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## Women returning to community college: a response to life changes and a desire for a revised identity (a case study of Paul D. Camp Community College)

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WOMEN RETURNING TO COMMUNITY COLLEGE: A RESPONSE TO LIFE  
CHANGES AND A DESIRE FOR A REVISED IDENTITY (A CASE STUDY OF  
PAUL D. CAMP COMMUNITY COLLEGE)

*The College of William and Mary*

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A RESPONSE TO LIFE CHANGES AND A  
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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

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by  
Margaret Irene Morgan

April 1987

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Dedication

To my mother and my father -  
for their love and support through  
all of my transitions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Completing the requirements for the Doctor of Education has involved the direction, cooperation and help of certain key individuals. To them I wish to express my thanks.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

This exploratory study focuses on the reasons adult women return to school, specifically a community college. A major assumption of this research is that a return to education is a method women use to help them negotiate transitions that occur during their adult development. The study explores the change events that may prompt adult women to enroll in college. It also examines the issue of identity revision as it relates to adult women students.

#### Background of the Problem

Research data indicate that the age distribution of college students is changing (Tittle and Denker, 1980), and that a growing proportion of today's undergraduates are adults. A November 1985 report issued by the United States bureau of the census states that approximately "36 percent of college students were 25 years old and over in 1984. . ." (p. 2).

Trends in higher education are usually associated with the major four year institutions. However, the trend of the nontraditional student enrolling in college "has already appeared in the least traditional sectors of higher education (i.e. public two-year colleges rather than elite universities)" (Fisher-Thompson and Kuhn, 1981, p. 11). They also found that "at two-year schools older students comprise 40 percent of enrollment" (p. 1).

From this group of older students emerges a distinct subgroup of learners. They are usually referred to as "returning women" or "reentry women." The American Association of University Women assembled statistics which indicate that in "1983, there were over 1.5 million post-secondary students over the age of 34, 66 percent of whom were women" (Mann, The Washington Post, Friday, October 15, 1985, p. C3). Fisher-Thompson and Kuhn's (1981) research has found that "enrollment in community colleges includes nearly 53 percent women" (p. 1). Solomon (1985) also comments on the trend of women returning to community college. According to Solomon, "The community college graduates were part of a trend, in which older women increasingly became students. By 1980 approximately one-third of

collegians were twenty-five years of age or older, and most of these were women" (p. 206).

What accounts for the large numbers of adult women students in post-secondary education? The reasons adults return to school are numerous, but Aslanian and Brickell (1980) suggest that the overriding cause is the adults' attempt to cope with change in their lives which prompts a desire to learn. What life changes will prompt this type of coping response in women?

Gilligan's (1982) research suggests that life changes that involve separation issues are critical events for adult women. Women's development focuses on attachment and dependency and ". . .delineates the path. . .to a maturity realized through interdependence and taking care" (Gilligan, p. 172). Interdependence and caring are inextricably linked for women because women's ". . .identity is defined in a context of relationship and judged by a standard of responsibility and care" (Gilligan, p. 160). Gilligan believes that this method of identity formation leaves women in a vulnerable position when separation events occur during their adult development. Change events that separate women from sources of relationship threaten their identity. The woman can no longer delay forming an

autonomous definition of herself and she must now develop ". . .an internally grounded identity" (Tittle and Denker, 1980, p. 43).

As previously stated, learning is a coping strategy used by adults to negotiate a change event in their lives. Richardson and Sands (1983) state that adult women who return to school are at a crucial stage in their adult development and are reassessing their lives. "Women who enter the university at this atypical time appear to be at a critical point in their development as adults, a point in which they are asking themselves who they are, what they want, and who they wish to be" (Richardson and Sands, p. 1). Churgin (1978) concurs with this assessment. "In the past her identity had always been defined by her relationship to others; now, for perhaps the first time, she is seeking to develop a meaning for her own existence apart from her familial obligations" (p. 190). A return to school may serve a two-fold purpose for the adult woman student. It may enable the woman to negotiate a change event in her life, and a return to school may also enable her to revise her identity.

The findings from this research conducted at a community college setting should help contribute to a

fuller understanding of the needs of returning women by discovering which life transitions are most likely to prompt a return to community college. These results may have significance for community college support services such as financial aid and counseling. It may also be possible from this study to determine whether enrollment in a community college also provides a source of identity for the adult woman student. Services and programs could then be designed to better facilitate this identity formation.

This research on returning women students may have broader significance as well. The trend of reentry women is an issue for higher education institutions in general. The data obtained from this study will contribute to knowledge of the characteristics and needs of returning women students. This information has implications for admissions policies, personal and academic counseling services, curriculum development, educational delivery systems, placement services, financial aid policies, and future research. In addition, such information may encourage colleges and universities to examine their missions, and their goals and objectives regarding the nontraditional student. Hopefully, the results of this study provide information

that will aid in higher education's responses to this growing subgroup of students.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research is to determine what factors prompt adult women to return to college, specifically a community college. This research examines life changes as they pertain to returning women with the hope of finding out whether specific life transitions prompt women's decision to return to school. This study also seeks to determine if life transitions provoke women to revise their identity through education. Finally, the research attempts to ascertain if becoming a student at a community college plays a role in the process of identity revision.

#### Theory

A synthesis of two theories provides the conceptual framework for the research. Aslanian and Brickell's (1980) theory that a life transition prompts a learning response is integrated with Gilligan's (1982) theory that women identify themselves in the context of relationships. This study assumes that a change event that threatens and/or severs a relationship affects the woman's identity. Consequently, the woman will return to school to negotiate this transition and also to



establish new sources of relationships, thus a new identity.

Research Questions To Be Answered

The study examines the main reasons adult women return to school, specifically community college. The following questions address these reasons.

Main Research Question

Are life changes (i.e. divorce, children leaving home, career change) and the desire for a revised identity the major reasons adult women return to education?

Subsidiary Questions

1. Do life changes prompt adult women to return to community college?
  - a) Do life transitions that affect the women's primary relationships prompt a return to community college?
    1. Does the death of a spouse prompt a return to community college?
    2. Does divorce or separation encourage a woman to return to community college?
    3. Do children entering school or leaving home prompt a return to community college?

- b) Does the need for an income (primary or secondary source) prompt a return to community college?
  - c) Does a change in job status (hired, fired, promoted, or transferred) influence a return to community college?
  - d) Does a change in health prompt a return to community college?
  - e) Does a change in leisure time prompt a woman to return to community college?
  - f) Does a change in one's religious beliefs or experiences prompt a woman to return to community college?
  - g) Do women return to community college and not actively seek to revise their identity?
2. Do women return to community college to revise their identity?
- a) Do women see the acquisition of a One-Year Certificate or a Two-Year Associate Degree as a way to revise their identity?
  - b) Do women view the acquisition of vocational or professional skills (e.g. clerical skills, drafting skills, data processing skills, etc.) as a means to revise their identity?

- c) Do women return to community college seeking to become more independent (e.g. financially or socially)?
  - d) Do women return to community college to achieve an identity separate from their spouse and children?
  - e) Do women return to community college to develop career goals?
  - f) Do women return to community college to establish and/or enhance their professional identity?
3. Do the reasons for a return to community college differ for women based upon their age, race, marital status, and current employment status?

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of consistency, operational definitions of the key terms used throughout this study have been developed. These terms are used to specify the main research question and the subsidiary research questions.

Returning woman/Reentry woman is an adult female student who is at least 25 years old and who has enrolled in college after a two or more year break in her formal education (Prager, 1983; Roehl and Okun,

(1984). These terms will be used synonymously.

Transition will be used interchangeably with life change, change in life, and change event. These terms refer to the change in the adult woman's life, a change in status per se, that necessitates a learning response (Aslanian and Brickell, 1980).

Connectedness refers to the woman's "union with others" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 47). It includes relationships and other sources of attachment established by the woman throughout her life cycle.

Identity will be used interchangeably with self-concept, sense of self, self-image, and feelings about oneself. Identity refers to a woman's self-perception and includes her skills, interests, values, goals and plans for her life and work. It also includes her recognition of her individuality and self-worth outside of the roles she plays in relation to others (Richardson and Sands, 1983).

Return to college will be used interchangeably with enrollment in college, return to Paul D. Camp Community College (PDCCC), and enroll at PDCCC.

#### Limitations of the Study

The subjects of the study were limited to women aged 25 years or older who had returned to Paul D. Camp

Community College during the Fall 1985, Winter 1986 and/or Spring 1986 quarters. From the 372 women who qualified, a random sample of 186 women was selected.

Because this research population reflects a group of reentry women who live in an economically disadvantaged area, generalizations regarding the life transitions that may prompt all adult women to return to school, specifically a community college, must be made cautiously.

The generalizations of the research are also limited because Paul D. Camp Community College is a small, rural institution. Generalizations to the total population of returning women students attending community college or higher education as a whole should be made with caution.

#### Overview of the Study

The related literature is reviewed in Chapter 2. An overview of adult development theory is presented. This is followed by a discussion of the literature relating specifically to transitions that occur during women's development. The effects these change events have on women's identity are examined.

In Chapter 3 the design of the study is outlined. The study's limitations are discussed. This chapter also includes a description of the sample population, the

research procedure and method of analysis.

The survey findings are presented in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 contains the analysis of the interview data. The study's results in relation to the research questions are discussed in each of these chapters.

The conclusions of the research are stated in Chapter 6. The implications for institutional policy and practice and for future research are then discussed.

## Chapter 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Adults' return to formal education continues to increase at a rapid rate. The United States Bureau of the Census (1985) reports that "in October 1984, 58.8 million persons were enrolled in school, including 4.6 million persons 25 years old and over, (past the expected school-leaving age)" (p. 1). The numbers of adult new enrollees in educational programs reflect the enormous increase in adults' rate of participation in formal education, but do little to explain the growing trend of the adult learner. Aslanian and Brickell (1980) believe the "if we had a better understanding of the dynamics underlying adult learning. . .perhaps we could account for the current rate of growth" (p. xii). Aslanian and Brickell's research led them to an important conclusion:

. . .most adult decisions to seek educational renewal are clearly and directly related to significant changes in their lives - changes affecting their careers, family situations, health, religion, or leisure opportunities. Going back to school is less significantly a transition in itself than a consequence of some other change, actual or anticipated, in individual circumstances. (p. ix)

Thus, there seems to be a cause and effect relationship between the changes an adult experiences during his life cycle and a need to learn.

Using this perspective, it is appropriate to examine literature on adult development as a general foundation for this research on why adult women return to school. In addition, literature specifically concerning women's developmental issues is scrutinized. Finally, consideration is given to theory that attempts to explain the reasons adult women return to school.

#### Adult Development: A Time of Change

Systematic studies of adulthood show that the adult years are characterized by continuous change. Erikson (1950) envisions a theory of development which is cumulative and orderly; each of his eight stages and processes follow and build upon the previous stage. He employs the principle of epigenesis to describe the interdependence of change events that occur during the developmental stages.

His (Erikson's) theory of development is also lent determinancy by its principle of epigenesis - the principle that for any given developmental process to transpire, others have to have transpired before it, and that the resolution of any given prior crisis is not fixed for all time, but it must develop further at all subsequent



stages. (Smelser and Erikson, 1980, pp. 20-21)

Epigenesis does not totally determine the dynamics of the developmental stages. "Each developmental stage has a measure of its own autonomous dynamics" (p. 20).

Gould's (1978) theory of adult development is also cumulative, but it is more focused than that of Erikson. Gould emphasizes the challenges that occur from the late teens through the late forties and the adult's attempt to cope with these changes:

. . .adulthood is not a plateau; rather it is a dynamic and changing time for all of us. As we grow and change, we take steps away from childhood and toward adulthood - steps such as marriage, work, consciously developing a talent or buying a home. With each step, the unfinished business of childhood intrudes, disturbing our emotions and requiring psychological work. With this in mind, adults may now view their disturbed feelings at particular periods as a possible sign of progress, as part of their attempted movement toward a fuller adult life. (p. 14)

Gould also believes that certain change events that occur during an adult's life serve as developmental bench marks.

Certain key events - buying a first house, a first car, experiencing a first job, a first baby, the first loss of a parent, first physical injury or first clear sign of aging - force us to see ourselves more as the creators of our live and less as living out the lives we thought were our destiny. (p. 13)

Levinson's approach to adult development concentrates on the "transition-crisis-adaptation sequence which are rooted in an individual's changing social situation" (Smelser and Erikson, 1980, p. 19). Levinson (1978) makes an analogy between each developmental period and seasons. He elaborates on this seasons imagery:

To speak of seasons is to say that the life course has a certain shape, that it evolves through a series of definable forms. A season is a relatively stable segment of the total cycle. . . .To say that a season is relatively stable, however, does not mean that it is stationary or static. Change goes on within each, and a transition is required for the shift from one season to the next. (p. 7)

Just as the seasons pass in a given sequence, "Levinson found that man traverses the periods in a given order and must deal with the developmental tasks appropriate to each stage" (Aslanian and Brickell, 1980, p. 19).

Despite the differences in the focus of these theories each stresses "that crisis and adaptation yield some kind of cumulative development" (Smelser and Erikson, 1980, p. 19).

#### Attachment and Separation in Adult Development

The recent interest in the study of adulthood has been likened to the last frontier by Smelser and Erikson (1980). They state that "the systematic study

of adulthood is akin to filling in the remaining white parts on the map, all the others having been settled or colonized" (p. 1). Levinson (1978) can be included in this group of developmental theorists who want to fill in the gaps on the adult life cycle map. Based upon an all male study he seeks "to create an overarching conception of development that could encompass the diverse social changes occurring in adult life" (Levinson p. 8).

Although he does not include women in his "Seasons" study, Levinson does admit that women are challenged by development just as men are. He contends that the developmental stages of the two genders are the same, yet different: biology and social circumstances being the variables that affect the developmental periods of men and women.

As in Levinson's study, the subjects in most developmental studies are exclusively male. This is a major limitation in most theories of adult development. Psychological theorists as a result have accepted the "male life as the norm and they have tried to fashion women out of a masculine cloth" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 6). Consequently, the interpretation of women's development has been problematic. Gilligan elaborates:

In all of these accounts the women are silent. . . . Thus there seems to be a line of development missing from current depictions of adult development, a failure to describe the progression of relationships toward a maturity of interdependence. Though the truth of separation is recognized in most developmental texts, the reality of continuing connection is lost or relegated to the background where the figure of women appear. In this way, the emerging conception of adult development casts a familiar shadow on women's lives, pointing again toward the incompleteness of their separation, depicting them as mired in relationships. (Gilligan, pp. 155-156)

With the conception of development currently framed in a male perspective, the value of relationships in the adult life cycle is not a significant issue. However, Gilligan contends that relationships come to the forefront when women's development is studied. She believes that the failure to include women in current models of adult development "may point to a problem in the representation [of human development], a limitation in the conception of [the] human condition about certain truths about life" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 2).

These certain truths revolve around the issues of attachment and separation. According to Gilligan (1982),

Attachment and separation anchor the cycle of human life, describing the biology of human reproduction and the psychology of human development. . . . This reiterative counterpoint in human experience, however, when molded into a

developmental ordering, tends to disappear in the course of its linear reduction into the equation of development with separation. . . .The limitation of this rendition is most apparent in absence of women from accounts of adult development. (p. 151)

Because adult development is equated with separation, women's development has been deemed incomplete due to the "continuing importance of attachment" (p. 23) throughout their life cycle.

A probable cause for the different values placed on the developmental issues of attachment and separation is the environment in which the adult is living. Smelser and Erikson (1980) state that the life course is affected by the sociocultural environment. The way the adult experiences his or her adulthood is determined by the way his or her life is organized by the culture. Consequently, the socialization process appears to differ for men and women.

#### Socialization Practices That Affect Women's Development

The importance of attachment results from a socialization process that begins early in the woman's life cycle. Chodorow (1978) comments on the sex differences in experiences of individuation and relationship:

From very early, then, because they are parented by a person of the same gender. . . girls come to experience themselves as less differentiated than boys, as more continuous with and related to the external object-world, and as differently oriented to their inner object-world as well. (p. 167)

"Consequently, relationships, and particularly issues of dependency are experienced differently by women and men. For boys and men, separation and individuation are critically tied to gender identity since separation from the mother is essential for the development of masculinity" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 8). Attachment becomes "not only a descriptive difference but also a developmental liability. . ." (p. 91). Whereas men feel independent when separated, women feel isolated, inferior, and unfulfilled.

Theorists suggest that, in order to feel complete, women seek sources of attachment. Horney (1945) addresses this issue when she describes the compliant personality and the individual who tends to move toward people.

When moving toward people he accepts his own helplessness, and in spite of his estrangement and fears tries to win the affection of others and to lean on them. Only in this way can he feel safe with them. . . .By complying with them, he gains a feeling of belonging and support which makes him feel less isolated. . . .He

shows a marked need for a 'partner' - that is a friend, lover, husband or wife who is to fulfill all expectations of life and take responsibility for good and evil, his successful manipulation becoming the predominant task. (pp. 42, 49-50)

The socialization practices experienced by girls and female adolescents and the manipulation they later experience as adults appears to result in the repression of those personality qualities and attributes that may threaten their ability to establish and maintain attachments. Rubin (1979) analyzed socialization practices. She concluded that women become ambivalent adults because of the conflicting messages they receive during their development. Tittle and Denker (1980) comment on these conflicting messages.

The cultural expectation is that girls will be sweet and nice, not expressing other aspects of the self such as the curious and intellectual. Girls are given two messages from a very early age. They are told to achieve, but not go beyond that which is appropriate for a girl. (p. 44)

Achievement by women is appropriate only within certain degrees. This appropriateness is "defined in terms of a woman's relationship to a man" (Tittle and Denker, p. 44). To Horney (1945) this need for a relationship with a man changes the woman. "A girl formerly tomboyish, ambitious, rebellious, when she falls

in love may turn into a compliant, dependent woman, apparently without ambition" (p. 44). Maccoby (1963) concludes that the sublimation of those threatening attributes of intelligence and ambition are manifested long before a woman develops a relationship with a man because "it appears that some of the restraints upon her intellectuality make themselves felt long before marriage. . ." (p. 25). Gunderson (1963) calls this repression the great law.

The great law in this "other world" of women deals with the true "success" of a female. It says, "Thou shalt be loved by a man. Become a wife. Have a family. Do it early. Do it now." The second law is like unto the first: "Dissemble under a facade of charm and glamor your inherent strength, ambition, and intellectual power. All these qualities will serve you best within the framework of the first law's achievement and are most successful when they stay invisible." (p. 184)

Despite recent changes in the views about appropriate roles for women, Tittle's (Tittle and Denker, 1980) 1979 research indicates that "sex-role socialization" (p. 70) causes sex-role stereotypes to prevail.

#### Relationships and Women's Identity Formation

Relationships are important to both men and women throughout their life cycles. Horney (1945) believes that personalities are affected by relationships. "Human



relationships are so crucial that they are found to mold the qualities we develop, the goals we set for ourselves, the values we believe in" (pp. 46-47). This is especially true for women because they "define themselves in a context of human relationships" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 17).

Identity issues and relationships seem to be inextricably linked for women. Comments on Erikson's theories of identity formation are included in several studies. Tarule's (1980) research supports Erikson's theory that identity is one of the key tasks and themes that recur throughout the adult life cycle. But when discussing the issue of women's identity formation Erikson's theory relies upon the perspective of the male life cycle. A woman's identity is perceived by Erikson as a void needing to be filled. Laws (1979) suggests that "Erikson characterizes the identity of the young woman in a way parallel with inner space: in his theory, she reserves space in her lifestyle planning and her personal identity which will be filled by her future mate" (Laws, p. 273). And "Erikson ponders how a woman can have an identity without having met the man she will marry, concluding that her attractiveness and selectivity of the kind of man she will marry will provide a basis for her identity" (Richardson and Sands, 1983, p. 4).

According to some theorists women's identity formation seems to be on hold until she marries. "In fact, since so much of a woman's status is ascribed by her husband's status, women are often stalled in establishing a firm identity until their marriage plans are solidified" (Tittle and Denker, 1980, p. 146). Because "the family life cycle has been considered synonymous with the female life cycle" (p. 112) a woman's identity is associated with her family and work roles. Her identity is expanded as she acquires new roles and relationships through her family. "Every role is defined in partnership with other roles (e.g. mother-child; husband-wife)" (Laws, 1979, p. 3). As a result of this pairing of roles, a woman's identity takes on the appearance of a puzzle; her husband forms a piece; her children have their individual sections; in-laws and parents add their portions as do friends and society. "The wife is assumed to reflect her husband's status, her children's needs and other people's expectations. She is viewed in terms of the functions she serves for others" (Laws, p. 91). Despite what appears to be a complete picture - a fulfilled woman - the woman has no autonomy because "in the ceaseless round of unremarked activity, the sense of self can be

worn away and the positive sense of one's individuality obliterated" (Laws, p. 145). "Women are expected to give their energies to the lives of their families rather than creating lives of their own" (Tittle and Denker, 1980, p. 70). This is a "cultural mandate" (p. 70).

#### Transitions That Threaten Identity

As stated previously, adulthood is not a static phase of life. It includes changes. Pearlin (1980) asserts that newness is more the rule than the exception. "Adulthood is not a quiescent stretch interspersed with occasional change; it is a time in which change is continuous, interspersed with occasional quiescent interludes" (p. 174). Sheehy's (1976) studies led her to conclude that while adults are challenged by these changes or transitions that occur throughout their development, these changes also present the opportunity for the adult to grow.

It would be surprising if we didn't experience some pain as we leave the familiarity of one adult stage for the uncertainty of the next. But the willingness to move through each passage is equivalent to the willingness to live abundantly. If we don't change, we don't grow. (p. 513)

Knox (1977) uses the word adaptation when describing how adults cope with life changes.

The relative stability of adult life is periodically punctuated by change events such as marriage, a job change, or the death of a close friend, that alter significantly the individual's relationships with other people and disturb the routine of social participation. . . .These events may occur in any relationship - family, occupational, or community. They may entail a gain, a loss, or a combination of gains and losses in role relationships . . . .Because change events entail alterations in role relationships, some adaptation is inescapable. (pp. 513-514, 548)

Like the men in Levinson's study (1978), women also experience marker events during their adult development. Women, too, must reassess their lives and they are especially "vulnerable to the issues of separation that arise at mid-life" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 170). The dilemma for women arises when the concern for herself conflicts with her sense of responsibility to others. The development of woman's identity, which focuses principally on her roles within the family structure, actually delays the woman's definition of self and the recognition of her individuality.

With socialization processes and practices that impel a woman to repress the attributes of intelligence, assertiveness, curiosity, etc., and consequently leave her dependent upon others for her sense of identity and fulfillment, how do these transitions affect women?

Current theories of adult development offer an explanation, but only within the context of the male life cycle. Gilligan (1982) recognizes this discrepancy when she states "theories formerly considered to be sexually neutral in their scientific objectivity are found instead to reflect a consistent observational bias" (p. 6). Gilligan concludes that "women bring to the life cycle a different point of view and order human experience in terms of different priorities" (p. 22).

In view of the evidence that women perceive and construe social reality differently from men and that these differences center around experiences of attachment and separation, life transitions that invariably engage these experiences can be expected to involve women in a distinctive way.  
(Gilligan, p. 171)

These transitions might be perceived by the woman as having critical consequences for the remainder of her life cycle. These life changes may be threatening to the identity of the adult woman. If women identify themselves through their relationships and attachments to others, their identity and sense of self are threatened by a separation from this identity source.

. . .the events of mid-life - the menopause and changes in family and work - can alter a woman's activities of care that affect her sense of herself. If mid-life brings an end to relationships, to the sense of

connection on which she relies, as well as to the activities of care through which she judges her worth, then the mourning that accompanies all life transitions can give way to melancholia of self-depreciation and despair. (Gilligan, p. 171)

This raises a question with implications for education. How can a woman successfully negotiate a transition that involves the key developmental issues of identity and separation?

