):

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the Adult Learners' Lived Experiences study. I look forward to our upcoming interview which should last approximately 60 minutes. You will be asked to read and sign the Informed Consent Letter prior to our interview.

Interview arrangements:

Date:

Time:

Location:

In preparation for the interview, please think about the following topics for our first session:

- Distinctive needs and expectations as an adult learner
- Addressing challenges
- Influential people and factors
- Confidence level
- Academic performance
- Relationships
- Making meaning of your experience

Your willingness to share your experience as an adult learner in the program at (host institution) for this study is greatly appreciated. Please don't hesitate to call or send an email message to me in advance if you have questions.

All the best,

LaTonya Branham

_____ (cell)

Appendix D: Study Participant Excerpts

EXCERPTS - FIRST PHASE OF INTERVIEWS (15 study participants)

Decisions for Returning to College

SP1: I was thinking about leaving my current employer. And they actually offered me a raise but told me as a stipulation, I'd need to go back and get a bachelor's. So here I am.

SP2: Well, I currently work at one of the major hospitals in the area around here, and it was getting to be pretty obvious for any of us. I don't want to say professionally because technically I'm not professional - I guess for the support staff to be able to move up, they knew that they needed to have a degree, so I knew I wanted to stay here but I knew I wanted to advance so I figured the AE program was right for me.

SP4: I started school 15 years ago and I ended up leaving after a year and a half because I had a child. And it was just very hard to work and go to school as a traditional student. And at that time, I left school to raise my child, and as she became older - she's 17 now - I stressed the importance to talk to her about the importance of higher education. And I really kind of just felt like a fraud because I was preaching something that I had not put into practice myself. So, I made a deal with her that I would go back, and I wanted to finish my education before she began hers... My daughter will be able to start college this fall. So, I was able to keep that promise to her.

SP8: Well, after doing three-plus years in college - I came right out of high school - I completed my first term in education. Thought I wanted to be a teacher, but I ended up working in the field of developmental disabilities... I was able to acquire a management position. I managed for eight and half years, but I was always told unless I had a degree, I couldn't go any further. So honestly with the favor of God, I have been able to keep good jobs making more money than people with degrees. I mean, I was really blessed to do that. The AE program was very intriguing if you will because I could get my degree in a year and a half. They honored all of my old classes and I only had to take one prerequisite class and everything else was major based, so it was a no-brainer to go ahead and get my bachelor's degree. That's what lead me to the AE program.

SP9: Okay. I have a tendency to go off topic so if-- I guess because I'm very passionate about learning, and it wasn't always like that in my life. So, I wanted to go back, and I think my story is a little bit unique because I'm not currently employed. And so basically, I was at GOMU for around six years and nothing - I was without a degree, when I started right after high school. I worked during that time and I'd switched majors. So basically, what I happened was I got married and had our first son, and I was still actually taking classes. So, after he was born, which was 13 years ago, I stopped when he was a baby, so it was my last class. And I always wanted to go back; that was always my goal. But what hindered me was I did not know what I wanted to do nor do I still know what I want to do. So, it was kind of hard to-- I kept saying, "Well, maybe once I go back, it'll come to me what I want to do." I just knew that I liked to learn. I was diagnosed with ADD when I was in college, and I think that was a huge thing because it was a struggle for me prior

in my-- when I was back in school, when I was 19 or whatever. So ever since I've been back, I've loved it. So basically, right now, I'm tired of just trying to figure out still what I want to do, whereas I feel like a lot of the other students are in organizations that pay for their college to finish their degrees, so they can further their careers. And I feel like I've always been a volunteer. I've always been involved in various things, but I don't think there's a lot like me that are in the AE program currently.

SP10: Well, of course, for instance, my first time going to college I didn't really concentrate on the books a whole lot and I went into the military for some time, about 14 years. And I came out with the intentions of going back to major in education. But responsibilities kind of take control of the situation.... Really, most of my college years and most of the semester hours that I obtained were from going back as a non-traditional student. Because I did the same thing when I was in the military, went to evening classes and what have you. I just kind of surveyed the schools that are here in the tristate and found that GOMU was kind of friendlier than most. It was always an ambition of mine to get my undergrad degree.

SP11: I was in between-- I had started a job and was thinking that I needed to do something a little different. Something that will be able to work with my schedule wanting to go back to school...it was convenient to go here, and it was close. So that's how I chose GOMU and then found that they had an organizational leadership program.

SP12: Well, I'm 43 years old and I started college 20-something years ago right out of high school and I started in a career that was in finance, wealth management. And so, in finance if you don't have federal licenses then you can't really do anything. I was in school when I got this job, I put it on hold for a semester to study for what's called the Series 7 and the 63. And so, I took some time off to do that intending to get right back, and then I was working for the branch manager and then there were more licenses, so I put those on hold again-- put school on hold again to finish those. And so, I kept putting school on hold to finish my FINRA certifications and then ended up getting married, having children, and school just kind of got pushed aside. So, I never finished and now I'm still in the same job and I want to get my CSP and you have to have a four-year degree to do that, and so that is why I'm finishing up right now to get that four-year degree, so I can go on and do my CSP.

SP13: Well, my job as a medical transcriptionist was becoming obsolete. They were replacing them, and eventually, they did lay us off. And I knew that was-- even though I could probably find something-- it was harder to find transcription jobs. I could probably find one, but I knew that, generally, they were just phasing out. So I'd done this for 17 years, and I loved it. But I had to face reality. Things were changing. And I didn't want to be left without being able to find a job that paid just as well. And so I decided-- well, they put me in another job at the hospital, and I had to take a pay cut. And even then, I was making more than that particular job. But it was the only thing I was qualified to do. So I would never make any more money in that position. And as long as I didn't have a degree, I could never do anything else. So I got mad one day and decided, "I'm done with this. I'm going to-- I got to go to school." And I checked out a couple other schools, but I came to GOMU and signed right up because I liked the adult learner program.

SP14: Well, that's an interesting and long story. But I'll try to make it short. I found in the past, because I didn't have self-discipline and I didn't know what I wanted out of life-- so as I got a little bit older, I decided that education was what I needed. And being on my own-- and so what led me back to school is self-growth and discovery, and a need for education in order to further myself.

SP15: I've always wanted to get my degree. However, I got on at the fire department at a very young age. I was a teenager when I was accepted. And since I had a really good job, and my whole point of college or my view of college was the only reason to go to college is to get a decent job, I figured that I wouldn't need college. However, the fire department has changed over the years, and to gain access to higher promotional opportunities means that you need a degree. So, the position I currently serve, I'm an assistant chief, and the only reason I have that position is because I threw myself into work experience. But if I didn't have a chief who realized that, they could have a required that for my position. Most people in my field have a degree. I interviewed for the chief of department position and wasn't allowed to continue in the process because I didn't have a degree, even though I felt that I could have made a difference as a chief. And it was at that point, when I was interviewing as chief, that I realized that even just for personal reasons that I need to pursue my degree.

SP16: I started in GOMU many, many, many years ago and I never quite finished the program I was in. So, when the opportunity came for the adult learning program, it fit my personal needs because I'm a mom and I work full-time. And so, the classes and schedule fit my needs, so I can complete what I started a long time ago... In order to move forward without getting an RN degree, I needed this degree to push me forward in case I wanted to be the administrator one day. So, I needed a bachelor's degree in organizational leadership so that way I can boost my own self up in my job.

SP17: Well, when I turned traditional college age, 18, after high school, I started out as a fine arts student at the University of _____. I wasn't a very good student when it came to traditional classes, but I was really good at art. So, while I got all of the necessary credits for the art side, I was pretty bad at getting the credits for the general education to actually get the degree. After five years of toiling away-- I'm also a type 1 diabetic, so my mom was spending a lot of money on insurance, that was before Obamacare could extend the age for children on their parent's insurance. So, I got to a point where my mom had to have a COBRA policy. It was very expensive. I didn't feel right about it. So, I dropped out of school, got into the corporate working world and figured someday I would go back to school.

SP18: Well, a little backstory, I had started college when I was 18. And I didn't know what I wanted to do. I went through my first year, and I just wasn't sure. So, ended up leaving and then going back to school again a couple of years from that. And thinking that I thought that I knew what I wanted to do, I still didn't know [laughter] what I wanted to do. So, I did a year there. And then a long time went by, about 5 years, and I knew I wanted to finish. And it was just finding a program that would fit my wants and needs. So, I spent a long time trying to find what program would best fit. And I ended up stumbling on GOMU's AE program. I went online, and I looked at other places, like ___ in _____, and _____, and GOMU. I emailed them about the AE program and what

are the requirements one needed. And they were very nice and accommodating and very helpful, which I didn't really have a great experience at my past college experiences. They had a program that I thought I would like to do, which is organizational leadership. And it seemed like a broad range of things you could do with the degree. And I've always wanted to kind of better my leadership skills. So that's what led me to the AE program.

Owning Personal Experiences

SP7: Just making sure that I-- I know that I read-- any little bit of free time I have is going to have to be dedicated to studying, basically, because I have a long commute. I work a part time job [laughter] on the side, just seasonal, for the holidays. And then, pretty much everything else when I'm home, all I do is study, so that way I know that-- and if I feel like I'm lost, then I make sure I reach out to the instructor and stay late if I need to or whatever it takes to get it done. I want to finish. I'm really motivated to finish, so I will do what I need to do to make it happen, basically.

SP8: I just want to change my tax bracket. I know that-- for the better, up, up ways. I know that I'm qualified, in a sense, but I'm not certified. So, one can be qualified but not certified according to the world. But I'm qualified to be the director of a program and I'm ready to walk in there.

SP8 (continued): I'm pleased. I'm patting myself on the back. I'm making A's in every class that I've taken thus far, with the exception of my B plus, having A's. And I'm like, "_____, if you would've applied yourself years ago" because I wasn't applying myself. I was there. And I've always been blessed to-- I go to class, whether I take a note or not, I could pass with at least a C with no effort. None. And with effort, look at me. This is my goal. I'm killing it out here. That is what I'm trying to do. So, no desire to drop out. I'm really just trying to get myself to sit still long enough to get this plan with continuing education going.

SP10: What I need to do is probably just get to devote probably more time, and kind of reinforce the learning methods, whether it's the skill of writing down on note cards more or some method of retention. Talking into recorders, or just really writing more of the information so I can retain it as opposed to just reading it. But writing it down I think will probably help me a little better.

SP12: It's something I never thought would actually happen but-- because thinking about putting that on-- thinking about going to school with kids and a full-time job and a husband, it's a daunting thought but it's doable. I don't really stress too much about it. Honestly, I haven't been presented with anything that's overly frightening at this point. The instructors I have had don't seem to want to trick you. They just want you to know the material. They tell you what you need to know and it's your responsibility to sit down and study for it.

SP13: I think I do pretty well. I get most things-- I've gotten better at starting ahead of time.

SP14: I was in to making good money, almost \$30 an hour. And I didn't want to do construction anymore. I was searching, and nobody prior wanted to hire me for anything more than throwing boxes or something. And I know I can do something in IT and sales, and so I joined the IT program at GOMU. And I started filling out applications and told people what I was trying to do. And I ended up getting a real good job in an IT company where I'm at now. And, yeah, so the rest is kind of history. But third strike - you need to finish strong. I'm going to finish. I have two years left. And in all honesty, I love every minute of it.

SP16: This was something that I always wanted to accomplish for my own personal goals. So, this is something that I knew a long time ago that I wanted to complete. It just so happened that-- well, luckily, I found the AE program, so I could complete it. Because going to school traditional classes, it just wasn't going to work with being a full-time mom, and having to work full-time, and take care of those needs. So, this program really helped me decide that, "Yes, I can do it." And being around peers my own age with similar situations, it kind of motivates me more seeing that other people can do it. They're in my same situation. There's no reason why I can't complete it. So that's kind of been a good motivating factor, to have seen other classmates complete it then-- in the same program that I am in.

SP17: Well I was supposed to take three classes that summer, and I only took one online class. And even being on pain medicine and stuff and having to type with one hand with my left hand and I'm right-handed, I still managed to get an A minus in the class. So, I mean, it's those things where you're like, well, you do the best you can. At the end, when you get your grade, you're like, "All right, well, I did okay."

Learning Awareness and Strategies

SP13: In the beginning, it was harder, but I've adjusted, and I can judge after the first assignment, or so, am I going to be able to get through this? Or is this something that's going to be harder? If it's a harder class, I'll start earlier. If it's an easier class, I kind of know I can get through it quicker, and I may not start as soon, I'll do a different assignment that takes longer. But I've learned to judge what's going to take me longer. I know it's going to take me three days to write that paper, research that, or answer these questions or get through. So, I've learned to figure out how long it takes me to do it because the assignments are usually the same with that teacher, or that professor. They kind of assign-- or it seems to me that you can judge after the first assignment or two, and after the first test, you kind of know how they're going to be. So, I've learned, "Okay, I know that's going to take longer." I plan more time, spend more time on it, and I've managed to get everything done.

SP16: With the adult learning, I'm with a lot of people my age, my peers and so it's a different outlook on life. It's a different responsibility. I'm more so wanting to learn, wanting to get all the information that I could possibly get versus being a traditional student where I just didn't quite have that drive that I have now in the adult learning program. Not at first, not at first [laughter]. I was second-guessing, "Oh my gosh, what are you doing? Here you are at 40 years old. Is it really appropriate to go back to school?"

So, I second-guessed myself a whole lot. But once I got into the program and saw my fellow students and it just kind of was like "Oh, this is where you're supposed to be. This is your fit [laughter]."

Controlling Challenges

SP2: I am a single mom. So, there were challenges. I work full-time, and I started back at school. And being impatient that you're in school full-time, there were some things that I had to give up with my kids, sporting events that I didn't get to make. Things like that for either class or doing homework. So, there were compromises. But my kids had things to do as well as I did. But in the long run, I've told myself that it's going to work out better for all of us, them and myself, to do this. Oh! Now, it's good. I've had to drop courses and then go back to the programs, but not because of anything of not being able to do the time for the school and the school work as well and work. More or less, it's been, I've had medical issues that I was afraid would compromise the time I could put into school. I would hope so after seven years. It's not as hard as I had initially experienced or thought would be the problem all the way through. You do get used to it. Again, you forget that you can do these extra things if that makes sense.

SP2 (continued): Honestly, when I got back after some issues with medical, I did contact the adviser that I had for the business administration and told her that I don't believe I could have done-- there was a lot of classes that had to do with finance, and then after what I experienced before I left on medical leave or I just took time off for medical, I didn't feel like I could really focus on the math that was going to be required to do this finances and accounting classes for the business administration degree. But these classes for the organizational leadership, after reading up on them, were more along of my line of what at the time and the energy I could put through for this degree would be much simpler for me because I like these kinds of psychology and research-gear literature kind of classes, more so than math. I manage it on my own. I do take medicine for it. I haven't needed any help with it from my professor. That is something that I suffer with. I've tried to just kind of deal with it on my own.

SP4: It was kind of a challenge [*saying "No" to children*]. I mean, they were used to me picking them up from school, and being here with them all night, all the time. That was just our routine because my husband travels for work and things like that. But it was a challenge, but we just kind of talked about it, and just kind of established some healthy boundaries surrounding my school time, and my own work time, and that that was important, too. So, it was a challenge at first, but they quickly understood that it's important to me, and it became important to them as well.

SP7: So those two new classes I'm taking now is a research class [laughter], and it's quite a bit of information to cram into eight weeks. But you just have to really be disciplined because I mean, overall, it is an accelerated program. You have to understand that and just you have to push yourself really hard basically to be able to keep up... I know that the very first exam was really intense for everybody, but he recognized what was going on with everybody and he's gone out of his way to make it possible for us to succeed in

this class. So overall, you just have to have your own intrinsic motivation basically and get through it [laughter].

