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Running Head: NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS & IDENTITY SUPPORT

MAKING A COMEBACK: AN EXPLORATION OF NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS  
AND IDENTITY SUPPORT

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Thesis

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Making A Comeback: An Exploration of Nontraditional Students and Identity Support

Chairperson: Dr. Alan Sillars

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the effects of identity supportive messages on nontraditional students in terms of facilitating identification with the student role. Identity support involves the extent to which an individual believes that others understand, accept, and/or provide instrumental support for valued social identities. Considering the life-changing (identity altering) adjustment of resuming school in the middle of adulthood and assuming the new “student” role—especially in connection with other roles and responsibilities—the relationship between nontraditional students and identity support is particularly salient. Twenty-four in-depth interviews helped identify encouraging and discouraging messages students received from a variety of sources. The results indicated that identity support served as an essential resource during the identity work process because it promoted or restored a sense of competence. Consequently, identity encouraging messages (particularly from “credible others”) helped motivate older adults to resume their educations, to persist through challenges and doubts, and to develop identity-preserving counter-discourses to cope with discouragement. Interestingly, counter-discourses were a type of identity work strategy utilized to counter negative identity messages and were co-constructed through a combination of personal agency and encouraging messages from supportive networks. From a practical standpoint, the results indicated that universities also play a role. They convey messages of support indirectly through the resources they provide to assist older learners. However, educational institutions can work to improve full recognition of nontraditional students on campus as valued members of the student body.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	5
Understanding Identity: Tensions and Management .....	5
Identity Concerns for Nontraditional Students .....	7
Identity Support .....	11
Research Questions.....	16
Methods.....	18
Participants.....	18
Interview Procedures .....	18
Narrative Interviews.....	21
Analysis.....	22
Results.....	23
Identity Supportive Messages.....	24
Self-support.....	25
Societal support.....	27
Network support.....	28
Identity support from credible others.....	30
Identity Discouraging Messages.....	32
Discouraging self-talk.....	32
Discouraging societal discourse.....	33
Discouraging network messages.....	34
Counter-Discourse Strategies.....	36
Age, Sex, and Circumstance .....	40
University Messages .....	45
Discussion.....	49
How and Why Supportive?.....	50
Identity Discouragement and Counter-Discourse Strategies .....	55
Sex and Circumstances .....	57
Gender.....	58
Age.....	59
University Improvements.....	60
Conclusion .....	61
References.....	64
Appendix.....	72

### Introduction

Economic shifts, vocational dead-ends, and empty nests often drive people to reconsider their academic careers. For some, a return to campus is motivated by the desire to secure a more marketable edge through education (Home, 1998; Hostetler, Sweet, & Moen, 2007; Kirby, Biever, Martinez, Gomez, 2004; Swanson, Broadbridge, & Karatzias, 2006; Sweet & Moen, 2007). For others (often women) who put academic goals on hold to start earning a living or raising a family, it presents the unique opportunity to settle unfinished business, finally satisfying long-awaited academic ambitions (Hostetler et al., 2007; Mottarella, Fritzsche, Whitten, & Bedsole, 2009; Sweet & Moen, 2007). Whether individuals return to enhance their skills or to resume delayed / interrupted educational pursuits, institutions around the nation are experiencing record enrollment from an influx of older individuals known as “nontraditional students” (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009; Home, 1998; Query, Parry, & Flint, 1992; Swanson et al., 2006; Sweet & Moen, 2007; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005).

To clarify, the label “nontraditional” typically applies to students who do not fall within the traditional 18-25 age demographic and who did not pursue and complete college immediately following high school (Bye et al., 2007; Giancola et al., 2009; Houser, 2006; Onolemhemen, Rea, & Bowers, 2008; Sweet & Moen, 2007). It could also include those who are first-generation, part-time, returning mothers, students attending two-year institutions, and students with dependents (Giancola et al., 2009; Onolemhemen et al., 2008; Sweet & Moen, 2007; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005); however, for the purposes of this study, age will be the defining characteristic. As previously mentioned, enrollment of these “nontrads” is on the rise. In fact, researchers note that changes in life stages have “led to adult learners over the age of 25 becoming the fastest growing group of undergraduates in North America” (Bye et al., 2007,

p.142). One plausible explanation is that the United States may be more tolerant and encouraging of “educational late blooming” (Levin & Levin, 1991; Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998) than many other societies, resulting in the assertion that nontraditional college enrollment to pursue higher education is a characteristically American approach (Astone, Shoen, Ensminger, & Rothert, 2000; Hostetler et al., 2007; Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Consequently, more than nine million adult learners are enrolled in adult education programs through postsecondary institutions, according to an estimate from the U.S. Department of Education (Onolemhemen et al., 2008, p. 115). As a result, 30% to 50% of the North American undergraduate population in the past decade has been composed of these nontraditional learners (Bye et al., 2007, p. 142).

Although this “second chance” philosophy may have increased nontraditional student enrollment, the same cannot be said of nontraditional graduation rates. In fact, low completion for degree and certificate programs is an area of growing concern (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). For example, by 1994 only 31% of nontraditional students who enrolled between 1989 and 1990 had earned a bachelor’s degree, as opposed to 54% of their traditional student classmates (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005, pp. 912-913). Clearly there is a gap that remains to be filled regarding discrepancies between nontraditional students’ college experiences and their traditional counterparts that are leading to these numbers. Furthermore, these graduation rates are troubling considering the projection that in the next few years, there will be more jobs requiring college experience than there will be people qualified to fill them (Obama, 2009). Due to this projection, President Obama has instituted the American Graduation Initiative, a plan to obtain the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020 (Obama, 2009).

However, much of the success of this initiative is dependent on the nontraditional student demographic—evidence that this increasing student population warrants further scrutiny.

While some research has sought to respond to the undertaking, much of the nontraditional experience remains unexplored (Giancola et. al, 2009; Kirby et al., 2004; Sweet & Moen, 2007). One of the critical areas requiring attention concerns identity management and support. Those returning to college undergo the challenge of transitioning into the life of a student. As noted by identity researchers, critical life events serve as key points where identity management/work becomes crucial because they often arouse feelings of uncertainty, inconsistency, worry, and self-doubt (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Pepper & Larson, 2006). Furthermore, immersing themselves in this new identity of “student” is a complicated experience to manage due to the generational gap existing between them and their fellow students, the ambiguity of the identity label “nontraditional,” and their numerous obligations outside the classroom.