Learning: A Coping Strategy for Change

"In tying women's self-development to the exercise of their own reason, the early feminists saw education critical for women if they were to live under their own control" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 129).

Even while urging caution to women with aspirations, they [female educators] opened the way for them to take unconventional routes. Almira Phelps thus observed that "if genius, circumstance of fortune or the providence of God assigns" one "a more public and conspicuous station," a woman "ought cheerfully do all that her own powers, aided by the blessings of God, can achieve." (Solomon, 1985, p. 25)

These early educators "showed women students that they had both a right and an obligation to take themselves seriously" and "that the first object should not be 'to prepare to please the other'" (Solomon, p. 26).

Aslanian and Brickell (1980) elaborate upon the early feminists' notion of education. Like other theorists they see adults' lives as a series of transitions. Their research takes into consideration the current theories of adult life stages and social change. They then hypothesize that there is a relationship between adult development and learning. In their view, learning is the strategy used by adults to cope with the change they are experiencing. Learning is the bridge between the changes in the adult's status; it is the strategy used by adults when they realize "that they will have to learn something new if they are going to make the transition successfully" (Aslanian and Brickell, p. 52).

Weathersby's (1977) doctoral dissertation used a developmental perspective to study adults' uses of formal education. She found that there was a relationship between an adult's decision to enroll in the Adult Degree Program (ADP) at Goddard College and significant life changes. Similarly, she found that the ADP provided "a support structure for life transitions" (p. 242). She elaborates:

Whether it is consciously designed or intended as such, education is a developmental intervention in adults' lives, an

activity that is potentially, if not inextricably, linked to processes of growth, development, change, and transformation. (p. 238)

Weathersby's research also indicates that the reasons adults enroll in school are often "time-linked" (p. 53). She writes that "one's sense of critical tasks claiming one's attention changes as one progresses through the life cycle, giving rise to different educational needs" (p. 54). With specific regard to women's reasons for enrolling in the ADP at Goddard, Weathersby says they tend "to enroll in transitional life periods" (p. 242). This seems to be especially evident during the Thirties, Forties and Fifties Transitions. Weathersby concludes that the reasons women enroll in the ADP at Goddard differ based upon their ages and developmental phase.

During the Thirties Transition the woman seeks to redirect her life.

Finishing one's interrupted education is important, and now possible for married women whose children are old enough to be in school. Overcoming entrapment in work and family roles becomes a focal issue; there is a clearer need to seek professional advancement on one's own terms. (Weathersby, p. 99)

During the Forties Transition, the woman student again faces changes that involve work and family roles, but returning to school at this time is not so much an



attempt to redirect one's life as it is to explore one's interests.

Forty seems an age that is for many a watershed of consciousness. . . .At forty, they felt a new self-acceptance: personality was set, it was too late to change, and they felt free to pursue activities of their own choosing rather than please others. The two most common themes are finding meaningful work in changed family circumstances and exploring one's identity apart from family and work roles. (Weathersby, pp. 110-111)

The woman at the Fifties Transition and beyond enrolled "after crisis and personal upheaval" (Weathersby, p. 114). For these students a return to school enables them to explore new directions and "foster the acquisition of work which is personally defined and strongly related to fundamental goals and values" (p. 114).

Women at mid-life phases of their development experience transitions that can affect the direction of their lives. Gilligan (1982) suggests "that the major transitions in women's lives would seem to involve changes in the understanding and activities of care" (p. 171). Weathersby (1977) states that "intimacy issues (e.g. choosing to marry, leaving a spouse, or the break-up of an important relationship, group living situation)" (p. 93) are major personal issues. As a result, the woman begins to explore her life and to take responsibility for

its direction. "Many women at mid-life seem to be separating themselves from family (husband, children), as well as transforming the directions of their parental family into expectations which more clearly match their personalities and life situation" (Weathersby, p. 53). Gilligan (1982) believes the woman is able to do this because there has been a change in the woman's perception of caring. "When the distinction between helping and pleasing frees the activity of taking care from the wish for approval by others, the ethic of responsibility can become a self-chosen anchor of personal integrity and strength" (Gilligan, p. 171).

Letchworth (1970) concurs with Weathersby's findings that transitions involving intimacy along with change events that involve identity are key issues for adult women. According to Gilligan (1982), the life changes that are most threatening to a woman are those which involve identity and intimacy because they affect the woman's sense of self. Their dream of "fulfillment and achievement through the life of another, either children or husband. . . .has been rudely interrupted for many of the women who return to higher education, providing part of the psychological motivation for returning" (Tittle and Denker, 1980, p. 43). Some of

these rude interruptions are a dissolved marriage (Danowski, 1983; Saslaw, 1981), serious illness (Weathersby, 1977), and some other type of object loss, such as the loss of a job or the death of a child (Thoen and Weiner, 1983).

Women may return to higher education to learn to negotiate a life change that has left a gap in a source of fulfillment and identity. A woman who enrolls in college may be concerned about her self-esteem and identity (Hetherington and Hudson, 1981). Kaplan (1982) found that

. . . apparently, women unable to achieve a sense of separate identity through personal achievement as adolescents could readily do so in their maturity. . . . The result might be a return to school . . . . For those women, the process of education appears to have served as a means to develop an emerging sense of personal identity.  
(pp. 10, 14)

With a self-concept that has been challenged by a change event in her life, the woman may return to school because "formal schooling for most women represents a means to an end; schooling will help them reach some other goal that is important to strengthening their self-image" (DuBrin, 1972, p. 96). Weathersby (1977) concurs. She concludes that for women "the program [Goddard's Adult Degree Program] provides support for redefining one's identity

and work" (p. vii).

### Summary

According to several theorists (Gilligan, 1982; Laws, 1979; Tittle and Denker, 1980) a woman's "identity is defined in a context of relationship" (Gilligan, p. 160). In their view, "the major transitions in women's lives would seem to involve changes in the understanding and activities of care" (p. 171). When these change events occur, the woman literally faces an identity crisis. Miller (1977) focuses on this dilemma:

. . .women stay with, build on, and develop in a context of attachment and affiliation with others, and women's sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make, and then maintain, affiliations and relationships, and that, eventually, for many women, the threat of disruption of an affiliation is perceived not just as a loss of a relationship but as something closer to a total loss of self. (p. 83)

When such a transition occurs, a woman may return to school. She faces the task of defining herself in a new context. She is ". . .confronted with the task of identifying herself apart from her role as wife and mother. . ." (Wheaton and Robinson, 1983, p. 45).

Because the woman's identity has been changed and/or eliminated by this change event, achieving a sense of

identity may be an important goal for women who choose to continue their education. Returning women may be attempting to resolve a developmental crisis and they may be "committed to education for both personal development and vocational goals" (Tittle and Denker, 1980, p. 119). The process of education appears to be a means by which women can cope with life changes. At the same time education serves as a means to develop a sense of self. This study, grounded in adult developmental theory and Gilligan's (1982) notion of connectedness, will endeavor to test these assertions with adult women returning to a community college setting.

## Chapter 3

### METHODOLOGY

This study attempts to confirm or disconfirm the hypothesis that life transitions and the desire to revise one's identity prompt adult women to return to school, particularly a community college.

This chapter includes a description of the sample population and a discussion of how the research instruments used in this study address each of the subsidiary research questions. A description of the contents of the questionnaire and interview schedule, the pilot study, the procedures for the administration of the questionnaire and interview schedule and the method of data analysis are included.

#### Sample

This is an exploratory study of returning women students at Paul D. Camp Community College. The women selected to participate in the study had to meet all of the following criteria which have been used in the literature to define a reentry woman in higher education (Fisher-Thompson and Kuhn, 1981; Prager, 1983; Roehl and Okun, 1984):

1. They had to be 25 years old or older.
2. They had to be enrolled in a credit course of study.
3. In order to be considered "currently enrolled" the women had to be new enrollees to Paul D. Camp and attending class(es) in the Fall 1985, Winter 1986, and/or Spring 1986 terms.
4. They had to be enrolled at Paul D. Camp Community College after at least a two year lapse since their last formal educational experience.

A computer printout of the names of 372 women who met these criteria was obtained from Paul D. Camp Community College's registration files. Because the number of eligible women was higher than anticipated, a random sample of the qualified research population was used. Every other name was chosen beginning with the first name on the list. Two exceptions were made. One student was ineligible because he was male. In the second case the mailing information and other necessary data were unavailable. In each of these instances, the next name on the list of qualified students was used. Using this procedure, a final sample of 186 qualified women was obtained.

The participants in this research project live in Paul D. Camp Community College's service area. This area comprises 1,400 square miles. The region is predominantly rural. It "includes the cities of Franklin and Suffolk and the counties of Southampton and Isle of Wight in southeastern Virginia" (Grant Proposal from Paul D. Camp Community College to The Virginia Department of Education, July 26, 1985, p. 25). Paul D. Camp's service region has a population of approximately 95,000 people. The area is economically disadvantaged with a high rate of unemployment. The "median household income and per capita income in the region are substantially below the mean for the state of Virginia" (p. 25). Because this research population reflects a group of reentry women who live in an economically disadvantaged area, generalizations regarding the life transitions that may prompt all women to return to school must be made cautiously.

#### Instrumentation

The purpose of this study is to identify the principle reasons adult women return to school. The specific issues examined concern whether life changes and the desire for a revised identity are the major reasons adult women return to community college.



Modifications of research instruments utilized by Aslanian and Brickell (1980), Astin (1969), Tittle and Denker (1980), and Weathersby (1977) were used to develop a questionnaire and interview schedule. Components of each research instrument focus on specific change events and aspects of identity formation that may influence a woman's decision to return to a formal education setting. These components are presented in relation to each of the subsidiary research questions.

Are life changes the major reason adult women return to community college? (subsidiary question number 1) is addressed by survey and interview schedule questions that focus on specific transitions that may have influenced the woman to enroll in a community college. Some questions focus on transitions that affect the woman's primary sources of relationships. Examples of each change events are: death of a spouse, divorce or separation, and children entering school or leaving home. The survey items also focus on other life transitions that may have prompted the woman to enroll in Paul D. Camp Community College. These questions ask about changes in the woman's job status and the need for an income.

In the interview schedule, the woman is given the opportunity to elaborate upon any life transitions that

may have prompted her to return to Paul D. Camp.

Do women return to community college to revise their identity? (subsidiary question number 2) is addressed by items on the questionnaire and interview schedule that relate to the process of identity formation in women. These questions focus on life goals, independence and autonomy, and how becoming a student may have affected the woman's identity and sense of self. Other questions address the more concrete aspects of identity formation. These items focus on the woman's quest for new skills and interests such as acquiring vocational or professional skills, developing career goals, and earning a One-Year Certificate or a Two-Year Associate Degree. In the survey consideration is also given to the possibility that a woman may return to Paul D. Camp Community College and not actively seek to revise her identity.

The interview schedule also includes questions on the personal and professional goals that the woman hopes to achieve as a result of enrolling at Paul D. Camp Community College. These goals are, likewise, related to a woman's identity formation.

Do the reasons for a return to community college differ for women based upon their age, race, marital

status, and current employment status? This question (subsidiary question number 3) is addressed by the demographic data obtained from the questionnaire. Each of these variables may influence the women's reasons for returning to school.

Age has been identified as an important variable when describing women's enrollment trends and patterns (Fisher-Thompson and Kuhn, 1983; Richardson and Sands, 1981; United States Bureau of the Census, 1985; and Weathersby, 1977). Research evidence (Kaplan, 1982; Richardson and Sands, 1981; and Weathersby, 1977) indicates that women at different ages enroll in college for somewhat different reasons.

Fisher-Thompson and Kuhn's (1981) research on national trends concerning nontraditional student populations, including reentry women, describes enrollment trends. Their data indicate that "racial minorities make up a larger portion of enrollment at community colleges than at four-year institutions" (Fisher-Thompson and Kuhn, p. 2). Of the 1,000 students enrolled at Paul D. Camp Community College in 1984-1985, 37 percent were minority (Grant Proposal from Paul D. Camp Community College to The Virginia Department of Education, July 26, 1985). Hence, it is important to

determine if minority and majority women return to education for similar or different reasons.

Fisher-Thompson and Kuhn's (1981) research also describes the correlation between returning women's educational needs and career considerations. They elaborate:

Reentry women. . .now outnumber college men for their age groups, in both absolute numbers and in proportionate rates.

At the same time, many of these returning women students are in the paid work force. . . .Whether because of economic necessity or personal choice, women are now entering or re-entering the labor force at unprecedented rates.

The correlation between a good education and a good job has not gone unnoticed by women in the work force. Because the average woman, whether single or married, will work more than 34 years of her life, she does indeed have a large stake in obtaining a sound education in preparation for her chosen career. As more women aspire to move up the career ladder, more will be returning to college for additional education and training. (Fisher-Thompson and Kuhn, 1981, p. 1)

Therefore, it is important to determine if career considerations are important reasons adult women return to school.

Each of the variables outlined in subsidiary question number 3 is used to compare and contrast the reasons women return to school. This information may

also aid in the identification of patterns in adult women's reasons for returning to community college.

Questionnaire        The survey is a four-page questionnaire consisting of 22 items. The questions focus on the following areas: (a) demographic data including name, address, telephone number, date of birth, area of residence, marital status, family size, and work status (Items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11); (b) educational experience in the past and current student status (Items 12, 13, 14, and 15); (c) developmental issues including questions on life and career goals, identity goals, how the respondent would describe herself at the present time, and her reasons for returning to school (Items 16, 17, 18, and 20); (d) change events that may have prompted the respondent to return to Paul D. Camp (Items 17, 18, and 19); and (e) whether or not becoming a student has had an effect on her in terms of coping with changes in her life and/or work and on her self-perception (Items 21 and 22).

The questionnaire is semi-structured. Some questions can be answered by placing a check mark in the appropriate response categories. Other questions are less structured and require short essay answers.

Interview Schedule      The interview schedule supplements the information obtained from the questionnaire. It includes questions relating to any change events that occurred in the women's lives that were related to their decision to enroll at Paul D. Camp Community College, such as: why they enrolled when they did as opposed to at some other time (Item 1); what they hoped to achieve by enrolling at Paul D. Camp (Item 2); when the change event took place (Items 3a and 3b); who was involved in this change (Item 3c); if any problems (i.e. with her spouse, her family, her employer) arose as a result of this life transition (Item 3d); and how this event or situation was resolved (Items 3e and 3f). Other questions address the women's self-concept prior to enrolling at Paul D. Camp (Item 4) and their self-perception at the time of the interview (Item 5). The final question (Item 6) gives the women the opportunity to provide other information that they feel is pertinent to their decision to enroll at Paul D. Camp Community College, but is not addressed by an interview question.

The Pilot Study      The questionnaire and interview were pilot tested prior to their use with the returning women students at Paul D. Camp Community College. The

pilot study phase of the research was conducted from March 24, 1986 through April 11, 1986.

The pilot study population consisted of seven women who had returned to college. The participants were attending the Tidewater Area Center of Saint Leo College located at the Little Creek Naval Amphibious Base in Norfolk, Virginia or the Virginia Beach, Virginia branch of Tidewater Community College. Their names were obtained from a list of students who had volunteered to participate in the pilot study. The preliminary questionnaire and a cover letter were mailed to the seven women. They were asked to complete the questionnaire and to add their comments and/or suggestions regarding the questions. There was a 100 percent response rate to the pilot questionnaire.

The interview schedule was piloted with three of the women who completed the preliminary questionnaire. They were asked to respond to each question and to offer their feedback about the questions after the interview process was concluded. Modifications were made to the questionnaire and the interview schedule based upon the comments received from the pilot study participants. The questionnaire and interview schedule used in the study of the returning women students at Paul D. Camp

Community College are presented in Appendix B and Appendix E respectively.

Questionnaire and Interview Schedule Administration

The Returning Women Survey for Paul D. Camp Community College was mailed with a cover letter (Appendix A) explaining the study on May 1, 1986 to 186 of the returning women students at Paul D. Camp. The women were requested to complete and return the survey by May 11, 1986 using the addressed, stamped envelope that was enclosed with the questionnaire and cover letter. A follow-up letter (Appendix C) and questionnaire were mailed on May 15, 1986 to those women who had not responded by the completion date. The completion date for the follow-up mailing was May 25, 1986.

From those women who completed and returned the questionnaire, a stratified random sample based upon the age of the respondent was selected to be interviewed. Age was used as the principle selection criterion because of Weathersby's (1977) work indicating that age gives a general indication of the adult's life phase.

The evidence that life phase is a meaningful construct. . .lies in the many time-linked reasons given for enrollment and in students' perceptions of the role of education in making desired changes in their lives and work. . .one's sense of critical tasks claiming one's attention changes as one progresses



through the life cycle, giving rise to different educational needs.  
(Weathersby, pp. 53, 54)

Consequently, the reasons women return to community college may differ for women of different ages.

Other variables that helped provide a cross section of interviewees were used. Consideration was given to the women's marital status, race, and current employment status. Sixteen women representing four age categories from 25 to 60 were chosen to be interviewed. An additional eight women were selected to serve as interview alternates.

The interview subjects were contacted initially by telephone. A post card reminder of the day, date, time and interview location was then sent to each of the women who had agreed to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted during a four day period from June 17, 1986 through June 20, 1986. The women were interviewed in a variety of locations such as their home, place of employment and both the Franklin, Virginia and the Suffolk, Virginia campuses of Paul D. Camp Community College. In accordance with the requirements of the Human Subjects Committee of The College of William and Mary, the interview participants gave informed consent (Appendix D).

Notes on the responses to the interview questions were recorded during the interview session on paper and later transcribed in more detail. Most interviews were about half an hour in length.

### Analysis

For both survey and interview data frequencies and percentages were computed for descriptive and comparative purposes. The main objective was to identify response patterns that may help to clarify why women return to college after a lapse in their formal education. The questionnaire data were compared and contrasted based upon the respondents' age, race, marital status and current employment status. Interview responses were used to elaborate upon and to clarify the survey findings.

### Summary

A questionnaire and interview schedule were the research instruments used in this study. The questions focused on the major reasons adult women return to school, specifically Paul D. Camp Community College. Frequencies and percentages were then computed to identify the varying reasons women chose to resume their formal education.

## Chapter 4

### ANALYSIS OF SURVEY RESULTS

#### Introduction

As previously stated, the general purpose of this study was to identify the principle reasons non-traditional aged women return to college. More specifically this research examined whether life changes and the desire for a revised identity are the major reasons women return to a community college. Data collected through the Returning Women Survey for Paul D. Camp Community College are analyzed in this chapter.

#### Sample

The Returning Women Survey for Paul D. Camp Community College (PDCCC) was sent to a randomly selected sample of 186 of 372 qualified returning women students at PDCCC. Ninety surveys were returned for a response rate of 48 percent. Of the surveys returned, two (2 percent) were not usable and were not included in the analysis of data. Thus, of the 90 returned questionnaires, 88 were used in the analysis of data.

Responses were analyzed according to the respondents' age, race, marital status, and current employment status.

The survey responses were grouped according to the age categories used by Weathersby (1977); "20-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, and 61-85" (p. 46). Because the participants in this study had to be 25 years old or older, the first age category was changed to include those women aged 25-30. Two surveys (2 percent of the completed surveys) were included in the 25-30 year old category despite the fact the respondents had not yet reached their 25th birthday. It was decided to include these surveys in the analysis of data because the participants were in their 25th year. The frequency and percent distribution of the respondents by age is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that the great majority of respondents (92 percent) were aged 50 and under. This data parallels Tittle and Denker's (1980) findings which indicated that women who return to higher education in their twenties, thirties, and forties constitute somewhere "between 80 and 90 percent of the returning women in any institution" (p. 43). A large portion (45 percent) of the respondents in this

Table 1. Respondent Sample: Frequency and Percent Distribution by Age

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Age	N	%
25-30	19	21.6
31-40	40	45.4
41-50	22	25.0
51-60	5	5.7
61-85	2	2.3
Total	88	100.0

---

are in the 31-40 age category. This pattern reflects the current enrollment trend of returning women in higher education nationally. The largest increase in college students aged 35 and older is among women (Fisher-Thompson and Kuhn, 1981; Mann, 1985; Saslaw, 1981; Tittle and Denker, 1980).

One of the purposes of this study was to determine if majority and minority women return to education for similar or different reasons. The race of the participants is presented in Table 2. The number of white returning women students responding to the survey was nearly twice as large as the number of black returning women. Nearly 65 percent of the respondents were white. Thirty-five percent were black. This difference does not necessarily indicate that white women are more likely to return to college than black women. This variance could be attributed to a low response rate among nonwhite returning women students at Paul D. Camp Community College.

The breakdown of the marital status of the returning women participants is shown in Table 3. Seventy-seven percent of the participants were married. Wheaton and Robinson (1983) described the typical returning woman student as being in her mid-thirties

Table 2. Respondent Sample: Frequency and Percent Distribution by Race

Race	N	%
White	57	64.8
Black	31	35.2
Total	88	100.0

and married. Tittle and Denker (1980) suggest that the "continuations of 'traditional' patterns [e.g. marriage, parenthood, homemaker] are likely to mean that the patterns of returning women [homemakers who return to formal education] will continue" (p. 16). This could be a possible explanation for the large percentage of married returning women students in this sample.

Single (never been married) women comprised 10 percent of the respondents. Divorced women comprised nearly 6 percent of the sample population. Almost 5 percent of the women were separated. Two percent of the women were widowed.

Table 3. Respondent Sample: Frequency and Percent Distribution by Marital Status

Marital Status	N	%
Single	9	10.2
Married	68	77.3
Divorced	5	5.7
Separated	4	4.5
Widowed	2	2.3
TOTAL	88	100.0



Consistent with previous research on returning women students, many of the students in this sample work outside the home. This trend is apparent in Table 4.

Table 4. Respondent Sample: Frequency and Percent Distribution by Current Employment Status

Employed Outside the Home	N	%
Yes	59	67.1
No	29	32.9
TOTAL	88	100.0

The number of respondents in the paid work force is double the number of women who are not employed outside the home. The distribution of the participants' type of employment is presented in Table 5.

Sixty-eight percent of the participants were involved in work activities outside the home. Sixteen women (18 percent) were employed part-time and nearly 47 percent were employed full-time. These data correspond with Fisher-Thompson and Kuhn's (1981) research. They found that ". . .among women 25-54, estimates average 65 percent to over 70 percent will be

Table 5. Respondent Sample: Frequency and Percent  
Distribution by Type of  
Employment

Employment Status	N	%
Part-time	16	18.2
Full-time	41	46.6
Other	2	2.3
Subtotal	59	67.1
Not employed	29	32.9
Total	88	100.0

working outside the home" (p. 3). "Other" included such activities as volunteer work and babysitting.

This sample seems to reflect some of the characteristics of returning women reported by Tittle and Denker (1980). "Typical" returning women ". . . were married, often with children, and typically pursuing education as part-time students while engaged in part- or full-time employment" (p. 34). The majority of the women in this sample were married and worked outside the home as in Tittle and Denker's (1980) description. The age range of the sample compares with the current trend of women returning to community college who are ". . . beyond the traditional ages for community college students (that is, 18-20 years of age)" (p. 32). A characteristic unique to this sample is the fact that they live in a region where ". . . the percentage of persons . . . with income below the poverty level is substantially higher for the service region [PDCCC's service area] than for the entire state [Virginia]" (Grant Proposal from Paul D. Camp Community College to The Virginia Department of Education, July 26, 1985, p. 25). In sum, in most respects this sample seems to be representative of the general population of returning women students.