SP7 (continued): I have seven classes to complete. Right now, my biggest challenge to get started was the financial part, and they've been flexible with me. And once I get-- that's probably the hardest part is the financial part. School is stressful but once I get through, and I know that I can do well in the classes, I'll be reimbursed, and they'll pay for themselves. So just the initial getting started was challenging. But now that I kind of got this, I kind of oil my brain up to get ready to get back into being a student again [laughter]. That was the most challenging part. But now I feel like I have everything I need to-- I know what I need to do, and I'll be able to accomplish it.

SP8: I don't know if you ready for this but I'm going to share. In March of 2015, I was assaulted by my ex-boyfriend. See this is one of the things that really drove me to go ahead and start digging in on life. Not that I didn't value it or appreciate it before - because I'm a big lover of life - but I wasn't giving it my all. And I can say that. I was just kind of, "I'm good. I can do what I want to do. I can travel if I want to travel. I'm okay." But there's more. And I thank God for allowing me to still be here because I could be dead. I was choked to the point of unconsciousness and I had suffered second and third-degree burns to a significant portion of my back because where I was choked, I was choked on a steam radiator heater. You know them? That's where my back was when he choked me out. Sprained MCL, burns to my back, being choked, right? It's like, "Hey, why are you settling?" Now, I want to make sure I make it clear, I was not in an abusive relationship. Never did I ever feel like he was going to put his hands on me. He's bi-polar, but I never felt intimidated by that because I felt like I never matched his anger. So when he got upset I would just say, "Hey, are we hanging out today or you don't want to?" And he would always be like, "Okay, I'm calm." "All right, let's roll." But I had gotten to a place where I didn't want to work at work, and work at home. I was just like no more - and I just don't think this is my life. So just as calmly as I'm talking to you I said to him, "This is not going to work out. We can be friends, but I'm not going to be your woman no more. I'm not going to be able to do it." And he snapped.

SP9: I would say the challenge that's different for me is going to be, "what's next?" type of thing. I did visit the career center at GOMU and, yeah, there wasn't anything specifically for adults. The young lady that helped me, she was very nice, and we kind of went through different personality tests and that. And she's kind of like, "This is why you're having such problems. Because you are analytical, but you're a people person." So, I couldn't sit at a desk. Plus, I've been a student and a mom. I mean how am I going to go back into that nine-to-five work world? Is that what I want? That type of thing. And it comes down to me. But I think as I graduate in May, it's getting closer so it's kind of like, "Okay, how can I make some type of income while still being home?" So, I feel like with a degree and things like that. I guess on the board at my kids' school, I've started different programs in the community that I'm involved in. But I think that's my biggest challenge now, because I think I've always just thought it would come to me and [laughter], and now it's getting close to graduation. But as far as school work, it is a challenge sometimes to get it all completed, and the one thing I truly struggle with is paper writing. And I've

been able to perfect my structure, but it does still take me a long time. And the one thing, honestly, that's helped me, another tool, is Grammarly.

SP9 (continued): I feel like-- oh it is very different. I think because I've learned ways that I can do that'll work for me. I guess I realized-- I know I wanted to be a leader in some way, whether-- and I know that in order to be the most effective, I have to have both. So, I've tried to do different things to at least change one little thing at a time, whether it's-- for an example, I had this psychology class. Part of this thing with an online class is that you have to pace yourself and not wait until the last minute. Well we have quizzes, and there's two a week with each chapter, but she doesn't have them due-- she does six are due at half the semester, and six are due at the other half, but you can work on them when you're working on the chapters they're correlated to. And I have, since the class started, done every single quiz at the week that I-- versus waiting until the last minute to do them all. And that's huge for me, because I'm usually a procrastinator and wait until the last minute. So I feel like I'm slowly-- because I've learned that. I've learned that that is important if I want to be credible and things like that. So, I know it's a struggle, but I've learned, and I've asked in many of my classes, "Is it easier to teach a relationship person to be task-oriented, or a task person to be relationship-oriented?" And I think that it is easier to teach a relationship person to be task-oriented.

SP10: I kind of depended on my advisor for all of that, the office where she kind of worked to register for things because I hadn't kind of brushed up on getting around the college network. And then I used my wife as a resource and things of that nature. So, it was a task just getting acclimated to the surroundings, to the computer systems, or their particular computer system, because I work on a computer every day... There were a lot of different tasks involved with making everything school ready, so I used my wife, I used my advisor's office, I even went to financial aid and people were really, they were really helpful at times. Went to the VA [Veterans Administration office], I didn't get as much as I thought I would get from the VA, but I even used them as a resource at one point.

SP11: I think the main one is that of being home-- like today, as soon as I get off the phone, I will be doing a literature review. To me, I'm at the base level so trying to do what is only expected but still there are a few pages where I am like, Oh God! here's the information for me to put it together. It's like oh, okay, that wasn't as bad as I thought... My main objective is that even with the things I have going on, there's so much that I still wait. I mean absolutely wait that I see it while I'm doing it but it's almost like a mental state of "I don't care". So, it's just like I don't know if that's part of being overwhelmed or processing. It's just kind of like there's a certain place. It does get in that. All I want is just sit here. But what I've learned as I mature, is sometimes if my body is saying that, I do it. And if I have the time to do it, then here's a refreshment the next day. There's a refreshing that I'm able to accomplish. And I accomplish a lot more. So, I'm learning to respect what my mentor is saying, "Hey, lay down." Or when my body is saying, "Hey, sit down." Because I see a lot of people that do stress and they look like what they're going through. And I'm not about that a bit. Not saying that I'm exempt from it but I don't believe that you should have to. But like I said, once I disciplined myself and get myself together, for

me, my faith is praying, it takes a lot of fasting, talking through it to the Lord. But then there's being ministered to and getting the Word, which could be an outside source or someone to call or something like that. Just picking up the Bible and reading scripture. That makes all the difference. And then that helps boost me and focus my goals that I'm trying to achieve.

SP12: I kind of break them down into like, "Okay, I can do anything for this amount of time," because everything is very fast paced in the AE program. And so, going into, say for example, this fall's semester I'm in, I had it in my brain, I'm like, "This is going to be the worst 16 weeks of this year and a half because I'm on campus two nights a week, three and a half hours." That's a lot when you work all day and so I would literally break it down, "Okay, this is eight classes. I can do this." Or, if I'm looking at one particular class, "Okay, this is eight weeks. I can do this." And I would literally break it down into, "I've only got three more." So just kind of try and overcoming the overwhelming feelings that I would have sometimes. And then there's certain projects that I just like more than others. I hate doing presentations and I just kind of had to talk my way through them sometimes, talk my way through my anxiety over them. And just realize that everybody else probably had similar anxieties, and we all are kind of in the same boat, and I probably won't see any of these people ever again in my life. So [laughter] I talk myself through a lot of my challenges [laughter] if that makes any sense.

SP12 (continued): Yes, I'm very pleased with the writing part. I've never really had any issues with that. Especially in the class I'm in now, I literally have a perfect score on everything we've been writing: annotated bibliographies, and we're getting ready to do the literature review, and every week. I mean, I didn't know what an annotated bibliography was before I started this class and I've gotten perfect scores on every single one of them. And in fact, my instructor asked me, he said, "Are you sure you don't want to be a professional researcher?" And I'm like, "No, I'm pretty sure I don't. But thanks for the compliment [laughs]." So, that part of it I'm very pleased with. Now, it's kind of funny because I'm kind of a-- he said something about how I am in class. I am an extroverted person but something intimidates me about talking up in a large group of people, so I'm sort of quiet in class. And I wish I wasn't really like that. If called on, I will certainly speak up and talk but I won't volunteer to talk. So, I wish I was a little different in that regard.

SP13: Well, I knew from the beginning that school was going to be a priority, so I totally stopped doing things like my scrapbooking and stuff that I used to do. I just said, "I've got to put that aside for four years. It's not forever. It's just for now." Usually, if I get into situations where I've come up-- I can't do this assignment. I don't know what's going on. I call my friends in the class that I've made. That helps most of the time. That helps a lot. Yeah, I've had to give up a few things. We don't go out, or I'll make time, "Okay tonight, this one night, I'm going out to do whatever." We go out to eat, or whatever social, but I don't do it all during the week. So, I set my time to this is school time, and this is TV time. This is home time. This is social time. This is cleaning. And then school, if something takes me longer than I anticipated, then I don't get the kitchen clean that night.

SP14: I can tell you as I'm a bit older it's harder for my rote memory, as far as being able to recall things from memory. I noticed when I was younger I could read a book and then recite terms and definitions a lot better. And I noticed that a lot of my peers and stuff, their rote memory is not as good as well. But when your rote memory starts to go when you get older, what we're finding as classmates, we talk among each other and myself included, is that our associations get stronger. So, we might not be able to recall it, but if we see it, we'll remember. Whereas when we were younger, we didn't remember it. I don't know if that makes any sense. For instance, if I see a question, I would not remember exactly where in the book it was. But if you just ask me and I didn't see it, we can't find it as easy. We can't search through our memory for it. So that's kind of a struggle sometimes. But a lot of the tests are associations. So, we do real well.

SP15: Well challenges within the program, this last semester I had one of the most challenging professors that I've ever had. And so what I did - I researched how to study efficiently and effectively, and to find what strategies work for the top students. And I've recently started applying some of those. Challenges with outside of the program, school is a priority. There are a few things that do take priority over school. Our father has Alzheimer's, my sister is the primary caregiver, but I support her in that. I've been able to work caring for him around my schedule. Of course, my kids are grown, thank goodness, so I don't really have to invest that much time in them. And my wife has been very supportive. Without her support, I couldn't have gone back to school either. And she's very encouraging. So with the challenges, I use my support system and then I just try to see what other people have done who've dealt with similar challenges and then apply their strategies that work.

SP15 (continued): I might have to slow down just for financial reasons. I'm paying for this out-of-pocket. Well, my work reimburses part of it, but then the other part is out-of-pocket. And yesterday my furnace went out, so that was \$5,000 I could have used for something else. But that would be the only reason. Or who knows what happens with the family. If there's sickness or something happens with my dad. If things continue as they are it shouldn't be a problem, but again, who knows what's around the next corner.

SP16: I've not really had a whole lot of challenges, but I can always say if I had a work issue or something had come, and I can't make it to class, I have been able to reach out to my professors. They've been very courteous. They kind of let you know what's happening, what's going on, and you can get the information. So, I've not really had any issue, per se, with that. I mean, they've all been really perceptive to-- they know that we're adult learners and so they kind of take that into consideration with the courses.

Balancing Act

SP1: I hate the time that you'll lose with your family. Finding the balance of, "I really want to get this done and get it over with," but at the same time, how many 18-hour days can you do without kind of going nuts? But that's the one struggle that I have is trying to decide how much is too much. I really want to get it done, and I want to get it done now, but at the same time, I want to have some time with the family at the house.

SP2: I would say there was some. It depended on what the sporting event or school event was, and if it was important to them and I ended up having to miss it. But for the most part, they understood.

SP4: It's no longer important at this stage of my journey. I think that we all kind of have a general respect that we all go to work all day. So by the time you come to class, everyone's already put in a full day at work and have family and children, obligations. And we're all stuffing food in our face because we know we're running from one place to another. I just think that that's not something that I would have wanted. But it's just something that most of the professors in the program also have a general level of respect for.

Yes, I have a job outside of going to school. I work about 50 hours a week for a pharmaceutical company. I have that, and I have my three children who are all involved in sports. So, it's really just planning and prioritizing as early as possible. Again, my husband, he works full-time, and he sometimes travels for his job. We just would have to really pull it out a week ahead of time, month really, ahead of time about who would be where and how we prioritize these things.

SP9: Well, that's a good question because I am a very free-spirited, laid-back person, and I need to have a certain amount of space. So, when I had to take online tests that are timed, time is very important-- I haven't reached out and got any special assistance for ADD like I did when I used to be at N____, because I wanted to see if-- for example, their timed tests and things like that. Because I wanted to see how I could do. But it was a struggle last semester, because we had three and a half hours, and I would use every three and a half hours for these exams. But I'd have to make sure it was a time where I was away from any kid. I had my headphones on. Even if they'd look at me, they couldn't be in the room. So, I had to find a time. I'd usually do it Saturday nights because everybody was here. I would go downstairs. But as far as during the week, I am blessed in the fact that I have a little time. I watch my sister's kids, and one of them is in preschool, so I have a couple hours where I can work on my schoolwork when he's at school before I pick him up. So, I try to get it done when no one's around, basically [laughter].

SP10: The physical preparation, like you said before, I'm busy at a lot of things. I have a career, I'm busy in the church, busy in the community, so just the balancing of time for each chance or each event was important, but I didn't have to do much preparation other than prayer.

SP11: I do currently work two jobs, one full-time, one part-time. I'm going to school full-time, and then I'm very active at my local religious assembly church I've been. As well as I sit on a few boards. One's for educational facility, and then the other, just for recreation. And so, it's difficult to balance.

SP16: That's the beauty about being in this program. Because the classes are one to two times a week and there's some online classes, it really helps me with my lifestyle. So, I

know when my classes are, so I can arrange my job schedule and my children, who are much older, around that schedule. So, they know that one day a week, I'll be in class, so it's just really easier to navigate and handle schoolwork in that program. Time management is very important. I had to literally get a planner and get a schedule out so my kids know where I am and what classes I have. And so, it helps me plan out what to do, who needs to be where.

Career

SP1: Originally, I would have loved to go back to school for some sort of engineering, but most adult programs don't have an engineering program. So, most of it's going to be business, organizational leadership, some of those arch degrees. So organizational leadership, I felt like I was going to get the most out of it, probably.

SP2: I would hope to be promoted to management here at the hospital, where I currently work, or I could move into, I have a lot of health care background. So with the organizational leadership, I figured if I couldn't get into management, maybe I could move into HR. I'm kind of hoping it opens up a possible field should I need to switch or change fields.

SP4: I work at a Fortune 10 company and I just really like the work that I'm doing. And I hope to stay on with the company after I graduate. And I thought organizational leadership was something that could assist me in my current job in my future endeavors with my same company.

SP10: I'm not really looking to move up in my career field per se. But what my objective is -- I intend on coaching. I want to be able to kind of enrich, develop, motivate, and nurture children. And then at the same time kind of welcome in and introduce parents who really don't have a clue as to the hardships that children kind of endure coming up. Particularly as minorities and male minorities. I don't think the school system is friendly to our children, even when they are not at fault for their disposition-- not solely at fault for their disposition. I look at it as parents being mostly at fault, and then those who were put in charge or put in the area to work with children aren't really doing a good job as far as nurturing and developing as opposed to exploiting and just letting them get by without reaching their potential. So that's my hope, to be able to do that.

SP11: Organizational leadership I feel is a very broad program... The definition of getting a group of people together leading them toward achieving a common goal. So, it helps me with this industry whether I was to open my own restaurant, just knowing more of the HR side, which I think a lot of chefs don't know unless they work corporate and running a restaurant. If they work for a hotel or the casinos, the larger organizations that are not private or necessarily franchised, they don't have those skills. I think it'll help me manage a kitchen better, as far as caring for the employees.

SP12: Well, okay, I'll be quite honest with you. I started out when I went back in business and that was going to take me three years and then when I finally realized I could get through organizational leadership in a year and a half, I switched. I'm glad I did though because I'm learning so much about just how important it is. I mean, just the concepts in organizational leadership, how businesses look for some of these things in people, it's not just all about intelligence, it's about emotional intelligence and that kind of thing... Everything in our industry is called a series. They're licenses. So, I have one called a 9/10, which is a branch manager's license. If I wanted to run a branch and lead a branch, I could do that with my licenses. So, this actually fits in, even though that's not the direction I'm going, it actually does fit in with that particular path if I was ever going to go that way.

SP13: Well, actually it doesn't relate [laughter]. It's just they offered five different degrees, and I ruled out the others based on my own personal interest and I thought, "Well, it sounds good." But I decided I'm done with medical. Once I was done, I was done. I didn't want to go back. I didn't like the hospital. And some of the new things going on with healthcare and stuff, I just didn't like it anymore. I didn't want to be in that world anymore, so I said I'm going to completely do a complete career change, which is hard [laughter] because they say I have no experience, so I'm having to start from ground zero. But I'll get through it somehow.