Surrounded by fellow classmates whose ages may range anywhere from five to thirty-plus years younger, nontraditional students have the unique task of finding their own niche in a system typically designed for a significantly younger student population. Not only do these older learners have to successfully navigate life as a student, but many also do so with the added pressure of full-fledged family responsibilities and work commitments. Balancing school assignments, career obligations, and relationship expectations, nontraditional students experience great stress and strain on their identities due to inter-role conflicts that inevitably arise while trying to manage the multiple—and at times opposing—obligations and responsibilities demanded by various roles (Giancola et al., 2009; Home, 1998; Kirby et al., 2004; Mottarella et al., 2009; Onolemhemen et al., 2008; Query et al., 1992; Quimby & O’Brien, 2006; Swanson et

al., 2006; Sweet & Moen, 2007). In essence, they may find themselves struggling to satisfy multiple identity concerns: “I’m a nontraditional student. How does the university define my role, what are my fellow students’ expectations, and am I measuring up?” “I’m a parent; how does society define my role, and am I measuring up?” “I’m a spouse, an employee, a family member, a responsible adult...” the list goes on, and with it, expectations and prescribed sets of behaviors as expressed through social interaction and discourse.

With identity tensions and nontraditional students being inextricably linked, research investigating the identity management and coping mechanisms employed by these students would be insightful. Previous studies indicate that academic support from fellow students is critical at the college level “where students often view communication with fellow students as their primary source of academic support” (Thompson & Mazer, 2009, p. 434). Additional research suggests that peer and faculty relationships may also be important (Giancola et al., 2009). These findings become even more compelling when considering the fact that nontraditional students are generally less involved in campus activities and less likely to establish relationships with fellow students and faculty (Bye et al., 2007; Onolemhemen et al., 2008), a palpable result of their demanding schedules. The question naturally arises, “Who/What is their support to help them see their academic endeavors through to completion?” To what extent do they look to themselves and to what extent do personal relationships (e.g., close friends, romantic partners, family members) in addition to academic relationships provide critical identity support?

Although numerous studies within the communication literature have been conducted concerning both identity and social support separately, there are fewer that have explored a combination of the two: identity support. Identity support involves “the degree to which



individuals believe that another person understands, accepts, or provides instrumental support for valued social identities” (Weisz & Wood, 2005, p. 417). Although identity support may share similarities with other common types of support, it is different in the sense that it demonstrates acceptance and encouragement of enacting a specific role. Considering the life-changing (identity altering) adjustment of resuming school in the middle of adulthood and assuming the new “student” role, the relationship between nontraditional students and identity support may be particularly salient. Consequently, the purpose of this study is to examine identity and social support, specifically how they intersect to form identity support. Additionally, it explores the extent to which identity support may be distinctively critical to nontraditional students juggling multiple, competing roles and following life trajectories somewhat atypical of mainstream expectations. Finally, it analyzes nontraditional students’ personal narratives according to five primary research questions designed to reveal the types of identity support that nontraditional students utilize throughout their college experiences to manage identity tensions.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Understanding Identity: Tensions and Management**

Identity presents an intriguing yet mystifying subject of study—one that is infinitely complex and difficult to explain in concrete terms. At the same time, it is an issue critical to explore. As researchers note, “...identity is problematic – and yet so crucial to how and what one values, thinks, feel and does in all social domains...that the dynamics of identity need to be better understood” (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000, p. 14). Although identity is a pervasive aspect of the human experience, it is challenging to study largely because of its dynamic nature. For example, changes in both the physical and social environments are likely to result in shifts and adjustments in an individual’s identity.

The complex and changing nature of identity not only renders identity issues difficult to research but also difficult to manage. From research and personal experience, we understand that change can create uncertainty, which can be a disconcerting, distressing state (Berger & Calabrese, 1987). In fact, some research suggests that humans possess an innate drive to reduce high levels uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Bradac, 2001) possibly because of the stress associated with it. As such, individuals often strive to combat the stress of uncertainty by regularly engaging in sensemaking (Weick, 1995) to explain unusual events, restore order, and render the world predictable and comfortable once again.

In terms of uncertainty and identity, the same holds true. As Giddens (1991) describes it, identity is “the self as reflexively understood by the person,” (p. 53), and as Alvesson et al. (2008) summarize it, “personal identities are negotiated—created, threatened, bolstered, reproduced and overhauled—through ongoing, embodied interaction; and... draw on available social discourses or narratives about who one can be and how one should act” (p. 11). In other words, after careful contemplation, individuals come to an understanding or belief of who they are and where they fit in society, based on their own and others’ assessments. Once established, there is a sense of security associated with knowing who one is and who one is not. However, identities do not merely remain fixed once they are formed because “Change disrupts identities, forcing members to search for redefinition” (Pepper & Larson, 2006, p. 66). This redefinition entails a complicated, ongoing process of identity work (Alvesson et al., 2008; Kuhn, 2006) in which individuals strive to “create a coherent sense of self in response to the multiple (and perhaps conflicting) scripts, roles, and subject positions” (Kuhn, 2006, p. 1,341). Thus identity work often results in individuals agonizing over identity options (Pepper & Larson, 2006) such as, “Who am I now? Is this part of me?” “How should I act?”

Consequently, an individual's identity work will be increasingly complicated by the number of roles involved. Roles serve as "mechanism[s] for identification" (Simpson & Carroll, 2008, p. 32). They enable us to understand how society conceptualizes certain identities attached to roles. As such, there are expectations that accompany roles (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2003; Kuhn & Nelson, 2005; Scott, 2007). Clearly this can be problematic when the expectations of one role are in opposition or competition with the expectations of another. Therefore, with each role and each accompanying expectation, an individual will again be required to engage in identity work to determine how that role fits into their previous identity construction, to what extent they can or want to internalize that role as part of their identity, and what adjustments this new role will require. Naturally then, participating in new roles (which will be discussed in greater detail later) as well as other life changes will give rise to unsettling identity tensions that must somehow be addressed.

### **Identity Concerns for Nontraditional Students**

For the nontraditional student, one such identity-altering change is deviating from a more typical adult life trajectory to return to school. Although this change may not initially appear momentous enough to disrupt identity, it becomes increasingly apparent considering a "life course" perspective. As noted by Settersten and Lovegreen (1998), numerous scholars have suggested that life courses are rigidly structured and experienced, particularly where work and educational trajectories are concerned. This rigidity may be due to a few interconnected factors. To begin with, Kohli (1986) proposed the notion that "tripartition" or "triangulation" within the structure of the life course is an inherent barrier to pursuing education as an adult. Triangulation suggests that life courses are divided into three categories or periods organized around a primary focal point: work. Accordingly, the first period of life involves education and training for work,

the second, working continuously, and the final period, absence from work or retirement. Hence by middle age, work and family roles are typically at their peak or well on their way (Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005), leaving little time for educational endeavors. Clearly then, from a life course perspective, the societal expectation is that schooling occurs before settling into a job and starting a family. In fact, according to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2008), Americans almost unanimously agree that pursuing a college education immediately following high school is critical to life success and more important than taking even a good job at that time. Evidently, there is a cultural mindset strongly in place. What this means for the nontraditional student is that not only is college going to be implicitly geared towards the young (Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998; Sweet & Moen, 2007), but returning to school as an adult will require swimming against the cultural tide.