### Organization of the Findings

The survey findings have been divided into four general categories:

1. Stability in returning women's life and/or work
2. Life transitions which prompt adult women to return to community college
3. Identity revision in returning women students
4. Reasons for a return to community college based upon age, race, marital status, and current employment status of the participants

The data on the issues of stability, life transitions, and identity revision are initially analyzed based upon the responses of the total sample. The data on these issues are then analyzed based upon the age, race, marital status, and current employment status of the respondents.

### Change Events That Motivate Women to Learn

Research has indicated that adult development is characterized by continuous change (Gould, 1987; Knox, 1977; Levinson, 1978; Sheehy, 1976). Aslanian and Brickell (1980) found ". . .that life transitions establish reasons to learn" (p. 56). Based upon this cause-effect relationship between change events in the

adult life cycle and a learning response, what assessment can be made about the reasons adult women learn?

Knowledge of change events returning women experience is important for understanding their motivation to learn in a formal education setting. The first subsidiary research question was designed to determine whether or not life changes prompt women to return to community college. To obtain this information the participants were asked to describe their reasons for enrolling at Paul D. Camp Community College (Survey items 18, 19, and 20). They were also asked to describe themselves based upon their current life and/or work situation (Item 17). The women's responses to these questions reveal that some women returned to formal education during a stable time in their life and/or work. Other women enrolled at PDCCC after experiencing a change event in their life and/or work. It is apparent that these transitions which prompt a return to community college differ from woman to woman.

Stability in Returning Women's Life and/or Work      The frequency and percent distribution of the women who described their life and/or work situation as stable

is presented in Table 6. Nearly 33 percent of the respondents felt that their current life and/or work situation was stable. In other words, the women who selected this category to describe their present situation felt that there had not been much change in their life and/or work. The majority of the women (67 percent) left this category blank. This indicates that over two thirds of the participants felt that stability was not an accurate description of their present life and/or work situation.

Table 6. Respondent Sample: Life and/or Work Situation Stable

	N	%
Life and/or work stable	29	33.0
No Response	59	67.0
Total	88	100.0

It is important to note that a woman's concept of stability does not remain constant. Rather it is a perception that varies from woman to woman depending upon the significance she places on factors that influence her life. For example, a woman in the 25-30 age group might equate being married with stability, whereas being married might not be as significant for

a woman in the 51-60 age category. This woman might equate stability with income. While the concept of stability is unique to each woman in this study, it is nonetheless a common characteristic because stability is equated with security for most women.

In general, the data reveal that the majority of respondents did not describe their present life and/or work situation as stable. Why did two thirds of the women feel that stability was not an accurate description of their life and/or work situation? Data relating to life transitions and identity revision offer an explanation.

Life Transitions Which Prompt Adult Women to Enroll at Community College Adults can experience transitions in all aspects of their life. For example, change events can occur within adults' family, career, and health. To learn about transitions in the lives of returning women, the participants were asked to describe themselves based upon their present life and/or work situation. Table 7 indicates the frequencies and percentages of the respondents who had either recently experienced a major change in their life or work, and those women who were trying to achieve stability in these areas. Nearly 32 percent of

Table 7. Respondents' Description of Present Life and/or Work Situation

	Present Life/Work Situation		No Response		Total (88)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Recently experienced a major change in my life and/or work	28	31.8	60	68.2	88	100.0
About to make changes in my life and/or work	30	34.1	58	65.9	88	100.0
Trying to achieve stability in my life and/or work	20	22.7	68	77.3	88	100.0



the returning women respondents had recently experienced a major change (e.g., being fired, laid off, divorced) in their life or work. Thirty-four percent indicated that a change event was imminent. This sort of anticipated change is often accompanied by uncertainty and a determination to confront the challenge of change. For example, a 29 year old returning woman stated:

After sitting on a job and seeing so much unfairness, and underhanded things go on, you say to yourself, "Hey, I've got to get out of here." So you do the best thing that will help you and that's go back to school. For some other people it may be different, but I see I need more education in order to achieve stability.<sup>1</sup>

A career change was anticipated by this participant, and in making this change she hoped to achieve stability. Another woman (age 33) was also anticipating a transition that would not only change her life, but that of her family as well.

I need a change. I am tired of welfare and its rules and regulations. . . .I want my children to have better than

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this document the author has used editorial license to correct grammar and syntax in quotations.

what they have been getting. I can't stand my situation any longer. It's awful to live the way I do and not have enough money to do anything.

If an individual is trying to achieve stability, it can be assumed that their present life or work situation is in a period of transition. Almost 23 percent of the respondents were attempting to achieve stability in their life or work.

What types of transitions prompt adult women to enroll at Paul D. Camp Community College? The participants were asked to describe the type of change event they had experienced prior to enrolling at PDCCC. Categories for this response included changes that affected the women's primary relationships such as the death of a spouse, divorce or separation, and children entering school or leaving home. Changes in career, health, religion, and leisure time were also cited.

Changes in Women's Primary Relationships Aslanian and Brickell (1980) found that ". . .changes in an adult's relations with family members require learning something outside of family life. . ." (p. 58).

Transitions that affect women's primary relationships (which include spouse, children and parents) could prompt a return to college. The responses to the

question regarding changes in primary relationships are presented in Table 8.

A change in marital status was cited by 12 percent of the women as the transition that influenced their decision to return to college. For example, a 56 year old returning woman student reflected: "We lived on a farm and that is busy enough even though financially strained. After being widowed, I decided that was time to check things out." This participant's decision to enroll at PCCC was a direct result of having experienced a transition that changed her status in the family. A change in marital status due to divorce was the reason given by a 28 year old woman for her return to school.

[I enrolled] because I suddenly found myself with a lot of time. Finding myself single again and working part time, I couldn't think of anything better to do or a better time to do it.

As with a change in marital status, children leaving home affects the woman's role in her family relationship. Seventeen women (19 percent) stated their return to college was a result of children entering school or leaving home. Some respondents had experienced this change in their status as caretaker. Others anticipated this change and returned to school

Table 8. Reason for Return to College:  
Experienced a Change in Primary Relationships

	Change in Primary Relationships N	%	No Response N	%	Total (88) N	%
Marital status changed	11	12.5	77	87.5	88	100.0
Children at home	17	19.3	71	80.7	88	100.0
						78

to prepare for this transition.

A 42 year old mother commented on the timing of her enrollment in PDCCC. "It was convenient at the time. My son was sixteen and pretty much on his own. . .I had the time on my hands with an almost grown son and a working husband." And from a 34 year old woman who was preparing herself for the transition of her children leaving home:

My kids are getting older and soon will be leaving one at a time, and I don't want to be doing what I'm doing all my life as a bus driver and a house cleaner. There's something better out there for me and I'm going for it no matter how long it takes. The things I have learned so far are just outstanding.

It is apparent from the findings cited that transitions that affect women's primary relationships are influential in prompting some adult women to enroll at PDCCC.

Need for an Income Because the participants in this study live in an economically depressed area, it was important to determine if work related transitions prompt adult women to enroll at PDCCC. The requirements for employment necessitate current marketable skills. In general, the need for an income was synonymous with a need for job skills for

the respondents. In other words, for some returning women the need for an income prompted a return to school in order to learn new skills for employment. The relevant data are presented in Table 9.

Nearly 31 percent of the participants responded that a need for an income and consequently the need to learn marketable skills, was the transition that influenced their return to college. A 32 year old participant commented:

The situation that prompted me to enroll at Paul D. Camp was I was tired of sitting home doing nothing. I felt my life was being wasted. I wanted a job but it seemed as though my skills were not strong enough. So I enrolled to better myself as an individual and I wanted to gain more knowledge in the field of computer programming.

The data suggest that the need for marketable job skills influenced some women to return to formal education. However, this work related transition does not appear to be an important reason for a return to school for most of the respondents.

Changes in Job Status      Work related transitions also include a change in job status (such as being hired, fired, promoted, laid off). The respondents were asked if a change in job status prompted their return to education. The data are displayed in

Table 9. Reason for Return to College:  
 Needed Skills to Get a Job

	Transition N	%	No Response N	%	Total (88) N	%
Needed skills to get job	27	30.7	61	69.3	88	100.0

Table 10.

Table 10. Reason For Return to College:  
Change in Job Status

	Transition		No Response		Total (88)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Job status changed	14	15.9	74	84.1	88	100.0

Sixteen percent of the participants returned to college as a result of having experienced a change in job status. A 40 year old participant commented: "I started a new job and needed the course I am taking." Another participant (age 28) described her reason for enrolling at PDCCC: "Last summer when I was laid off, I went out to look for other work and found I really wasn't qualified to do much. I decided that this would be a good time to take the course." Another returning woman (age 46) was anticipating a career move which prompted her to enroll at PDCCC:

After I had been approached about doing this particular job for my company, the one course I needed to help me with my soon-to-be-new career was being held at the campus and I jumped at the opportunity to take it. The timing was perfect. Shortly after I had been approached about the position opening up, around June, I learned of the class and noted it concluded approximately the time my new position was to go into effect.



Transitions that are job related often require learning something new in order to negotiate successfully this change in work related status. "Many adults [who had experienced changes in their careers] had to learn in order to get their jobs, keep them, or advance beyond them" (Aslanian and Brickell, 1980, p. 66). The aforementioned examples illustrate that a change in job status prompted a decision to learn by a small proportion of the returning women students.

Changes in Health Aslanian and Brickell's (1980) research found that changes in personal health prompt a learning response. They found that the reasons adults learn for health fell into two categories: "1) recovering from personal injury or illness and 2) maintaining physical fitness" (p. 81).

The participants were asked if a change in personal health prompted their return to college. One respondent (1 percent) indicated that her return to college was influenced by personal health. This particular returning woman student enrolled at PDCCC because of general discontent with her job and depression which resulted from family and personal problems.

A desire to maintain their physical fitness prompted four (4 percent) women to return to school. One respondent (age 40) stated: "I want to improve the physical condition of my body and mind. That is why I signed up for the exercise course offered at the college."

The women who enrolled at PDCCC for health related reasons were interested primarily in maintaining their physical well being. However, a health related transition did not influence the great majority of the participants in this study to enroll at PDCCC.

Changes in Leisure Time Changes in leisure time also prompt a learning response in some adults. Aslanian and Brickell (1980) estimated that nearly 13 percent of adult transitions are leisure related. Some of these changes require the adult to develop new leisure activities such as hobbies, crafts or sports. Four respondents (4 percent) enrolled at Paul D. Camp Community College because of a leisure related change event. All of these women were pursuing an interest in painting or drawing. One respondent (age 65) commented: "I felt I needed additional courses in drawing to assist in my hobby of watercolor painting."

Another woman (age 72) returned to college after receiving a set of paints as a gift. These women illustrate that change events can be leisure related and that a learning response may follow. However, the very large majority of women in this sample did not cite a leisure related change event as the reason for their decision to enroll at PDCCC.

#### Changes in Religious Beliefs and/or Experiences

Transitions of a religious nature also prompt a learning response among some adults. None of the respondents in this study attributed their decision to return to college to a major religious transition. However, three respondents (3 percent) felt that God had guided them to the time when it was right to enroll in college. "I felt like it was just my time, and the Lord made that possible for me" was the reason a 34 year old participant enrolled at PDCCC. According to Aslanian and Brickell (1980) "some adults, particularly those who grew up in the South or who still live there, have an intensely personal relationship with God" (p. 84). Such seems to be the case for these three returning women. But for the great majority of the women in the sample, a religious transition had not influenced their decision to enroll

at PDCCC.

Other Factors That Influence Women's Return College

A question on other factors that prompt women to return to community college yielded responses that could be classified into three categories: teacher recertification, an interest in the subject matter, and convenience of the educational opportunity. Six respondents (7 percent) indicated they enrolled at PDCCC to renew their teaching certificates. The state or school districts' requirements for recertification stipulate that credit courses be taken within a specific period of time (e.g., every five years). According to Aslanian and Brickell (1980) such employer requirements will prompt an adult to learn.

The data on the women who enrolled at PDCCC for other reasons are displayed in Table 11. (It must be noted that these figures include those respondents who may have already indicated that a transition in their life or work prompted their enrollment at PDCCC.) Fifty percent of the participants mentioned that an interest in the subject matter influenced their decision to enroll in a class. The other half of the respondents did not indicate that interest in the subject matter was an important variable when they decided to return to college.

Table 11. Reason for Return to College:  
Other Factors

	Other Factors N	Other Factors %	No Response N	No Response %	Total (88) N	Total (88) %
Subject matter interested me, convenience of the educational opportunity	44*	50	44	50	88	100.0

\*This figure includes  
6 women who had  
enrolled at PDCCC for  
teaching recertification

Factors other than transitions appeared to be influential in prompting half of the participants to enroll at PDCCC. This could be attributed primarily to two reasons. First, some of the women in this study had to learn because of teaching recertification requirements. Despite the involuntary nature of their learning, ". . .it is difficult to force adults to study irrelevant topics" (Aslanian and Brickell, 1980, p. 113). Consequently, the women who had to return to college to renew their teaching certificates probably enrolled in courses that interested them and would have some personal or professional relevance.

Aslanian and Brickell (1980) may also provide the second explanation for why half of the women in the sample indicated that an interest in the subject matter prompted their decision to enroll at PDCCC. They state: "While the topic an adult chooses to learn is always related to the life transition requiring that learning, the topic is not always related to the event triggering the learned" (p. 113). In other words, some learning must take place when a change event occurs, but the selected learning activity may occur in an area that appears to be unrelated to the type of transition that has occurred. For example, one woman's decision to learn computer

skills was triggered by her divorce. It is apparent that an interest in the subject matter may have been precipitated by a change event that occurred in the women's life.

#### Conclusions on Transitions as a Reason for a Return to College

In sum, the data on life transitions as a reason adult women enroll in college reveal that change events did influence a substantial portion of the respondents to enroll at PDCCC. The data suggest that family and work related transitions were more likely to prompt a return to college than health, religious or leisure related change events. The findings reveal that career related change events were influential in motivating more participants to enroll at PDCCC than were family related transitions. However, caution must be exercised when applying this conclusion to the general population of returning women students. The generalizability of this conclusion is limited because the participants live in an economically disadvantaged area where work related change events had critical consequences for some of the participants. Nonetheless, the findings support an affirmative response to the first subsidiary research question. Life changes

do prompt many adult women to return to community college.

#### Identity Revision in Returning Women Students

The theoretical framework of this study leads to two fundamental assumptions about returning women students. The first assumption is that women return to college to learn to cope with a change event that has occurred in their life. The second assumption is that the desire to revise their identity also prompts adult women to return to college.

The types of life transitions that prompt adult women to enroll at PDCCC have been discussed. The issue of women's identity formation and its relationship to college attendance will now be addressed.

According to Gilligan (1982) women define themselves in the context of relationship and connection. For women ". . .the self and other are interdependent. . ." (p. 127). Women form relationships in their family, work, and social environments. If a transition occurs that severs or threatens this form of connection, and consequently the woman's source of identity, how will the woman reestablish her sense of self? As previously discussed, Aslanian and Brickell (1980) suggest that a learning response will be triggered by such a change event.



With specific regard to women, Richardson and Sands (1983) found that many who return to school are at a turning point in their adult development. These women are concerned with identity issues and "are asking themselves who they are, what they want, and who they wish to be" (p. 1).

The second subsidiary research question addressed the issue of identity revision in returning women students at Paul D. Camp Community College. Survey items 16, 21, and 22 specifically asked about identity revision. The participants were asked to rank order (1 = extremely important goal, 5 = not an important goal) goals and objectives commonly associated with identity formation. These goals and objectives include:

1. Completing the requirements for a One-Year Certificate or a Two-Year Associate Degree
2. Setting long-range life goals
3. Becoming a more independent person with an identity separate from spouse and children.
4. Acquiring the vocational or professional skills to obtain a better job
5. Setting long-range work goals

Completing Requirements for a One-Year Certificate or  
a Two-Year Associate Degree

One portion of the second subsidiary research question addressed the importance of completing degree or certification requirements. The importance of this goal to the returning women respondents is displayed in Table 12. Almost 38 percent of the participants responded that completing the requirements for a One-Year Certificate or a Two-Year Associate Degree was an important goal. Forty-two percent replied that this was not an important goal. It is apparent from the data that completing degree and certification requirements was not an important identity revision goal for most of the returning women in this sample, but it was an important goal for a substantial percentage.

Professional Identity Kaplan (1982) found that both intellectual and vocational motivations contribute to the development of a new identity in returning women. One aspect of this identity formation involves the acquisition or enhancement of a professional identity. Professional identity includes the work skills or interests that the woman has developed or hopes to develop outside of her family/

Table 12. Identity Revision Goal: Importance of Completing the Requirements For a One-Year Certificate or a Two-Year Associate Degree

	N	%
Completing the requirements for a One-Year Certificate or a Two-Year Associate Degree	33	37.5
Not an important goal	37	42.0
No Response	18	20.4
Total	88	99.9 <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Total may differ from 100 percent due to rounding error.

home environment. Acquiring or enhancing a professional identity also involves the development of career goals. The second subsidiary research question addressed the importance of a professional identity to the returning women students at Paul D. Camp Community College. The participants were asked to rank order (1 = extremely important goal, 5 = not an important goal) the importance of acquiring the vocational or professional skills to enable them to obtain a better job and thus establish or enhance their professional identity. The respondents were also asked to rank order the importance of setting long-range work goals. The importance of acquiring vocational or professional skills for job improvement will be discussed first followed by the data on the importance of setting long-range career goals.

Acquiring Vocational or Professional Skills.

The responses to the question on acquiring vocational or professional skills are displayed in Table 13. Seventy-seven percent of the women responded that acquiring or improving their professional identity was an important goal. This goal includes acquiring the vocational or professional skills to get a better job and to establish or enhance a professional identity.

Table 13. Identity Revision Goal: Importance of Acquiring Vocational or Professional Skills to Develop or Enhance a Professional Identity

	N	%
Acquiring the vocational or professional skills to enable me to get a better job (Establish or enhance professional identity)	68	77.3
Not an important goal	12	13.6
No Response	8	9.1
Total	88	100.0

The importance of establishing or enhancing a professional identity is illustrated in the following comments.

A 41 year old woman who wanted to begin a career commented: "I'm more content and happier with myself - feel I have learned a lot and could work if I could find a job." For women who are already employed outside the home, a return to college enhanced their professional identity:

It has helped me obtain a supervisory position at Sovran Bank and I hope it will help me get more promotions.  
(age 29)

I feel as long as I'm in school, someday I will be able to improve my job position. (age 29)

Yes, it [a return to PDCCC] gave me more confidence in office skills - typing, word processing and working with the public on a day to day basis.  
(age 52)

It is obvious from these comments that acquiring vocational or professional skills to develop or improve a professional identity is an important goal for a majority of the participants. This trend seems to concur with Tittle and Denker's (1980) findings. They reported that community college students were interested in acquiring the vocational and

professional skills that would enable them to find a job. Perhaps once returning women acquire the skills necessary for employment, they are then able to augment their professional identity by developing long-range career goals.

Developing Long-Range Career Goals. Thoughts of beginning a career outside of the realm of family may include developing long-range work goals. The returning women participants were asked about the importance of setting long-range career goals. The data from this question are presented in Table 14. Seventy-six percent of the respondents indicated that setting long-range goals for their work was an important objective. Establishing career goals was not a significant issue for only 16 percent of the participants.

It is apparent that establishing or enhancing a professional identity was not just a short term objective for the participants. Rather, once they had acquired vocational and professional capabilities, they projected the use of these skills in some form of employment. The data strongly indicate that developing long-range career goals was an important aspect of the women's professional identity formation.

Table 14. Identity Revision Goal: Importance of Long-Range Career Goals

	N	%
Importance of setting long-range goals for my work	67	76.1
Not an important goal	14	15.9
No Response	7	7.9
Total	88	99.9 <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Total may differ from 100 percent due to rounding error.



The thrust of the data suggest that establishing or enhancing a professional identity is an important issue for most of the returning women in the sample. Work, and the status and recognition that accompanies it, is a major aspect of an adult's identity formation. "When we attach ourselves to particular work, we are likely to stay with it because, if we are successful, it confirms our status as adults" (Smelser and Erikson, 1980, p. 228). This seems to be especially true for men. Much of a man's identity is derived from his work (Levinson, 1978). Women, on the other hand, can ". . . expect to have an [identity] option: to work outside the home or to work inside the home" (Smelser and Erikson, 1980, p. 229). For those women who choose to work inside the home, their identity develops through their roles as wife and mother. The development of a professional identity may be postponed because of these familial roles and responsibilities. At a later date if a woman's roles within the family structure change, so may her identity. She may then opt for an identity that is related to a career. A return to college to acquire marketable skills may help a woman to develop a career related identity. If a woman has already developed an

identity based upon her work outside the home, she may return to college to enhance her professional self-image. These reasons may help to explain why women who have returned to college are interested in developing or enhancing a professional identity.

Achieving Independence Theory and prior research (Kaplan, 1982; Sewall, 1984; Tittle and Denker, 1980; Weathersby, 1977) suggest women who return to college after a lapse in their education are attempting to define themselves on their own terms. Another facet of identity formation in women involves achieving independence from family roles. Survey item 16 addressed two aspects of achieving this independence from family. The first included establishing long-range life goals that would enable women to become financially or socially independent. The second involved achieving an identity separate from spouse and children. In other words, the woman would develop an autonomous identity.

Developing long-range life goals to achieve financial or social independence will be discussed first. The analysis of data on achieving an identity separate from spouse and children will be discussed second.

Developing Long-Range Life Goals to Become Independent. In order to become financially or socially independent, returning women must establish goals that will enable them to achieve this end. The returning women at PDCCC were asked whether setting long-range life goals was an important issue for them. The responses to this question are displayed in Table 15. Nearly 74 percent of the returning women indicated setting long-range life goals was an important identity revision goal.

Table 15. Identity Revision Goal: Importance of Setting Long-Range Life Goals to Achieve Independence

	N	%
Setting long-range goals for my life	65	73.9
Not an important goal	14	15.9
No Response	9	10.2
Total	88	100.0

The following comments illustrate the importance of developing long-range life goals to many returning women students. A 32 year old woman stated: "Paul D. Camp has helped me find out what I want to do with the rest of my life. I feel confident around others that are striving to be something in life, just like me." A 28 year old returning woman observed: "I could see myself getting a start in making and accomplishing my goals for the future." A 41 year old participant felt that "it [going to school] has given me a sense of the possibilities in life." Independence was important for a 35 year old. She commented: "I feel more independent; very proud of myself. I feel I've moved up the social ladder." And long-range goals were an important issue for a 33 year old respondent. "It's [going to PDCCC] helped me identify and specify the basic criteria for my life."

It is apparent from these comments that returning women at PDCCC are striving to achieve independence by setting long-range goals for their life. For most of the participants in this study, their return to college seems to be an initial step in the process of achieving independence.

Developing an Identity Separate from Spouse and Children. According to the survey findings returning women students at Paul D. Camp Community College developed long-range life goals to help them achieve financial or social independence. Becoming independent for many women also involves developing an identity separate from spouse and children. The women were asked to rank order (1 = extremely important goal, 5 = not an important goal) the importance of becoming a more independent person with their own identity. The responses to this question are presented in Table 16. Seventy-seven percent of the returning women participants indicated that becoming a more independent person with an autonomous identity was an important goal for them.

Comments from the returning women participants illustrate the importance of developing a new identity separate from spouse and children. A 32 year old participant said that "becoming a student helped me to realize that I am more than a mother and parent. By going to school I feel I can do just about anything." Enrolling at PDCCC helped a 45 year old realize that she can become independent. "It [going to PDCCC] has made me feel good about myself. It will make me more

Table 16. Identity Revision Goal: Importance of  
Becoming a More Independent  
Person with an Autonomous  
Identity

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	N	%
Becoming a more independent person with my own identity	68	77.3
Not an important goal	15	17.0
No Response	5	5.7
Total	88	100.0

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independent."