SP18: I always wanted a leadership role but haven't had a whole lot of opportunities to get a leadership type of a role because for most of them, you need a degree for it. I guess I would be a great leader, someone that would understand the ins and outs of other people and how they operate and how to run something, so I thought that that would be the best fit because I felt that I could do a lot with the leadership degree. You won't be stuck working in one specific place. You can do a lot of with it.

Confidence Level

SP1: I would say, on a scale of 1 to 10, coming in, I was probably at about a 4 or 5. Now, maybe an eight or nine. And that's just because I didn't know really what I was getting into. And then after I had a couple classes that I was successful at, then I felt like, "I can do it. I can do anything for two years here [laughter]."

SP2: Yeah, definitely. There's been/ a confidence increase for me, learning how to research databases, put papers together. I mean, like I said before I come from a very small school and by the time I got to be in high school we were not required to do the big writing paper that it seemed had been something all of my sisters had to do.

It's very invigorating I guess is the best word I can think to give you. It's a boost of confidence that not only are you working full time and working four days a week plus and raising kids, but you're actually taking these college-level courses that these kids are doing, and they're doing this all at one time so they're finishing at all I think somebody needs to-- you need to take pride in that and finish it with good grades - is even more of a boost to your confidence.

SP7: Definitely higher. Because that's really great to be in a very supportive program. And the advisers are still available, and they're constantly sending you emails. And that's something you don't get as a traditional student... You know what you need to do, and I'm very confident that I can complete this program.

SP8: I feel like it's something that I've always had. Not that there aren't moments of doubt. We all have them, right? ...But confidence, I'm thankful, I've always had it.

SP9: Oh, totally. It's raised 100% because I'm like a whole different student now. I felt like I wasn't doing it for myself before. I don't know. Or, that I had to prove it to myself, and then I proved that I could do it. And that has been huge for me. But, I'm not also in a work environment where I did things to make myself feel good about myself.

SP10: Like I said, coming from the military I was prepared having led personnel, and then come out in civilian sector, I've been in management positions, taken management courses and trainings, and things of that nature. I would say that I was pretty confident because I didn't look at it as I'm me against someone else. I knew that I had it in me already because I know what I can do if I can just focus in on the task and give it its sufficient time as far as for a study. I was basically confident. I don't know if I'm even more confident now, it's just because it's the time, I think. I look at myself as having the credentials to complete a task.

SP12: I'm still in finance and doing the same thing. I have gained a huge amount of confidence over the years. I didn't even know what I was doing when I started in this business. I got this job as a fluke. I didn't know anything about it, didn't even know if I wanted to stay in it, and turns out I was pretty good at it... So yes, I have definitely gained confidence since I was in school 20-something years ago.

SP13: I've discovered even more about who I am and what I want to be even in the one or two classes I didn't do well in, and I didn't like. But I've loved all the classes I've taken, and that has given me a lot of confidence. And as I've gone along, I'm like, "Wow, I've got an A in this class." And it just really has given me a lot of confidence as I work my way through. I've done a lot better than I thought I would.

SP14: Oh, it's a 360. I mean I'm feeling much more confident and sure of myself and my direction.

SP15: I actually am more confident once I started school as an adult -- before you go to college, you're not really sure what to expect. Especially if you've never been to college before. But the AE program has been good being around adult learners. My confidence has actually increased having gone to classes and taken tests as opposed to lessons. So as long as life doesn't get in the way, which you know it has a tendency to, I'm confident that I can complete my degree.

SP16: Each class builds on my confidence. Each class, each assignment that I have to do, I constantly am building because I'm getting great feedback. So, again, once you get great feedback, that builds your confidence up even more. And when you are applying what you're learning in class to everyday life, it, again, still builds your confidence up. It's a compliment, I think, when my co-workers are telling me, "Oh, your leadership skills are developing in a great manner." I contribute that to the courses that I've been taking. So these courses are preparing me for better and better in my own job life.

SP18: I think it's evolved in a good way. Even now, I still get nerves. I really had nerves about my math class just because I know it's not my strongest area. But I think versus when I started, I think it's a lot better because now that I'm more familiar with writing papers in the correct format and just kind of generally knowing what to expect and just kind of things like that has really helped my confidence level versus when I started. Getting to know the ins and outs of GOMU.

Conquering Fear

SP9: That's why I was afraid I was going to get off on a tangent, because learning is so precious, and I never valued it until I've been back. I mean because I proved to myself that by working hard and by working the way that works for me, I know I can do it.

So I feel like I would tell people, "It's not what it was." I mean, I waited 13, 12 years because I was scared of what I would do when I got out, or what kind of student would I be? And I could have been learning so much this entire time, I think. I love it. I love pulling onto campus because everybody in those buildings is learning [laughter].

SP12: Yeah, talking in big groups, maybe it's my whole fear of presentations and talking in big groups. I don't like it. I prefer smaller groups. But it's just funny. I think people might perceive me as being more introverted and I'm really not [laughter].

SP18: That was one of my fears about returning back to college after being gone for so long, was that I was going to have to take a lot of these remedial courses over again. But I think what also helped me go further with going back to school was that I didn't have to retake all these classes again. Once I found that out, that kind of encouraged me more to go back to school because that was a big factor, also, in me delaying or putting off going back, so that was a big factor.

Expectations

SP1: I wasn't sure what to expect because, at the community college level, I knew that the course load wasn't quite the same. I knew it probably was going to be a little bit heavier for the bachelor's than it was at the community college. And I think that that's true. It is a little bit heavier, little bit more writing and things like that. But I really didn't know what to expect when I was starting, just because I hadn't been at this level before.

SP4: Coming in as an adult learner, I didn't really know what to expect. I didn't know if teachers would be strict about start times and end times. I didn't know if-- I don't know. I didn't know that they'd understand that we do have a job outside of school, and really, I've been so pleasantly surprised... I also feel like I also established that level of respect that I would always be in class and I would be on time if I didn't have some work obligation that I had to attend to otherwise. I think that that kind of goes both ways. But I do think that as long as you go in there as a student and respect your professors, and respect their time, if you had a few work obligations during the semester that it wouldn't be received negatively.

SP8: Honestly, I feel like the AE program have gone above and beyond my expectation. And that has a lot to do with the instructors, the advisors, the accessibility of people who are teaching us. I'm really blown away. I feel warm at GOMU. I feel warm. And I'm going to say this. Traditionally, GOMU is not a place where African-American people, black people are there, right? So, in my education program, there was me. That was it. There were no other black people that I saw in my classes, in math elementary educators, in art elementary educators, in music elementary educators. It was me. I see more now in the AE program. But what I'm seeing is, I still feel warm. I don't feel isolated, or away from the group, or not included, or anything like that. And not that anybody would really be able to make me feel that way [laughter]. But what I'm saying is I don't feel that. I feel warm. I feel like they really want people to succeed.

SP11: My expectations, they exceed my expectations. I'll answer one thing, I'll be honest, like I just go to class. And then, people ask me what classes I'm taking and I know that may sound ignorant to some degree, but I don't know, I just go. I know that the class starts on this date, I know that the class is at this time... So yeah, it's just go in, handle your business, leave, turn in your stuff when you're supposed to, and that's how I view it. So, it's set up where I don't have to do anything extra.

SP13: Actually, I think this has been a really good program. It's actually been better than I had expected. I love that we have a really good advisor. And if I have any questions or concerns, I'll call her and set up a meeting. And she can usually walk me through anything, or work out anything, or tell me anything I need. And having her accessible like that, it's been really a plus. The only need I think they could do probably a little better. I mean, they have the career center, but as far as helping us get-- I don't know. I think most of the AE students probably already have a job, and they're just going to get a promotion, but I'm totally changing careers. I could use a little more help setting up internships, or setting up co-ops, or something to get my foot in the door, get my foot in the door because I'm starting completely over. And that's really hard at this age. And it's hard to know how to do it. I think they know, I mean, sort of getting the job for you. They need to give more instructions on how to get the job because finding a job in today's world is totally different than it was 30 years ago, 20 years ago even. So, the last time I had to look for a job, it wasn't on the Internet. And so that's the transition that I'm having a hard time with. And the career center, I mean, they helped me with the resume, but I found that it wasn't good. It wasn't good enough for my situation. And they didn't understand-- at the career center, they didn't understand my situation because I have all medical and

“you're applying for a different job,” and so the employers are like, “Well.” So, they didn't help me transition my resume correctly. They're more geared toward the younger kids. And I think that could be improved, or maybe they need a different career center or a career person just for older people trying to get jobs.

Well, I only have seven classes left. Two semesters after this two weeks. I have two more semesters, and I'm done. And I am looking forward to being done. Even though I've enjoyed it, I'm ready to be done and move on. I'm about ready to go back to work now and make use and learn, apply in the real world. See how what I've learned applies in the real world. How are they using this in a day-to-day job setting? That's what I want to know next.

SP14: The expectations that I had were if I tried my best, with the good grades that I have-- I've got straight A's so far and I continue to do that. But the teachers are hands down some of the best people I've ever met. My classmates are great. I love everything. Everything about it that they promised me, except for the online classes, has been spot on.

SP15: The only expectations I wanted was just to get a degree, so I just-- I didn't have enough knowledge to have an expectation. But the counselors have been really good. My instructors have been very accommodating. The program has been satisfied my higher educational needs.

SP16: I'm pretty satisfied. When I first started, I was a little intimidated, didn't know what to expect, but with the professors, with my advisors, it just really has gone beyond my expectations on this adult learning process.

SP17: I think that my expectations for myself have been exceeded. Like I said, I wasn't a very good student. Who knew that when you're not out partying, and you actually take time to do your homework and study and things like that, that you can be a really good student. But I kind of mentioned it before, I have been somewhat disappointed a little bit about some of the professors. It feels like some of them haven't quite given as much of themselves as I have given of myself. I feel like I'm giving 100%... But by and large, it's met the expectation. I've learned a lot. I've had to push myself here and there and make myself more disciplined. So, that's always a good thing.

SP18: As far as expectations, I didn't really know what to expect, to be honest. I was a nervous wreck just going back to school after so long just because I just didn't know how I would do academically because I have a hard time focusing on things. I'm always just doing one thing one minute, and then two seconds later, I'm doing something else. I didn't really have any expectations going in. All I really knew about the program, for the most part, was it was designed for adult students that had jobs, and kids, and other obligations. I thought that at least was that it was a better, super fit, what I needed at this time of my life as far as expectations.

Support

SP1: My wife is a stay-at-home mom. She's just recently a stay-at-home mom, and she understands. She knows that it's to better her family and hopefully, I can make a little bit more money with the degree. Its long days for her too, with an infant for that long, so she's suffering through it. But it's like I said, hopefully, it'll pay for itself in the long run, and she knows that. And she's been awesome.

SP4: I've gotten married and I have two other children now. So, all three of my children, and my husband has been so supportive the whole way, and my parents. Everyone just kind of pitched in to help out with giving the kids a ride or getting them where they needed to be, so I could really focus on school.

SP8: I'm really blessed to have both my parents still here. I'm not married, I'm not currently in a relationship. So, it's me, my son, my mom, and my dad. We all live together, which makes life for me almost stress free. I don't have to worry about a sitter. I don't have to worry about how my son's going to get picked up from school. My parents are both retired... But I'm blessed to have the support of my family. So, a lot of the stressors that a lot of the people face about child care, or, "How is my child going to get his homework done," or, "I can't make it to the awards ceremony--" my parents are there.

SP12: I have a wonderful husband who thankfully is the one who does all the cooking anyway, so it's not like they're missing me in terms of mom making meals and things like that. He really just picks up the slack for me and I couldn't do it without him honestly. I was very active before I started school. I did boot camp and went to the gym three or four times a week, and I had to put that on hold specifically in the last 16 weeks because I've been on campus twice a week for 16 weeks, which is a lot. Typically, you have a mixture of online classes in there, but mine, I had four on-campus classes in the two eight-weeks. So that's two nights a week away from home, so I couldn't go and go with my normal workout schedule after that because I'd be gone four nights a week, which is completely unfair, and I wouldn't want to be away from my family, so that's affected me kind of. It stinks because I hate not being able to work out, but I'd rather be at home and see the kids and stuff. So, for the most part we've made it work. I mean the kids have been very supportive. They understand that this is important, and I want to be able to show a good example for them, and just kind of be like, "Don't do things the way I did them. This is not fun [laughter]." But they've been very supportive and they're like, "Mom, is tonight a class night?", and that kind of thing, but it's worked out okay.

I feel like I've had it a little bit easier because of the support I have at home. But there's also people that I talk to that have literally quit their jobs, and just been supported by their husbands so they've had it easier than I have. I would just say people accomplish amazing things and there's people in so much worse situations than I'm in that can accomplish great, great things.

SP15: Well, my wife is very supportive because she also-- even though she does not have her degree, we all value learning, and that's something that's always been a priority.

Both of my kids are the same way. Well, my daughter's in school now. My son, he has his associate degree and he's currently working, but we've always valued education. And so, they've been very, very supportive in my goal of getting my bachelor's.

SP16: Because my children are 16, so they're also in their own study needs. So, it's kind of nice because when we are all sitting there doing our homework together, they understand that I'm trying to accomplish things, they're trying to accomplish things, and they see me working hard completing my thing, and so it actually inspires them to do as just as well in school. So, it actually has helped all of us in the sense of our academics.

SP17: Yeah. The toughest critic there is - is always going to be myself on me and my wife constantly is telling me that. For example, this past semester that just ended, I got my first ever B, up until for-- how many semesters? Nine semesters. The lowest grade I've ever got was an A minus. And I got my first B. And my wife had to try to point out-- by the way, that semester started the same week that my second child was born. So, for the four months of that semester was four months of my second child's life. [His wife] "Oh and by the way, you just got a promotion when you're trying to figure out this new job. Oh, and you're in school. A "B" is okay." So yeah. I mean, at the end of the day, I'm really pleased with what I-- when you sit back, and you look at the things that are going on in my life and that I'm holding a 3.87 or something like that.

Influencers

SP2: Well, I do have girlfriends and things like that. They've all been very encouraging. Co-workers. They say, "You can do this, I've got faith in you. You just got to buckle down, do what you got to do." So, everybody that I've ever run across or have told me that I'm doing this has been encouraging. As far as what they say – yes, but for me to actually tell you, influence-wise, for me the influence has been the two things, that's been my girls, my family, my girls, and my motivation to want to do more in my career here at the hospital.

My girls. That may be a cliché answer, but I want to show my girls that it's possible. I do have one daughter in nursing school at NKU, and if I keep to my classes this time around, she and I will both graduate at the same time, and I'm proud of that and I hope she is, too.

SP4: There is. My very first class that I took, I was so nervous and intimidated. The professor that I had is a professor in the organizational leadership department and his name is J_____. And I ended up having him like three or four times throughout my program, and he was just such an amazing, influential person. He just really got to know the students and it wasn't just an instructor-student relationship. He cared about you as a person. He cared about you in your professional career. He cared about you in your family life. Professors like him, get going back and getting your degree just a pleasure. His classes were fun, and I learned so much from him.

The way that the courses are formatted in the adult learning program, is that when you go back, and you have your path of classes to take, your academic advisor is absolutely

influential. I feel like when I was there, before, as a traditional student, I could never meet with my advisor. She just never had time. But now coming back as an adult learner, my advisor is just so into early registration, in putting classes actually in your cart that you have to register for, and just coming up with-- it's like a matrix or a plan that says, "These are the classes you'll take at this semester. If you can take four here, you should take four." They're just absolutely so influential.

SP7: I guess, that's probably where my intrinsic motivation comes from. I am the youngest of seven children. I'll be the only one to have completed any kind of higher education. ...I would just say overall, just two different people that I worked with over the years. To us, to better understand the work cultures in general, and then to get back and bring it back. So, we've been out of the program for about almost four years. And my current organization, my department was very supportive and encouraged me to go back and take advantage of tuition reimbursement.