Additional research indicates that social guidelines differ for men and women with respect to selecting appropriate life courses and measuring life achievement (Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998). This occurs because “Gender enters as a maintenance tool for this imbalanced structure, supplying images of how roles should be enacted and by whom” (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004, p.14). For women, returning to school entails going against the “mother mandate”—a culturally/socially prescribed belief—maintaining that women must have and spend time with their children in order to “be complete and successful in the female role” (Mottarella, 2009, p. 223) with a “good mother” evaluated in terms of the time she spends with her children (Russo, 1976, p. 148). In other words, women are often expected to be the primary caregivers regardless of other roles (Home, 1998; Mottarella, 2009; Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998). However, with current economic conditions and the increasing number of single mothers, this may not even be a feasible option for many of today’s women. Unfortunately, with good

mothers often described as those who focus on caregiving and putting family first, many women may struggle to manage an identity that satisfies both the practical demands of her family and societal expectations of what it means to be a good parent.

Women are not the only ones struggling to satisfy cultural expectations. In fact, men may be bound by an even less flexible life course pattern. For example, the female life trajectory allows for discontinuous patterns in education and work due to family responsibilities (Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998; Sweet & Moen, 2007). On the other hand, a man returning as a nontraditional student may find that “neither their responsibility to provide for their families nor the structure of the occupational sphere afford such flexibility” (Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998, para. 12). These expectations of both adult women and men are not likely to disappear once they enter the classroom. On the contrary, since identity tensions are discursively created (Kuhn & Nelson, 2005; Pepper & Larson, 2006; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005) the competing discourses from the different organizations of family, work, and school may result in nontraditional students experiencing instability, conflict, anxiety (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Pepper & Larson, 2006), and even guilt over their perceived failure to successfully meet the requirements of each.

Prior obligations to work and family may take precedence over educational pursuits, but this can serve as a serious handicap for the nontraditional student in terms of academic performance and peer interaction. Consequently, Onolemhemen et al. (2008) propose that, even with educational institutions making attempts to accommodate adult learners, “lifestyle issues continue to prove burdensome and are probably the most important factors impacting the academic performance of nontraditional students” (p.116). One critical area involves integration and commitment to the student lifestyle. This is not meant to suggest that nontraditional students do not possess a strong work ethic or the desire to succeed academically. On the contrary,

nontraditional students “approach learning in the context of life application” (Bye et al., 2007, p. 181) not only in terms of enhancing their skill set (Home, 1998; Hostetler et al., 2007; Kirby et al., 2004; Sweet & Moen, 2007), but also for self-improvement and to satisfy intellectual curiosity (Bye et al., 2007; Ricco, Sabet, & Clough, 2009). The issue is that many adult learners opt for a part-time rather than fulltime schedule to allow time for both work and family responsibilities.

However, numerous studies have shown that part-time enrollment has a negative effect on academic performance and degree completion (Horn, 1996; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Tinto 1987), with part-time students being considerably less likely to graduate (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). One reason is because it does not allow for full immersion into the student lifestyle. This is significant when considering that an educational institution’s social and academic environment typically helps facilitate educational attainment (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Tinto, 1987). As such, the beneficial effects offered by institutions may be reduced for nontraditional students who are only partially integrated into the system. This can result in lost eligibility for financial aid and scholarships (Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005) which not only help alleviate financial burdens (leaving time to focus on academic endeavors) but also provide incentives to “maintain high grades and work toward the timely completion of their education” (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005, p.914).

Furthermore, part-time enrollment may result in limited interaction with fellow students. Interpersonal relationships are critical to identity formation (Scott, 2007) because it is through social interaction and relationships that people learn what is appropriate and expected behavior, especially regarding specific roles (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2003; Kuhn & Nelson, 2005; Scott, 2007). In essence, we rely on social discourse and comparison to regulate ourselves to fit certain

identities, such as that of a student. Consequently, less interaction with classmates may lead nontraditional students to feel uncertain and unfamiliar in their student roles, generating feelings of displacement and even exclusion (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). This is problematic when considering that social acceptance and integration by peers and faculty are critical for retaining nontraditional students, especially female (Mottarella et al., 2009). Evidently, in order for adult learners to possess the best opportunity for educational success, there must be a careful blending of their academic and personal spheres (Bryant, 2001; Goldsmith & Archambault, 1997). In short, returning adults must be supported to fully embrace their identities as students.

### **Identity Support**

Regarding nontraditional learning, stress is a critical factor linked to GPA, academic persistence, and goal commitment (Giancola et al., 2009). Unmitigated stress can culminate in frustration, burnout, depression, and even serious health problems (Folkman et al., 1986; Query et al., 1992), not only for nontraditional students, but also for their families (Query et al., 1992). In other words, stress has the potential to substantially affect physical and mental well-being as well as overall life satisfaction. As previously mentioned, some studies indicate that role conflict serves as a significant—if not the primary—source of nontraditional student stress (Giancola et al., 2009; Onolemhemen et al., 2008; Query et al., 1992; Sweet & Moen, 2007). However, in a study of nontraditional female students, researchers found that the women experienced both “greater role strain and greater role gratification” (Sweet & Moen, 2007, p. 234)—strain from struggling to juggle competing family and academic responsibilities, and gratification as a result of acquiring skills and resources, boosted self-esteem, and a sense of achievement and purpose connected to their academic pursuits. Another study found that greater identification with the student role was related to higher self-esteem for nontraditional students (Shields, 1995). In

essence, role identification promotes self-esteem which may better facilitate academic completion.

The question remains, “How does one successfully identify with a role?” According to the literature, roles are “specific forms of behavior associated with given positions” (Katz & Kahn, 1978, p. 43). Furthermore, a role is a “patterned sequence of learned actions or deeds performed by a person in an interactional situation” (Sarbin, 1953, p. 225). This reinforces the previous emphasis on the influence of discourse on role enactment and, subsequently, identity formation. By discourse, I am referring to the prevalent talk and messages that individuals draw upon as they engage in identity work. Through societal and organizational discourses, idealized role representations are established, communicated, and learned. However, enacting a role is not synonymous with identifying with a role, although role enactment is a necessary step toward role identification. Simply put, there is a difference between something that one *does* and something that one *is*. Immediately this triggers thoughts of the debate regarding the real-self / fake-self dichotomy, the notion that engaging in multiple roles can result in an individual experiencing a fractured sense of identity rather than a more cohesive, “crystallized” sense of self (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). A cohesive sense of self is one that frames the multidimensional parts of identity not as fragments but as facets composing a “crystallized self” with the idea that “the more facets, the more beautiful and complex” the life experience (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005, p.186).