Becoming a student again has affected every aspect of my life. I am more independent, more confident, as well as proud of my accomplishments. I now find that I have a separate and productive life of my own along with the life I live as a mother and wife,

reports a 33 year old returning woman. And a 25 year observed that

Becoming a student has given me confidence in myself that I never had before. All of my life, I felt I had to be totally dependent on other people. Now I know that I can contribute something to the people I love and to myself. I am so proud of myself because I now have some independence in my life.

Comments such as these clearly indicate that achieving an autonomous identity is an important goal for returning women students at PDCCC.

Gilligan's (1982) research indicated that women define themselves in the context of relationships. When relationships change or fail, women may begin to reassess the purpose and direction of their life. In the song "Slip Slidin' Away," Paul Simon (1977) sang of this identity struggle:

I know a woman, became a wife.  
 These are the very words she uses to  
 describe her life.  
 She said, "A good day ain't got no rain."  
 She said, "A bad day is when I lie in  
 bed and thing of things that might  
 have been."

Women who are in the process of reassessing their life's direction are attempting to answer several questions. Levinson (1978) summed up this procedure when he described men in mid-life transition. His analysis is appropriate for women confronting identity issues. Levinson states that men ask themselves: "'What have I done? Where am I now? Of what value is my life to society, to other persons, and especially to myself?'" He must deal with the disparity between what he is and what he has dreamed of becoming" (p. 30). Hetherington and Hudson (1981) found that women who return to school are often attempting to answer such questions. The same appears to be true for many of the women in this study.

Overall, a return to college was perceived as a positive change for the participants in this research. Perhaps the process of education enabled them to begin to develop their independence in a supportive environment. Howard (1975) stated that women who decide to return to school ". . . need assurance that their return to college is a positive and active decision to reenter the mainstream of life" (p. 47). Once the women receive affirmation about their decision to return to school, their self-confidence



may improve. As a result, they may feel better prepared to make decisions regarding their future. Their life may then become more self-determined rather than predetermined. For most of the women in this study achieving independence was an important aspect of their identity formation.

#### Factors that Affect the Importance of Identity

##### Revision

The relevant data indicate that identity revision is an important goal for the returning women participants. However, it is important to ascertain whether or not some women return to community college yet not actively seek to revise their identity. This issue was addressed by the first subsidiary research question which sought to determine whether or not life changes prompt adult women to return to formal education. It is appropriate to discuss the data relevant to that question in this section on identity revision. As indicated in Table 11, 50 percent of the participants responded that an interest in the subject matter influenced their decision to enroll at Paul D. Camp Community College. This figure includes six respondents who returned specifically to renew their teaching certification. These women consistently

ranked the goals and objectives associated with identity formation (Item 16) low (4 = starting to become an important goal and 5 = not an important goal). Revising their identity was not an important issue for these participants. The following comments illustrate this point. A 36 year old participant stated: "I am only taking this class to complete my requirements for recertification on my teaching degree." And a 30 year old returning woman replied: "The classes I am taking now are for recertification purposes and furthering my computer education. My goals will not change because of my present classes." It is apparent from these illustrations that, although revising one's identity was an important goal for the majority of the participants who enrolled at PDCCC, it was not an important goal for everyone.

#### Conclusions on Identity Revision in Returning Women Students

The data in this section reveal that identity revision is an important goal for most of the participants in the sample. The findings suggest that many of the returning women at PDCCC are in the process of reassessing their life and taking steps to develop goals that help them in their professional and personal

development. Furthermore, the returning women seem to be especially interested in developing an autonomous identity and acquiring vocational and professional skills for the enhancement of a work related identity. It was interesting to note that completing degree and certification requirements was the least important identity revision objective for the women in this sample. Based on these findings, it appears that an affirmative response to the second subsidiary research question is appropriate. Identity revision is an important goal for the majority of women who returned to Paul D. Camp Community College.

Reasons for a Return to PDCCC Based Upon Age, Race, Marital Status, and Current Employment Status

The analysis of what prompts adult women to return to Paul D. Camp Community College evolved from three subsidiary research questions:

1. Do life changes prompt adult women to return to community college?
2. Do women return to community college to revise their identity?
3. Do the reasons for a return to community college differ based upon the women's age, race, marital status, and current employment status?

The data on stability in returning women's life and/or work, life changes (subsidiary research question 1), and identity revision (subsidiary research question 2) have been discussed based upon the responses of the total group. In the following section the data are analyzed specifically in relation to the respondents' age, race, marital status, and current employment status. (Survey items 4, 6, 7, and 8).

Stability in Returning Women's Life and/or Work: By Age, Race, Marital Status, and Current Employment Status

Responses to the stability questions based upon the participants' age are presented in Table 17. Women who considered their present circumstances stable ranged from 0 percent for women in the 61-85 age category to nearly 41 percent of the women in the 41-50 age group. Variations in the perceptions of a stable life or work environment extended from 21 percent for women aged 25-30, peaked with the 41-50 age group (41 percent), and then declined in each of the subsequent age categories.

The data based upon the respondents' race are displayed in Table 18. The majority of women (67 percent) did not describe their life or work

Table 17. Respondent Sample: Life and/or Work Situation Stable by Age

	25-30(19)	51-40(40)	41-50(22)	51-60(5)	61-85(2)	Total (88)
	N	N	N	N	N	N
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes, life and/or work situation stable	4	14	9	2	0	29
	21.0	35.0	40.9	40.0	0.0	33.0
No response	15	26	13	3	2	59
	78.9	65.0	59.1	60.0	100.0	67.0
Total	19	40	22	5	2	88
	99.9 <sup>1</sup>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

<sup>1</sup>Total may differ from 100 percent due to rounding error.

Table 18. Respondent Sample: Life and/or Work Situation Stable by Race

	White (57)		Black (31)		Total (88)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes, Life and/or work situation stable	22	38.6	7	22.6	29	33.0
No Response	35	61.4	24	77.4	59	67.0
Total	57	100.0	31	100.0	88	100.0

situations as stable. Differences between the responses of the white and black participants are notable. Thirty-nine percent of the white respondents indicated that they were in a stable period. Only 23 percent of the black respondents felt they were in a period of stability. It is apparent that the majority of the black and the white women in this sample returned to college during a time of instability and stress. Enrollment at PDCCC may be perceived as a way to achieve present and future stability in their life while at the same time it provided other support services (such as financial aid and counseling) to the participants.

The responses to the stability question based upon the participants' marital status are displayed in Table 19. Examination of the data reveals differences in each of the marital status categories. Twenty-two percent of the single participants described their life or work situation as stable as did 20 percent of those women who were divorced. Zero percent of the separated and widowed women felt they were in a stable period in their life or work. The percentage citing a stable life or work situation increased to 38 percent for married women.

Table 19. Respondent Sample: Life and/or Work Situation Stable by Marital Status

	Single (9) N	%	Married (68) N	%	Divorced (5) N	%	Separated (4) N	%	Widowed (2) N	%	Total (88) N	%
Yes, life and/or work situation stable	2	22.2	26	38.2	1	20.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	29	33.0
No response	7	77.8	42	61.8	4	80.0	4	100.0	2	100.0	59	67.0
Total	9	100.0	68	100.0	5	100.0	4	100.0	2	100.0	88	100.0



The responses to the issue of stability based upon the participants' current employment status are presented in Table 20. Thirty-seven percent of the participants who were employed outside the home stated that their life or work situation was stable. Of those women who did not work outside the home, 24 percent indicated that they were in a period of stability with regard to their life or work.

In general, the data reveal that the majority of respondents did not describe their present life or work situation as stable regardless of age, race, marital status, and current employment status. Instability does appear to be a more common experience, however, for women who are black, unmarried, or not employed outside the home. What has transpired in the women's lives that leads the majority of them to feel that their life or work situation is unstable? The data relating to life transitions may provide a possible explanation. This information is discussed next.

#### Reasons for Return to College: Life Changes by Age

For purposes of discussion, the reasons for a return to college have been categorized into family related transitions, work related transitions, and other reasons (such as an interest in the subject

Table 20. Respondent Sample: Life and/or Work Situation Stable  
by Current Employment Status

	Employed (59)		Not Employed (29)		Total (88)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes, life and/or work situation stable	22	37.3	7	24.0	29	33.0
No Response	37	62.7	22	76.0	59	67.0
Total	59	100.0	29	100.0	88	100.0

matter, convenience of scheduling, and recertification requirements). The types of transitions that prompted a return to formal education based upon the participants' age are summarized in Table 21. (It should be noted that the participants could check responses in all of the transition categories that applied to them. Hence, percentages may add up to more than 100). Family related transitions fell into two groups: a change in marital status (married, divorced, separated, or widowed) and children not at home. A change in marital status prompted a small portion of the women in the sample to return to college, ranging from 7 percent of the women 31-40 to 20 percent of the women 51-60. One of the two respondents over 60 also stated that a change in her marital status prompted her to return to college.

Family related transitions included children leaving home. Gilligan (1982) found that transitions involving the issues of attachment and separation are threatening to women. Separation from children influenced 18 percent of the returning women participants to enroll at PDMCC. None of the women in the 25-30 age group returned to college because their children were no longer at home. This could be

Table 21. Summary of Reasons For Return to College by Age

	25-30(19)	31-40(40)	41-50(22)	51-60(5)	61-85(2)	Total (88)
	N	N	N	N	N	N
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Family Related Transitions						
Marital Status Changed	3 15.8	3 7.5	3 13.6	1 20.0	1 50.0	11 12.5
Children not at Home	0 0.0	6 15.0	7 31.8	2 40.0	2 100.0	17 19.3
Work Related Transitions						
Change in Job Status	3 15.8	5 21.5	5 22.7	1 20.0	0 0.0	14 15.9
Needed Skills to Get a Job	6 31.6	12 30.0	8 36.4	1 20.0	0 0.0	27 30.7
Other	9 47.4	21 52.5	10 45.4	2 40.0	2 100.0	44 50.0

attributed to three factors. First, some of the women in this age category did not have children. Second, the children of the participants in this age group may be of pre-school age. And finally, children of women aged 25-30 may be too young to leave home on a permanent basis. Separation from their children appears not to be an issue for women aged 25-30.

Children not at home was a significant issue for women in the subsequent age groups, however. The percentage of women who cited children leaving home or entering school as the transition that influenced their enrollment in PDCCC increased in each successive age group. Fifteen percent of the participants aged 31-40 indicated that they enrolled at PDCCC because their children were not at home. Likewise, 32 percent of the respondents aged 41-50, 40 percent of the women in the 51-60 age category and all of the returning women participants aged 61-85 returned to college at least partially because their children were no longer in the home.

The data on family related transitions involving changes in marital status and children leaving home concur with Aslanian and Brickell's (1980) findings. Their study showed that:

While adjusting to marriage may cause a 25- to 35-year-old to learn, those in the middle years of life, 35-49 years of age, may need to learn something new to adjust to divorce, to children going off to school, or to college or work.  
(p. 90)

The data from this study suggest that family related change events affect women, especially after age 49. Evidently family related changes such as a revision in marital status and children leaving home prompt adult women to return to college.

Work related change events also prompt some adult women to enroll at Paul D. Camp Community College (refer to Table 21). Nearly sixteen percent of the participants stated that a change in job status (such as being hired, fired, laid off, promoted) influenced their decision to return to college. Approximately 16 percent of the women aged 25 to 30 indicated that a change in job status prompted them to enroll at PDCCC. This type of work related change was cited by 12 percent of the 31-40 year old respondents as the reason they returned to college. Response rates in the next two age categories varied slightly with nearly 23 percent of the 41-50 year old participants and 20 percent of the 51-60 year old women stating a change in job status prompted their decision to

enroll at PDCCC. A change in job status was not an issue for any of the women in the 61-85 year old age category. Overall, a change in job status does not appear to be an important reason for a return to college for very many women in this sample.

Ryan (1979) found that one of the reasons women become college students is to prepare for a career. Women who are anticipating such a change and/or who need to update job skills may return to school for occupational re-tooling. Nearly 32 percent of the participants aged 25-30 indicated that they needed skills to get a job and thus enrolled at PDCCC. This type of work related transition was cited by 30 percent of the women in the 31-40 age category. Acquiring the skills necessary for employment influenced 36 percent of the respondents aged 41-50 to return to college. Declines in percentages were noted in each of the subsequent age groups. In general, it appears that acquiring marketable job skills prompted a substantial portion of the women in the first three age categories (25-30, 31-40, 41-50) to return to college. The data suggest that a need for job skills was not influential in prompting the women in the 51-60 and 61-85 age categories to enroll

at PDCCC. Unlike their younger counterparts, the women in the latter two groups may no longer be interested in developing skills that may better prepare them for employment.

The data suggest that work related transitions were more influential in prompting a return to PDCCC than family related change events. Aslanian and Brickell (1980) found that career transitions account for over half of the learning undertaken by adults aged 25 to 65. "Evidently" they report, "what prompts most adult Americans to learn are changes in their work, be it for the purposes of getting, holding, or advancing in their jobs before age 65. . ." (p. 91). This appears to be the case with the women who returned to PDCCC. While family related transitions did prompt women to return to college, more participants were directly affected by change events in their careers.

Other reasons for a return to college included an interest in the subject matter, convenience of scheduling or instruction, or the need for teacher recertification. Fifty percent of the participants indicated their return to school was influenced by such factors. It must be noted that women who



participated in this study may have indicated their decision to enroll at PDCCC was influenced by a family related or work related change event as well as by "other" factors. Over 47 percent of women aged 25-30 responded that they enrolled at PDCCC for "other" reasons. Citation of "other" reasons for a return to college climaxed in the 31-40 age category. Over 52 percent of the participants in this age group listed "other" reasons for their return to college. Percentages declined in each of the two subsequent age categories and increased sharply (from 40 percent to 100 percent) in the 61-85 age group.

Based upon the data displayed in Table 21 it would appear that life transitions were less influential than other factors in prompting adult women to enroll at PDCCC. While some adult women students returned to college because a life transition necessitated a learning response, other reasons were important as well. When a life transition precipitates a learning response, women may see this as the perfect opportunity to seek and develop new horizons for themselves. Thus, they may enroll in courses and programs that will help them to redirect their lives. This may account for the number

of women who mentioned they returned to formal education for "other" reasons.

Reasons for Return to College: Life Changes by Race

The data on life changes as a reason for enrolling at PDCCC are summarized based upon the race of the respondents in Table 22. A change in marital status prompted nearly 23 percent of the black respondents to enroll at PDCCC. This reason for a return to college was cited by 7 percent of the white participants. Children who were no longer in the home influenced a slightly larger proportion of white than black women to enroll at PDCCC. Twenty-one percent of the white respondents stated that children leaving home or entering school influenced their decision to return to college compared to 16 percent of the black women.

As stated previously, work related transitions were influential in prompting some adult women to enroll at Paul D. Camp Community College. Nineteen percent of the black respondents and 14 percent of white respondents stated that a change in job status influenced their decision to enroll at PDCCC. A substantial difference is apparent in the percentage of black and white women who enrolled at PDCCC

Table 22. Summary of Reasons for Return to College by Race

	White (57)	Black (31)	Total (88)
	N	N	N
	%	%	%
Family Related Transitions			
Marital Status Changed	4	7	11
	7.0	22.6	12.5
Children not at Home	12	5	17
	21.0	16.1	19.3
Work Related Transitions			
Change in Job Status	8	6	14
	14.0	19.3	15.9
Needed Skills to get a Job	12	15	27
	21.0	48.4	30.7
Other	33	11	44
	57.9	35.5	50.0

because of a need to acquire marketable job skills. Over 48 percent of the black respondents indicated the need to acquire the skills necessary to obtain a job prompted their decision to return to school. The response rate of the black women was over twice the response rate of the white respondents (21 percent) regarding the need for job skills.

Aslanian and Brickell (1980) found that "there are no appreciable differences among whites, blacks, and others in the kinds of events triggering learning" (p. 92). The data from this research suggest the contrary. Differences were noted between the races in both family related and work related transitions. The black women were more inclined than white women to enroll at PDCCC because of a change in marital status. Likewise, the white women respondents cited children leaving home or entering school more frequently than the black participants as the reason for their return to college. Notable differences also occurred in the work related transition categories. The black women mentioned the need to acquire job skills and a change in job status more frequently than the white participants. In general, black women's response rates in each category of

change event surpassed those of white respondents except in the family related transition of children leaving home or entering school.

Differences were also noted in the "Other" category. Nearly 58 percent of the white participants enrolled at PDCCC for reasons such as an interest in the subject matter, to comply with teacher recertification requirements, or convenience of scheduling or instruction compared to only 35 percent of the black respondents.

The differences in the responses of black and white participants could be attributed to several factors. The number of female headed households has increased nationally, especially among blacks. Tittle and Denker (1980) found that the families maintained by women are usually the most impoverished. "These women are generally black, younger, more likely to have children, and more likely to be divorced or never married. . ." (p. 17). Tittle and Denker estimated that about 28 percent of black families were maintained by women. Work related transitions undoubtedly could have critical consequences for women who are maintaining their households. A change in job status (such as being fired or laid off) could

mean the loss of income. Black women may return to school after experiencing such a change event. Also many black women may be ill prepared to enter the job market and consequently enroll at PDCCC to acquire the skills to enter the labor force. Because the participants in this study live in an economically depressed area, work related change events probably required the women to learn new skills or attitudes to help them negotiate this transition. Saslaw (1981) reports, "Employment has been the reason for additional education [by women], and the changes in the structure of families make the return to higher education and career planning more critical for this already very determined group of [returning women] students" (p. 44). Women of both races enrolled at PDCCC because of career related change events, but the data suggest that work related transitions, especially obtaining job skills, seem to be more critical for the black participants.

Likewise, a change in marital status prompted more black women than white women to enroll at PDCCC. The previous discussion on career related change events showed that female headed households have increased. If a black woman is divorced, separated

or widowed, she becomes the head of the family and consequently becomes responsible for its maintenance and support. While this is also true for white women, the black women in this study seemed to be affected more profoundly by a change in their marital status than white women.

More white women returned to college because of "Other" reasons than their black counterparts. The data show that white women were affected to a lesser degree by family related and work related change events than the black participants. The white respondents may be more inclined to enroll at PDCCC for intellectual stimulation (for example, an interest in the subject matter) because the imperative to enter or reenter the world of work may not be as critical for them as for the black participants.

#### Reasons for Return to College: Life Changes by Marital

Status      The summary of data for a return to formal education based upon the marital status of the participants is presented in Table 23. The findings indicate that a change in marital status was influential in prompting a decision to enroll at PDCCC for divorced, separated, and widowed women.

Table 23. Summary of Reasons For Return to College  
by Marital Status

	Single (9) N	%	N	Married (68) N	%	N	Divorced (5) N	%	N	Separated (4) N	%	N	Widowed (2) N	%	N	Total (88) N	%
Family Related Transitions																	
Marital Status Changed	1	11.1	1	2.9	2	40.0	4	100.0	2	100.0	11	12.5					
Children not at Home	1	11.1	13	19.1	1	20.0	1	25.0	1	50.0	17	19.3					
Work Related Transitions																	
Change in Job Status	2	22.2	11	16.2	1	20.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	14	15.9					
Needed Skills to get a Job	4	44.4	17	25.0	3	60.0	2	50.0	1	50.0	27	30.7					
Other	6	66.7	35	51.5	5	20.0	1	25.0	1	50.0	44	50.0					



Forty percent of the divorced respondents and 100 percent of the separated and widowed participants respectively, returned to college because they had experienced a change in their marital status. Less than 3 percent of the married participants and only one single respondent mentioned they returned to school because of a change in their marital status. (The single respondent had recently become engaged and anticipated a change in her marital status).

The number of women who stated that children leaving home or entering school influenced their decision to enroll at PDCCC varied only slightly in each marital status category. One of the single participants (a single parent) indicated that children not being at home prompted her return to college. Percentages increased gradually in the married (19 percent), divorced (20 percent), and separated (25 percent) categories and peaked in the widowed category (50 percent). However, these differences are not large enough to suggest that this reason for returning to school is related to a woman's marital status.

A change in job status influenced some women in the single, married, and divorced categories to enroll

at PDCCC. Twenty-two percent of the single participants enrolled at PDCCC because of a change in job status as did 16 percent of the married respondents. Twenty percent of the divorced women returned to college because of a change in job status. None of the separated and widowed respondents enrolled at PDCCC after experiencing a change in their job status. Again, these variations are not large enough to indicate any meaningful differences among the women sampled.

Acquiring the skills necessary to obtain a job was an objective that influenced women in all marital status categories to return to school. Over 44 percent of the single (never married) respondents were encouraged to enroll at PDCCC because they needed skills to get a job. A decline in the response rate was noted in the married category. Only 25 percent of the married participants mentioned they enrolled at PDCCC because they needed to obtain marketable job skills. In contrast, response rates peaked at 60 percent in the category of divorced women. Likewise, 50 percent of the separated and widowed respondents respectively stated their return to college was influenced by a need to acquire skills to get a job.

In general, married women were less inclined to return to school for job skill needs than those participants who were never married or who were no longer married. The women who were never married or who were no longer married may have been the sole source of support for themselves and their families. Acquiring the skills that could give them an advantage in the competitive job market was a critical issue for these women.

As in the previous discussions regarding response rates in the "Other" category, married and unmarried women also returned to college for reasons over and above family related and career related transitions. However, no clear pattern emerges by marital status for a return to college for "other" reasons.

The reasons women return to college discussed above concur with the findings of other research conducted on returning women students (Aslanian and Brickell, 1980; Eliason, 1981; Laws, 1979; Prah, 1980; Saslaw, 1981; Sewall, 1984). These theorists generally agree that marital status can be an important factor in women's decision to return to school. Aslanian and Brickell (1980) analyzed the reasons adults return to school based upon their marital status:

Married people and divorced/separated people, as well as people who are single and have never been married, learn primarily because of changes in their careers, and, to a lesser extent, in their family lives. Widowed persons, on the other hand, learn in order to make better use of leisure and to cope with their family situations as often as they learn because of changes in their careers. (p. 92)

As in Aslanian and Brickell's (1980) study, many of the respondents in this study who were not married cited work related change events as an important factor in their decision to enroll at PDCCC. This is understandable given the fact that divorced, separated, and single women are responsible for maintaining themselves or their families. Married women may be contributing a second income. Work related transitions have special significance for the participants in this study because they live in an area with a high rate of unemployment. It is, however, important to note that more unmarried than married women indicated that a need to develop job skills prompted their enrollment at PDCCC.

Unlike Aslanian and Brickell's (1980) findings, more of the respondents who were no longer married than married or never married respondents identified family related changes than work related changes as

the principle reason they enrolled at PDCCC. A change in marital status and children leaving home or entering school were the specific change events that influenced many of the divorced, separated, and widowed respondents to enroll at PDCCC. A change in marital status may require women to enter the work force because they have lost their source of financial support. The women who are no longer married may have few job skills and must return to college to acquire skills to locate a job. This may also account for the high response rates of the participants who were no longer married to the career related transitions category of needed skills to get a job.

The majority of participants who were no longer married indicated that a need for job skills was imperative if they expected to find gainful employment. The transitions that prompted their return to college seem to follow a logical progression. Divorce, separation, and widowhood may result in the loss of income for women. They may be required to become self-sufficient financially. If they are ill-prepared to seek employment, the need to learn marketable job skills becomes a critical issue.

A change in marital status seems to have a ripple effect because it causes transitions to occur in other aspects of women's lives.

Changes in the family structure involving children leaving home or entering school may alleviate some family responsibilities. Consequently, women may now have the time to return to school either to complete or begin their education. The widowed participants indicated that family related and work related transitions were influential in prompting their decision to return to college. Although the sample of widowed respondents is too small to draw any meaningful conclusions, the finding does seem to concur with Aslanian and Brickell's (1980) results. They attribute their findings to the fact that widowed individuals are usually older and spend proportionately more of their time at work and leisure activities.