SP8: My direct supervisor says, "Yes, do it. Yes, let's go. Let's get it."

SP9: I would say the one thing that sticks with me is my father, who always wanted me to finish school, and he passed a couple years ago. So I feel like that sticks with me. I think my kids are definitely an influence, just to be a role model for them.

SP10: One was my wife, she was probably a motivation for me. She had just graduated from UC in December so I kind of made my mind up really at that point when I kind of talked her into going back to school. That kind of propelled me.

SP11: As an adult learner, definitely would have to be my intermediate family. Between my maternal grandmother and grandfather, my father, my mother, and then my maternal aunt, my mother's sister, and my father's brother because they're all successful in what they do in their industry. My uncle, he worked for Nike. So, he's been at organization for years. He was _____ Nike manager for a large portion of that time. And then he branched off and it was another successful golfer, female golfer. He was her agent for a few years. And he worked for an agent, started his own, and now he works for the _____ as a vice president of a certain department. And then my aunt, she's in medical administration. Been doing that, assistant director for three hospitals in Illinois. And that's just a little bit. My dad was a state trooper. So, everyone around me, they have at least associate's or higher. They've worked and just moved up in different companies or worked for a few organizations. So, they're always, "Hey, you got to have that piece of paper." For lack of better words. If you want to move up, you have to have skills you know, but also to have the things to back you up. So, they were influential.

SP11 (continued): There is one woman. I think she has since graduated. She graduated I think last May of 2017. But my second class, she was in there. And I watched how she was answering questions for the professor. She was an older woman. And she gave her background, but I know that she was over 50. She was a widow, and she was just given different things, and she won a Woman of the Year award. Very humble, very sweet. But I watched her in this class. It was astronomy. And everyone in there, I mean, we were

bombing the tests collectively. Like for a fact, we were talking about it [inaudible]. And she was the only one that was getting As and Bs. Well, I sat behind her and I watched how she studied. She printed out the PowerPoints, along with the notes. Then she took notes on the bottom of the PowerPoint. And then she would go back and review them and brought them to class. That I feel is difficult. I don't know if it's going to come up later for you. But I do find it difficult at times to organize your life to go back to school. Especially if you're already into employment, been there for a while, so you've got to interject that. But for her, she reviewed the information prior to coming, and she did have certain questions that she didn't understand with her reading or research. So then for her, things are making sense when she asked the professor.

SP12: My husband was definitely an influence. I mean, there's been a couple of tough times where I'm like, "You know what, I'll just quit this, I'll just stop it. This is too much." And he's like, "No, I want you to get your degree. I want you to get your degree." So he's definitely been an influence.

SP13: I've made friends in the classes who've had more than one class with me, and the fact that they're doing it too and were around the same age or at least the same generation, that helps better than being surrounded by a bunch of 20-year olds [laughter]. To me, that shows I'm not alone, and I can do this. And then even the professors, they don't talk down to us. They actually almost think of us as peers almost. They don't treat us like the 20-year-olds, and they expect more of us, but we always do better.

SP14: The biggest one is my grandparents. They have just been invaluable the whole time. Supporting me. Not just if I need like financial assistance or something like that, but encouragement and telling me, "We always knew you could do it. We knew you were capable of it. You're like a completely different person since you started going back to school. It's just we're so happy." So yeah, my grandparents were huge. My brother is a huge support, both of my brothers, actually pretty much all siblings are a huge support. They both graduated from GOMU. My parents, they're a pretty big support. It's just they've got their own things going on right now so that is what it is.

SP17: Well someday came and came and came, and then finally my wife, she actually graduated from a master's program at __ and had been pushing me or trying to get me to consider going back to get a degree or finish a degree. And really, the day that I watched her graduate and walk across the stage with her master's was kind of the final motivation I needed to say, "Okay, I need to do this." ...And so I was determined that when she finished, that it was my turn. I was going to go back. A co-worker of mine had graduated that same year from the AE program at GOMU. That's how I heard about it. So, I started looking into it and the next thing I knew, I was enrolled and now, couple years later, here I am.

Well, obviously, my wife was a big supporter and nudge person to build my confidence and say, "No, you really can do this. You should do this. You're not the same kid who used to party all the time and not go to class. It'll be different." ... But the other motivating factor was professional. I'm in management at a financial services company

and I managed to get myself from a fine art background to management. I was a supervisor of an annuity team with a FINRA series licensed representative. And I could very easily-- my boss say, "Look, you're kind of topping out of your potential because of your education. You can only go so far in this world." He says, "Here's your ambition, this is what you want, but this thing is going to hold you back. So, you have to make changes if you want to actually keep going." And so, that was definitely in the back of my mind.

SP18: I think, first, influence. I think seeing other people in leadership roles kind of made me want to be in a leadership role, specifically people that were not leaders. Just because I've seen a lot of-- I've seen a lot of good leadership, too. But I've seen some really bad leadership. And I thought I'd be good at it because I would take people's considerations or their feelings and their consideration.

Needs—Met and Unmet

SP2: I feel like in the class setting, I do feel like I get what I need. As far as being distracted, it can happen but it's not the way you would think like I have the problem here by myself with the ADD. If there's a distraction, she's like because there's a distraction for the whole class. You know what I mean? There's enough going on that I feel like I can gather what's being taught or what's being said probably more so than if I was trying to watch a lecture or something like that online from either Blackboard or Canvas which actually, it's much easier for me to take in the class, take notes when I'm in class.

SP7: Overall, I'm very satisfied with how it's working. Still, I have few little glitches. But the building that we're in-- we've mentioned it to our professor and he's going to take care of it. But I think there's only one very small computer lab and it doesn't work. And that's a little frustrating because we should have access to-- we're taking classes at the main campus, and even though we are on the main campus, we're kind of off in the way in the old building. But the technology should be accessible to us.

SP9: Well, I would say the huge difference with being back at college that has helped me with the program is how far the academics have come. Like I said prior, the learning difficulties-- I love how it seems like a lot of professors have incorporated different types of learning, so they'll have a quick YouTube clip on what they're going to talk about, or they'll have you get in groups. That's all been very helpful and aided to my success, because if I had to sit and just listen to a lecture, I wouldn't have been able to retain the information so much. So I think that's going across all academics as far as they're starting to realize that the information sticks a lot more when you do different approaches, and if they're engaged with your students.

SP11: I feel like it's more about the quality than the quantity. So, you don't just feel like a number. Every time that I had an issue I called my advisor, which is very few, but the ones that I felt were large enough issues, she solved them within 30 seconds. I don't think we had a conversation lasting over two minutes. Even meeting her in person for the first time to get set up for the classes. I don't think I was there any more than five minutes. She

had all my information, everything organized in an Excel sheet, I mean to a tee. It was saying, this is when you'll graduate, this is what you need to do. And then even if you do, she had to supplement a couple classes, you know like, "Okay, well, if you don't want to do this, you can do this, just call me at the time. I'll send you a notice or call you to remind you." And she was, she was very prompt, you know, to me again, that's being organized.

SP13: I think there's a need for someone different, someone who specializes in older people trying to change careers, mid-life career change. And maybe there's not that many. I don't know. Nobody's ever said, "You need this." But I have tried to use the career center, and I think they're great for the 20-year-olds, but they're kind of directing them, and I'm not in that position, and I found it's a little different for me. I need some instruction on, "Okay, in your situation, you should do this. Your resume should look like this." I don't really know what I need to be doing. But I do know it's different from what a 20-year-old should be doing.

SP14: I don't like online classes. I don't mind taking a test online. I don't mind doing homework online. But I like spinning my gears and we talk a lot every time we're in a class. There's just something about a classroom that's just -- you can't get online. It's the interaction. It's the going to the class. It's the camaraderie, the, I guess you can call it the struggle. You know what I mean? We talk about life and-- so it's really the classroom time is very important to me. And when I hear about they're starting to put more classes online - they were going to start doing that - I told them, I said to my classmates, "We'll petition this year because we didn't sign up for online classes." Nobody gets anything out of it. It's just you're taking our money and we're not enjoying it. Do you know what I mean? Part of adult learning is to enjoy it. So, the online classes are not meeting expectations and they're not fulfilling. That's the only complaint that I have.

SP14 (continued): Yeah, and honestly, I mean I hate to sound bad, but I don't really care where I get a degree from as long as it's an accredited university. But I am proud to be where I'm at, so yeah. I live like 10 minutes from GOMU, so it works out great.

SP18: I think my needs are being met, as far as that goes. I really do. I don't know how to elaborate on it, but I know some of the professors, they kind of let you, like an assignment, for example, kind of, "Hey, what situation has happened in your life? Apply what we learned to something that's happened in your life or whatever." So just having those real-world experiences and stuff really has kind of helped I guess with that. ...I think a lot of it just depends on student needs. So, some students can do well in every course. Some can't. Maybe if they offered 16-week courses for some adult learners, maybe that could be something. But other than that, I'm not really sure. Everything's been pretty good so far.

Relationships—Peer

SP1: Now, that I'm a little bit older, I don't think it does as much. If I would've been taking these classes at 23, 24, I think it probably would've been a lot more beneficial,

being a little bit younger. But now that I've been in the workforce, and I've kind of gone through, kind of, the same things that we're doing, just with group projects, speaking in front of people, and stuff like that, I don't know if I'm getting as much out of it as I might have if I did it earlier, if that makes sense.

SP2: I will admit, I actually preferred to work on my own. That probably sounds horrible [laughter]. Isn't that horrible? Only because I don't want to have to put my docs in with somebody and not know whether they're going to do it or not. So, I don't have a problem making friends to do projects in class and things like that.

SP7: You don't realize it when you're online, but actually being in class, again, it's nice to know that you have every kind of student who has the same perception, or you can ask some questions. Just filling in the blanks so that you didn't miss anything, so it is nice to have that interaction that if you were-- especially because everybody has a different perspective, it's kind of interesting versus being online ... It's nice to be able to have interaction with your instructor. I mean, you obviously have the ability to email them, but you sometimes don't always do that.

SP8: Usually by where you sit. We all get a little territorial about-- I don't care what anybody says, you go to class on the first day-- and most of the time people don't move around. They go to their seat and it's the seat they sit in. And this is me, and most people are the same way. And most of my relationships have been built around the people that I sit around, and I haven't exchanged one phone number with anybody. We did exchange emails because we have to do a project together. ...And I think that's more of a testament to what people are already doing in their lives. You just come to class! You come to class to come to class, and you do what you have to do, and you get on out of there.

SP11: No, not through my peers. To be honest, mine is kind of like being, if you will, back at grade school, and you sit there and say, "my friend," not understanding the power of the word. ...So, we have a class together, we may build a rapport for that class, whether-- it may come up that we have to work in a group together, it may come up that we need to do certain things. I've never seen any of them outside of the class. ...No, I don't have a relationship with anybody.

SP13: I was really surprised that most people, they'll talk to you after the first day, and they'll say, "Let's exchange numbers, and we can get together or we can--" you just kind of always find someone who can help you with anything you're having problems with. You can work together, and it helps a lot to have other people around like you. They've always been willing. I've never been in any class where nobody talked to me or anything. Every class, you always at least find one or two people that you can help or trade notes with or ask questions too. And that helps a lot. That's something you need, or I've needed throughout the program is someone to call and say, "Hey, I didn't quite understand this." Or, "What do you think about this." Or to bounce ideas off of, or ask about the homework, or if they were having a hard time with it, and usually, we can talk through-- if there's any issues I was having, I'd call somebody, and I've met with people at their

houses. We've met here at the school. We've met outside of the class at some point and it's really helped getting through.

SP15: I can't say that there's relationships. I mean, you know, I get along with everybody. That's kind of my default. I couldn't have gotten where I'm at now if I didn't do that. And, so, I just go by the rule that you just treat people with respect, you have a positive attitude, and that carries you a long way. And, you know, again, my outspokenness, it's not belligerent, it's not with anger. Behind it is a motivation. But, just as trying to contribute and participate in class and to offer them a viewpoint which may be different from one they've encounter in their normal life. ... We had a couple of people who are younger than 30 in my class, and it's-- I mean, it's interesting listening to their point of view. They are still in a similar situation even though we're far apart in age, similar to mine, so most of them are working full-time, and they're there just to get an education either to advance their career goals, mostly to advance their career goals. So, we probably share more things in common than not.

SP16: With my peers, because I've been in a couple courses now with the same group of individuals, I've actually been able to professionally kind of exchange information and get together on the outside of, actually, courses. So, you kind of forge a different professional relationship with other people.

SP18: I think being in-class versus online definitely made a difference. I've done a group project for online class. And we did really well on it, but it was more of just, "Let's just get together and get it done," type of thing. Where the traditional classes that we actually had to go to, it was still, "Let's get done," but you kind of build relationships with some of those people. Some of those people I've been in classes with before, they know your strengths, you know theirs, and their weaknesses, and what each person is good or not good at. So as far as the peers, I think in-class was definitely more of a valuable experience because you get to know - just people that you're working with.

Relationships—Professor

SP9: I would say that the relationships and the professors are phenomenal. The one main thing I loved about the AE program is that every single professor I had was different, in a good way, but they all had the same bottom line principles. I loved the fact that they were all so different. One would be funny and maybe not as organized, but then one is very young but very organized. But I felt like it was a lot of not telling me what I should think or feel, and I really got a lot of that when I was back prior. And maybe it was coming from an all-girls high school to a college, but I like it now. I feel like I'm not hearing professors' point of views to the point of where it would skew what I feel. Do you know what I mean?

SP10: I've met professors who are very cordial. I don't think I've met a professor who was stand-offish in any kind of way. I've met, in types of students or my peers who I would love to have time to do things in addition to class. But it's almost impossible [laughter]. There's not a whole lot of males who attend GOMU. There's some females

who may be from _____ but just to be practical, the associations I don't think is there. Yeah, I would like to because that is what being diverse is all about.

SP12: Yes. When you work with an instructor face-to-face, and they know you and they - and I've had several of them several times, so it kind of raises the bar. There's an expectation there that I set for myself where it's like, "Okay, this person knows me personally, I don't want to let them down in any way." Whereas, I feel like if I'm online it's definitely easier to kind of skate by and just not put as much effort in and still make a good grade. Because, if you don't know somebody face-to-- I don't feel like-- the only person I'd really be letting down is myself if I don't do well. I'm not letting down an instructor.

SP13: The professors are, I think, even more willing to work with us. They're always willing to work with you if you have any problems. They understand that we're in a different position than a 19-year-old or a 20-year-old. We have families, and jobs, and lives. Our lives are full adult lives going on, and they understand that. And every one of them are more than willing to work with you to help you get your assignments done, or turn them in when you can, or whatever you need help with. They're more than willing, and that helps a lot.

SP14: I have not had a professor where I didn't shake their hands at the end of the semester and say I wish we could extend this another eight weeks. So, I could get the whole effect of your teaching because I love you so much. Except for my online professor. I cannot stand him. I can't stand his responses. I can't stand the way he answers questions. I've called the guy. I really can't stand him... Yeah, absolutely. I think I could have a lot of friends at work if I wanted to, but I try not to mix the two, and so these are kind of like my friends here. Like my friend, _____. He is from _____. Somewhere in Africa. We have the same major and have the same class together. It's great to have a best friend to talk to. You know what I mean?

SP15: I've had good relationships with all my professors. Being 50 years old and in the position I'm in, I'm outspoken. I always contribute to class and always give my opinion, but I always do it in a respectful way [laughter]. And a lot of the professors appreciate that. Then on top of that, I mean, I'm older than-- actually, I think I've been older than all - no, no, that's not true. My sociology professor-- I'm older than most of my professors. And most of them do respect the fact that I've worked professionally for probably as long as they've been alive on the earth. I haven't had any professors that have been too arrogant or too difficult to deal with. Most of them have been-- actually, no, all of them have been very easy to deal with, and I've had good relationships with all of them. Most of them appreciate that I'm there to learn and I'm there to contribute. And, as a result, that enhances our relationship and doesn't serve as an obstacle.