According to Pepper and Larson (2006), identification “is the result of reconciling identity tensions in ways consistent with organizational messages of what members should understand and believe” (p. 63). In other words, in order for nontraditional students to successfully identify with the student role (in addition to their other roles) as yet another



enriching facet of their lives, they must somehow find the means to reconcile how they view themselves with the role expectations required by the organizations they belong to: school, home, and work. However, this is easier said than done because the more roles, the more difficult it is to coordinate and execute them. As Ashcraft and Mumby (2003) explain, each organization has its own guidelines “predisposing and rewarding members to practice in particular ways” (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004, p.13). In effect, nontraditional students will be pushed—and push themselves—to adhere to specific behavioral guidelines required by three different organizations. Naturally, this is problematic since the demands of each are typically simultaneous, competing, and expecting to be given precedence over the others (Home, 1998).

Since identity tensions are discursively created (Kuhn & Nelson, 2005; Pepper & Larson, 2006; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005), perhaps they can also be discursively relieved. By this, I mean that consistent messages of reaffirmation regarding one’s sense of self in connection with roles they are engaging in may enable them to better balance identity tensions and promote successful identification with those roles. (This is not to suggest that supportive messages will fully resolve the identity tensions, only that they will enable an individual to strike a more comfortable balance between them.) At times, this may require offering not only typical messages of affirmation, but also counter-discourses that bolster identity by justifiably challenging prevalent societal expectations connected with certain roles. For example, societal discourse may assert that “The time to be a student and complete higher education is during early adulthood before you have a full-time job and start a family.” On the other hand, a counter-discourse might be, “Now that you’re older and wiser, you have a better understanding of what you want to do with your education. You’ll be a more focused student now than you would have been if you enrolled when you were 18.” In essence, I am referring to identity support. As briefly established earlier,

identity support is an individual's belief that someone else "understands, accepts, or provides instrumental support for valued social identities" (Weisz & Wood, 2005, p. 417), with social identities being "aspects of self-definition related to social groups, categories, and roles" (Weisz & Wood, 2005, p. 417). In the case of nontraditional learners, the social identity requiring support is that of the student role.

It might appear that identity support overlaps or may even be synonymous with other types of social support. For example, emotional support (comforting and security during stressful times), esteem support (bolstering a sense of competence or self-esteem), instrumental support (concrete assistance through necessary resources), and informational support (information, advice, or guidance regarding solutions to problems) (Cutrona & Russell, 1990) all share commonalities with identity support. However, this study maintains the notion that identity support is conceptually different from other types of social support in that it demonstrates a more specialized understanding of identities and provides instrumental support for satisfying identity-related goals (Weisz & Wood, 2005). To illustrate the difference, Olivia, a nontraditional student, may receive this emotionally supportive message from her husband Wesley after a stressful day at school, "Honey, you are such a hard worker and putting so much more effort in than most of the other students, but is it really worth it? Wouldn't you be happier spending more time working at your job where at least they pay you for putting in more time?" From this, we can see that while Wesley is emotionally supporting his wife's hard work and effort in school, he is actually discouraging her from being a student.

Arguably, the proposed differences between identity support and other types of social support may lend further fuel to the debate concerning the extent to which social support is multidimensional. Some authors suggest that overlap between dimensions of social support

renders it difficult—perhaps impossible—to delineate clear and meaningful distinctions regarding types of support, whereas others conclude that it is, in fact, important to distinguish the multiple dimensions (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). While it is beyond the scope of this study to flesh out the various justifying arguments (for further discussion, see Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Goldsmith, 2004; Sarason & Sarason, 2009), from the standpoint of this research, the individuals involved as well as the context will cause certain elements of social support to become more salient, resulting in specific manifestations or types of support. In terms of identity support, insofar as emotional, esteem, instrumental, and informational means are directly used to facilitate successful identification with a role, they are functioning as identity support.

Referring back to Olivia as an example, her academic advisor may supply her with the informational support necessary to successfully prepare and integrate herself as a student early on in the enrollment process. Once the semester is underway, if she is struggling to balance the academic load with other work and family responsibilities, Olivia's mother may provide instrumental support in the form of baby-sitting for the kids because she understands the importance of Olivia having quiet time to complete assignments. Finally, encouragement (emotional and esteem support) from her husband, instructors, classmates, and so forth may enable Olivia to endure the rigorous daily challenges rising to meet her. From this example, it becomes evident how a variety of supportive behaviors are reaffirming Olivia's identity as a student and facilitating her academic goals. Clearly then, numerous things could indirectly provide identity support for nontraditional students. However, due to natural constraints of time and method, the research lens must be more narrowly focused on explicit types of identity support. Referencing the previous notion that identification is a discursive process and considering that various communication scholars have highlighted the need to examine social

support through careful evaluation of the message (Burlison, 2010; Goldsmith, 2004; Jones & Wirtz, 2006), identity supportive messages will be the primary focus.

### **Research Questions**

In terms of nontraditional students, messages that best lend support may be those that provide affirmation or serve as counter-discourses. Such supportive messages may better facilitate adult learners' enactment of the student role, enabling them to identify more strongly with being a student, ultimately increasing their self-esteem (Shields, 1995; Sweet & Moen 2007). Furthermore, if these messages come from supportive others, this may help to alleviate the stress associated with inter-role conflicts (Dyk, 1987), providing more time, energy, and motivation for academic work. That said, we must be careful to avoid the overarching assumption that nontraditional students are entirely vulnerable to every competing social discourse (arising from the organizations of work, home, and school) regarding their role and identities (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Simpson & Carroll, 2008). They, as all individuals, possess agency—knowledge and reflexivity—enabling them to make the choice to enact societal expectations or alter them (Simpson & Carroll, 2008), as proposed by structuration theory (Kuhn & Nelson, 2005; Poole & McPhee, 2005). Consequently, negotiating the nontraditional student identity to balance the tensions of competing discourses most likely relies on both personal agency as well as identity support from others. As such, this study will address the following questions:

- RQ1: a) What messages are most memorable for encouraging or discouraging nontraditional students' identification with the student role?
- b) Where do these supportive and unsupportive messages originate (the self, organizational discourses, interpersonal discourses)?

Once nontraditional students have received messages both supporting and discouraging them in their roles as students, they may try to manage those messages by reframing their identities in such a way that they achieve a sense of balance between the identity tensions. As such,

RQ2: How do nontraditional students manage tensions between conflicting identity messages?