This analysis of the reasons for a return to college shows that there is some relationship between the marital status of returning women and their decision to enroll at PDCCC. In general, women who were never married were stimulated to return to college because of work-related transitions and other

factors such as an interest in the subject matter. The majority of married women in this sample enrolled at PDCCC for other reasons such as convenience of scheduling and interest in the subject matter. Some of the married women were affected by family or work related change events and subsequently returned to school. A need for job skills was the specific change event that was influential in prompting married women to enroll at PDCCC. For most of those women who were no longer married, their return to college was prompted by a change in their marital status and a need for job skills.

Reasons for Return to College: Life Changes by Current Employment Status

The reasons for enrolling at Paul D. Camp Community College based upon the current employment status of the participants are compiled in Table 24. Nearly 12 percent of the participants who were employed and almost 14 percent of the women who were not employed outside the home cited a change in marital status as the transition that prompted them to return to college. Children leaving home or entering school influenced over 13 percent of the employed participants to enroll at PDCCC. However, this family related change event involving children

Table 24. Summary of Reasons for Return to College by Current Employment Status

	Employed (59) N	Employed (59) %	Not Employed (29) N	Employed (29) %	Total (88) N	Total (88) %
Family Related Transitions						
Marital Status Changed	7	11.9	4	13.8	11	12.5
Children Not at Home	8	13.5	9	31.0	17	19.3
Work Related Transitions						
Change in Job Status	11	18.6	3	10.3	14	15.9
Needed Skills to Get a Job	13	22.0	14	48.3	27	30.7
Other	27	45.8	17	58.6	44	50.0



was cited by 31 percent of the respondents who were not employed outside the home. This trend was also noted by Aslanian and Brickell (1980) who found that ". . .homemakers, not surprisingly, have their learning triggered by family events" (p. 95). As discussed in the previous section on marital status, children leaving home or entering school may lessen some of the time spent in caring for offspring. Women may return to college to learn to cope with this change event. This "free" time from children also provides the time and opportunity for women to develop interests apart from family responsibilities. Women who are employed outside of the home have already begun to establish a life of their own and thus may be less affected by family related change events such as a changed marital status or children who are no longer in the home environment.

Work related transitions also affected the educational objectives of some women who were employed and those who were not working outside the home. Nearly 19 percent of the employed participants mentioned a change in job status influenced their decision to return to college. And 22 percent of this group stated that the need to

acquire skills to get a job prompted them to enroll at PDCCC. Aslanian and Brickell (1980) found that employed individuals are affected by career related transitions. This finding mirrors some of the reasons the participants in this study returned to school. It is understandable that women who are employed would be affected by work related change events given the fact that they may be seeking advancement in their present job or establishing a new or different career path. It is surprising, however, that a larger number of working women did not return to school to pursue career goals.

Women who were not working outside the home also mentioned work related transitions as reasons for their return to college. Ten percent of the participants who were not employed outside the home stated a change in job status had prompted their decision to enroll at PDCCC. These women may have been employed and were now home due to being fired or laid off. Acquiring skills to get a job prompted 48 percent of the non-working respondents to return to college. According to Aslanian and Brickell, "If an adult is not employed. . .he or she learns to get job skills but is stimulated to do so because of family

events" (1980, p. 95). In general when non-working women return to school they are seeking career related goals, but are motivated to enroll because of a family related change event.

Employment goals were given as reasons for a return to formal education by women who were currently employed and those who were not employed outside the home. Additional education is one way of accomplishing these vocational objectives.

Almost 46 percent of the respondents who were employed cited "other" reasons for their return to college. Convenience of scheduling and an interest in the subject matter influenced working women to enroll at PDCCC when they did as opposed to at some other time. Employed women, who were balancing home and work schedules, were influenced to enroll in a course because of the time and location of instruction. An interest in the subject matter was also mentioned as a reason for a return to college, especially if it would help the women to develop or enhance their job skills.

Nearly 59 percent of the respondents who were not employed outside the home also stated "other" reasons for their return to formal education. Convenience

of scheduling and location of classes were mentioned most often. This is understandable if the women still have responsibilities at home and must consequently schedule their day around the activities and needs of family members. Once the women had the opportunity to return to college, they selected to enroll in classes that interested them. Thus, an interest in the subject matter also influenced women who did not work outside the home to enroll at PDCCC. In sum, women who were not employed outside the home were more affected by family and career related change events than women who were employed.

Conclusions on Reasons for a Return to College by Age, Race, Marital Status, and Current Employment Status

Is there a relationship between the age, race, marital status, and current employment status of women and transitions that influence their decision to return to college? Based upon the findings, an affirmative answer to this question is appropriate.

Age When the data on transitions are examined by the age of the respondents, it is apparent that the women in the 41-50 age category were more affected by transitions than were the women in the other age

groups. This finding is consistent with Gilligan's (1982) research which found that ". . .women's embeddedness in lives of relationship, their orientation to interdependence, their subordination of achievement to care, and their conflicts over competitive success leave them personally at risk in mid-life. . ." (p. 171). Women in this sample aged 41-50 were in a stage of their development when the family related change event of children leaving home was coming into view. These women were also vulnerable to work related change events. Their responses to the question regarding a change in job status and a need for job skills exceeded those of women in the other age categories. In sum, most of the women aged 41-50 were in a critical stage of their development and returned to college in response to family and work related transitions.

The younger women in the sample (25-30, 31-40) appeared to be less susceptible to family related transitions than the respondents in the 41-50 age category. This is not to imply that family related transitions were not influential in prompting the younger respondents to return to college. Some of the women aged 31-40 indicated a change in marital

status and children leaving home did influence the timing of their enrollment at PDCCC. However, a substantial portion of the women aged 25-30 and 31-40 attributed their return to college to the need to obtain marketable job skills.

The type of transitions that influence a return to college are the inverse for the participants aged 51-60 and 61-85. Family related change events prompted a large portion of the women in the 51-60 and 61-85 age categories to enroll at PDCCC. Work related transitions appear to have little bearing on a return to college for the older respondents.

Based on these findings it appears that as the women's age increases, family related transitions become more influential in prompting their return to college. Work related transitions tend to prompt younger women to enroll at PDCCC.

Race The importance of life transitions as a reason for a return to college can be further clarified by examining the data relating to the race of the respondent. According to this study's findings, family and work related change events were more influential in prompting the black women in the sample than the white participants to return to

school. The only exception occurred in the family related transition of children not at home. Perhaps the children of the black women in this sample were too young to leave home, or adult children continued to live within the black family. Consequently, the family related change event of children leaving home was not as influential in prompting the black participants to return to college.

Marital Status The findings seem to indicate that the women who were no longer married (separated, divorced, widowed) were motivated to enroll at PDCCC as a result of a change in their marital status. The data also suggest that the need to acquire job skills may be a consequence of the participants' changed marital status. This inference is reinforced by the finding that fewer of the separated, divorced, and widowed respondents indicated that other factors (such as an interest in the subject matter) influenced their decision to return to school.

Current Employment Status The data relating to employment status indicate that women who were not employed outside the home exceeded those of the employed participants in all transition categories stimulating enrollment except change in job status.

Perhaps women who are not employed outside the home have fewer alternatives for employment and are consequently more affected by change events that may occur in their life.

Identity Revision in Returning Women Students Based Upon Age, Race, Marital Status, and Current Employment Status

Weathersby's (1977) research on adult's uses of formal education considered the issue of a return to education as a means to negotiate life's change events. She found that differences occurred between men and women on the timing of their enrollment. Men returned to school during stable periods in their lives whereas women tended to enroll during transitional periods in their lives. Weathersby (1977) also addressed the issue of personal recognition, an aspect of identity, and the role it plays in a return to school. "Having achieved recognition [usually associated with work or career accomplishments] they [men] are free to study for precisely the opposite reasons that may impel women at transitional life periods" (p. 78). In other words, while a change event may have prompted the women's decision to return to school, the need to develop an identity is the goal that motivates women



to learn. This is understandable given the fact that women typically identify themselves in the context of relationship and connectedness (Gilligan, 1982).

When a change event threatens or severs this identity source women are faced with the challenge of finding out who they really are. They must develop an identity independent of internal (family) and external (societal) constraints and expectations. This attempt to define one's self is a challenge because for women "the capacity to make a commitment and stick to it is the measure of successful identity formation" (Smelser and Erikson, 1980, p. 128). When these commitments weaken or fail women perceive this as ". . . a sign of some terrible mistake in the search for self and identity" (p. 129). A return to education may help to rectify this "wrong". A discussion of identity revision among the returning women participants at Paul D. Camp Community College based upon their age, race, marital status, and current employment status follows.

Identity Revision Goals: by Age      Identity revision goals based upon the age of the respondents are summarized in Table 25. Completing the requirements for a One-Year Certificate or a Two-Year Associate

Table 25. Summary of Identity Revision Goals by Age

	25-30(19)		31-40(40)		41-50(22)		51-60(5)		61-85(2)		Total (88)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Completing the requirements for a One-Year Certificate or a Two-Year Associate Degree	9	47.4	14	35.0	8	36.4	2	40.0	0	0.0	33	37.5
Acquiring the vocational or professional skills to get a better job (establish or enhance a professional identity)	14	73.7	33	82.5	17	77.3	4	80.0	0	0.0	68	77.3
Setting long-range goals for work	17	89.4	32	80.0	16	72.7	2	40.0	0	0.0	67	76.1
Setting long-range life goals	17	89.4	30	75.0	17	77.3	1	20.0	0	0.0	65	73.9
Becoming a more independent person with own identity (separate from spouse and children	16	84.2	31	77.5	17	77.3	3	60.0	1	50.0	68	77.3

Degree was an important goal for over 47 percent of the women aged 25-30. But in general, this goal was not as significant to the participants as other identity revision goals.

With the exception of the two women in the 61-85 age category, over 70 percent of the participants in each of the other age groups indicated that establishing or enhancing a professional identity by acquiring the vocational or professional skills necessary for employment was a significant issue for them. This was especially true for women in the 31-40 age category. Over 82 percent of the participants in this age group mentioned that a professional identity was important as did 80 percent of the respondents aged 51-60.

In line with developing a professional identity, the participants also indicated that setting long-range career goals was important. Over 89 percent of the women aged 25-30 stated developing long-range goals for work was a significant issue in their life. Percentages decreased in each of the subsequent age categories with the greatest difference occurring between the age groups of 51-60 (40 percent) and 61-85 (0 percent).

Aslanian and Brickell (1980) reported that over half of the learning undertaken by adults between the ages of 25 and 65 is for career purposes. More women of all ages are entering the labor force. It is estimated that "90 percent of all women will be employed outside the home at some time during their lives" and that presently "over 46 percent of all women over age 25 are in the labor force" (Fisher-Thompson and Kuhn, 1981, p. 3). The younger women in this sample may expect to be in the labor force for most of their lives and are consequently developing a career path by establishing long-range work goals. The older participants may have postponed a career due to family responsibilities and now desire ". . .to lead active, productive lives in the economic mainstream. . ." (Aslanian and Brickell, 1980, p. 29). Like their younger counterparts, they want to establish work goals that will help them enter the world of work. However, for those respondents in the 61-85 age category, the necessity or desire to work may have diminished. Therefore, setting long-range work goals is not an issue for them.

It is conceivable that the older women in this sample have already spent a portion of their life in the work force and now want to pursue avenues of personal interest such as hobbies and other leisure related activities. This finding concurs with the trend noted by Aslanian and Brickell (1980). They stated younger adults focus their learning toward career goals. This interest in career diminishes with age, and learning for leisure goals increases. "This shift begins between the ages of 50 and 65, and intensifies after 65" (p. 91).

Establishing a personal identity by developing long-range life goals was an important personal goal for the majority of women in the first three age groups (25-30, 31-40, and 41-50). Seventy-five percent of the respondents aged 31-40 mentioned life goals as an important issue as did over 89 percent of the participants in the 25-30 age category. Developing long-range life goals was important to over 77 percent of the women aged 41-50.

These results are in keeping with Weathersby's (1977) findings which indicate that women seek to redefine their identity at the transition ages of thirty, forty, and fifty. Establishing long-range

life goals was not a major issue for women in the 51-60 and 61-85 age groups. This fact reflects the advancing age of these women who may feel that their life pattern is fairly well established and therefore setting long-range life goals was not a concern for them. However, the women in the 51-60 and 61-85 age categories were interested in becoming more independent persons with autonomous identities. Sixty percent of the respondents aged 51-60 and half of the participants aged 61-85 mentioned establishing their independence was an important goal. This was a critical issue for even more of the participants in the first three age categories. Over 84 percent of the participants aged 25-30 wanted to become independent with their own identity. Likewise, becoming a more independent person with an autonomous identity was an important goal for 77 percent of the women aged 31-40 and for 77 percent of the participants in the 41-50 age category.

Identity revision goals were important for women in all of the age categories except the 61-85 age group. Developing a professional and a personal identity were mentioned by the great majority of women. In contrast, the issue of completing the

requirements for a One-Year Certificate or a Two-Year Associate Degree was not considered an important identity revision goal by a majority of the participants in this study.

Identity Revision Goals: by Race      The summary of data on identity revision goals based upon the race of the participants is presented in Table 26. Clearly, the percentages of the black respondents surpassed those of the white participants in all identity revision goals categories. The most substantial difference was noted in the respondents' desire to complete the requirements for a One-Year Certificate or a Two-Year Associate Degree. Seventy-one percent of the black participants indicated that completing certification and degree requirements was an important goal compared to just over 19 percent of the white respondents. This difference does not necessarily indicate that the white participants are less interested than the black respondents in completing certification or degree requirements. Rather, the white women in this study did not consider the acquisition of a One-Year Certificate or a Two-Year Associate Degree an important identity revision goal whereas the black respondents did.

Table 26. Summary of Identity Revision Goals by Race

	White (57)		Black (31)		Total (88)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Completing the requirements for a One-Year Certificate or a Two-Year Associate Degree	11	19.3	22	71.0	33	37.5
Acquiring the vocational or professional skills to get a better job (establish or enhance a professional identity)	41	71.9	27	87.1	68	77.3
Setting long-range goals for work	41	71.9	26	83.9	67	76.1
Setting long-range life goals	40	70.2	25	80.6	65	73.9
Becoming a more independent person with own identity (separate from spouse and children)	41	71.9	27	87.1	68	77.3



Perhaps the black women in this sample felt that acquiring a certificate or a degree would give them more credibility and more status in the area's [PDCCC service area] competitive job market. A One-Year Certificate or a Two-Year Associate Degree apparently is considered a valuable personal and professional asset by the black participants.

The response rates of the white women in the other identity revision goal categories remained fairly consistent. The percentages ranged from 70 percent in each of the three remaining identity revision goals categories (acquiring vocational or professional skills, setting long-range work goals and becoming a more independent person with an autonomous identity). A wider range of percentages was noted for the responses of the black participants. Nearly 81 percent of the black respondents indicated that setting long-range life goals was an important issue, with 87 percent stating that acquiring the vocational or professional skills to get a job was an important identity revision goal.

Despite their race, large numbers of the participants were seeking to develop a new

self-perception. This process has been labeled "separation individuation" (Anderson, 1974, pp. 201-2). This process involves emotionally giving up ties of dependency and "thus being free to acknowledge and develop one's own individuality, independently of what the environment's response may be to it" (pp. 201-2). The analysis of data reveal that while the percentages of black women exceed those of the white participants, identity revision is an important personal development goal for returning women of both races.

Identity Revision Goals: By Marital Status      The compilation of identity revision goals based upon the marital status of the respondents is presented in Table 27. Just over 44 percent of the single respondents indicated that completing the requirements for a certificate or a degree was an important identity revision goal. In sharp contrast, the great majority of the participants who were single (almost 89 percent) were interested in establishing or enhancing their professional identity. They hoped to accomplish this goal by acquiring the vocational or professional skills necessary for employment. All of the single respondents wanted to revise their identities by

Table 27. Summary of Identity Revision Goals by Marital Status

	Single (9) N	%	Married (68) N	%	Divorced (5) N	%	Separated (4) N	%	Widowed (2) N	%	Total (88) N	%
Completing the requirements for a One-Year Certificate or a Two-Year Associate Degree	4	44.4	21	30.9	4	80.0	3	75.0	1	50.0	33	37.5
Acquiring the vocational or professional skills to get a better job (establish or enhance a professional identity)	8	88.9	50	73.5	5	100.0	4	100.0	1	50.0	68	77.3
Setting long-range goals for work	9	100.0	49	72.0	4	80.0	4	100.0	1	50.0	67	76.1
Setting long-range life goals	9	100.0	47	69.1	4	80.0	4	100.0	1	50.0	65	73.9
Becoming a more independent person with own identity (separate from spouse and children	9	100.0	49	72.0	5	100.0	4	100.0	1	50.0	68	77.3

establishing long-range life goals and long-range career goals along with developing independence.

Married women are also interested in revising their identities, but not to the extent of the single, divorced, and separated respondents. As with the single participants, completing degree and certification requirements was not a significant issue for the majority of the married respondents. Just under 40 percent of the married participants wanted to complete the requirements for a One-Year Certificate or a Two-Year Associate Degree. The percentages of response for married women regarding the issue of identity revision ranged from 69 percent in the setting long-range life goals category to 73 percent in the category concerning establishing or enhancing a professional identity. Seventy-two percent of the married women stated setting long-range goals and becoming a more independent person with an autonomous identity were important identity revision goals.

Identity revision was, likewise, an important goal for the respondents who were no longer married. The percentages for the divorced respondents ranged from 75 percent to 100 percent in the identity

revision goals categories. The percentages for the two widowed respondents were the same in each identity revision goal category. Fifty percent of the widowed women indicated the various identity revision goals were important to them.

According to Gilligan (1982) woman's identity is strongly tied to the relationships she forms during her life. "In response to the request to describe themselves, all of the women describe a relationship, depicting their identity in the connection of future mother, present wife. . ." (p. 159). This may account for the slightly lower percentages in the identity revision goal categories for those participants who were married. Many of the married respondents may feel that their identity is already in place. Consequently, fewer of them feel that identity revision is a significant issue for them at this time in their life. The following comments from married returning women illustrate this point:

I am very proud of the life I have made as a wife and homemaker. In this day and age you feel like you almost have to make excuses for not being in the career world. (age 41)

My family has always come first. . . .I love being a mother and I don't have to feel guilty. (age 41)

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to suggest that identity revision is not a goal for married women students. Like their unmarried counterparts, the majority indicated a desire to refine their personal and professional sense of self.

Single women, naturally, have not yet developed an identity related to marriage. While the possibility exists that the single women may eventually base their identity upon future familial roles, they are currently attempting to develop an identity separate from their role in their parental family. Single women may be developing what Levinson (1977) called a "preliminary adult identity" (p. 22). Although Levinson's study dealt with an exclusively male population, his findings regarding men who are entering the adult world offer an appropriate description of single women who, despite their age, are also attempting to find their niche. Levinson states:

He must now shift the center of gravity of his life from the position of child in the family of origin to the position of novice adult with a new home base that is more truly his own. It is time for full entry into the adult world. This requires multiple efforts: to explore the available possibilities, to

arrive at a crystallized (though by no means final) definition of himself as an adult, and to make and live with his initial choices regarding occupation, love relationships, life styles and values. (p. 79)

While all of the single women may not fall into the age category (age 22-29) used by Levinson to describe the Early Adult Transition, the single women may undergo this identity revision process nonetheless. The identity developed by the single women may be temporary with a major revision to occur if marriage and other family relationships develop. Of course aspects of the identity the women develop while they are still single may persist after marriage. "For individual women independence will have different meanings, with self-definition extending over a lifetime" (Solomon, 1985, p. 210).

According to Gilligan (1982) women's relationships are the basis of their identity; "much as men select a lifestyle when they choose an occupation, women do so when they choose a spouse" (Laws, 1979, p. 44). Smelser and Erikson (1980) call this type of identity formation the love myth.

The love myth describes the attempt to define one's self by the free choice of a love partner, fusing the problem of the

search for one's true self with the quest for one's right mate. The correlate of such self-definition is identity. . .(p. 128)

Divorced, separated, and widowed women can no longer rely on their married status, especially their spouse, as the basis of their self-definition. Their identity, as they knew it, has been severely altered. These women are faced with an identity crisis. The dissolution of a marriage may force women to confront themselves about who they are. Identity revision becomes an imperative issue for many divorced, separated, and widowed women. Most of the respondents in this study exemplify this point. The divorced, separated, and one of the two widowed respondents indicated that identity revision was an important goal. Developing an identity as a human being, rather than an identity based upon roles, becomes essential.

Identity Revision Goals: By Current Employment Status

The summary of identity revision goals based upon the current employment status of the participants is presented in Table 28. Almost 29 percent of the women employed outside the home indicated they wanted to revise their identity by completing the requirements for a One-Year Certificate or a



Table 28. Summary of Identity Revision Goals by Current Employment Status

	Employed (59) N	%	Not Employed (29) N	%	Total (88) N	%
Completing the requirements for a One-Year Certificate or a Two-Year Associate Degree	17	28.8	16	55.2	33	37.5
Acquiring the vocational or professional skills to get a better job (establish or enhance a professional identity)	48	81.3	20	69.0	68	77.3
Setting long-range goals for work	47	79.7	20	69.0	67	76.1
Setting long-range life goals	47	79.7	21	72.4	65	73.9
Becoming a more independent person with own identity (separate from spouse and children)	47	79.7	21	72.4	68	77.3

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Two-Year Associate Degree. In comparison, over 55 percent of the participants who were not employed outside the home indicated completing certification and degree requirements was an important identity goal. Percentages were fairly consistent in each of the identity revision categories. For women who were employed outside the home, the percentages ranged from 80 percent to 81 percent in the identity revision categories. The range of percentages for the respondents who did not work outside the home was 69 to 72 percent.

The largest difference in percentages occurred in the identity revision goal of completing the requirements for a certificate or an associate degree. More women who were not employed outside the home indicated that completing degree and certification requirements was an important identity revision goal.

With regard to identity revision in returning women students, Kaplan (1982) stated that the ". . . acquisition of professional credentials helped create a new personal identity" (p. 11). Evidently women who do not work outside the home associate obtaining a One-Year Certificate or a Two-Year Associate Degree with revising their identity. This

may be especially true for homemakers who postponed their education. For example, one respondent (aged 33) who was a homemaker and who also indicated that it was an extremely important goal for her to complete her degree requirements stated, "I want very much to complete the education I started but had to give up years ago."

Women in each employment classification were interested in revising their identity, but their desire for self-growth seemed to vary based upon their "meaning perspectives" (Tarule, 1980, p. 25). In other words, women who are content in their present roles (i.e. wife, mother, career person) are less inclined to want to revise their identity associated with said role. A woman who is satisfied with her identity as a homemaker may not want to revise her identity in this role. This may account for the lower percentages in the career related identity revision goals for women who were not employed outside the home. A 32 year old homemaker who took an art class at Paul D. Camp Community College commented: "These things [identity revision goals] are not as important to me now as they may become later. What is important to me now is to provide for my childrens'

needs, which are great. . ." Women who are employed may have a family-related identity, but they also have an image of themselves based upon their work. These returning women may seek to revise or enhance their identity both at home and at work. This may account for the higher percentages in both work related and personal related identity revision goals for those participants who were employed outside the home.

Conclusions on Identity Revision Goals by Age, Race, Marital Status, and Current Employment Status

In sum, the majority of women in this sample indicated a desire to revise their identity. Some women were more interested than others in developing or enhancing a professional identity. Identity goals related to personal growth were also important issues for many of the participants. Closer scrutiny of the data reveals that age, race, marital status, and current employment status are related to the identity revision goals of returning women.