SP16: It's been good. I think each professor brings a different challenge and a different perspective. Some are a little bit easier to talk to or kind of get the information relayed across. And then others are just kind of strictly by the book, they kind of just read to you.

And others are more engaging. The more engaging ones, class tends to be a lot more fun and actually goes quickly.

SP18: I think there's definitely a difference in something like that, with online teachers versus in-class teachers. I think the connection I've made with the teachers I've actually physically went to class with have been way better connections than the ones that I've took classes from online. Just kind of like you're passing through online, and that's kind of it. You don't really get to know the teacher, or their experiences, or anything. And when you're in the in-class thing, teachers more so kind of talk about their experiences and you get that chance to kind of interact with them face-to-face, and you kind of get to know them for who they are, rather than just it being a person sitting behind a computer and you've never seen them a day in your life. And you'll never see them, what they look like or anything [laughter].

Transformational Experiences

SP1: I'm noticing a difference in the way that I've dealt with some of the people, just as far as some of the soft skills and, like I said, the relationships between me and them. Maybe I was communicating with them in a way that wasn't as beneficial as could be. And I think these classes have helped me with that, dealing with people that are different than me, personality-wise.

SP4: Just because I've learned a lot about how to deal with people that are different than me. You get into this idea as you grow up, and people are different, and this program's really kind of shone a light on-- that people do things differently, but that's okay too, that you could still come to the same outcome. I don't know. I feel like that that's one of the most beneficial things as well.

SP9: Oh, every day, every day. I'm trying to think of specifically-- my son, oldest, is 13 so I feel like a lot of psychology of businesses and things like that I carry on and talk to him about. I think the main thing that I always talk about is just people and differences in dealing and working with people. I feel like that is what I've learned and that's what I'm trying to communicate with the kids, because this person might have said this to you, look at the bigger picture type of thing. How can you deal with this effectively? I mean, I think the whole point of life is trying to communicate, learn to communicate, and listen to each other's language.

SP15: Yes, actually. There are things we studied about performance appraisals. Also, a lot of the things that I'm learning in leadership are principles that I've practiced myself but didn't know that they had names and didn't know that they were actually studied. So, we've been talking about the different styles of leadership autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire and I've seen all of those throughout my career. And I try to take the best parts of involving those who work for me in decision making, setting goals together, constant feedback, and two-way communication. And I try to be-- and then mentoring. So, actually a lot of things that I'm learning I have already been applying, but I just now I can apply them more so and realize they actually have a name to them as opposed to--

basically, I was just trying to follow the Bible's counsel do onto others as you wish them to do onto you.

SP16: It's actually helped me become a little bit more organized. It helps me understand the leadership role that I'm currently in and how to move forward in a new leadership role.

SP17: Well I will say that, so this is my third year at GOMU. I've been dean's list the whole time. I've got a national honor society membership through GOMU. So, it's been a whole different kind of college experience academically. Well in September, I replaced the boss that I was just talking about as the head of the department. So now I have 30 people reporting to me as the head of the department. And a big driving force was the fact that I was able to implement things that I was learning and different things with people at a higher leadership levels. Communication, organizational communication, just different things changed with my mental state to be able to carry myself differently. And it wasn't all the classes, but there was definitely pieces that I was able to put into my professional life that showed the leadership that needed to make a decision of who was going to get promoted to replace my boss when he got promoted, that I truly feel like this has helped me get the next step, that I don't know if I necessarily would have gotten had I stayed the same course and I wasn't a year away from graduating.

SP18: I think I'm better academically now than I was at 18. I think it's just life experiences. I think that's a lot of it. I'm able to kind of comprehend more real-life situations and things that are happening in the world. I think that's helped me be more prepared academically than I was when I was 18.

Adult Education at GOMU

SP1: It was the hybrid program that took care of all my registration. That was big for me because at the community college that I worked at or that I went to before, registration was a headache, trying to get all the classes in. This class was only offered in the spring, and it's only offered once a year, and all that stuff. This program, in particular, had a plan mapped out, over two years. So, you knew exactly what classes you were going to be in and when you would graduate and all that stuff. So that was big for me.

I remember when I started community college, I was three or four years out of high school when I went back to community college. And when I did, I kind of wanted to give up because the registration process was so aggravating. It was like they make it so hard on you, you don't want to go back. So that experience and then the experience I've had here has been polar opposites. And you're right, it does. It makes a lot easier to just go to school and not have to worry about that other stuff. ...It seems like it's pretty diverse. I was under the impression it was going to be all people maybe around my age. But I've seen people from 70, all the way down to 22, all different walks of life, different jobs, different cultures, races. I mean, it's pretty diverse.

SP4: The professors are so involved in your success. And just the way that they do the classes and have availability of the classes, it's really an ideal situation right now.

I think it's wonderful. I think it's different for sure, but I feel like we get kind of the benefits of both, that we get all the benefits of being a student at this huge organization with student discounts or there's a gorgeous rec center on campus. We get all those benefits that traditional students get, but we also get this added layer of professional respect and understanding that we are adults. We do have real-world work experience. So it's really the best of both worlds, I think.

SP7: The leadership courses, all their instructors have been very enlightening. Just overall, even if you-- no matter what your role will be, after the program, you'll definitely be a better employee because you'll be able to understand-- I think it will give you a greater emotional intelligence in whatever you choose to do.

The only thing I've heard is that they're shortening the classes to seven weeks. I'm not sure when exactly that begins, possibly in January, the winter semester. That makes me a little bit nervous because eight weeks is pretty challenging.

I haven't actually reached out to anybody because they will-- unless it's financial aid related, they will handle it for us, like simple things. So helpful. You want to order your parking pass, or your student ID card, they handle all the logistics of that. You just give them your information, the payment information, they would go and pick it up and bring it to us. And that's fantastic [laughter].

SP8: I have found a way to make it work. So, required readings for classes, I make that work. What I find in this adult learning program, and I don't know if I should say this or not but, we have books, but our lecture covers what they're going to cover on the test. So, at this point, I don't feel like the textbook, is overly necessary, because they're instructing us on what they want us to know and what they're going to test us on. It's totally and completely lecture, or if they do like a special handout or something like that. It's all over that. It's not necessarily over that piece that might be in a textbook or-- it's not that.

SP10: Teachers are more patient and understanding of the transition that's needed. So yeah, I would promote adult learning by all means. Like I said, I have always wanted it.

SP12: I think AE, in and of itself, I think it's a great program... I think they're trying to do great things and so just having that degree from that college at all I think is something to be proud of. I didn't really do a lot of cost comparison; I think it's reasonably priced.

SP13: And what I really like is the people here walked me through the entire process. And I didn't have to guess because it'd been 30 years since I'd signed up for a college class. And obviously, computers now are not what they were 30 years ago, and everything's online. And that's what really helps -- they have walked me through everything I needed to do. They told me step-by-step, "Do this. Fill out this paperwork.

Do this." And they showed me everything, and they made it easy for me. So, I appreciated that.

There's a lot of other degree programs that I think older adults could benefit from... I think they need to offer more degrees. I think that could be improved. But there's only so many classes they offer that are AE classes that are offered at night. So, I think they just need to expand it a little more.

SP14: So if I have to go to the financial aid office or something like that, I have to schedule an appointment, because I can't just go during the day like a regular "traditional student".

We're talking 35 seconds from the center of campus. I mean I don't really consider it that far away. I guess some people do. I mean, I know it's not in a single building and-- I actually find it convenient because the parking lot's small, so I don't have to deal with hundreds and hundreds of cars and a huge long walk like every time I have to go the main campus. So I actually find it beneficial. But the question is, do I like it that way? The answer is yes. Do I wish more of my classes were on-campus with the younger students? Yeah, that'd be nice. Being the older one and talking to the other kids and seeing what's going on. A lot of my classes getting ready to come up will be in the main building, which is kind of unusual but that's the way IT is going.

SP15: Well, I wanted Org Leadership as a degree. And I looked at online-- which, I don't like online. I'm not even fond of the online classes at GOMU. But that's just the way that teaching is done nowadays. I always wanted a degree from a brick-and-mortar university that was regionally accredited. And so when I found the program at AE, and one that was catered towards adults, too-- I found AE had just ticked off all my boxes, and so that's why I went for GOMU.

Oh, I love the eight-week classes. Matter of fact, when they drop to seven next year, that'll be even better. Yeah, I like the accelerated program. I could not imagine trying to stay engaged in one class for 16 weeks, because generally, about the time the eight weeks comes up, I'm ready to move on to the next thing. ...I've had female instructors. I've had black instructors, white male instructors. It is a diverse program.

SP16: I've been pleased with the program. I don't know if they can offer a little bit more of variety of bachelor's degrees might help. I'm not quite sure what they can or what they can't offer because most of it may not fit everyone's desires. So maybe they can kind of change it up a little bit.

SP17: So a program like AE? Yes, I would recommend to where there's classes that are accelerated, they allow you to take classes at your own speed and you can still finish in four years... I can't say that I would necessarily recommend GOMU. I find that they are not very supportive when it comes to adult learners. Their bookstore sucks quite frankly. They're only open until 5:00 o'clock most days. I don't get off work until 5:00 o'clock. And as I said before, I work 45 minutes away. If traffic is bad, I'm barely making it to a

6:00 o'clock class. And you can't even get to the bookstore to pick up a book. I have to get out of work early to get there or I have to pay to have it shipped to me, which is just added expense. I've gone through it round and round with that. I've had a lot of different things where I feel like GOMU really doesn't care about their adult learner population, which is really unfortunate. So, a program like AE, absolutely recommend it. At GOMU? I don't know.

I wrote an email to the-- not the chancellor, but the person that's supposed to be like the ombudsman of the university. I'm trying to think of the actual name of it. Basically, kind of venting my frustration because that's supposed to be the person in the university that is supposed to care about those kind of things. And I tried to lay out, "Look, I'm 34 years old. I work for a large company that could potentially send more people to your university. I am in a place in my life where I'm an immediate alum that could actually make contributions to your program. Why wouldn't you want to make my experience the best as possible? I'm an immediate alum that has earned income at a higher level instead of being an entry-level position and having to work 10 years to get to that. I feel like I'm the kind of person that you would kind of want to make sure that they have a good experience." But I got really no response out of that. And it's just disappointing.

SP18: I think the point that I really liked about the AE Program is because this degree program is laid out for you, and you know what you were going to take from semester to semester, rather than waiting until assignment time and having to fight three other students for the same class. You kind of know what's coming up ahead. And there's none of where they're just trying to throw you in any kind of class just because they're trying to get rid of you because they don't really want to talk to you at that point type of thing, where they're not trying to help you. ... Sometimes when I think about it, the longer drive is much worth it because the experience is much better for me as far as the treatment. And they really are there to help you, and again, that map of knowing what you need to do to get it done.

Academic Advisors

SP1: They've been phenomenal. Like I said, they kind of give you a two-year program, and if you have any questions at all, I'll email my adviser, and she'll literally do whatever it takes. If I want more online, then she'll put a note in my file, and she starts putting more online classes. If I want to take a certain class, she can move things around. They've been awesome, really good. I think, in our program, there's only three or four people that I've dealt with, but every single one of them have been extremely helpful.

SP7: And that way you know that you're on the right track and you're not wasting time taking classes you don't need, so I love it.

SP17: For five years, I did not know who my advisor was. I went out there, tried to schedule classes on my own and was just stupid. Really, honestly, it was dumb. But I didn't know any better. But at GOMU, from day one, here's the plan, here's what you want to do. I've had to alter some things. Last summer, I had shoulder surgery, so I had to

alter a couple things in the summer class because I didn't really want to drive from my house on the west side, to my work in B___ and then down to GOMU and then back because I was driving with one arm. I wanted to limit that. So, I was able to manipulate some stuff and... she's been really great the whole time - that's one of the - in my opinion - one of the shining stars about the AE program is the advisors that they have.

Academic Performance

SP4: No remedial, I was able to just go right in.

SP8: I will say that I was focused on getting a C or better in that class. There's no way I was going to accept anything less. I was shooting for an A. I knew that was kind of unrealistic because I'm not a Math girl, but I tried it. And I ended up with a B+.

SP10: A couple of classes I've had to take over. And the thing about it is, is that both classes that I had to take over I was interested in. That is, it was so much work I think the retention method-- I mean, the retention need just practically blew me away. When you have to-- you're looking through five and six chapters of information-- it was just a lot for me. I took two online classes at, I think, eight each time. And I think that was probably my problem. I should have probably [taken] one in-class and one out, but the way AE sets them up some time, it's kind of that's the way they do it.

SP11: It's fluctuated. There have been a few classes I did not care for. There was one when I first began the degree program and I dropped it at the last minute. I knew it wasn't working but I was trying my best. But I wasn't understanding any of the material. The instructor, the professor to me was fine, but it just wasn't that clear. I wasn't processing what was taught, well enough.

My program performance is at the highest level - out of two other centers and then the highest on our campus. So that's a blessing. At the same token, it's more auto-pilot, where I'm able to be more creative, I'm not. And so, I say that because that does affect the academia part of me because it's kind of like how do I give enough energy and time to each one.

SP12: I feel really good about it. I wasn't a very good student 20-something years ago. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I wasn't focused, and I didn't have a very good GPA. And now I'm pretty much straight-As, except for my stats class. That was something I had to retake, and I hated so I got a B in it. But for the most part, I'm getting As. I'm a good writer and a lot of this program is about writing and so it works out really well for me. But no, I'm really pleased with what I've learned and what I'm doing academically, for sure.

SP13: Actually, I've done a whole lot better than I thought I would. I've done really well. I think I got a 3.3 grade-point average, but the only reason it came down is because, like I said, accounting didn't agree with me [laughter]. I just cannot do accounting. I had to take it twice. But all my other classes, especially the coding and stuff that I thought I would

never be able to do, I've gotten As in. I surprised myself, and actually, I've done a lot better than I thought I would.

SP14: Yeah. I'd say there's a little bit of fluctuation. A lot of it depends on what's going on at work. As an adult learner, 40 hours a week, I managed to stay on top of it but it's a lot. So sometimes I get stressed out. And from mental exhaustion, I cannot put 100% into some things, but I put 90%. Whereas somebody has four or five kids, because I'm single with no kids, I can put the 90% when I'm exhausted, whereas they're lucky to get the time to be able put 60% into it. So, in that regard, I have more time than other people as far as adult learning. But personally, yeah, I mean, it fluctuates a little bit for me but not much.

Campus Life

SP7: I don't really engage in much, because I don't live nearby. It's not really convenient for me. And I don't know, because when you're in-- again, if I was younger I might, but being an adult, I don't really know that I would show up to a college game.

SP10: There is no, really for me, other than going to school there's really not a lot of engagement. And I said I wish it were more than that because, I don't know that I need the college-- I had the college buzz before... So yeah, I would love to be more engaged with social events but it's difficult.

SP11: I haven't utilized the gym to know that it exists. It's crucial and I think for adult learners, I think it would be because, let's say you're coming from work, and you're usually a gym-goer. You can go and park -- because I just talked to a group of them just the other day that didn't know that they had access to the gym. And they're like, "Oh, for real?" And I'm like, "Yeah, you didn't know that... So, I think it makes a difference.

SP13: Well, I am interested in some things. Most of it I'm not. But I think there is a need. They had the business week. That was actually required for us to attend for some of our classes. They really needed to have those at night because a lot of people had to take off work in order to attend, and yet it wasn't necessarily required, but it was an extra-credit thing. But it was really interesting actually to attend, but they needed to have more of the sessions after 6:00 p.m. for AE, because there's a lot of AE students. There's enough that it would get-- they could have two or three sessions at night after 6:00 p.m. I was able to go. I wasn't working at the time, but there was one, yeah, I did have to take off the year before last or something, but I got the latest one I could. So there are some things they do that are of interest to AE students, but they can't go because you've got to pay for this education. You're going to work. You're working, and all the classes are in the evening, but I don't know that a lot of things are of interest other than things like career fair.