Considering that social acceptance and integration by peers and faculty are especially critical for retaining female nontraditional students (Mottarella et al., 2009), this suggests a potential gender distinction concerning identity support. Therefore,

RQ3: Do male and female nontraditional students differ in their utilization of identity support?

Furthermore, while educational institutions easily lump these older students into an all-encompassing category labeled “nontraditional,” this may be problematic in and of itself. For example, consider the differences between the following “nontraditional” students: a single man in his 30’s; a single-mother in her 30’s; a married, working father of three children; a non-working woman in her late 50’s experiencing an empty nest. Clearly these differences will significantly influence their motivations for returning to school, their levels of stress, and how they see themselves in relation to their academic endeavors. Consequently, the fourth question seeks to explore this complexity.

RQ4: How do various life circumstances affect how adult learners relate to their student identities?

To achieve a practical outcome as a result of this study, the final question explores the academic institution’s role in facilitating identity as a nontraditional student.

RQ5: What do universities say and do to support the identity of nontraditional students?

## Methods

### Participants

Data were collected from 24 nontraditional students at a university in the western USA. To qualify for the study, participants were required to fit the following description of a nontraditional student: They 1) had taken time off between high school and enrollment in college or resumed college after an extended period of absence – three years or more, 2) were between the ages of 26-49, and 3) were students (enrolled in at least 6 credits) working toward the completion of an undergraduate degree. Of the 24 participants, 12 were male and 12 female. Ages ranged from 26 to 49, with six males and six females between the ages of 26-37 and six males and six females between 38-49. Twenty-two participants identified themselves as Caucasian, one as Hispanic, and one as Hispanic and Native American. Students represented a variety of majors (15) and years in school (5 freshmen, 6 sophomores, 5 juniors, 8 seniors).

### Interview Procedures

Respondents were recruited through a combination of snowball and quota sampling. Although the initial stage of recruiting began in various undergraduate communication courses, later on, access to fellow colleagues' students lead to connections with other nontraditional students. A loose quota sample was necessary in order to examine the variation within nontraditional students—due to age and gender differences—that may not have been apparent otherwise. Furthermore, quotas helped to provide this diversity within more meaningful limits, in other words, preventing extreme outliers. For these reasons, quota categories for gender and age were established. The gender quota simply provided an even number of both males and females overall to indicate any gender-related variations regarding identity tensions and identity support. Age was limited from 26-49 years in order to investigate a more workforce-related

population of nontraditional students, since employment is an increasing motivation for the influx of nontraditional students (Home, 1998; Hostetler et al., 2007; Kirby et al., 2004; Swanson et al., 2006; Sweet & Moen, 2007). Age was further divided into a lower-age (26-37) and a higher-age (38-49) category, with half of the male and female participants in the lower category and half in the higher. This quota helped highlight variations resulting from different life circumstances which are likely to occur at certain stages of life (e.g., being single versus being a parent with children).

After being recruited, interviewees were provided with basic details of the study, time, and location for the interviews through email correspondence. Interviews were conducted in a department conference room on campus, allowing privacy, safety, and convenience. To adhere to ethical guidelines, participants received and signed informed consent forms explaining the basic purpose of the study, the strict confidentiality of all information shared, and the option to discontinue the interview at any time for any reason. Each was provided a personal copy to keep. Respondents were forewarned of my intention to record the interviews, strictly for transcription purposes, and only after obtaining consent did recording begin. At this point, I further clarified the process by explaining that there were no right or wrong answers, but that I was simply interested in them providing as much or as little detail as they preferred regarding their nontraditional student experiences. In short, I asked them to think of the interview as telling me “their story.” To reduce potential anxiety or discomfort associated with either the process or upsetting questions, I encouraged them to ask for clarification at any point during the interview and to feel free to express concerns regarding questions they were uncomfortable answering. After addressing these points, the interview proceeded.

In an attempt to balance both the flexibility and spontaneity necessary for productive interviews (Janesick, 2000; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), the interview guide contained primary questions related to critical points in nontraditional students' experiences, with probes used when necessary to uncover messages that facilitated or hindered identification with the student role (e.g., "Think back to when you first considered returning to school. What was going on then? [Primary questions] What encouraged you to attend college? [Potential probe] What discouraged you?" [Potential probe]). While the probes were designed to explore the research questions in detail, the order of questions and probes was flexible in order to follow the natural progression of the participants' stories. Ideas for identification of critical points materialized from four nontraditional student interviews acquired through a pilot study conducted in spring 2010. Based on the previous responses to questions regarding stress and change, it became more apparent that identity supportive messages may be more crucial at specific times in a nontraditional student's experience. Accordingly, the interview guide for this study was organized to walk participants back through their experiences and the messages they received in connection with 1) making the decision to return to college, 2) going through the enrollment process, and 3) being a student, both at a challenging time and a successful moment. In this way, participants were guided to reflect in more concrete terms on specific events and messages rather than being asked to respond to more general questions that might have seemed abstract and difficult to answer. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to one hour and 30 minutes (average length: 55 minutes) to allow for an in-depth look into nontraditional student identity work and identity support.



### **Narrative Interviews**

The study adopted a narrative approach to interviews adhering to Bateson's (1994) assertion that humans lead storied lives, and therefore think and learn through stories as well. If we construct stories to make sense of our world, then we may learn and understand others' experiences more completely through their narrative accounts. A common misconception of narrative interviews is that they are only useful or appropriate in terms of creating grand narratives (e.g., ethnographies, biographies), but smaller scale stories or mini-narratives surrounding specific times or events (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) are equally valuable for indicating salient aspects of an individual's circumstances and self-concepts.

Accordingly, narrative interviews provided deeper insight into the identity work of nontraditional students following the notion that "we need to see social action from the actor's point of view to understand what is happening" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p.31). This is particularly critical when considering issues of identity where it is essential to uncover individuals' reflections of their experiences in order to highlight discourses that have been influential in shaping their identities. As Kuhn (2006) suggests, "Identities are shaped at every turn by multiple local and distal discourses and require continuing justification to selves and others to sustain a particular self-narrative" (Kuhn, 2006, p. 1,340). Consequently, asking nontraditional students to provide their narrative accounts enabled me to observe them engaging in identity work during the interviews.

Interviewing has been considered a limited method because participants will only share information that presents them in a certain light. While this is true, it is also a critical aspect of identity work, demonstrating their preferred identities. As such, narrative research supports the notion that it is not only important to listen carefully to the story but also how the story is told.

Often, significant information can be derived from how individuals narrate their accounts in terms of what they as the storytellers choose to focus on or forget to mention entirely (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As such, narrative interviews are one of the most effective tools for “studying people’s identity work and conflicts in their self-presentations” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p.180).