Age The respondents in the 51-60 and 61-85 age categories were not as interested as their younger counterparts in setting long-range work and life goals and establishing their independence. This is understandable given the age of the women. They may

be comfortable with their current self-perception or believe it is too late in life to change it. Hence, they do not desire to revise their personal or professional sense of self to the extent that their younger counterparts do.

Race Although the majority of all women in this sample were interested in revising their identity, the responses of the black participants exceeded those of the white women in all identity revision goal categories. Race is an important variable when analyzing the needs of returning women. The personal and professional needs of black women seem to be essential to their identity revision. Perhaps black more than white women associate the acquisition of educational credentials with a potential for increased personal autonomy and professional growth.

Marital Status The data suggest that professional and personal identity revision goals were significant issues for the great majority of women who were no longer married (divorced, separated, widowed) and for those respondents who had never been married. The married participants were also interested in revising their personal and professional identities, but not to the extent of the women in the

other marital status categories.

Current Employment Status More women who were employed outside the home responded that personal and professional identity goals were important issues for them. On the other hand, completing degree and certification requirements was not a significant goal for the women who were employed. However, acquiring a One-Year Certificate or a Two-Year Associate Degree was an important personal goal for over half of the respondents who did not work outside the home. In other words, formal education credentials are more important to women who have no formal professional identity than they are to those who have already established some identity through their work.

#### Summary of Data Analysis

The analysis of data reveals the common family related and career related transitions that influenced adult women to enroll at Paul D. Camp Community College. Despite the similarities in these influential change events, variations occurred based upon the respondents' age, race, marital status, and current employment status. For example, black respondents were more inclined than the white participants to enroll at PDCCC to acquire the skills

necessary to obtain a job. Likewise, white returning women were more likely than the black respondents to enroll at PDCCC for other reasons such as an interest in the subject matter or the convenience of scheduling and instruction. The information on life transitions reveals that change events prompt adult women to return to community college, but the degree of influence these life changes have on women's decision to return to community college vary based upon the women's age, race, marital status, and current employment status. Solomon (1985) iterates this perspective. She states:

We can no longer think of women's lives as set from youth to old age. Family, career, and voluntary activities will have different functions at various points in their lives. The variety of choices for women makes education increasingly important. (p. 211)

In other words adult women may enroll at PDCCC because of a life transition, but these change events vary in significance based upon the women's personal characteristics and circumstances.

The data relating to identity revision in returning women students reveal that developing or revising their identity is an important goal for the returning women students at PDCCC across all

variables (age, race, marital status, and current employment status). Establishing or enhancing a professional identity was mentioned by a large majority of the respondents. Professional identity includes acquiring the vocational or professional skills to get a better job and developing long-range career goals. Most of the returning women participants also indicated that revising their personal identity was an important goal. A personal identity can be achieved by developing long-range life goals and by becoming an independent person with an identity separate from spouse, children, and other family related roles. Based upon the data, it appears that the returning women at Paul D. Camp Community College are primarily interested in developing or revising their professional or personal identity. Of secondary importance to the women in this sample was the identity revision goal of completing the requirements for a One-Year Certificate or a Two-Year Associate Degree.

Interviews with sixteen returning women were conducted to supplement the survey findings. The analysis of the interview data is discussed in Chapter 5. The findings from the survey and interview have



important theoretical and practical implications that are discussed in Chapter 6.

## Chapter 5

### ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEW DATA

#### Introduction

Personal interviews were conducted with a selected group of returning women students to supplement and elaborate upon the data obtained through the surveys. The analysis of the interview responses is presented in this chapter.

#### Sample

Using age as the primary selection criterion, sixteen respondents (18 percent of the survey respondents) were selected to be interviewed. Four women from each of the following age groups were chosen: 25-30; 31-40; 41-50; 51-60. No interviewees were selected from the 61-85 year old age group due to the small response rate in that category.

Although age was the principle selection criterion, other variables were used in the interviewee selection process. In an effort to choose a representative sample the participants' race, marital status, and current employment status were also considered.

### Organization of Findings

The interview findings have been grouped into six categories:

1. Timing of enrollment
2. Achievement goals of returning women
3. Change events in the lives of returning women
4. Making the decision to return to college
5. Self-perceptions of returning women
6. Advice from returning women

### Timing of Enrollment

The women were asked why they enrolled at PDCCC when they did as opposed to some other time in their life. The most common reasons cited were convenience and change events. The scheduling of classes and the location in which the courses were being offered accounted for 37 percent of the responses. Two women (12 percent) returned to school because of financial aid and transportation opportunities. At the same time, some of the women felt returning to school would help them cope with changes they were experiencing in their lives. Six women (37 percent) enrolled at PDCCC to help them deal with personal problems and loss, such as the death of a spouse. Two women (12 percent) experienced a work related change.

These findings are in keeping with Aslanian and Brickell's (1980) conclusions that the timing of an adult's decision to learn is often associated with a specific change event in his life: ". . .the timing of their (adults') entry into the learning arena is determined by specific events in their lives which permit them - or force them - to enter it" (p. 61). One participant (age 56) offered a rather colorful analysis of why she enrolled at PDCCC when she did:

I wouldn't have at all [returned to college] if my husband hadn't died. . . .I had tried the job thing. I decided I'd stop in at Paul D. (PDCCC) just for information. I had had no lunch and it hadn't been long since I lost my husband. Next thing I knew I was taking a test [a placement test in reading, writing and math]! I was tired. I said, "I'll never go back!" But, I was curious about what I had made [on the test] and what they said. I made 13 and 14 - first and second year college! I couldn't believe it! What could I have done if I had had a full stomach? The grades shocked and startled me. I decided if I could do this [well] on an empty stomach, what could I do on a full stomach?<sup>1</sup>

Trends appear in the data on timing of enrollment.

Responses from the women in the 25-30 and 31-40 age

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<sup>1</sup>The author has used editorial license throughout this document to correct grammar and syntax in quotations.

categories were equally divided between convenience and change event reasons. Two women in each age group indicated that a change event influenced the timing of their enrollment at PDCCC. Reasons of convenience were given by each of the remaining two women in the 25-30 and 31-40 age groups. The four returning women in the 41-50 age category represented the highest number of participants who stated change events affected the timing of their return to college. The inverse was true for the respondents aged 51-60. Three women in this category cited convenience reasons and one woman cited a change event as the factors that prompted them to return to college when they did as opposed to some other time.

It is obvious from the data that change events were a common reason given for a return to college by the majority of women aged 41-50. This result is consistent with the finding presented in Chapter 4 which indicated that women aged 41-50 are in a critical stage in their adult development when they are most susceptible to change events. This situation is not limited to a particular age group. In general, the timing of enrollment by the women in the interview sample was affected by change events or the

convenience of course scheduling or instruction.

#### Achievement Goals of Returning Women

Early in the interview the women were asked what they hoped to achieve by enrolling at PDCCC. One portion of the question concerned whether participants considered other alternatives besides a return to school. Twelve women (75 percent) had not. Of the four (25 percent) who had considered other options, two sought employment, one was active in a women's service organization, and one woman considered reenlisting in the service.

Alternatives to education were considered by respondents aged 25, 45, 56, and 60. Perhaps the 25 year old participant felt she would ultimately obtain the skills she needed for employment through the training provided by the military. However, she returned to school because she did not like the strict regimentation of military life. A return to education was the second choice for the participants aged 45, 56, and 60. It is conceivable that these women may have originally felt that they were too old to return to college and considered alternatives for that reason.

Other aspects of the question addressed the personal and professional goals of the participants. Their responses are categorized in Table 29. It is evident that goals related to personal growth and achievement are of vital importance to returning women. Over 93 percent of the participants hoped to accomplish a goal that would improve or enhance their self-perception. This finding concurs with Sewall (1984) who found that when adults were asked to choose the most important reason for returning to school "42% chose a personal growth goal as the primary reason (e.g., simply to learn, to achieve independence and a sense of identity, and to gain the satisfaction of having a degree)" (p. 311). The following comments illustrate the importance of personal growth goals to some of the returning women in the interview sample:

Yes, [I want] to get my GED and complete the geriatric program and graduate in June 1987 as a nurse's aid. (age 28)

This woman was intent on completing a specific program of study and felt becoming better educated would enhance her self-image and also increase her employment opportunities. Other women were more intrinsically motivated:

Table 29. Achievement Goals of Returning Women

Personal	N	%	Professional	N	%	Other	N	%
Self-fulfillment	9	56.2	Better job	2	12.5	Confidence	8	50.0
Job skills	4	25.0	Promotion	2	12.5	Better job	2	12.5
Complete GED	1	6.2	Nurse's Aid Certificate	2	12.5	Computer literacy	1	6.2
Off welfare	1	6.2	Real estate license	1	6.2	Fit into society better	1	6.2
Yes total	15	93.6	Yes total	7	43.7	Yes total	13	81.1
No total	1	6.2	No total	9	56.2	No total	3	18.7
TOTAL	16	99.8 <sup>1</sup>	Total	16	99.9	Total	16	99.8

<sup>1</sup>Total may differ from 100 percent due to rounding error.



Just showing what I can achieve. It had been a long time since I had been in an academic environment. (age 32)

Not professional in the sense of meaning to apply them [professional goals], but to achieve a long range goal I've set for myself. The goal is for self-improvement. At 17 I made a career choice of raising a family - a choice I have never regretted. I've reached an age where my son is 12 and it's time for me to grow as a person. This is my time now to grow as a person and an individual. My other goal [to raise a family] was by choice and now it's taken care of. (age 41)

The goals outlined in the "Other" category appear to be an extension of the personal goals mentioned. Again, the women are interested in achieving a sense of accomplishment in a variety of areas be it in computer literacy or acquiring the ability to contribute financially to her family's support.

Despite the fact the women who participated in this study live in an economically depressed area, only seven (43 percent) expressed a desire to achieve professional goals. This finding further emphasizes the importance of personal goals in women's decisions to enroll in a community college.

Change Events in Returning Women's Lives

One of the major objectives of this study is to determine whether life changes prompt adult women to return to college. Interview question number 3 on change events permits a discussion of transitions that have occurred in the women's lives and their significance in the women's decision to enroll at PDCCC. Each element of this question will be discussed.

The women were asked to describe the circumstances that stimulated them to change what they were doing and influenced their decision to return to college. For purposes of discussion the responses are grouped into four categories: family related changes, work related changes, convenience, and other. The distribution of responses in each category is presented in Table 30.

Work related change events were mentioned by 50 percent of the women. This information seems to contradict the responses outlined in Table 29 which indicates professional achievement goals were of less importance than personal achievement goals. While a work related change event may have been the turning point for the women, it may have also presented the opportunity to pursue an interest aside from a work related goal. Several of the women (25 percent)

Table 30. Turning Point Situations and Events

	N	%
Family related		
Husband's illness	1	6.2
Empty nest	1	6.2
Death of spouse	1	6.2
Subtotal	3	18.6
Work related		
Laid off	3	18.6
Improve work skills	2	12.5
Need for employment	2	12.5
Job dissatisfaction	1	6.2
Subtotal	8	49.8
Convenience		
Scheduling	2	12.5
Location	1	6.2
Financial aid	1	6.2
Subtotal	4	24.9
Other		
Returning Women Conference	1	6.2
TOTAL	16	99.5 <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Total may differ from 100 percent due to rounding error.

stated that the convenience of course scheduling, location of instruction, and availability of financial aid monies were important factors in their decision to enroll. These women had previously considered a return to school but because of time limits and other constraints were unable to do so. Transitions relating to family relationships were given by only a small portion of the women (19 percent). One woman (6 percent) stated that the Returning Women Conference conducted at PDCCC in the Fall of 1985 was the turning point in her decision to return to school.

After describing the transition that influenced their decision to enroll at PDCCC, the women were asked when this change event occurred. For twelve women (75 percent) it was a relatively recent experience, having occurred in 1985 or 1986. Four women (25 percent) had contemplated a return to school for what can be considered an extended period of time. One woman decided to continue her education twenty-five years ago, but waited until her children were grown to pursue her academic interests. Another had been mulling over the idea for approximately twenty years, but did not enroll until her only child married. Two other returning women experienced the transition that

prompted them to enroll at PDCCC within the past five years. According to Weathersby (1977) "there is some 'lag time' after a crisis event and before deciding to enroll, enough time to settle some emotional issues related to loss and to become somewhat clear about the necessity and direction of new goals" (p. 124). It is evident that lag time is not a clearly circumscribed or arbitrary period. It varies depending upon the woman and her situation.

The transitions experienced by the women in this study frequently involved other individuals. Family members accounted for 56 percent of the responses to this interview question. Family included spouse, children, and extended family members such as aunts, uncles and siblings. Other transitions involved the individual woman (25 percent). Friends and others (e.g. boss) were involved in a total of three instances (19 percent).

Not all transitions are negotiated smoothly. The women were asked if any problems arose as a result of this change event. Despite what could be interpreted as an intense or stressful transition (refer to Table 30) only five women (31 percent) experienced difficulty because of the change event. These

problems included the illness of a young daughter which made regular attendance at class difficult for one respondent. Another woman's problems were more intrinsic - she felt guilty about going to school. Problems on the home front were mentioned by two respondents. One noted that mom was not doing what mom is "supposed" to do. The children of another woman were concerned about the regularity of meals. Scheduling conflicts were cited by a young working woman whose husband was also working and attending school. These problems were resolved in a variety of ways. One student withdrew from her class. Patience and humor was another problem solving strategy. Rescheduling of classes and coming to grips with feelings of guilt were also mentioned.

#### Making the Decision to Return to College

If a woman who is contemplating a return to school suffers from a lack of confidence, one is left to wonder how she is able to make a decision that could have implications for the remainder of her life. Another interview question addressed the issue of whether the women received any help in making the decision to enroll at PDCCC. The responses were equally divided; 50 percent received help while 50

percent stated it was purely an individual decision. The decision help-mates included family members, other women considering taking the class, neighbors, and individuals at PDCCC such as the instructor, counselor, and the Office of Continuing Education.

Just as the change event that affected the women's life may involve others, so too does the decision to enroll at PDCCC. Both internal and external factors play important roles in the manner in which women confront, negotiate, and ultimately resolve transitions in their life.

#### Self-perceptions of Returning Women

Some women who return to school face psychological barriers such as low self-esteem and low aspirations. This characteristic of low self-esteem has been noted in several studies on returning women (Hetherington and Hudson, 1981; Simpkins and Ray, 1983; Tittle and Denker, 1980; Wheaton and Robinson, 1983). One of the objectives of this study is to learn about identity formation in adult women. Therefore it is important to compare how the women felt about themselves before enrolling at Paul D. Camp Community College and at the time of the interview.

When asked to describe themselves before enrolling at PDCCC fourteen women (87 percent) indicated that they lacked self-confidence. Some of the adjectives used by the women to describe themselves prior to enrolling at PDCCC include frightened, uncertain, naive, dependent, not confident, discouraged, and self-sacrificing. Comments from some of the interview participants provide examples of this weak self-image. A 28 year old woman stated: "I was uncertain about everything - unable to make decisions." A 40 year old felt her life lacked purpose and direction:

Well, I would say [describe myself] as a middle aged woman with no goal or direction. I felt something was missing, but I didn't know what it was. I felt a need to prove myself and to do more than I was doing.

In Quartet in Autumn (Pym, 1977) Letty, a recent retiree, had concluded that her informal study of sociology had not been what she had expected. She contemplated this disappointment and blamed it on the fact that she was probably unable to learn.

It must be that she was too old to learn anything new and that her brain had become atrophied. Had she indeed ever had a brain? Going back over her past life, she found it difficult to remember anything she had ever done



that required brain work. . . .She seemed totally unfitted for academic work, yet older people than she was were taking courses at the Open University. (p. 117)

Letty seems to be the fictional embodiment of the low self-esteem expressed by most of the women in this sample. She questioned her ability to learn. So, too, did several of the women in the interview sample. Accompanying their low self-confidence was anxiety about "making the grade". The women also expressed concern about whether or not they were still able to learn, especially in the company of younger students. "I was concerned about being in school with 18 year olds. Could my brain take it?" was how a 25 year old interview participant described her anxiety about returning to college. A 41 year old student initially felt threatened. She stated: "I was intimidated when I went in [to class]. All of them [students] were younger than me." Of the sixteen women interviewed, only two women (12 percent) stated they had positive feelings about themselves prior to enrolling at PDCCC. One described herself as "a positive thinker". The other viewed herself as "determined".

A question on their present self-perception showed marked changes in the women's opinions of themselves.

Fifteen (94 percent) stated that there had been a positive change in their feelings about themselves. The following remarks from some of the interview participants provide examples of this "new" self. A 24 year old reported that "I didn't have much self-confidence. Since being here [PDCCC] I found I can achieve something." And a 52 year old observed: "[I have] more confidence. I have a better perspective than I've had before, and I feel I have more control over things than I did before. I speak with more confidence." One woman who had indicated a strong self-image prior to enrolling at PDCCC felt that she was now even more sure of herself. In general, the returning women felt more confident, more motivated, goal oriented, and less dependent. Nine women (56 percent) directly attributed this change in their self-perception to their experience at PDCCC. Their student experience enabled these returning women to realize their potential on all planes, intellectual, personal, professional, and emotional.

#### Advice from Returning Women

In the final interview question the women were given the opportunity to provide any additional information they cared to give about their decision to

enroll at PDCCC. Not all of the women had anything they wished to add, but of those who did, the responses were surprising. Rather than discuss their own experience, most chose to make a statement - to send a message so to speak - to other women who might be considering a return to school. Their messages are presented exactly as they were given during the interview. The age of the contributor is indicated in parentheses.

Basically, I feel that no female should ever feel, whether you're 24 or 50, that it's too late to go back to school to achieve something you've wanted.  
(age 25)

If you find yourself in a situation you're not satisfied with, take the opportunity and do something about it! (age 25)

It's important to be self-reliant and not rely on men and be able to stand on your own two feet in case something happens. (age 28)

Tell them [women] to go for it. You don't lose anything. You can always learn something. (age 32)

I think that there are a lot of women who are not doing anything with their lives because of lack of encouragement. Women my age grew up in an era when women were only supposed to progress to a certain point. There is no goal a woman can't achieve. You're never too old to learn. (age 37)

If there was more money of this type [financial aid] there wouldn't be so many people on welfare. (age 38)

It's not important to have a specific goal or a particular plan. Take a course and find out more. (age 40)

It's worthwhile. I've learned and gained a sense of self and self-worth. . . .I suggest that women my age can do anything you want to do if you apply yourself. I'm having more fun the older I get! (age 41)

I would advise anyone to return to school. (age 44)

I'd tell any woman to go for it! Once you've learned, they can't take it away from you. (age 45)

I wish there was some way we could reach these other women who have had traumatic experiences and tell them, "Hey, it's not too late. If I can do it, you can." (age 50)

It's very worthwhile for men and women to take this [courses] for people contact and a chance to see that others are in the same boat despite their age. It's never too late to learn what we missed out on in our earlier years. The friendships you gain out of it are worth everything! (age 52)

I think everybody if they have the opportunity to go to college should try it. It's challenging. It keeps you from getting in a rut - from getting green. (age 59)

The more opportunities community colleges can offer women in their community is a boon to both the women and the community. (age 60)

These statements show that the message from these women is consistent across all ages: return to school. They want other women to realize that they are capable of changing themselves and the situation in which they find themselves. Ryan (1979) calls this "perspective transformation" (p. 7). It is the process by which the adult woman takes action to gain responsibility and control of her life. A return to school is one way to accomplish this end.

The comments further illustrate the changes in the participants' self-perception as a result of their return to college. As previously discussed, the confidence levels of most of the women interviewed had undergone a positive change. This parallels other findings on the self-growth of returning women (Hetherington and Hudson, 1981; Wheaton and Robinson, 1983).

What is it about the student experience that produces such an effect on the confidence levels of returning women? Returning women who are plagued with self-doubt may find a support group in their fellow returning women students. Wheaton and Robinson (1983) stated that these older women are ". . .very much in need of a new peer group of women in the same

circumstances" (p. 46). Evidently, once this connection with other returning women has been established, the women begin to experience increments of personal and academic success. "For some women, all they need to propel them toward reschooling is the awareness that other reentering or late entering students share their fears and problems" (Howard, 1975, p. 46). Thus, the metamorphosis of self-perception has begun. The statements from the interviewed women illustrate the end product of this change process - confident women with a new self-awareness. They then use this new confidence in other aspects of their life. "For many students, developing a support group on campus may enhance their ability to do well in school, complimenting the social networks they have outside the university setting" (Jacobs, Unger, Striegel-Moore, and Kimbrell, 1983, p. 374).

In sum, the advice offered by the interview participants represents the effect a return to school can have on other women who may be considering resuming or beginning their higher education. This positive change does not appear to be restricted by any demographic characteristic. The process of education seems to provide the opportunity and support returning

women need to meet their goals for self-growth and achievement.

#### Conclusions on Transitions and Identity Revision

Sixteen women were involved in the interview process. They were asked to elaborate upon their reason(s) for returning to school and to describe themselves prior to and after enrolling in PDCCC. In general, change events and convenience of course scheduling and instruction were the factors that influenced the timing of the women's enrollment. Once in school, nearly 94 percent of the women responded that they were most interested in personal achievement goals. "Other" goals (refer to Table 29) and professional goals ranked second and third respectively.

Aspects of the interview data parallel the survey results. The survey data revealed that change events did influence a substantial portion of the sample population to return to college. The interview findings give further support to this result. The great majority of the women who were interviewed stated that professional goals were less important than personal achievement goals. This result seems to be inconsistent with the survey data which found that most

of the returning women were interested in achieving professional goals. It is conceivable that the inconsistent finding on the importance of personal and professional achievement could be attributed to the fact that the information on achievement goals obtained in the interview setting was more specific than that obtained in the survey responses. Perhaps this inconsistency in the data was a function of the interview sample or possibly the interview setting encouraged the women to reflect more thoughtfully on the nature of the goals they were pursuing. The women in the interview sample were interested in accomplishing a rather broad personal objective - to revise their identity. Developing professional goals was one aspect of the total process of their identity revision. This may help to explain why professional achievement goals appeared less important than personal growth objectives to the women in the interview sample.

Fifty percent of the women interviewed cited a work related transition as the turning point situation or event that influenced their return to college. As previously stated, convenience of the educational opportunity was also an important variable. Because



PDCCC is located in a rural area scheduling and location of course instruction are prime concerns for the women it enrolls. Family related change events accounted for nearly 19 percent of the transitional situations and turning points leading to enrollment. Most (75 percent) of these critical changes occurred within the past two years. Other women had contemplated a return to school for several years.

The change events that precipitated enrollment usually involved others such as family members, friends or employers. Gilligan's (1982) research points out that connectedness is an important concern for women throughout their life cycle. Women's identity and success has been stereotypically measured by their ability to develop and maintain relationships. If they are able to do so, they can live "happily ever after". Adult development is not a fairy tale, however, where life follows a totally predictable path. As previously discussed, the adult life cycle is punctuated by change events. These transitions can alter relationships and consequently change women's sense of self. Aslanian and Brickell (1980) and Knox (1977) suggest that there is a connection between change events and learning. For some women a return to college may be a response to a change event that

has disrupted their sense of connection. Only 25 percent of the interviewed women felt that the transition they experienced had involved only themselves.

Transitions do not occur in a vacuum. They tend to have a ripple effect. When asked if any problems resulted from the change event mentioned, nearly 32 percent felt that there had been some residual difficulties. In contrast nearly 69 percent stated that they had not experienced any problems as a result of the change event that had occurred in their life.

The decision to enroll at PDCCC was made independently by 50 percent of the women. Of the others who did receive help in making the decision, most relied upon family members, neighbors, other women considering taking the class and PDCCC faculty and staff.