SP14: I mean, I thought about doing class-- what do they call it, student council? But I don't have time for the election and I can't meet during the day. Yeah, I wanted to do some of the fraternity stuff. Now that I'm older, I can't do any of that, most of it, because the way it is the only time I have mostly for homework besides some of the weekday stuff so. I mean, that's a challenge to be part of some of those activities for sure.

SP16: I've been invited, but I have not had the time to actually partake in those things. But I'm okay with that [laughter]. I'm okay with that. Again, it is a very vibrant college life and I had my time as a traditional college student way back when. So now it's just a different mindset that I have. So, for me, although I thank them for the invitation, it wouldn't be something I would partake in [laughter].

Curriculum Mapping

SP4: The biggest thing that the map has done for me is nothing feels better than checking a class off your list. You see the map from the very beginning, and you think, "If I deal with just what's on this paper, I can finish in that time." So it really gives you a great snapshot in time, what you need to complete but what date and that's when you graduate. I feel like seeing that on paper is so beneficial. And at the remainder of every semester, I go back and check off those four classes or three classes that I just completed. And it helps you see that you're that much closer to your goal.

SP7: And just thinking about each class and what will be required and the intensity level. I feel like most of the classes-- the class that I'm in now and the following class are going to be the most challenging, or maybe not, I could be wrong. I'm just kind of predicting because it gives you a little something to anticipate.

SP18: I really like that because it, for me, is a light at the end of the tunnel [laughter]. I can actually see that I actually am going to graduate, where, before, it was just kind of-- it wasn't mapped out... When I started the AE program and how she, the advisor, just said this is what you've taken, and this is all that you need to take for you to graduate. It's all mapped out for you. You don't have to spend time trying to figure out what to take next or if you take this elective or that elective. It was very helpful.

Group Projects

SP1: Personally, I would like to work alone, just because I'm more comfortable with it and just trust issues [laughter]. Really, group work, every once in a while, can be problematic. I've had probably three classes now that I've done group work with, and I mean, I haven't run into any issues. I actually got pretty lucky for my groups and stuff. So, it worked out.

I actually, in both of the most recent classes that we did group work in, I actually came up with the subject matter, and it was actually from my current job for our projects. One of our classes was public administration... It was very easy to come up with a topic. And those topics just made it a little bit more comfortable for me because I was almost like the subject matter expert in the group if that makes any sense.

SP2: On projects, I try to put my work in -- the last one we had, we tried to break it up as evenly as possible. Each person had what they could handle. We Skyped and different things to make sure that we were all on the same page with what needed to be done and

got it all turned in. So, it worked it out, it just-- for me, it adds stress that I don't like just because I hate depending on other people to get a grade.

SP7: It's really hard to communicate for an online group project. Most of the time there's a discussion board, so they tend to work out. But in class, it's-- I don't know. I don't particularly enjoy them.

SP8: Professionally speaking, if you're really doing a collaborative, I wouldn't mind. Learning, it's hard. It's hard because everybody has jobs. Most of the people that I was in a group with had children. I mean it was more of a hassle than not. It kind of ended up-- and it worked well because we're all driven. Everybody in my group was a driven individual. So, it wasn't like we had to wait on J_____ to turn his portion in or we had to wait on R_____ to turn her portion in. We turned our portion in. We had already converted it over to the PowerPoint, so it looked good.

SP10: I think I've had three group projects and we get it done. But as far as spending-- now on one occasion we spent time in a group, one of the first projects we did, we spent time after class and we did our thing, we talked, we communicated. So that was interesting, and I really enjoyed that. But the other two, we didn't do much time together. The last one, we talked a little bit, but not as much as the first time. And then we transferred the information to the person who put it all together. We get it done, but in as far as allotting time, could there be more time together to work on stuff? Yeah, there possibly could but as a group, I don't know that we made that effort.

SP11: Yes, you do your part, you do your role, but if there's someone else that's very aggressive or assertive to me, depending on what your role is -- I'll let them go forward, then you just see where your place is. I'm good at that. Let's go ahead and make this work because I deal with a whole bunch of leaders.

With a few projects, I do. I feel it just comes a bit if I don't let down my team, but I work with my team, do your parts and put it together. I always think because individuals make may be older that I find myself, "Did they like what I did? Was it good enough? Did it fall into place?" But I'm never the one that has to put everything together, thank God. For everybody else, like, "Oh, lets clean this up. Let's organize this." I feel I see it, but that is not the role I play. So, I'm always appreciative of the person that is that individual.

SP12: I mean I love people, I do. Actually, I don't like doing team projects simply because it's difficult when we all are busy to coordinate sometimes and get schedules coordinated so I would rather do individual projects. But that's simply because of a time thing, that's not because I don't like doing working with people. But no, every team I've had to work in we've all gotten along fine, and it's worked out just fine, and they all know that I hate presenting. And most of them-- nobody really likes to stand up in front of a room and present. I think you have to be a pretty special kind of person to like to do that. And so I just let them know, "I hate doing this but I'll do it," and we just get through it. I mean, I've never had any issues with working in teams.

SP13: I don't like groups [laughter]. Well, I would prefer the group-- I had one class, a project management class, that was online, and we had online groups, and I didn't like that because we were never able to meet in-person. It was all online, and that's harder to get people together. And some of them didn't work well. And those classes included more younger kids, and they just don't always like to do things ahead of time or get things done as fast as the older adult students would do. And I don't like the group projects, even though they say that's what you do in the real world... I don't think it should have been online. I think it should have been in-class. I think the group works better when you're in-person. I think there's more accountability when you know each other. And I think people perform better when they work in-person or can meet together in-person. So, it's all right. I understand that's the nature of some classes. Like project management, it's a group. It's learning how to be in a group. I understand that that's necessary in that class, but not every class.

I've had some groups that worked really well together. But that online group didn't do well. I mean, we got through it. We got everything turned in, but I didn't like that fact they were last minute, and I couldn't talk to them in-person. One of them just absolutely refused to meet with us.

SP14: It's enjoyable. Sometimes I don't like working with other people. I wouldn't have it any other way. I mean of course there's always that anxiety. It's social anxiety. It's programmed into us. I can be the person to walk into the room and just start talking. But some people can't. Being kind of a control freak like I am, it's hard to leave control in someone else's hands, as far as the project. But I think that's the team building, and I use this word camaraderie or bonding experience and it's valuable. I'm glad that every course has that. But again, I'm using an example that was very frustrating that I did not like is taking an online class. When I had a group project online, that was a nightmare. Couldn't get anybody together, nobody wanted to call anybody and is just-- everyone wanted to meet in this online chatroom and it just didn't work. I called my professor and he's like, "Well, then do it yourself." And it's like, okay, well now I have a 38-page project I need to do by myself. And it takes a little extra teamwork effort and relationship building to get that going if you have enough time to do that.

SP16: The group work can be a little challenging because, with everybody's individual schedules, it's hard to find a time and a place to kind of get your thoughts together. But with wonderful technology, instant messaging, email, we make it work. So, I mean, I like the group assignments. You get a perspective on different students. You kind of see things in a different light, so it gives you a different outlook and a different way of looking at things. So, I'm a fan on group projects.

I feel like I was perceived very well. I initiated a whole lot of getting things organized only because that's what I do in my job. It was very easy for me to step into that role, to get all of our assignments together, and kind of set up our things. So, it was easy for me to do that and so I kind of just walked into that role, if you will.

SP17: I probably wish that I would have built better relationships, because to be honest, group projects scare me, because part of it is out of my control. And I don't really know enough about the people I'm in the class with a lot to know, "Oh, this person is a really hard worker," and they're going to be there to pull their weight. I haven't really done a great job of building good relationships with peers in the class. There's a few. But overall, I would say and it's mostly my doing, not necessarily anybody else's.

Instructional Preference

SP1: I think there have been a couple instructors that are really good at lecturing and bring a little bit more out in the curriculum. Some of the classes I feel like I could've taken online, and I would've gotten the same amount out of. But there have been a couple classes where I thought that I got a little bit out of the actual lecture part of it, just because they elaborated on some things that confused me.

SP8: Personally, I love the person-to-person contact of the classroom. I do have to take two online courses. I'll take one next semester and then my final semester. That's the only class I'll have as an online class. I don't know how I'm going to feel or like it... I really enjoy being able to talk to people, interact with people, the professors, fellow students. That drives me. So, I'm not really sure. I don't have an answer for that one yet. But I'll know in the next three or four months how-- I'm sure I'll do fine, but I really prefer the interaction.

SP10: Yes, I mean, because I think that's my attribute. My attribute is more so to deal with people because I'm a talker. I've got to talk, I've got just a need to be around people to feel the laughs and to feel the warmth. Whatever vibe it is, but I'm kind of an extrovert like that.

SP12: I mean, just because of time constraints, it's so much easier to just say have it online. But I'm a people person so you kind of miss out on that human interaction.

SP13: I really prefer the classroom. I prefer face-to-face. Although, I didn't mind, for some classes, like the English where we just had to write a paper, and read a couple books, and write papers on those. That was fine. I mean, I don't see a need to meet in a classroom for that. But most of my core classes, especially any of the computer classes, I've had a lot of those online, and I really think I would've gotten more if I would've had in-class. One of my classes was a database class and it was online, but he also taught a night class here face-to-face in another section. So he invited us if we wanted to sit in on that. And so, me and another woman did, and I really preferred that. Just some things I need to see; I need to hear. Online is just not the same. Like I said, it works for some classes.

SP16: I prefer in class face-to-face, although online is very convenient. However, if you are not focused and motivated and very organized, you can get left behind quite quickly.

SP17: It depends on what the subject matter is and it depends on how the professor sets up their online class. Some of the online stuff has been really easy, to be honest. And some of it's been really, really helpful, really educational, I guess I should say. But I am a people person, I like to talk to people, so I like going to the classes most of the time and interacting with people, raising your hand and asking questions in real time and having them answered in real time. There's something to be said about that. Where online class, you don't really get that so much, you have to rely on emails or chat boards or something like that. But it really depends on how the professors sets it up. If they are willing to put in their time to make it a good experience, then I found that it's been a good experience. If they kind of are disappointing and they just kind of sets some videos out there and go do these lessons over here and they don't really put anything of themselves in, then it's just kind of a go-through-the-motions course. That's kind of what I was talking about when I'm being disappointed with some of the classes and some of the professors.

SP18: Like math, for example. I just finished a statistics class. I don't think I would have done as well if it were online because something like that, I need the face-to-face experience. But there are other classes where I do online. I don't feel like I learn as well, but I still learn if that makes any sense. Because you're not really interacting with people, but-- you are interacting with people but not face-to-face. But it's definitely more of a convenience online. It saves you the commute from having to go there for class. So, both experiences are pretty good.

Math and Statistics

SP1: I didn't need any remedial classes. I did have to take a statistics class because my math wasn't up to par and, I think, a couple of English classes.

SP4: Yeah. And it definitely was not my strength but I'm pretty confident in my statistical abilities now.

SP7: I'm college ready. At the very beginning, years ago, there were a couple math classes that I had to take because I didn't take them in high school, I think, and before I could take statistics, I've already gotten through all that. That math was challenging when I was younger, but now I enjoy it.

SP12: I don't know if they consider stats remedial or not. I think it's a General Education class, so I don't think it's actually remedial. But I had to take it because I attempted it two times earlier and didn't pass it. So, you have to have it. And I didn't really know why stats was so important but now that I'm in this research and methods class in organizational leadership, because part of that is about learning about being a researcher, and reading scholarly articles, and things like that. And also, research involves statistics, so now I get why they make you take it. I got that out of the way first class. And no, I didn't feel ready to take that at all. I don't know if ever in my life I would feel ready to take that class. But you know what, I just jumped in I'm like, "I'm doing this, here we go," and I got into the groove pretty quickly with everything.

SP13: The only thing I needed to take was a math 101 class. But it was really interesting how well I did once I got in it because I haven't done it—who does algebra in their life? You don't use it.

SP18: I just finished taking a statistics class, and something like that, for me personally, I would have rather taken at a 16-week interval just because I process math a little bit slower than others, where more of the classes where you can write papers and do things like that, I'm very good at.

Online Classes

SP1: Coming in, because it had been-- I think it had been four years since I was in school. I was kind of nervous, and I wasn't sure if I'd like online. So, I was kind of leaning towards the in-person, but once I got in and kind of got my feet wet, I really like online now because it's just easier being able to do it at the house and not having to go to school and all that. So, I'd say right now, I'd rather online, just because I know kind of what I'm getting into. But when I first started, I definitely liked in-person more so.

SP7: Online classes can be just as tough, but you don't have the obligation to physically be in class and that cuts down on a lot of stress.

SP8: I do have a little bit of anxiety about the online courses. Just a little bit. I know I'll be fine but it's not what I like.

SP9: Oh, I have the best online instructor. I like to be there in class, so I like to be on campus, because I learn better obviously. I mean it is nice to have an online class. If I was working full-time, it would obviously probably be the best way. But this professor that I have this semester for industrial organization psychology, she did so many things to make it wonderful.

SP10: You know what? Like I said before, when I took classes in the military, they were eight-week classes as well. What I do prefer is in-class as opposed to online. I think online, they give you more work and it's not as personable. It's just the information that they give me in the book or the video, and it's not really-- you don't get as much practical input, I think, in the online classes. But I understand that they have to set up things that way and I'm getting by. But the online classes are really tough.

I'm not perfect, I can probably get better in that area as well. But when I had the online classes, I try to treat those as if it was class time. So, if I had two online classes I would devote six o'clock to nine o'clock to study. Say if I were in class, I get the class time in addition to giving the class its study period. So that's what I try to do. Can I get better with it? Yes. There is room for improvement.

SP15: I've taken a few online classes through AE. One was just pretty much--the instructor had us read the book and then she gave us a test, which to me is-- I can do that myself. There's no reason I need to spend \$1,250 for you to do that. The second one was

better. She actually had online lectures... But online learning, to me, it's just not my favorite.

Professors

SP2: Well, the sociology professor is online. I really don't have any dealings with her. Everything's online, she's pretty much loaded everything up. Any questions, she seems to make sure she answers any questions anybody says and directs them to everybody... The one class I have on campus on Monday nights—Professor V__, I like him a lot. He's interesting and he's good at teaching a class for educational research. It's a good subject for him to be teaching. He's made it enjoyable and fun.

SP4: Some of the professors are great and they're just really into you as a person. Others are just kind of traditional where it's really just a professor-student relationship and they're not really there to get to know you. A lot of them aren't as quick to respond outside of class or office hours. I just think that being a professional adult has helped dealing with other professional adults as well. So even professor-student relationships. I think that that's helped as well, just learning how to deal with different kinds of people. But they're not that much different.

SP8: I would say so far, the only difference that I can assess is the grading method. The presentation method, it's pretty much universal. How they present what they want us to know. How they present what's going to be on the test. The only difference to me is one professor might be worth 150 points, and one professor might be worth 45 points. You're like, "Hey, that was a lot of work for 45 [laughter] points." But then it gives you an opportunity to miss a few and it doesn't hurt you so bad.

Dr. H__. He is the best. I got him a thank-you card at the end of class. I gave it to him and I told him that nobody has ever told him how much his energy really encouraged me or other people I'm sure-- because he does videos, talk night. He would do Skype. He would do anything to help you understand because he understands the level of difficulty this test can be to people who are not mathematicians. And he was just so committed to us.

SP9: And so, she always gives feedback, and I just think she goes above and beyond to make sure that she's successful in making sure that everybody understands everything.