### **Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed producing 311 pages. Working from a grounded theory perspective (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), immersion in the data of nontraditional students’ personal accounts revealed themes emerging from their expressions of how identity work and identity support intertwine. The 2010 pilot study indicated initial areas to be mindful of. For example, identity work for nontraditional students may be a process that relies on a combination of identity support from others as well as personal constructions of the self, and depending on the individual and circumstances, one may be more heavily relied upon than the other. Additionally, previous interviews revealed that nontraditional students may try to manage conflicting messages according to specific identity outcomes. By identity outcomes, I mean certain themes used to frame identity in a particular light in order to achieve a sense of balance between the identity tensions. For example, previous participants cited that, even though they were completing their educations at a later stage in life, they would be able to do so more successfully due to having a stronger sense of purpose driving their academic efforts.

Keeping in mind these previous possibilities as well as being prepared for other emergent themes, half of the interviews were used to conduct a preliminary “open coding” process of analysis whereby I analyzed statements line by line to begin highlighting distinctive aspects of the interviews and writing coding notes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I attempted to extract salient

features of identity supportive messages, how they were used for identity management, and their impacts depending on the individuals and their circumstances. Following this step, I carefully analyzed the interviews for similarities and differences in order to create tentative codes. After using defining characteristics indicated by the participants to create codes and categories, the data were grouped accordingly (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), using NVivo software, and interpreted in the context of the research questions. As Strauss and Corbin (1998) explain, qualitative analysis is a cyclical process of analyzing, organizing, coding, interpreting, reanalyzing, and so on. As such, I used the second half of the data to reassess established categories, and confirm, expand, or alter them accordingly, and continued the cycle, moving back and forth across the interviews.

Next, I coded axially by looking for answers to questions, such as the following: What are characteristics of effective identity support? Who most commonly issues that support? How is the identity support helpful to nontraditional students? As a result, I developed greater sensitivity (insight) into the relationships within the data enabling me to flesh out conceptual explanations for the relationships and integrate or draw out larger theoretical themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Throughout the process, I endeavored to let the students' interpretations guide my own, often using their own expressions to help categorize and explain. Consequently, the following results highlight the most salient points of identity management through identity support as indicated by nontraditional students themselves.

### **Results**

The primary goals of this examination were to explore how messages supported or discouraged older learners in identifying with the student role, where these messages originated, and the ways nontraditional students utilized identity support to balance identity tensions.

Additionally, it examined differences in the utilization and function of identity support based on sex, age, and circumstances. Finally, it considered university messages that supported or discouraged nontraditional students' identity work. The subsequent results address the aforementioned areas following the order of the research questions, beginning with RQ 1. Illustrative quotations from nontraditional students are used throughout to depict and support various findings.

### **Identity Supportive Messages**

The first research question regarded encouraging and discouraging messages that nontraditional students received with regards to being a student (RQ 1a), and who generated these messages (RQ 1b). Looking first at identity encouragement, there were different messages from a variety of sources inspiring nontraditional students to return to college and motivating them to persist on to academic completion. The social network—parents, siblings, children, friends, co-workers, advisors, faculty, and fellow students—included the most commonly referenced sources of direct identity supportive messages. In addition, nontraditional students also indicated relying on personal agency in the form of motivational self-talk. However, the extent to which they did so was related to gender, as will be discussed later under RQ3. Finally, societal discourse also influenced and motivated older adults to return as nontraditional students, although these messages were implied rather than directly stated.

Altogether, the supportive messages that were most effective centered around two main objectives: endorsement of the endeavor and endorsement of the individual. In terms of endorsing the endeavor, older students drew upon self-talk along with societal and network supportive messages that focused on what would be gained by going back to college and also what could be lost without it, thereby endorsing the importance of returning to school and

completing higher education. In other words, the support emphasized how being a student would facilitate identity-related goals connected with personal fulfillment and occupational advancement. Because the supportive aspect of the message was sometimes underlying rather than overt, these messages did not always resemble traditionally accepted notions of a supportive message but were, nevertheless, valuing and promoting the student role. Regarding endorsing the individual, nontraditional students primarily referenced more traditional encouraging messages received from those in the social network. These messages focused on older learners' capabilities and accomplishments.

**Self-support.** Motivational self-talk developed as a result of interviewees' identity work. The process began with realizations of being burned out working in dead-end jobs, feeling unsatisfied with where their lives were and where they were heading, and experiencing a sense that something was missing from what they had envisioned for themselves. In essence, they expressed a feeling of not living up to what they considered their full potential—not satisfying critical identity goals.

And then in 2008, it just got—I don't know if I was getting restless at work or I felt like I could contribute more than what the president of the company was allowing me to do, and so there was a lot of tension there. And you know, I just thought, there's more to life than this. My kids are getting older, and I don't want to be doing this for the rest of my life. (Female, 41)

Although one might expect to hear this kind of epiphany from an older adult experienced with time, this sentiment was also conveyed by the younger age group as well.

I just don't want to be 40 years old and still making \$15 an hour at Lowe's. I look at my senior managers, and I don't want that. I wanna do something that I enjoy every day. That's kinda what pushed me over the edge to get me to go back to school. (Female, 26)

Upon recognizing the disparity between their aspirations and their current circumstances, both younger and older adults reasoned that college was the means of satisfying more of their

identity-related goals because it would enable them to take their lives in a better direction, turn over a new leaf, and achieve personal goals with a newfound sense of purpose.

I think the final decision was just me thinking that I need to better myself; I need to better my education. (Female, 26)

I was making over \$50,000 a year. And so I was like, “Which one do I wanna do, you know. Which one is really going to make me happy? I’m making this amount of money, but what do I really wanna do with my life?” At that point, I was 30, so I thought “What do I wanna do?” Well, what I want to pursue [education]—one, you need a degree... You know, I just felt that drive to kind of pursue that I guess. (Male, 33)

I just decided that I’m not going to turn 80 years old with a regret. It’s something I’ve wanted to do for a lot of years, so I’m doing it. Besides the strong desire to not have a regret, if you want your life to change, then you need to be about changing it. Nursing is something I’ve always wanted to do, on my heart to do. It’s how I want to retire. I want to give back...and so it’s a personal drive. (Female, 49)

This reasoning resulted in a personal drive to return as a nontraditional student as well as motivating self-talk (e.g., “I am excited to go back to school.” “Being a student and getting a college degree is going to help me fulfill my goals.” “I’m really driven, so I’m going to do well in college.”) Consequently, motivational self-talk arose from adults’ identity work, wherein they assessed their lives according to their identity goals, came up short, reasoned why, and arrived at the conclusion that becoming a nontraditional student was the solution.