Changes were noted in many of the women's self-perception. When asked to describe themselves prior to enrolling at PDCCC nearly 88 percent said they lacked self-confidence. The follow-up question addressed the women's self-perception at the time of the interview. Almost 94 percent had a positive self-image. Descriptors such as more confident, more assertive, more motivated, and goal oriented were used

by the women. Nine women (57 percent) felt this change in attitude was a direct result of having returned to school. This finding concurs with prior research on returning women (Kaplan, 1982; Sewall, 1984; Weathersby, 1977; Wheaton and Robinson, 1983) which found that there is a relationship between the education process and personal self-fulfillment.

Weathersby (1977) states:

If individuals enroll in academic programs simultaneously with major changes in life structure, or as a result of changes in age-related states of consciousness, and if the educational environment stimulates stage change, then there is a considerable amount of inner change necessarily associated with academic progress. (p. 203)

Apparently, the returning women in the interview sample had experienced some inner change as a result of their return to school. This trend was also evident in the analysis of survey data. The relationship between education and personal growth articulated by Weathersby (1977) is evident in this study's findings. Most of the returning women in the sample had experienced a changed self-perception after their return to college.

Analysis of Data Based Upon Age, Race, Marital Status,  
and Current Employment Status

Above, the interview data have been analyzed based upon the responses of the total sample of sixteen women. Next, the data are discussed based upon the age, race, marital status, and current employment status of the interview participants.

Age Regardless of age (Table 31) half of the women interviewed expressed work related reasons for a return to college. Younger women (aged 25-30) were more likely to return to school after a work related change than women in the three remaining age group categories (31-40, 41-50, 51-60). For example, a 25 year old participant expressed discontent with her bank job. She stated: "I wasn't satisfied with the job and decided to go back to school and do it the right way this time." Family related reasons (such as a change in marital status) influenced the decision to return to college for several of the women in the 41-50 and 51-60 age categories. However, work related change events were also an issue for some of the participants in these older age groups.

When asked about the types of goals they hoped to achieve, ten (62 percent) of the women wanted to meet

Table 31. Reasons for Return to College by Age

	25-30 (4)		31-40 (4)		41-50 (4)		51-60 (4)		TOTAL (16)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Family related	0	00	0	00	1	25	2	50	3	18.7
Work related	3	75	2	50	2	50	1	25	8	50.0
Convenience	1	25	1	25	1	25	1	25	4	25.0
Other	0	00	1	25	0	00	0	00	1	6.2
TOTAL	4	100	4	100	4	100	4	100	16	99.9 <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Total may differ from 100 percent due to rounding error.

personal growth objectives. All the women aged 31-40 stated personal achievement goals were important to them. Two women (50 percent) in each of the three remaining age groups (25-30, 41-50, 51-60) also indicated that they hoped to accomplish a personal achievement goal. Five women (31 percent) mentioned professional objectives. This was an important goal for two women each in the 41-50 and 51-60 age categories. One woman indicated that meeting a personal or a professional goal was not an issue for her. She had returned to college to renew her teaching certification. Although personal growth goals were important for all of the participants aged 31-40, the desire to achieve personal and professional goals does not appear to be related substantially by age differences.

In general, the interview data suggest that as a woman's age increases so, too, does the possibility that her decision to return to college was influenced by a family related change event. The importance of work related transitions as a reason for a return to college seems to decrease with age.

Race When reasons for a return to college were compared by race (Table 32) work related reasons again

Table 32. Reasons for Return to College by Race

	Black (8)		White (8)		Total (16)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Family related	0	00.0	3	37.5	3	18.7
Work related	6	75.0	2	25.0	8	50.0
Convenience	2	25.0	2	25.0	4	25.0
Other	0	00.0	1	12.5	1	6.2
TOTAL	8	100.0	8	100.0	16	99.9 <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Total may differ from 100 percent due to rounding error.

accounted for the greatest number of responses. However, differences were found between the races. White women were more likely to return to community college for a family related reason (e.g., husband's death), whereas family related reasons were not cited as an explanation by any of the black interviewees. Work related reasons were stated as the rationale by 75 percent of the black women and 25 percent of the white women who returned to college.

These findings parallel the survey data which indicated black women were more inclined than the white participants to return to college after experiencing a work related change event. Family related transitions were given as a reason for enrolling at PDCCC by some of the black survey respondents, but by none of the black women interviewed. This type of change event seemed to prompt more white women to return to school.

Only slight differences occurred between the races on the importance of accomplishing personal and professional goals. Five (62 percent) of the white interview participants and six (75 percent) of the black respondents were striving to achieve personal goals such as self-satisfaction and self-fulfillment. The similarities of responses between the black and



white participants were evident in the following comments. A black interview participant commented on the type of goal she hoped to accomplish: "Just showing what I can achieve." And a white returning woman echoed this desire for personal achievement: "The main essence of why I went back [to college] was personal - for self-satisfaction."

Professional goals were important to 25 percent of the black participants and an equal percentage of the white respondents. One white woman indicated that she was not attempting to accomplish either personal or professional goals. She had returned to college for teacher recertification requirements.

The interview data on personal and professional goals are not consistent with the survey findings which found that professional growth goals were more important than personal growth goals to most of the women despite their race. Many of the women in the interview sample were attempting to establish a life plan for themselves and a course of action that would enable them to accomplish their goals. Thus, personal goals would be an important issue for these women. Yet personal goals such as self-fulfillment can

encompass an array of specific goals such as learning how to use a computer to a general objective like learning to become more confident. Professional goals are an aspect of the bigger picture of personal growth objectives and could, consequently, appear to be secondary to the women in the interview sample.

Marital Status Despite their marital status, most of the women interviewed returned to community college for work related reasons (Table 33). The responses from the women who were never married were equally divided between work and convenience reasons. Most of the married women cited a work related change event as the reason they enrolled at PDCCC. Their remaining responses were evenly distributed between family related reasons and convenience. One married participant returned for teacher recertification purposes and did not indicate that any other reason influenced her return to college. The same pattern of responses in the married category was evident in the category of women who were no longer married (separated, divorced, widowed). Most of the participants who were no longer married mentioned a work related reason prompted their decision to enroll at PDCCC. Other reasons cited by these women were

Table 33. Reasons for Return to College by Marital Status

	Single (2)		Married (9)		Other (5)*		TOTAL (16)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Family related	0	00.0	2	22.2	1	20.0	3	18.7
Work related	1	50.0	4	44.4	3	60.0	8	50.0
Convenience	1	50.0	2	22.2	1	20.0	4	25.0
Other	0	00.0	1	11.1	0	00.0	1	6.2
TOTAL	2	100.0	9	99.9 <sup>1</sup>	5	100.0	16	99.9

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<sup>1</sup>Total may differ from 100 percent due to rounding error.

\*Other: separated, widowed, divorced

distributed equally between the family related and convenience categories.

Some inconsistencies were noted between the interview data and survey findings based upon the marital status of the participants. The interview and survey results regarding the women who were never married (single) parallel each other. Work related reasons were cited as the most important reason single women returned to college. Family related change events were second in importance for these women. The interview findings on married women were also consistent with the survey results. Change events that involved the family prompted some of these women to return to college, but work related transitions influenced most of the married respondents to enroll at PDCCC. The survey data indicated that change events involving the family prompted most of the participants who were no longer married (separated, divorced, widowed) to return to school. Work related transitions were important, but not to the extent of family related transitions. All of the relevant interview data on this group show an opposite trend. Most of the women in the interview sample who were no longer married cited work related reasons for their return to

college. This discrepancy may be attributable to the differences in sample composition between the survey and interview populations.

When asked about the types of goals they hoped to achieve by enrolling at PDCCC, eleven (62 percent) of the women cited a personal growth goal such as self-fulfillment. Four women (25 percent) mentioned they were striving for a professional goal such as obtaining a real estate license. The majority of women who were never married (100 percent), married (67 percent) and who were no longer married (60 percent) returned to college to accomplish a personal goal. Work related goals were important to two married women and two of the women who were no longer married.

As in previous discussions, the interview data on the importance of personal and professional goals by marital status were inconsistent with the survey findings. The survey data found that professional goals were more important than personal goals despite the marital status of the respondent. Perhaps a personal growth objective is the umbrella goal under

which other achievement goals, such as professional objectives, can be found. More fundamental personal growth goals may have emerged more clearly in the interviews than on the surveys. Most of the interviewed women wanted to prove that they could achieve or they wanted to gain a feeling of self-fulfillment. Self-fulfillment could be accomplished by meeting professional goals such as completing the requirements for a real estate license. Most goals returning women set for themselves lead to a heightened level of self-awareness and fulfillment. A comment from one of the interview participants illustrates this point: "I just hoped that [I could achieve] my goal - to improve myself and to be a better employee. I don't want to stop growing. It's [improving myself] beneficial in all areas."

Current Employment Status      Analysis of interview data based upon current employment status (Table 34) shows distinctive differences in the reasons women return to college. For one third of the women working outside the home, convenience was cited as an important reason for a return to school. This reason was mentioned by only one of the women who did not work outside the home. Work related reasons were

Table 34. Reasons for Return to College by Current Employment Status

	Employed (9)		Not Employed (7)		TOTAL (16)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Family related	2	22.2	1	14.3	3	18.7
Work related	3	33.3	5	71.4	8	50.0
Convenience	3	33.3	1	14.3	4	25.0
Other	1	11.1	0	00.0	1	6.2
TOTAL	9	99.9 <sup>1</sup>	7	100.0	16	99.9 <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Total may differ from 100 percent due to rounding error.

major motivating factors for some of the working women, but were very influential factors in the great majority of non-working women's decisions to enroll at PDCCC. Family related reasons were also mentioned by small numbers of women in both categories.

As in previous discussions regarding the goals the interviewed women hoped to achieve, personal goals were cited as the most important to women in general. Eleven (69 percent) women expressed a desire to improve their self-confidence. Four (25 percent) hoped to accomplish a specific professional objective such as getting a better job. When the data are analyzed by the women's employment status, five (55 percent) of the participants who were employed mentioned a personal growth objective. One participant who was employed expressed her desire for growth in this manner: "My confidence in myself is slim. School is one of the few things I do for myself. . . .Deep down, the hope for personal satisfaction [is my goal]. It's a self-want thing for me." Four (44 percent) of the employed participants wanted to achieve a professional goal such as getting a promotion or obtaining a better job.



Six (86 percent) women who were not employed outside the home also expressed a desire to accomplish some type of personal goal. A young woman who was not employed at the time of the interview said going to school "was just something personal that I knew I needed to do for myself - self-fulfillment really." One woman who was not working stated that she wanted to get a job.

As in the survey findings, the interviewed women were hoping to accomplish personal and professional goals. The interview data are consistent with the survey data. Women who were employed desired to achieve personal and professional goals. This is understandable because these women had an identity related to their work and family roles. The majority of women who were not employed outside the home were actively attempting to meet an objective related to personal growth and fulfillment. Perhaps the personal goals of the non-working women included work related objectives such as finding a job or learning job skills.

Conclusions Based Upon Age, Race, Marital Status, and  
Current Employment Status

The interview findings on the reasons women return to college based upon their age, race, marital status, and current employment status reveal that work related transitions and the desire to achieve personal goals are common motivating factors among women in general.

Age Work related reasons tended to prompt women in the younger age categories (25-30 and 31-40) to return to school. Career related change events also influenced the older women (41-50 and 51-60) to enroll at PDCCC, but transitions that involved family began to affect the timing of enrollment for the women in the two older age categories.

Most of the women interviewed mentioned they hoped to achieve a personal goal by returning to college. All of the women in the 31-40 age group wanted to meet some personal objective. The responses in each of the three remaining age categories were equally divided between personal and professional goals.

Race More black women than white women enrolled at PDCCC because they had experienced a work related change event. Family related transitions were not an

issue for the black respondents, yet this type of transition prompted a large portion of the white participants to return to school. Work related changes did influence some white women to enroll at PDCCC, but not to the extent of the black respondents.

Only a small difference in the importance of personal goals was evident between the races. Equal numbers of white and black women wanted to accomplish a professional objective.

Marital Status      Work related change events influenced a majority of the women interviewed to return to college. The marital status of the women did not seem related to this trend. Family related change events were an issue with the married respondents as were reasons of convenience in influencing their decision to enroll at PDCCC. Some of the women who were no longer married expressed reasons similar to those of married women for their return to college.

The majority of women in all marital status categories expressed a desire to accomplish some type of personal goal. Professional goals were mentioned by some of the respondents who were never married, married and who were no longer married.

Current Employment Status      The data relevant to current employment status reinforce the importance of work related change events to women's return to college. Work related change events were the reason given by a majority of interview participants who were not employed outside the home and by a substantial portion of the employed participants. Family related changes and convenience reasons also influenced some of the employed women to enroll at PDCCC, but these factors were not as important in prompting the non-working participants to return to college.

The women's current employment status was not related to their desire to achieve a personal growth goal. The majority of both women who were not employed outside the home and those who were employed expressed a specific personal goal they hoped to achieve. Professional goals were more important to the women who were employed than to those who were not.

#### Relationship to Research Questions

Next, the interview responses are analyzed in relation to each of the research questions. The analysis of interview data evolved from the three subsidiary research questions:

1. Do life changes prompt adult women to return to community college?

2. Do women return to community college to revise their identity?

3. Do the reasons for a return to community college differ based upon women's age, race, marital status, and current employment status?

Because this is an exploratory study the analysis is descriptive in nature. Although definitive conclusions cannot be drawn, it is possible to identify patterns in adult women's reasons for returning to school using this type of analysis.

Research Question 1 In reference to the first question, the data reveal that change events and convenience of educational opportunities are the two primary reasons given for a return to community college. Despite what appears to be substantial agreement on this point, somewhat varied reasons emerge within the two areas. Some women are likely to return to school if primary relationships (spouse, children, parents) were affected by a transition such as the death of a spouse or children entering school or leaving home. Work related change events also influenced some women's decision to enroll at PDCCC. Loss of

employment was an important influence on the decision of several women to return to school. The need for improved work skills necessary to enter the labor market or for promotion also prompted enrollment at PDCCC. This type of information indicates that the need for an income, be it the primary or secondary source, is a motivating force for a substantial portion of women who return to college.

Convenience of the educational opportunity was also cited as a reason for a return to college by some of the women interviewed. These women considered factors such as scheduling and location of course instruction when making the decision to enroll at PDCCC.

Transitions involving the women's personal health were not an issue for the interview participants in this study. However, the illness of an immediate family member did influence one woman to return to community college.

Life's transitions are not necessarily dramatic events. They can be subtle and occur over a period of time. Returning to college was viewed as a worthwhile effort for two reasons. First, attending class was considered a valuable use of the women's free time and

taught the women to use their free time wisely. They had to become better organized. Second, the women felt that education would help them cope with change, both current and anticipated, by teaching them to be better prepared personally and professionally.

Changes in religious beliefs or experiences were not mentioned by any of the interviewees as a transition that influenced their enrollment at PDCCC. However, one woman did say that God had given her the strength and courage to enroll and fulfill her desire to return to school.

In sum, the data relevant to the reasons women return to college indicate that change events do prompt many women to enroll at PDCCC. An affirmative response to the first subsidiary research question is appropriate.

Research Question 2      Data relating to the second subsidiary research question present insight into the process of identity formation in returning women students. Women who enroll at PDCCC are attempting to accomplish a variety of goals. Personal goals were most often cited by interview participants, but variations exist within this general objective. Self-fulfillment in and of itself was an important

goal for many participants. These women felt that personal goals could also be accomplished by completing the requirements for certification or learning new job skills. Acquiring or improving one's professional identity was yet another aspect of the women's identity revision.

Although women who return to college may not consciously seek to revise their identity, it appears that their sense of self is nonetheless affected by their student experience. Prior to enrolling the women described themselves in less than a positive light using such words as naive, frightened, unsure, no self-confidence. However, when describing their present self-image terms such as confident, more motivated and goal oriented were mentioned. Based on what these women reported, identity revision does occur when they return to formal education. It can result from a conscious effort to develop a sense of self apart from family and work roles. Or, it can be a direct but unanticipated result of the student and campus experience. In general, once the women realized that they were capable of achieving something by themselves and for themselves, their self-perceptions became more positive. A return to



community college appears to be a catalyst for the process of identity formation in returning women. This finding on the process of identity revision in college is consistent with the literature (DuBrin, 1972; Hetherington and Hudson, 1981; Kaplan, 1982; Weathersby, 1977; Wheaton and Robinson, 1983). The data seem to support an affirmative answer to the second subsidiary research question.

Research Question 3        In reference to the third subsidiary research question, the data reveal that the most common reasons women in general return to community college are work related. Reasons of convenience were the second most frequently mentioned. Some differences in the importance of work related change events and convenience to the women's decision to return to college were noted when the data were analyzed by the age, race, marital status, and current employment status of the interview respondents.

Younger women's return to college was usually prompted by a work related change event whereas family related transitions also influenced older women to enroll at PDCCC. The majority of black women interviewed returned to college after experiencing a work related change event. In comparison, family

related reasons were influential in prompting more white women to return to education. The data on marital status did not indicate any notable differences in the reasons women return to school. Women who were not employed outside the home enrolled at PDCCC for work related reasons, yet this was not cited as an important factor for a return to college by many of the women in the paid work force.

The same variables were also used to compare and contrast the importance of professional and personal development goals to the interviewed women. Most of the women expressed a desire to achieve a personal goal such as proving that they would still learn or to improve their self-confidence. Professional goals were important to some of the women, but not to the extent that personal goals were. This finding did not seem to be related to the race, marital status, or current employment status of the respondents. The majority of women in each of these categories indicated a desire to accomplish some type of personal growth. When the data were analyzed based upon the age of the women, personal goals were important to the majority of women in each of the age categories.

Summary

When the interview responses are compared and contrasted, work related reasons for returning to college are cited most frequently by women in all categories. As previously stated, PDCCC is located in a predominantly rural, economically disadvantaged area. Median household incomes are below the state average. It is therefore likely that a work related transition is an especially important reason for a return to school. For women who have become the primary source of financial support for their family it becomes imperative that they obtain or improve their job skills. A return to college is one way to improve their professional marketability. For those women who are already in the paid work force, keeping their position is important. Going to school is viewed as a means to improve their chances for promotion and also to increase their job stability. Based on what these returning women reported, work related changes are likely to prompt a return to school.

Nevertheless, although job related changes may have influenced them to enroll, personal achievement goals rather than professional goals seem most important to returning women. One of the bonuses for

the returning women is a new self-image and identity that evolves during their student experience.

The interview findings relevant to life change events parallel the survey results. Transitions did prompt many of the interview participants to enroll at PDCCC. The most influential change events appear to be work related. Once the women returned to school, however, they hoped to accomplish goals that would help them redefine their identity. This trend is evident in both the interview and survey results. The results of the interview found that most of the women hoped to achieve a personal growth goal. This is not consistent with the survey data. The survey data relevant to identity revision reveal that professional goals were important to many of the respondents. Overall, the interview findings appear to answer subsidiary research questions 1 and 2 affirmatively. A return to school by many of the interview participants was in response to a life change and the desire for a revised identity. When the interview data were analyzed by the age, race, marital status, and current employment status of the participants, some differences were noted in their reasons for a return to college. Small differences were also noted in the importance of

personal and professional growth objectives based upon the variables of age, race, marital status, and current employment status. Based upon these findings an affirmative answer to the third subsidiary research question seems appropriate. The reasons for a return to college differ somewhat based upon women's age, race, marital status, and current employment status.

## Chapter 6

### SUMMARY

#### Summary

Adults comprise a growing proportion of today's undergraduates. This group of older students includes a distinct subgroup of learners who are referred to as returning women. This qualitative study focuses on the reasons adult women return to formal education.

Theories of adult development provided the basis for this research. These theories imply that the adult life cycle is characterized by continuous change. These changes or transitions can be stressful, but at the same time they provide the opportunity for personal growth.

The major purpose of this research was to determine if life changes and the desire for a revised identity are the major reasons adult women return to school. A synthesis of two theories formed the conceptual framework for the study. Aslanian and Brickell's (1980) theory that a life transition prompts a learning response was integrated with Gilligan's (1982) theory that women identify themselves in the context of relationships. Evolving from this framework is the

assumption that a change event that threatens or severs a relationship affects a woman's identity. Consequently, the woman may return to school to negotiate this transition and also to revise her identity.

Returning women students at Paul D. Camp Community College described the reasons for their return to school and their personal and professional goals by completing a mailed questionnaire. Participants were asked about the transition(s) and identity goals that may have influenced their decision to enroll at PDCCC. They were also asked to provide information about their life and career goals, any change event(s) they had experienced that may have influenced their decision to enroll at PDCCC, and whether or not becoming a student had any effect on them in terms of coping with changes in their life and/or work and on their self-perception. Personal interviews were conducted with a portion of the survey respondents. The information from the interview was used to elaborate upon the survey data.

The reasons adult women return to community college and their identity revision goals were analyzed based upon the responses of the total sample. The responses were also analyzed according to the respondents' age, race, marital status, and current employment status.

The main objective of the analysis was to identify trends and patterns in the data that may help to clarify why adult women return to college after a lapse in their formal education. The analysis of data also sought to determine if these reasons for a return to education differ by the age, race, marital status, and current employment status of the participants.

### Conclusions

Based upon the survey and interview findings the following conclusions can be made:

1. Change events are influential in prompting adult women to enroll at Paul D. Camp Community College. Family and work related transitions are more likely to prompt a return to college than health, religious, or leisure related change events. In general, career related transitions are more significant than family related changes in prompting a return to college.

2. Identity revision is an important goal for the returning women at PDCCC. They are interested in developing an autonomous identity and establish personal and professional growth objectives to help them become more independent and self-sufficient.

3. Convenience of the educational opportunity (such as the location of instruction) and an interest in



the subject matter also influence the timing of women's enrollment at PDCCC.

4. Family and work related change events are common reasons women in general give for a return to school. However, noteworthy differences in their reasons for enrolling in college occur among returning women. Family related change events more frequently prompt older women and women who are no longer married to return to college. Younger women and women who were never married tend to enroll at PDCCC because of work related transitions. Both family and career related change events are influential in prompting black women and women who not work outside the home to return to college.

5. Identity reassessment is a common process among returning women. The importance of setting goals for their work and life, both aspects of identity definition, tends to decrease with age and among married women. Personal and professional identity revision seems to be especially important for black women, women who are single, separated, and divorced, and for working women. These women seem to regard personal and professional growth objectives as critical to their development of an autonomus identity.

6. Other factors that influence the timing of enrollment at PDCCC appear to differ among various subgroups of returning women. Reasons such as convenience of course offerings and an interest in the subject matter motivate more white women, single and married women, and women who are not employed outside the home to return to college than black women, divorced, separated, and widowed women, and employed women.

The data identify patterns in the reasons adult women return to college. Some of the reasons for enrollment seem to characterize returning women in general. However, the significance of various reasons for a return to school appears to differ at certain points in a woman's life. Based upon this information, it is possible to develop composite profiles of returning women.

#### Profiles of Returning Women

The reasons adult women return to college are as individual as the women themselves. Yet there appear to be themes common to all returning women. Prior to returning to college and sometimes during the early stages of their course work, almost all of the women mentioned that they lacked self confidence. They expressed concern about being able to function in their

new role as a student. Making the grade and competing with younger students were main causes of worry. Despite these psychological barriers, the women were highly motivated and made every effort to get to class, complete the required work, and to pass their courses.

Many returning women, either because of their own experiences or from observing the experiences of others, realized that life holds no guarantees and that they are ultimately responsible for themselves. One respondent expressed this realization in this way: "You shouldn't think you have life mapped. Time and chance can change everything." Women are troubled by this uncertainty - a kind of "what if - then what?" syndrome. What if my marriage fails - then what will I do? What if I lose my job - then what will I do? What if my children leave home - then what will I do? A return to school is a method used by returning women to answer the what if - then what questions. It enables them to develop a safety net. Education provides some stability for women who are attempting to negotiate a change event in their life, while at the same time it fosters independence and personal growth.