Oh, I've loved it. I've had the best professors. I will tell you-- I love to be on campus. The biggest issue is with professors that teach a class here and there, and it's because-- what am I trying to say? They're not a full-time employee or a part-timer, -- they have a nine-to-five job, and they just are here every once in a while, when they're needed. I feel like those professors sometimes-- the work is not consistent, or predictable, or organized. And this one time [laughter], the lady that works in the office for the AE, and she was one of my professors-- it was just hard because I don't know if it was her first class she taught, but there was no clear, definite instructions for what to do, and it was bad. But I feel like most of the time I have had good instructors, but I feel like there's a huge difference

between those that don't consistently teach a certain class and those that do, and they're used to it. There's probably a learning curve, but I just think that overall though, my professors have been amazing.

SP12: Faculty, okay. Well, I have liked all of my instructors so far. I honestly don't ask a lot from them, I pretty much just-- I feel like I'm kind of self-sufficient in things. I mean, I haven't had a lot of questions. I read the book, I go, I never miss class, I always make sure I go to class because I have nightmares. I've had nightmares my entire life about going back to school, and not going to class, and not knowing what's going on. It's actually a nightmare for me. So [laughs] I go to class very religiously. They see that I'm there. They know that I'm an attentive student. And I like everybody, and we email occasionally. And they know personal things that a lot of the instructors will ask, not personal questions, but they try to get to know you and they try to get the class to know each other so it's a little bit more personal. And they'll follow up on something and ask, "Hey, I know this was a big thing happening in your life. Did this happen for you?" So, so far, it's really great. I have had no issues with my instructors or anything like that. It's all been very good.

SP13: Most of the professors have enjoyed teaching older students because they do do better. I would say we're more responsible, and that gives the professors-- it helps them, I think, in the fact that we actually understand what they're talking about, and we care about what they're talking about. So, they actually encouraged me, I think, the way they talk to us, speak to us, and teach us. They teach us, and they don't look down on us. They actually lift us up and are impressed by what we do, so.

SP14: Yeah, he turned me off to him. I didn't like doing online classes in the first place. Here's how his online class is: everything that he worded is geared toward his regular classes. This is just something he does on the side. When he gives all assignments, they're all posted like we're getting ready to come to class even though we never see him. So instead of saying you need to post this. He'll say, "Bring this paper to class and have it ready by Thursday when we meet." It's like, "Dude, we're not moving." At least he could tell us more. He tells us, "I'm not changing all the wordings for everything I send out. It's just not going to happen." In other words, you're my side-gig. It is what it is." Like you do in high school. It's like, "Okay. You'd really like to have that kind of attitude about it? I mean we are trying. I have an A in this class."

SP17: I will say that most of the critiques that I have when it comes to student evaluation is that I wish professors did more. I think that's the difference between the mindset of someone, a traditional student and an adult learner who's paying \$1,200 of their own money as opposed to a parent or something like that. If I'm going to pay you that much money, to spend that much time away from my family, I want you to fill my brain with as much knowledge as possible. And sometimes I feel like I don't get that. Now I have had professors who are awesome and have certainly challenged me, but there are sometimes that I sit back, and I go, "Yeah, I mean I'm in second gear here." And they're really not even testing me to see if I can get to a different gear to push myself. And I think a younger me would have been totally okay with that because I could have

just skated by, but me at 34 is like, "Can I really get my money's worth here?" So, that's been one of the biggest challenges that I've mentally had to come over. It wasn't intimidation at all. It was actually like, "Bring it. Give me more."

I also appreciate the people who understand that you have a job. So I had a math professor kind of poll the class to say, "Okay, what do you guys do for a living?" And then as they were teaching the lessons and different things, they would say, "Oh hey, you're in finance. You're in annuities. You need to pay attention to this formula because that could help you understand how a mutual fund calculates its earnings potential." And I was like, "Oh, hell yeah. Thank you for understanding and relating this material to something that could be beneficial to me." Or when we were doing statistics and there were a couple people in the medical field and they're talking about statistical analysis of-- what was it? Side-effects and things like that. Like, "Yeah, really?" People make this stuff relatable. You have professional experience, relate the information to the professional experience whereas the traditional student has none of that and it's just information. So, it's not nearly as easy to relate the information to the student. So, when a professor understands that and can really make that information relate and seem really relevant, that to me is the sign of a really good professor.

SP18: But I think the AE professors, specifically, are definitely more aware with the adult learners that we're working full-time, and a lot of us have kids and busy lives. Not to say that they should excuse us from any assignments. I don't mean that. But some of the outside of AE professors, I don't think they always totally take that into consideration. I'm not sure if they think that most of their students are traditional. But I don't know.

I think what helped me was that I just kind of pushed myself. And more than I ever had, and because getting a degree was something that I really want to do. I was willing to just try it and see what happened. And I think, also, what helped me was when I first started my first class I had a teacher that held a kind of go-around to ask how you were doing on your first class, and introduce yourself, and what your major is, and how you got here, and stuff. And I kind of mentioned to her that this is my first semester back from many years of not being in school. And I'm just kind of nervous about how I'm going to do academically because I might not have to revisit skills of writing papers, like grammar skills and math. I knew I had a math class coming up. I was kind of nervous about that, and how I would do and preparing for that.

Traditional Students

SP1: Every once in a while, there will be somebody that takes one of the program's courses that is actually a traditional student. And then there's also a couple of the general education courses. Like the one I was telling you about, I believe, was astronomy. Yeah, I had to take astronomy. It was over in one of the main buildings, and there was a lot of traditional students in that. I felt like an old guy [laughter].

It was a different generation. You're going around with all these kids. In the AE program, I will say that everybody's there to further their career. Everybody's from similar

circumstances. And the class lectures, you can relate to everything that's being talked about, I would say.

SP2: At first, I will admit to being feeling slightly off center, I guess. That's the best way to describe it because of being the older person in the class. I don't think I have a problem making friends with anybody so by the end of the class I was talking to everybody and it didn't feel any different than sitting in one of the AE classes with the older students.

SP9: I have not had a chance to take a class with traditional learners. The one thing I like about AE is that you do have more life experience and-- not that the prior things are catty, I just feel like I've already kind of been through that. And I do think a lot of traditional learners like to be at school, but I feel like by the time that you are a non-traditional student you all are kind of on the same page and even though there are lots of differences, you still have that one thing in common. It's like a whole different world, I think. And that's why I like the AE program, because it's not-- and maybe it's my own biases from prior, being there for six years and going through the way that I was. But, personally, I would not want to be in classes with all traditional students.

It is just so different because I think-- and even one student, I think, even said-- a traditional student even said, "I'm just worried about what I'm doing tomorrow night, or-" It's just a different type of student, I guess.

SP10: I'll tell anybody because it's different going to school on a non-traditional basis than you would going traditional or going in a time slot where you have all young people. Not to say that's bad but the acceleration of learning is different. It's a totally different environment most of the time.

Well, like with 18, 19-year-old it's probably no. But I've taken classes with people probably 30 years younger [laughter]. I guess really you can't call them traditional, but when somebody's 30 years younger that's a big difference to me.

SP12: I think most of the activities are geared towards traditional students, is what I would think. I think they have a good understanding that the AE people are adults, sometimes grandmothers, grandfathers with kids and jobs and all that. And I don't think they expect people to want to go above and beyond. I mean it's not like we're 18 years old and we're going to drink and going to football game or whatever on Friday nights. I just don't think that's even a consideration for the AE program, really. I mean, that would be my impression because I see emails come out here and there, but I think it's definitely more geared towards the traditional student.

SP15: AE has done a very good job for the adult learner. The thing that I didn't want, or that I was dreading, was going to school with teenagers, which, thankfully, has not happened yet, and hopefully, it will not [laughter]. I do like going to school with people who have the same viewpoint that I do, that they're adults, and they're there to accomplish a purpose, because it cuts down on a lot of the nonsense that-- you're a teenager who isn't

sure what they want to do, or their parents are paying for it, so they don't have any skin in the game.

SP18: I took advantage of the writing center at school. And there were other students there that also had started, too, for the first time. And students that had been there for a little while, but they were adult workers like me, so it made me feel like I was kind of in my environment rather than going back to school and being with traditional students.

Making Meaning of the Adult Learners' Experience

SP4: I feel like the experience makes meaning for itself, just the knowledge that I've been able to access. And what's amazing about this program is it talks a lot about transformational leaders and transformation in general. And it's really transformed me. It's taught me so much, not only about dealing with other people, but things about myself, like prejudices that I may have carried or developed over time to be able to realize that. So I think that the impact that it's had on me, both personally and professionally, is it has the most meaning for me.

SP7: It's very fulfilling to be able to understand everything that organizational leadership involves, and being able, again, to help other people. And more intelligently, work through things in certain organizations. Some organizations were to get it down, people are on board with whatever needs to happen. But the different concepts of leadership, it's-- if I ever had any kind of management role, I think it would-- again, I've had one done before and learning what I've learned, it's definitely going to help me in the future, in anything that I end up doing.

SP10: My wife asked me, "When you graduate are you going to walk?" And probably the only reasoning for walking is that I have two grandchildren, 9 and 10 years old. And I think for them to see me walk and graduate from college will probably plant a seed within them. They parents tell them like having to go to college anyway and do good at school. But I think it will kind of motivate them and set a standard for them if they see me graduate and partaking in the festivities of the graduation. So that's probably my best motivation.

SP15: I love the courses of psychology. I loved trying to ascertain the theories behind why we think, how we think, and why we do what we do, and what our motivations are, and the courses on multicultural and global leadership. How seeing someone's different, their differences, and not seeing them as worse than you, but seeing them just as different, and seeing how you can use their differences, combine them with what you bring, and then come up with something better, or a better way of doing things or a better way of seeing things.

EXCERPTS - SECOND PHASE OF INTERVIEWS (Six participants)

Professors' Instructional Styles

SP7 (2nd Interview): The impact of a professor's instructional style can be motivating or demotivating depending on individual perception and general outlook. For me when a professor finds ways to make the content interactive using different modes of technology and supplementing the course with their own insights and references, I am more engaged. I also will retain more information since their direction will typically inspire me to look elsewhere or further into what they were discussing.

SP8 (2nd Interview): I will speak again on the amount of support I can attest to these instructors giving us. Like I said, I hadn't taken math class in I don't know how long, so stats [class] was a real issue - I was concerned. I was like "Oh, my God. Am I'm going to make it out of here?" But the professor, Dr. H was so supportive with his time, his energy. He was very patient. So that's been helpful. I don't know if in the traditional programs the instructors are the same, but in the AE program, every single professor that I've had thus far has been extremely supportive. If you send them an email, they'll respond. They do give us phone numbers, but I've never had to use anyone's phone number. If you have questions during class, before class, or after class, they're all very supportive.

SP8 (2nd Interview - continued): And to this point, I haven't had to use any of that, with the exception the time my teacher gave me a C on a paper, and I was like, "I don't make Cs on papers." I was like, "I don't know what you're doing here [laughter]." [For God's sake?]. And he was talking up like, "_____, it is not that bad." I was like "Oh, no. For me, it is. I need to understand where you are with this. Where did I not answer this question?" And really, I think he was just pushing me-- not I think, I know he was pushing me to just give him a little more. I had met the minimum requirements, but I'm pretty sure he wanted to see more. And so, on the second part of the paper, of course, I earned an A, which is what I do now. I can talk and write now. Now, that I can do [laughter]. When you're trying to-- I'm not a very good test taker, but for work, practical purposes, writing, understanding, being able to prove what I've learned in the class, I can do those things. But tests are just-- I don't know why I get so stressed out about tests. But that particular instructor, the way he asked questions, everybody touches their head. I mean, you've got a paragraph long question, and you've got five multiple choice answers to a paragraph long question, that stresses me out.

SP8 (2nd Interview - continued): And this class was a class where we had to do the group projects, where he gave us class time to work on the projects. And he was actually coming from one of the hospitals over here in Cincinnati the same time we were. So, he was commuting to work to get to class to instruct us. He was kind of like, "If you get stuck in traffic, just shoot me an email or something. I get it." Because he was having the same type of situation we were having. And he was one of the ones who was just kind of like-- because the majority of our class focused on us creating a presentation as a group. He did some instruction with us and talking to us about group presentations. And I would

say in the eight weeks, four of those weeks were us using our time to work on our presentations and do our presentations. And then the other four weeks we were in class with him. So, half the time we didn't even really see him unless we had a question for him. But that could have just been because of the type of class it was, but he was real laid-back. He gave us the instructions. If you have any questions. But it was kind of like he wasn't rigid. It wasn't rigid at all. Choose your topic, and as long as you can present facts about that, I'm good. That was pretty much it, which I think created some anxiety for some of my classmates [laughter]. They like stuff to be like A, B, C, D, E, F, G. What exactly are you looking for here? And I'm like, "You show [him]. Come on y'all. We can do this [laughter]." I don't really like a whole lot of restriction on how I'm moving. I like for people to give me a general idea and then we can move on.

SP9 (2nd Interview): Oh, I feel like every single one was completely different. I love the way that my professors incorporate video, or - and alternate types of learning because I feel like that's how people learn, or they bring in manipulative-- in my research class, he brought in a bunch of different-- well, they looked like Christmas cards, but we were in groups, and we had to kind of just describe everything. So that was a type of a research, like describing everything on it, and we really thought it was going towards this gear, but it was really turning it another gear, but it got you to think. So, I like the professors that are hands-on, that are very informative, that communicate their expectations, and follow through. But it's funny because one of my favorite professors was probably-- he only lectured, so he wasn't very-- but he was-- everybody either liked him or didn't like him. But he told you what to expect, and I really think that was-- he just communicated exactly what he expected. I think that's when it gets frustrating when there are adjunct professors that haven't taught the class before which everybody has a learning curve, but they don't really know how to go about the whole semester. And I feel like there's been other professors that have never even taught the class, but never said they didn't, and they were fine. I feel like some people when you don't have a-- and that's helped me with my own life because I've realized, "Oh my gosh I've got to have a plan." When they don't have a plan and they kind of wing it, it never works!

SP10 (2nd Interview): Dr. Z was good. He used people to help keep you engaged. Sociology class professor – she was amazing! She got me to read. I have to study...I just have to. She had me reading before class and generally I don't do that. The two classes that I had to take over were online classes.

SP11 (2nd Interview): I've noticed the full-time faculty - I think I like them a little bit better than the part-time faculty. The part-time faculty, or the adjuncts rather, they bring a lot to the table because they're currently employed. They're doing this on the side. The difference between the adjunct professors now-- and so I've got to take into account some things of ignorance and being fresh, the first time I went to college in comparing and understanding to now, really understanding titles and positions, the adjuncts are good. They're good. But you can tell that they're lenient. There's one professor, and he's full-time, and he's very thorough in what he does. He preps you good. So, he gives you all the things that you need. And one of his classes last year just really stuck in how he does organizational leadership in bringing in these professionals from the industry. He had the

coroner of _____ County, the CEO of the airport, and how his connections came about. You can tell it's real life, but how do you want to do this, and how do you want that? The most impactful one that he had was the gentleman that is one of the vice presidents for the _____ company. And he's African-American. Of course, for, I think, any individual, when you can identify or find identifiers within individuals that may have positions, that always encourages you.

I'm not trying to run, and haven't even been able to roll over yet, if you will, but still respecting, like, "Okay, I see this." So that was impactful. So, it was more or less-- that professor, his style was-- I liked it. His PowerPoints are very thorough. He almost made you feel like you were-- in my ignorance, sort of jump and say, "Preparing for your doctorate," because he's done it. He's had his for a while. He studied abroad, but still young. I think he's under 40. But still, had a lot of life experience, studied overseas in Europe, and has traveled. So, he had a lot to bring to the table that even if where I was listening, to the adults that were there. And I say adults...I still think I'm a kid, but the adults [laughter].

But to be honest, no [laughter]. There's nobody that's really brought anything that just opened my mind. The professor, there's not anybody that's taking you on as a mentor. And to be honest, I don't think that you can. Because the way that our pace is, you have eight weeks. You have an eight-week session. There's a lot to accomplish, especially if you're around the holiday, right after January hits, February. I think in February there is class on Presidents' Day, but you have Martin Luther King's Day after you just had that long break. So, you're kind of eager. Then you have a break in between. And so it's like, "Okay. Well, now you're down to seven." And if there's holidays in between for a Monday class, you miss their Monday class. So, they still have to get you through with the same information, but now you get it instead of eight weeks that was already pushing, now your just kind of stretched it. So, there's some things that you don't even get to hit in a strong fashion that would potentially be beneficial.