Closely connected with filling in the missing pieces to achieve personal fulfillment was the desire to improve financial circumstances and job security, a practical concern for any adult, particularly in unstable economic times. Again, this followed a similar process of identity work, wherein, nontraditional students concluded that not having a degree was holding them back from advancing in their careers or getting better jobs. “It’s pretty much you just can’t get the job without it [degree], so it’ll open the door” (Male, 38). Therefore, interviewees implied that becoming nontraditional students and completing college was the key not only to achieving personal fulfillment, but also critical to the occupational facet of their identities as well.

**Societal support.** From repetitious statements in the interviews, it was evident that nontraditional students' views on college and the student role were not simply self-generated, but were drawn from (and simultaneously reinforced) prevalent notions common in society at large. Alvesson et al. (2008) affirm this by explaining that the way “we understand ourselves is shaped by larger cultural and historical formations, which supply much of our identity vocabularies, norms, pressures and solutions, yet which do so in indirect and subtle ways” (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 11). Consequently, societal messages also endorsed the endeavor, but in a more subtle manner. Recall some of the previously referenced self-talk messages.

It's pretty much you just **can't get the job without it** [degree], so it'll open the door. (Male, 38)

I just **don't want to be 40 years old and still making \$15 an hour** at Lowe's. I look at my senior managers, and I don't want that. **I wanna do something that I enjoy every day.** That's kinda what pushed me over the edge to get me to go back to school. (Female, 26)

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In these statements, a familiar underlying message begins to surface. In today's world, higher education 1) leads to occupational opportunities and advancement, and 2) is necessary for personal fulfillment. Interestingly, societal messages can be so pervasive that students sometimes failed to consider the negative possibilities. For example, they may graduate with a degree, still not get their dream job or even a better job, and even if they do, that may not result in personal fulfillment. However, these students focused more on the positive possibility, and bought into the societal discourses that assert, “If you want a good job, you should go to college,” and “If you want to be more, you should go to college.”

Initially, societal messages endorsing the student role appeared as more of an underlying social norm than a traditional encouraging message. Therefore, such messages were not an obvious form of support. However, closer examination revealed that these messages are supporting the student identity by indirectly conveying a value for education and, consequently, promoting the student role. In other words, “Society values those who have completed higher education and rewards them.” Furthermore, based on nontraditional students’ expressions of their own reflection and reasoning (identity work), it became apparent that these older learners did process such messages as motivational reasons encouraging them to resume and complete their college educations.

**Network support.** Regarding network support that endorsed returning to school, nontraditional students indicated that parents, siblings, children, friends, and co-workers put positive pressure on them to resume their educations. These individuals encouraged them to seize the opportunity, make something more of themselves, and do it while they could before it was too late.

I was working at a high-end steakhouse, and I know from just a couple of people I was the youngest... And they were like, “Well, you’re young, and it’s fine to be making money right now, but you should try go out there and get a degree, otherwise you’re gonna be stuck in this forever. (Male, 29)

While not an overt supportive message, this type of verbalized reasoning served as another underlying encouraging message supporting the student role because it conveyed to prospective nontraditional students that others understood the value of completing higher education and, therefore, supported engaging in the student role.

In addition to endorsing a return to academic pursuits, network supportive messages also endorsed the individual who would be returning and putting forth the effort. Accordingly, the messages focused on or professed faith in a nontraditional student’s academic ability.



Sometimes the message was a vote of confidence communicating why an adult learner would be successful, which ultimately helped inspire them to make the decision to return to school for the first time and also helped them persist later on.

Yes, yes, and a lot of people that are educated said, “As soon as you start school, you’re gonna fall right into a groove, and you’re gonna find you do better this time around than you did in high school because you’re gonna know how to study and how to balance your time.” (Female, 43)

At other times, the vote of confidence was framed as a comparison. For example, if I can be a student, I know you are capable of being a student too. “Well, my friends were just like, ‘We’re doing it, and you’re smarter than we are, so just go do it’” (Male, 29).

Throughout their time as students, adult learners could recall multiple incidents where various individuals including advisors, professors, fellow students, friends, family members, and co-workers made comments recognizing and praising their academic abilities and efforts. At times, this was expressed as pride in the nontraditional student, which was particularly meaningful if it came from a member of the network who was initially skeptical.

My dad, you know was saying, “This is going to be more difficult for you, you know, study wise...” Well now, my dad completely brags when he found out about my GPA and all that stuff. You know, he has a lot of friends around here, and I’ll bump into them, and they’ll say, “Your dad said that you’re doing really well in school. Keep it up.” (Male, 33).

In other situations, it was expressed as admiration for returning to school regardless of age.

Nontraditional students seemed to take special note of this when it came from fellow traditional students.

I said something about, “Well, I’m just an old man,” and he said, “Yeah, I heard you talking about that. Good for you!” And it was a kid that I had never even met, you know. And he had overheard a conversation I was having with someone else about it. And a couple of the girls that I have study group with have said the same thing, said that, “Wow, you’re doing really well.” (Male, 44)

A highly crucial source of recognition came from professors and advisors, naturally because these individuals are considered experts and are typically familiar with the work/ability of their students. Consequently, being recognized was regarded as highly encouraging.

You mean like when you get 100% on your chemistry exam? Wohoo! Or you find the electro-negativity field that the professor couldn't find, and you emailed it to him, and then he said your name in class? Wohoo! That is when I decided, this is great!  
(Female, 49).

In several cases, there was actually a combination of endorsing both the endeavor and the individual. This was primarily manifested by a willingness to be helpful by showing the new students the ropes. In other words, knowledgeable others expressed their willingness to walk the nontraditional student through the expectations and other various ins and outs necessary to be a successful student. Often, this was done by an advisor or professor.

He [advisor] was just like, "Let me know if I can help you with anything: advice, help on the computer." Cyberbear and blackboard really messed with me at first *{laughing}*, so he sat down and taught me how to do everything. And it was just really helpful to have a little bit of insight before I got here. (Female, 32)

Many times assistance came from co-workers, friends, and family who were more experienced students. As one nontraditional student explained it, "My wife, you know, she has experience. She was a COMM grad here, so you know, she helped me. We kind of discussed things together and worked as a team" (Male, 46). Numerous accounts similar to this highlighted a critical finding of this research: identity support was more effective as a result of the perceived quality of that support based on the person's credibility who issued it.

**Identity support from credible others.** Some contend that any encouraging message is helpful. However, based on the social support literature, all support is not created equal. It is both relational and situational in that we expect different supportive messages depending on our relationship to the person issuing them as well as the circumstances surrounding the message

(Goldsmith, 2004, Helgeson, 2003). In terms of nontraditional students, the most effective identity supportive messages were those imparted by a “credible other.” A credible other simply refers to an individual who is qualified to comment based on their expertise regarding the endeavor (e.g., advisor, professor, more experienced student).