The research findings identify patterns and characteristics of returning women students that seem to be

age specific. Profiles of returning women based upon the five age categories follow.

The Returning Woman Aged 25-30 Weathersby (1977)

described students in this age group as attempting to connect themselves to society. The returning woman in this age group is trying to find a meaningful role in her family and work. This younger returning woman feels that her life and/or work situation is not as stable as she would like, and thus realizes that she must begin to take responsibility for her life's direction. She wants to establish her identity and independence on both a personal and professional level. She begins to develop long-range life goals.

Establishing or enhancing a professional identity and setting long-range career goals are salient issues for this woman. This young returning woman student is also interested in completing certification and degree requirements which she perceives as a prerequisite for accomplishing her career related goals. Her experiences in the world of work are her main focus. Consequently, her return to school is usually prompted by a work related transition such as the need to acquire the vocational or professional skills necessary to obtain or to keep a job.

The Returning Woman Aged 31-40 The theme of establishing a meaningful personal and professional identity continues for the returning woman in the 31-40 age category. Yet she realizes that the goals she had set for herself prior to returning to school may now have to be reassessed due to changes that may have occurred in her life and/or work. Family related transitions such as a change in marital status or children leaving home to attend school will prompt her decision to enroll in college. However, career related change events such as the need for marketable job skills are also influential in motivating her return to school. Because of the transitions she has experienced, her efforts to take responsibility for her life's direction become more focused, more self-centered, than they had been when she was younger. She strives to become more independent and believes this can be accomplished by setting more realistic long-range goals for her life. Likewise, she wants to establish a direction for her career. She sets long-range career goals and becomes actively involved in acquiring those vocational or professional skills that will establish or enhance her professional identity.

The Returning Woman Aged 41-50 The returning woman student aged 41-50 has reached a watershed in her

self-awareness. She realizes that her life no longer has to revolve around the needs and expectations of others and that she is free to define herself apart from family and social obligations. Hence, the woman channels her energy into this personal redefinition. She desires to become more independent and to develop an identity that is grounded more in a professional sphere rather than a family one. Family related transitions and career change events are influential in prompting her decision to return to college. Establishing long-range goals for her life and work are frequently mentioned as a means of acquiring this new independence and identity. She is especially interested in obtaining the skills necessary for professional enhancement.

The Returning Woman Aged 51-60 For this woman a return to school is part of her effort to explore new horizons. Her decision to return to formal education was most likely influenced by a family related transition. Like her younger counterparts, this returning woman desires to become more independent and to establish her own identity. She has a clear idea of what she would like to accomplish during the remainder of her life. These accomplishments are usually associated with career related identity revision goals. Establishing or

enhancing a professional identity is a salient issue. Another important issue mentioned is acquiring the vocational or professional skills that she believes are necessary for achieving her career objectives. This woman's personal goals include establishing an identity separate from spouse and children and completing degree or certification requirements.

The Returning Woman Aged 61-85. Because of the small number of women in this age category, this profile is based primarily on the literature (Aslanian and Brickell, 1980; Weathersby, 1977). The returning woman in this age category is motivated to return to school because of a family related transition. Her children are more than likely out of the home. She may have also experienced a change in her marital status due to the death of her spouse. Consequently, she has time to pursue avenues of personal interest. She tends to enroll in courses that will enrich her leisure time, such as drawing and painting classes. Revising her personal or professional identity is not a major issue for the woman in this age category. Yet she may express a desire to become more independent and believes a return to school accomplishes this goal.

### Implications of the Study

This research has identified common patterns in the reasons adult women return to college. While the study's conclusions are based upon data from a community college setting, they are worthy of consideration by higher education in general.

Theoretical Implications Systematic studies of the adult life cycle show that the adult years are characterized by considerable change. Some transitions are stressful for the adult, yet research suggests that each change is usually followed by a period of growth. The results of this study support this general premise. Similarities and differences in the types of transitions experienced by returning women students were identified. However, because of the paucity of theory and empirical data on women's development in particular, it remains difficult to determine whether these similarities and differences occur at specific stages of the women's life cycle. A more precise theory of women's development is necessary to assess accurately what changes are likely to occur during a woman's life cycle and subsequently which types of transitions are most likely to motivate a return to education. The results of this study indicate that work and family



related changes are more influential in a woman's decision to enroll in college than are other types of life transitions. These findings should help to enhance understanding of women's development as well as their interest in further education.

Implications for Policy and Practice As the numbers of returning women increase, higher education institutions need to evaluate their programs and policies regarding this important student subgroup. The findings of this study have implications for the way colleges and universities respond to the returning women in their classes.

Marketing and Recruitment. Aslanian and Brickell (1980) state that every adult is a potential learner. This study demonstrates that nontraditional aged women view education as a means to satisfy personal and professional needs. However, to benefit from educational opportunities, women must be made aware of the higher education programs and services available to them. To reach this audience of women educational information could be disseminated through the printed media such as newspapers, newsletters, and college catalogs. Radio and television advertising is another appropriate marketing strategy. Women can be recruited from women's service

organizations and other community groups such as church clubs and libraries. Local industries that employ large numbers of women are additional potential recruitment sources.

Once the potential learners have been identified and informed concerning educational opportunities, admissions requirements and financial aid policies must be reviewed and modified to meet the special needs of the nontraditional student, especially returning women.

Admissions Requirements. Barriers to reentry such as age restrictions or past educational preparation and performance criteria can discourage potential learners from returning to college. Community college's admissions policies are less selective and consequently more likely to accept larger numbers of nontraditional learners such as returning women students. Other higher education institutions that wish to serve older women students should also attempt to remove unnecessary barriers to their enrollment.

Financial Aid. Financial aid, or the lack thereof, poses a barrier to college reentry. Financial aid monies are usually available to full-time students. Most returning women attend school on a part-time basis. Hence, financial aid practices should be reevaluated and

changed to address the financial needs of part-time students. Loans, grants, scholarships, matching funds, work study programs, and money targeted specifically for returning women are specific suggestions for helping women finance their education. Financial aid should not be affected should a woman have to stop out from education for a short period of time.

Counseling. This study has shown that women tend to return to college during transitional periods in their life. A full range of counseling services should be available to returning women students to help them negotiate this time of uncertainty and stress.

Some returning women may need to avail themselves of psychological counseling to help them cope with the changes they may be experiencing in their life. The availability of this type of counseling may affect the women's self-concept, and ultimately may increase the possibility that they will persist in their chosen educational program.

Another type of counseling that deserves consideration is peer counseling. As indicated in this study, it is important for some women to know that others share their concerns regarding a return to school and the adjustments it entails. This type of

counseling could be provided in group sessions or on a one-to-one basis similar to a "big sisters" program. New students would be paired with individuals who had already adjusted to their returning woman status. A "big sister" could serve as a sounding board, tutor, and mentor to the novice returning woman student. As with psychological counseling, the peer counseling could have a positive effect on the self-concept of returning women. Both psychological and peer counseling could facilitate the process of identity revision in returning women students.

The findings of this study showed that many women were interested in developing or enhancing a professional identity. Higher education institutions should also provide career counseling for these women. Information about career opportunities and options in traditional and nontraditional fields for women should be available. This can be accomplished through workshops, seminars, and career days, much as these programs are presented in secondary schools. Providing opportunities for women to visit a variety of work settings (such as hospitals, industry, and business) would not only expose women to the range of career choices that are available, but would also reinforce or dispell any preconceived ideas that

the women may have had about specific occupations. Opportunities of this sort could help the women make more realistic and satisfying career choices.

An important aspect of career counseling is career development for women. Socialization practices tend to channel women into traditional roles such as marriage and parenthood. Women who also choose to work may do so in traditional roles such as secretarial science, education, and nursing. Career development programs would help women become aware of personal and professional options in traditional and nontraditional careers, and ultimately to establish personal and professional goals that meet their individual needs and aspirations.

Finally, placement services that help returning women find employment should be an integral part of career counseling and development programs. This service could act as a general referral network for women by making them aware of potential employment opportunities, helping them complete applications and write resumes, and scheduling job interviews for them.

Curriculum. The data on the reasons adult women return to college have important implications for curriculum development and course scheduling. Women who return to college after a lapse in their education may

need refresher courses in reading, mathematics, and writing. Basic skills programs in each of these areas would help remediate weaknesses the women may have in these areas. Courses in note-taking, basic research methods, and writing papers would be beneficial to returning women who have concerns about their abilities in these skills areas. The availability of such courses could reduce the women's level of anxiety and affect their overall academic performance.

Not all women who resume their education are interested in completing degree and certification requirements. Rather they return to college to take classes for enjoyment and enrichment. Courses that foster a hobby (such as painting, bird watching) or address a personal need (such as income tax preparation, self-defense, physical fitness) would also encourage women's participation in education.

Scheduling. The results of this study indicate that women tend to enroll in courses that are offered at a convenient time and location. This knowledge is helpful to institutions when scheduling courses.

Scheduling classes during evening hours or on weekends is necessary for returning women students who work outside the home. Flexibility in scheduling is

also required for those women who are trying to integrate family and student roles. Offering courses at off-campus locations such as nearby high schools or businesses may not only provide easier access to the educational opportunity, but may also serve to alleviate transportation problems. Setting up park and ride centers or a car pooling system are two specific suggestions that should be considered.

Consideration should also be given to delivery systems that increase the accessibility of education to women. Tele-courses, video taped lessons, and independent study opportunities are examples of delivery systems that address the issue of convenience of the educational opportunity.

Another concern that is related to scheduling is the length of time given to complete course or certification and degree requirements. Granting credit for life experience is important for women who have returned to college after a lapse in their education. Flexibility in the length of time allowed to complete course and degree requirements and in accepting transfer credits (such as credits that were earned several years prior to reentry to college and applying transfer credits to meet certification and degree

requirements) would be beneficial to women who are trying to begin or resume their formal education.

Special Services. Women returning to education at an atypical age bring special needs with them. One characteristic of returning women is their low level of self-confidence. Consequently, they do not always trust their ability to make decisions and experience some difficulty in taking charge of their life. Activities such as assertiveness training, time management, and decision-making strategies can help alleviate some of the concerns women may have about the appropriateness of their decisions. Efforts such as these would also serve to enhance women's self-perception and identity revision.

Many returning women are trying to balance family, work, and academic responsibilities. Concerns about meeting family needs often preclude or postpone women's decision to return to college. Although the women in this study did not specifically mention child care, the availability of child care facilities is an area that institutions should address when designing programs and services to meet the needs of returning women students. A needs assessment would indicate the services that would benefit women students. Consideration should be



given to such factors as cost, the location of child care services (on campus or off campus sites), and the hours such services would be available.

In keeping with the theme of meeting the unique needs of returning women, it is appropriate that institutions provide a "home base" for these students. A women's center could be the equivalent of the campus center for traditional undergraduates. It would provide a central location where returning women could congregate and socialize. It would also serve as a location where the necessary support services such as counseling and child care were provided. These support services should be scheduled at the convenience of the returning women students.

Special Populations. Within the general population of returning women are subgroups of women with special needs. Some of these women have recently experienced a change in marital status due to divorce, separation, or widowhood. This study also showed that black women are more vulnerable to change events that occur in their life. Institutions must be aware of the fact that some women return to education during times of extreme stress and instability. These women would especially benefit from the counseling services, child care facilities,

transportation, financial aid, assertiveness training, and the women's center previously discussed.

#### Implications for Future Research

This report describes an exploratory study of the reasons adult women return to college. While the findings illustrate trends and patterns associated with the timing of women's enrollment in college, they also raised issues that should be addressed in future research.

The generalizability of the findings are limited because the participants in this study enrolled at a small, rural community college. Similar studies including urban community colleges and four year institutions would help to determine which reasons for a return to education are representative of the general population of returning women.

Adult developmental theory formed the basis of this research. However, most theories of adult development are grounded in a male perspective. More research on the development of women is warranted. Not only would this research add to the general knowledge of the adult life cycle, it would also provide more definitive information about the characteristics of women at successive developmental stages. Such information would help to break down developmental stereotypes of women. It would

also help institutions address the specific needs of returning women at each developmental phase.

The data found that the reasons women return to formal education and the importance of identity revision goals are related to women's age, race, marital status, and current employment status. More focused research concerning these differences is needed. Such research would provide more specific information about transitions that influence women to return to college and the effect these change events have on women's identity revision goals. In addition, this knowledge may be needed by higher education institutions to help meet the specific needs of special types of returning women students. This information might enable support services to be sensitive to individual women's special circumstances. Finally, a comparable study of the reasons adult men return to education would provide more information about developmental similarities and differences between men and women. Such a study would help to determine the distinctive needs of male and female returning students. Such information could lead to increased participation of adults in education.

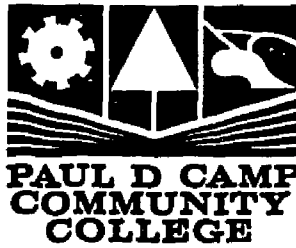
In sum, the use of a developmental framework has provided important information about the reasons adult

women return to college. By employing a developmental perspective it may be possible to "dig out all of the puzzle" (interview respondent, age 56) about the special needs of returning women students. However, many important pieces of the puzzle have been clarified.

Once these pieces - the special needs - have been determined, institutions can become more receptive and responsive to nontraditional women students. Returning women and higher education institutions should benefit from this heightened awareness and sensitivity.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A  
COVER LETTER TO RETURNING  
WOMEN PARTICIPANTS



Post Office Box 737, Franklin, Virginia 23851 • Telephone 804/562-2171

May 1, 1986

To the Returning Women Students at Paul D. Camp Community College:

I am asking for your help with a project that I am conducting in conjunction with Paul D. Camp Community College. For my doctoral dissertation at The College of William and Mary, I am studying the principle reasons why adult women return to school. This topic interests me for personal reasons as well as academic reasons. I, too, am a returning woman student.

I am asking you, as returning women, to help me answer the question, "Why do adult women return to school?" I need your responses to the enclosed questionnaire to help me identify the various reasons that women decide to resume their education. Please respond to each question as thoroughly as you can. Your individual responses will be kept strictly confidential.

It would be a tremendous help if you would complete and return the questionnaire in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope by May 11, 1986. I will be contacting a small number of you to schedule a brief interview to discuss in more detail your reasons for returning to school.

Your responses will provide important information that will be very helpful to me and to the faculty and staff of Paul D. Camp. I appreciate your cooperation in this research effort.

Sincerely,

Margaret E. Morgan, Doctoral Candidate at The College of William and Mary

Dorothea Scott, Project Director of The Opportunity Center

APPENDIX B  
RETURNING WOMEN SURVEY  
FOR PAUL D. CAMP COMMUNITY COLLEGE



**PLEASE NOTE:**

**Duplicate page numbers. Text  
follows. Filmed as received.**

**University Microfilms International**

RETURNING WOMEN SURVEY  
FOR PAUL D. CAMP COMMUNITY COLLEGE

This questionnaire is designed to find out what prompts adult women to return to school, specifically a community college. Your cooperation is very important. Please answer all of the questions as completely as you can. Thank you!

Directions: Some of the following questions will require a check mark or a circle to indicate your answer. Other questions are less structured and you can answer them as you wish. Please be sure to respond to the questions on the back of each page. Feel free to use extra paper if you need more space for your answers.

1. Name: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_
3. Telephone: (    ) \_\_\_\_\_-\_\_\_\_\_
4. Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_  
                            Mon.    Day    Year
5. Area of Residence  
\_\_\_\_ Franklin  
\_\_\_\_ Suffolk  
\_\_\_\_ Southampton County  
\_\_\_\_ Isle of Wight County  
\_\_\_\_ Other Please specify \_\_\_\_\_
6. Marital Status  
\_\_\_\_ Single (never been married)  
\_\_\_\_ Married  
\_\_\_\_ Divorced  
\_\_\_\_ Separated  
\_\_\_\_ Widowed
7. Race  
\_\_\_\_ White  
\_\_\_\_ Black/Afro-American  
\_\_\_\_ Hispanic  
\_\_\_\_ Asian American  
\_\_\_\_ Other Please specify \_\_\_\_\_
8. Are you currently employed outside your home?    \_\_\_\_ Yes    \_\_\_\_ No  
If yes, please check one.  
\_\_\_\_ Part-time    \_\_\_\_ Full-time    \_\_\_\_ Other Specify \_\_\_\_\_
9. Number of children: \_\_\_\_\_
10. Ages of your children: \_\_\_\_\_
11. Number of children still living at home: \_\_\_\_\_

12. What educational experience have you had prior to enrolling at Paul D. Camp Community College? (Please check all that apply).  
 High School (or equivalency)  
 Some previous college classes  
 College degree  
 Other Please specify \_\_\_\_\_
13. How long ago was your last formal training or educational experience?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Number of years      Year you quit going to school \_\_\_\_\_
14. In what type of program are you currently enrolled? (Check one).  
 One-Year Certificate  
 Two-Year Associate Degree  
 Non-curricular (registered under special conditions)  
 Other Please explain \_\_\_\_\_
15. How are you currently enrolled at Paul D. Camp? (Check all that apply).  
 Part-time  
 Full-time  
 Evening student  
 Day student  
 Other Please specify \_\_\_\_\_
16. Please circle one number for each of the following sentences to show how important they are to you at this time in your life.

	<i>Extremely important goal now</i>	<i>Very important goal now</i>	<i>Fairly important goal</i>	<i>Starting to become important</i>	<i>Not an important goal</i>
a) Completing the requirements for a One-Year Certificate or a Two-Year Associate Degree	1	2	3	4	5
b) Setting long range goals for my life	1	2	3	4	5
c) Becoming a more independent person with my own identity	1	2	3	4	5
d) Acquiring the vocational or professional skills to enable me to get a better job	1	2	3	4	5
e) Setting long range goals for my work	1	2	3	4	5

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_

17. Which of the following statements best describes you at this time? (If more than one applies to you, please put a 1 by the most accurate statement and a 2 by the other statement that applies).

- My life and/or work situation is stable; there has not been much change. Explain briefly \_\_\_\_\_
  - I have recently experienced a major change in my life and/or work. Explain briefly \_\_\_\_\_
  - I feel that I am about to make changes in my life and/or work. Explain briefly \_\_\_\_\_
  - I'm trying to achieve stability in my life and/or work. Explain briefly \_\_\_\_\_
  - Other Please specify \_\_\_\_\_
- 

18. Which of the following best describes your reason(s) for enrolling at Paul D. Camp Community College? (If more than one applies to you, please put a 1 by the most important reason, a 2 by the next important reason, a 3 by the third important reason and so on).

- My marital status changed. (Married, divorced, separated, widowed)
  - My job situation changed. (Hired, fired, promoted, transferred)
  - My children are not at home. (In school or grown up and on their own)
  - I needed skills to get a job.
  - The subject matter interested me.
  - Other Please explain \_\_\_\_\_
- 

Please answer the following questions as completely as you can. Use extra paper if you need more space.

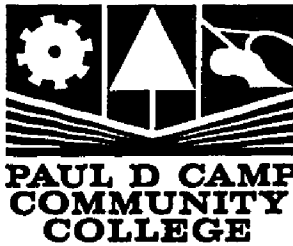
19. When did you decide to enroll at Paul D. Camp Community College? (For example, can you recall the time or situation that may have prompted you to enroll at Paul D. Camp?)

20. Why did you enroll at Paul D. Camp when you did rather than at some other time?

21. Has becoming a student at Paul D. Camp helped you cope with any changes in your life and/or work? If so, how?

22. Has becoming a student at Paul D. Camp had any effect on your identity or sense of self? If so, how has it affected your feeling about yourself? (For example, are you more independent, more confident, proud of your accomplishments?)

APPENDIX C  
FOLLOW-UP LETTER TO  
RETURNING WOMEN PARTICIPANTS



Post Office Box 737, Franklin, Virginia 23851 · Telephone 804/562-2171

May 15, 1986

To the Returning Women Students at Paul D. Camp Community College:

Approximately two weeks ago I wrote you asking for your help with a research project being conducted at Paul D. Camp Community College. I mailed a letter and questionnaire to you as part of my study on the principle reasons adult women return to school. To date, I have not received your reply.

I have enclosed another questionnaire for your convenience. Please respond to each question as thoroughly as you can. It would be very helpful if you would return the questionnaire in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope by May 25, 1986.

Your responses will provide valuable information that will be very helpful to me and to the faculty and staff of Paul D. Camp. I appreciate your cooperation in this research effort.

Sincerely,

Margaret I. Morgan  
Doctoral Candidate at The College of William and Mary

APPENDIX D  
INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM



CONSENT FORM

I understand that the interview will deal with the reasons adult women return to school and whether becoming a student has any effect on returning women. I also understand that my anonymity is assured, that the information I provide will be released only in aggregate form, and that in no way will I be identified in any reported findings. I am aware that I can withdraw my participation at any time.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name printed

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Margaret I. Morgan  
Doctoral Candidate  
The College of William and Mary

APPENDIX E  
RETURNING WOMEN INTERVIEW

## Returning Women Interview

The purpose of this interview is to ask you about your reasons for returning to school and if becoming a student has affected you in any way. Please answer each question as thoroughly as possible. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential.

1. Why did you enroll at Paul D. Camp Community College?  
Probe: Why was it important to enroll when you did as opposed to some other time in your life?
2. What did you hope to achieve by enrolling at Paul D. Camp?  
Probes: Did you consider other alternatives besides a return to school?  
  
Did you hope to achieve personal goals?  
  
Did you hope to achieve professional goals?  
  
Where there any other goals you hoped to accomplish?
3. What do you feel were the circumstances that influenced you to change what you were doing before you enrolled at Paul D. Camp?
  - a) What was the situation or event you consider was the turning point for you?
  - b) When did it happen?
  - c) Who did it involve?
  - d) Did any problems arise for you as a result of this change? (For example: with your spouse, your family, your employer)
  - e) Did you receive any help in making the decision to enroll?
  - f) How were the problems resolved?
4. How would you describe yourself before enrolling at Paul D. Camp?
5. How would you describe yourself now?  
Probe: Has your experience at Paul D. Camp changed you in any way? If so, how?
6. Is there anything you would like to add?

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1980-1987      The College of William and Mary  
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## Abstract

WOMEN RETURNING TO COMMUNITY COLLEGE: A RESPONSE TO LIFE CHANGES AND A DESIRE FOR A REVISED IDENTITY (A CASE STUDY OF PAUL D. CAMP COMMUNITY COLLEGE)

Margaret Irene Morgan, Ed.D.

The College of William and Mary in Virginia, April 1987

Chairman: Roger G. Baldwin

The purpose of this study was to identify what factors prompt adult women to return to community college. Adult developmental theory provided a framework for the study. Aslanian and Brickell's (1980) theory that life transitions prompt a learning response was integrated with Gilligan's (1982) theory that women identify themselves in the context of relationships. Information was gathered to determine whether life changes and the desire for a revised identity are the major reasons adult women return to school.

The population of this study was a randomly selected sample of 186 women who had returned to Paul D. Camp Community College during the academic year, 1985-86. The participants had to be 25 years old or older, enrolled in a credit course of study, and returning to college after at least a two year lapse in their formal educational experience. Those women selected to participate in the study responded to a survey asking them to describe their current life situation and reasons for their return to school. Personal interviews were conducted with a select portion of the survey respondents.

Frequencies and percentages were calculated to identify common and distinctive patterns in the reasons adult women return to college. The results support the hypothesis that life changes and the desire for a revised identity prompt women in general to return to education. However, notable differences were identified among women according to their age, race, marital and employment status.

Further study on the development of women is needed. More information regarding the special needs of

returning women students in general is warranted. In addition, research on selected categories of returning women students (e.g., minority group women, women who are no longer married) is also needed.