And even with the one-- there was one lady, [she was really good, and I've had her a few times. And she is really thorough. She does well. Like I said, they do well because they have that outside experience. But you can tell also through the thoroughness of a PowerPoint for certain things. I think for us working to have an adjunct, they understand as well, so they accommodate your schedule. And then their information, the way that they can break it down, isn't different. Whereas the full-time professor, you can tell they'll teach, but both of them are teaching, you just kind of got one that's kind of more technical, and then you've got one that's more practical. So, you're getting a good even balance.

SP17 (2nd Interview): I enjoy professors who understand the fact that they're not teaching a traditional student class. That they understand that the people that are coming here and are sitting there for three hours in an evening, when they've already worked an eight to 10-hour day and probably have kids or family at home, that they're sacrificing time with them, they understand that that's a different circumstance. And they teach differently, they can appreciate what people are sacrificing to go to school. And so they teach

differently, they approach the classroom differently. They don't have to have super strict rules because it's not a room of teenagers. They understand that if I have to step out of a classroom to take a phone call, it's probably because it's an important phone call that I wouldn't otherwise step out of. It's not a buddy or something like that. And so, I really appreciate teachers who take the time to understand where the adult learner is coming from. And I also appreciate the people who understand that you have a job. So, I had a math professor kind of poll the class to say, "Okay, what do you guys do for a living?" And then as they were teaching the lessons and different things, they would say, "Oh hey, you're in finance. You're in annuities. You need to pay attention to this formula because that could help you understand how a mutual fund calculates its earnings potential." And I was like, "Oh, hell yeah. Thank you for understanding and relating this material to something that could be beneficial to me." Or when we were doing statistics and there were a couple people in the medical field and they're talking about statistical analysis of-- what was it? Side-effects and things like that. Like, "Yeah, really?" people make this stuff relatable. You have professional experience, relate the information to the professional experience whereas the traditional student has none of that and it's just information. So, it's not nearly as easy to relate the information to the student. So, when a professor understands that and can really make that information relate and seem really relevant, that to me is the sign of a really good professor.

Confidence and Overcoming Intimidation

SP7 (2nd Interview): Planning ahead and scheduling the time to put effort into productive studying is necessary if you are intimidated by a course. I try to read material before my class. Reading material before a lecture is beneficial because it allows you to process information before it is presented to you for the first time. I write down any questions I might have during the lecture. It is also helpful and encouraging when you talk with other students in the class or those who have taken the class previously. You find that 9 times out of 10 they have the same concerns and intimidation.

SP8 (2nd Interview): When I think of the word intimidation, I think about things that I might feel hesitant about or not confident about. But I don't have any of that. I don't feel like that was an issue for me. I made my mind up, and it was what I was going to do, and that was it. I didn't care who was going to be in the classroom, who the instructor was going to be. None of that mattered to me because my mind was made up that I was getting ready to do it.

SP9 (2nd Interview): So, when I first went back, I was in a class that happened to be with people that had been there awhile. So obviously, they know a lot more. They know each other a lot more. They know how to write papers. They know how to-- I think that was a little intimidating, but I feel like I got there early. I overcame that by getting there a little bit early and talking to people. But I think it is hard when people go back because there is such a mix of people. So, some people might have not been ready to graduate, but then they're in class with somebody that just came back after not being at school for 20 some years. So, I think that's difficult.

Earlier, I remember sitting next to other people that were early that way I could talk to them and get to know a little bit-- actually, that was my first class, and somebody was a senior getting ready to graduate, but needed to take this class as well. He was the one that told me about Grammarly, and about different-- other tools to help him along his journey at being back in school. So, I think getting there early allowed me to ask questions about assignments, or it helped ease the fear of not really knowing what I was doing, or the best way to, like, navigate assignments and things like that. So, it just allowed me to communicate with the other students that know a little bit more, and I knew a little more at the time about being back in school.

SP10 (2nd Interview): Church, and family obligations are most important roles. "I allowed time to interfere with my studies." Not intimidated, but just need more "focus" time.

SP11 (2nd Interview): I think in a previous interview-- the intimidation that I think that you have that you first have to overcome is going back into the educational realm, especially depending on how long you've been out of it. Granted, my age is 28, but the last time I was in school - 10 years ago, and that was a different type of degree. It was a culinary arts degree and an associate's. Now, I'm going for the bachelor's. It's a little different because you're amongst peers, but for me, I'm one of the younger ones in the courses. So, when it comes with a lot of life experience that someone that's 10 years my senior or 20 years my senior-- when they're referring to their children, and their children are my age who are-- few of them that we know-- [inaudible] because it may be one of their children or child, and I'm like, "Oh, yeah, I know such and such." And when they bring that to the table-- answer questions because [you're the man?], "Oh, I don't know anything [laughter]--" the others. And then one of those - it's hard to just getting over it - is what do you do in a day-- which for me, I lead people in my current position and I am instructor, so it's huge to have to kind of put your big boy drawers on and get to it and just say, "Okay. I know that," and just trust that what knowledge you have is going to suffice or be efficient, and if not, you'll be redirected to what the question really is or what the information is. So, overcoming this, coming to the point when you go to do your homework, for me, if there's questions that I feel like I should-- and I learned that especially in my first two semesters coming back to school. If I just don't know it, I need to ask because-- and I'm doing that homework. I'm struggling for two and three hours going around and about, getting discouraged. Then when I finally understand, it only takes me a half hour to complete the assignment. Or it only takes me an hour to type the paper. It may even be three or four pages that may seem intimidating at first, or longer, and it's not. All it is, is just a matter of understanding the information and getting it done.

Emulate someone that seems to be doing well, making sure that they're credible. They're asking questions, and when it comes back to-- there was a simple quiz or a paper, and you just ask, "Hey, I was just curious," and being bold about it not for any ill will, but, "How did you do?" And they say, "Oh, well I got a A," or, "I got a B." And if you're anything lower than that, it's one of those, "Okay. Well, what areas did you look at? And how did you go about it?" So yeah, definitely asking the questions or watching. That's huge, too.

SP17 (2nd Interview): The nice thing about the AE program is-- well, it's double-edged sword. The nice thing is the building that the vast majority of the AE classes are is where all the other adult learners are, so you don't really feel that out of place. Although, just a couple weeks ago when I was studying for finals, I took a half a day vacation from work on the day of my exam to go to the library and just sit down and read and study for like five hours. And that was one of the few times where I've been on campus amongst 18 to 22-year-old students. And you do kind of feel out of place. I think I remember texting my wife going, "Man, I feel like an old guy." And there I am sitting in my business clothes. I didn't change clothes or anything. I'm in dress shoes and dress pants and button-down shirt and sitting in the library. But I've never felt intimidated like that is going to prohibit me from doing it. It's just a thing you kind of have to get over. I haven't really had any problems with intimidation or anything along those lines with professors.

Envisioning the Rewards of Investing in an Adult Learning Program

SP7 (2nd Interview): Knowing that once I complete my program my job opportunities and salary will improve is very motivating.

SP8 (2nd Interview): That's it. Like I said before when we spoke the last time, and I used that phrase - qualified but not certified. So, with that, the only reason I came back to school is because I realized I had to have a degree in order to move forward. Not that I'm not qualified to move forward already, but I'm not "certified" according to the world to do that. I have to do it [laughter]. But I realized that with certification, with that degree, nobody's going to be able to tell me no. And if I hear no over here, I'm going to hear yes over there, and that's what I believe in.

Well, I'm already in the field that I believe that I'm set to be in, at least in the area. So, I'm already there. My foot's already in the door. I already have a reputation in the field that's a good reputation all over from-- now, I work for the county, and the county is really over the head of everything that happens in the developmental disability field. So, when I say that, the county authorizes billing for providers to be paid. Even though the payments may come from the state, the county has to authorize the services, and I work for them people now. I'm already in a place where I know that my degree will help me move forward. I don't have to look for that place. If that makes sense?

SP9 (2nd Interview): I think just the importance of education was reiterated, and that is definitely a reward. I could go to school for the rest of my life and be content [laughter]. I like to learn things, and I feel at the academic level or the higher academic level that you learn about the research, and you learn about current research, and current issues, and ways to do the research. I think that was really interesting, that research class that I just got out of because it made me realize that in everyday life you hear certain things, but it makes it-- it depends on did the study, or if they had an agenda. One of the rewards would be to help me think outside the box, and about education, and how important it is, and to keep an open mind, and to never stop learning.

SP10 (2nd Interview): Information on leadership (cultural related) was a great class. I don't want to waste what God has given me. I don't care about walking in the ceremony, but my children and family want me to participate. Be an example to others that it can be done.

SP11 (2nd Interview): The main reward is I appreciate it. Definitely. I'm sure I said this in a previous interview that I don't think I would've appreciated it going back to school. With my personality, I don't even know that if I could've gone or attended a traditional dormitory, college life, for multiple reasons. As a joke, my family says that I'm a bourgeoisie, in a sense [laughter], so I know for a fact that living with people, I don't think that that will work. But also, just being a social individual, I would've been focused on just engaging in multiple things, probably more so than the education piece. So, it could've been a waste of money. Now I value it. Not only am I paying for it out of my pocket, but I also-- because I have something to bring to the table. It's something I desire. It's not anything that I was told I had to do. It wasn't a directive given, it's an adult choice? So that's the first thing. I have pride in something that I put my mind to, that I actually did and that I was provided the strength and did well.

So now it's important for me also to, not proving to them [family - parents], but to myself, like, "Oh, you're capable." So, when I do graduate cum laude and my GPA is up to that status and those accolades that come with it, getting the letters for the honor society, not the one that everybody gets, but the one that you're actually selected for because your GPA-- yeah, you got to pay for it, but your GPA does qualify. Having that, that means a lot. So looking forward to what that has to yield. So as a personal gain, that's the reward. It's more of that, "What is this going to do for the future?" The current local fellowship that I'm in, my pastor is a visionary. He's a businessman. He's one that I would definitely hear as a leader. And so his visions for what he wants for the community, the church itself, and being entrepreneurs and business owners, and what we provide for the community that we are in, that you can see with him being on vision and being in tune, it's like, "Okay, I see that in the future," what I feel has been dropped into my destiny, for my own purpose. If I go, "Hey, I see these things being set up--" so it's one of those-- it's just there's a lot of things just lining up that, for me, my yield, it may not be this year, but I know that it's coming. And I can see those things and I'm being prepped for it.

SP17 (2nd Interview): I'm not 100% sure where I'm going to end up. I know that there's certain God-given talents that people have and one of those things I believe I have is leadership. People tend to follow me. I've had that my whole life. I don't mind being the center of attention, the person people look to for leadership and guidance. And so, I've always possessed those. And one of the reasons why I picked the business administration was I know that I needed to fill gaps of knowledge that I knew I had. And you can't really fully lead unless you close some of those gaps of knowledge. And so, that's really what this journey has been about. And I think that it will continue to help me in that regard as I take on-- I'm going to start getting into 300, 400 level classes that are a little bit more-- probably, more advanced in the subject matter. So, I imagine that that will continue to help me grow as I get closer to the finish line.

Shaping Expectations for the Next Chapter of Life

SP7 (2nd Interview): While putting a lot of effort into my courses and anticipating the completion of my degree, my expectations for the next chapter of my life include my high hopes that new job opportunities will become available, allowing me to utilize my education.

SP8 (2nd Interview): Entrepreneurship has been something that I've considered, probably, for the last 12 to 15 years. That's the only place of hesitation, maybe intimidation, now that I think about that word, which whom much is given, much is required. And I think about that a lot. So, when you step out and you become the leader, the facilitator, the organizer, the visionary, your responsibilities increase, and it takes on a whole other area. So, if I went into the entrepreneur area, it would be more for like personal development or training instruction on areas that people, at least in my opinion, are lacking in empathy, ethics, and all of those real hard training spaces people don't like to go in. But people like to deal with that black and white. All of that stuff is really easy and really simple to see and know. When we start dealing with things like diversity, empathy, and ethics, nobody wants to touch that. I like them spaces [laughter].

The leadership development was good and the research methods. The research methods were interesting to me because it helped me really think and focus on ways to learn about the specific things I'm interested in, like how to look those up. When I took that class, I spent a lot of time looking at African American leaders or women of color in leadership, and there's not a lot of information out there.

What I found is a lot of the classes that I've taken so far are things that I'm familiar with, but I didn't have the technical term for types of leaders, laissez-faire leaders. Leaders who really don't care. Yeah. I've encountered that before, but I didn't realize that was the technical term for it. So, stuff like that. But other than that, I've been doing this for years. So, I was just like, "Oh, that's what that is. Okay." But I've seen it, experienced it, dealt with it.

SP9 (2nd Interview): I would say that I'm not really sure exactly what path I am going to take yet. And it's because I have been a stay-at-home mom for 13 years, and that's my number one priority. But one of the things I'm thinking about doing is going back and getting certified for an Student board program which is a form of a reading program that I consider ... basically in schools where it's a rating program. So, my degree is going to help me because it's going to allow me to be able to get that certification and allow me hopefully to be able to have a flexible schedule where I'm not working full-time yet, and things like that so... I think the classes that I've taken have helped me be able to communicate effectively, and also to realize that I have to be oriented, and take the first step, and not just expect everything to fall under my lap where I feel like I have to go out on a limb, and realize that I have to-- class has taught me how much relationship and task orientation - that's important in leadership and in whatever area I am trying to improve upon that. Having a plan, taking the steps, and communicating with other people that can

help me further my career is one of the things that I've learned from the classes that I've taken.

I've definitely become a much better communicator. And that's always been an interest to me, but I feel like I've learned so many things about the importance of differences, and having different points-of-view, different-- and that that's important, and I think that we forget that sometimes because we tend to gravitate toward like-minded people, and then to judge if they don't feel a certain or particular way. When you need all of these different points-of-view, too, and to be able to communicate that it's okay to have those, and to be disagreed with. And I felt that a lot at school because I felt like I would feel-- I mean we'd tend to be in a bubble, and it was challenging to have people that effectively communicated, and disagreed, and that was okay.

SP10 (2nd Interview): Want to enable people to adapt to change because it's a major issue. "I need to hone my skills in that area to be able to help others." "There were courses in the program that really helped me so far and they will help me in the next chapter of life."

SP11 (2nd Interview): This experience is shaping in multiple ways because it's putting titles to a language I've been speaking for my current position for now six years. Definitely. So, it's helping. It's bringing some lights, and things, and insight, and giving proper direction. So, looking forward to the next chapter. I really don't know what the next chapter looks like, but I know that it's an expectation towards so many things because my adult learner program is organizational leadership, which is so versatile to go, especially-- I just reflect back on the pamphlet.

But when I looked at their coursework, and not to get too off-topic, but looking at them, I had to look at where I was going and what job opportunities did they offer. And GOMU did a better presentation of-- well, you can go into corporate America. You can go into education administration. You can go into the nonprofit realm. You can go into the entrepreneurial realm. And they have actual jobs, and programs, and internships on their pamphlet, on the website, that was very detailed in obtaining like, "Oh, I want this," whereas _ [another institution]__ College was decent, but they didn't give me that broadness of what I was going to do with the degree upon obtaining it. So, with that, I don't know what it looks like, but I know that it's very broad for me.

SP17 (2nd Interview): Another driving force is that I have aspirations that I want to see for myself and it was clear, I needed education to help me achieve those goals. And that's a huge reason why I'm not going back to finish a fine art degree. I instead, I am going to get a business degree because that's the world that I'm in. And those are things that I know I need, like accounting and finance and marketing, and all of those kinds of things that I didn't get in my past college education that you need a foundation for in order to progress up the corporate ladder.

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