I think I’m assured from the professors the most, whenever I get good feedback from them because they are my professors. They’re the ones that are teaching me. And when I get good feedback from them, I definitely know that I’m doing okay, that I’m where I should be. (Male, 44)

A credible other is also someone who is qualified regarding their knowledge of the student’s background (e.g., family, friend, co-worker).

Well, the one that really sticks in my mind is a law enforcement person, a friend of mine. I asked him if I’m doing the right thing, not only going to school but trying to change. And he said, “Oh definitely.” ‘Cause I was concerned about my age, and he says, “No, you should go to school and meet some people that you should be surrounded by.” So I took his word to heart and says, “Yeah, you’re right.” ‘Cause without him saying that, I would have been doing the same old-same old... Yeah, he was saying, “Continue doing what you’re doing. I know it’s hard, but at least try. Don’t give up.” (Male, 41)

Hearing from a credible other who was a combination of both (e.g., family, friend, co-worker who was also formerly or currently a college student) was highly effective.

Because I really respect her opinion, and the fact that she was working in the same position I was in and because she’d been there 2 years less than me, and here she is with a master’s degree, so if anyone would know, she would know. Her encouragement was just invaluable. She’s like, “You need to get up there and do it. I know you can do it.” It made me feel good because she had 30 years of experience as a director. That made me really respect her and say, yeah, I should really go do this. (Female, 43)

Nontraditional students seemed to value supportive messages from these individuals because they viewed the support as more legitimate and objective than messages from less knowledgeable others who were simply trying to be encouraging out of love and concern. Additionally, messages from these supporters served to reduce uncertainty and boost confidence, again due to their background knowledge of both the nontraditional student’s abilities and what

college entails. Ultimately, these messages were critical for increasing and restoring nontraditional students' sense of competence. When older learners did waiver, credible others proved vital in terms of student retention. Nontraditional students often cited them as urging persistence by regularly checking up on them, giving pep talks, or providing "tough love," meaning they acknowledged the nontraditional learner's efforts, but would not let them off the hook.

I was like, "I don't know what to do. I'm really tempted to stop going to school because I don't want to do this." My sister was the one who was like, "Don't stop..." my sister has been where I am right now, so when she was like, "Don't do it...that's the one thing that I wish I wouldn't have done" I took it full-heartedly. She had her moment of empathy where she's like, "I understand; I know what you're going through. Whatever you decide, I'm gonna support you either way—Just don't do it. It's gonna be better for you if you stay in school..." (Female, 26).

### **Identity Discouraging Messages**

Regarding the negative side of RQ 1, identity discouraging messages, like encouraging messages, originated from the self, some members of the social network, and underlying societal discourses that influenced the self and others. These messages focused on adult learners' inabilities: academically, socially, and in terms of financial and family responsibilities. The most pervasive discouragement was the sense of being "too old"—too old to fit in socially and/or to keep up academically. Although members of the social network issued these messages at times, typically these doubts were generated by the nontraditional students themselves, and again, were likely linked to larger societal discourses.

**Discouraging self-talk.** Socially speaking, adult learners initially worried that they simply would not fit in at a university designed for traditional-aged students. As one nontraditional student explained it, "The things that were discouraging was my age. Right out of the gate, I thought, 'What am I going to do with all those young people? How are they going to

treat me? How am I going to feel?” (Female, 49). Interestingly, feeling too old to be a college student was expressed by both the older and the younger nontraditional students. As one younger student describes, “I didn’t want to come into that first class and have everyone be like, ‘Oh my god, who’s the old lady?’ I was so afraid that I was gonna be the oldest person in the class and that no one else on campus was going to be 25” (Female, 27). Academically, adult learners also harbored concerns about being too old to keep up in their studies. They talked about being out of school mode—not remembering math or how to write an essay, not being technologically adept—and wondered if they were so behind they were incapable of ever catching up.

I’ve always kind of had a feeling like I’ll be a couple steps behind and maybe even still have that feeling like I don’t get what these kids get. I learned how to type on typewriters. So, they have grown up with the technology that it is now, typing papers where I wrote papers in high school. It’s a bit different now, so I felt like I would kinda come in, and there was that. And maybe, you know, I’m not good enough anymore, too old for it. (Male, 29)

**Discouraging societal discourse.** Nontraditional students’ fear of being “too old” connects back to the previously discussed notion of triangulation (Kohli, 1986) wherein the standard life trajectory follows a sequential pattern of 1) education for work, 2) working continuously, and 3) absence from work or retirement. Consequently, triangulation produces the societal expectation that schooling occurs before starting a job and a family. Naturally, this leads to the identity discouraging message that one is “too old” to be back in school. Furthermore, because nontraditional students’ age range falls within the second phase of life wherein one is supposed to be working continuously (in a job and at home), this gives rise to the next discouraging message that adults who return as students are not fulfilling their adult duties. A third identity discouraging message interacting with age-related doubts is the belief that some people are “not college people.” Although not linked to triangulation, this message may be

connected to larger social perceptions associated with social or economic class which become internalized and reproduced.

**Discouraging network messages.** Identity discouraging messages from the social and academic networks created or reinforced doubts about nontraditional students' social, academic, financial, and family abilities. One discouraging message previously addressed was the idea that certain people just are not college material, and therefore, are not capable of fitting in academically or socially. This was more often the case for nontraditional students who had dropped out of high school or who were the first in their family to pursue a college degree.

But I very much picked up on cues as a kid and as an adult—even my mother said, “You just think this is going to solve everything, don’t you?” She was working class; she was a secretary her entire life, you know, my dad was a truck driver. We didn’t know anything about college; we didn’t know what to think of it. Rich people go to college, you know. {*laughing*} And that was my misconception for a long time too until I actually got here and saw that there were a lot of poor people here {*laughing*}. (Male, 28)

Nontraditional students expressed being particularly concerned with fitting in academically, most likely because they viewed this as the key responsibility of any student. Therefore, although extremely rare, if faculty or staff said anything to reinforce doubts regarding academic abilities, nontraditional students were highly sensitive to it. Naturally, it caused them to seriously question their ability to be students since they were already apprehensive about their rusty or limited academic skills.

He was the first professor I ever saw, and it was an introduction for people who were declared as psych majors. And I walked into this classroom that seats maybe 30, and I sat right up front with a blank piece of paper—the first thing I’m gonna write in college. And he comes in and basically tells us, “80% of you are not going to make it.” I’m like, okay. “And this is going to be a struggle,” but not in calm terms like I’m conveying, but very intimidating. No light at the end of the tunnel. There was no qualification of the statement. It was just, “This is doom. Welcome to Mordor.” {*laughing*} And I was very much off-put... (Male, 28)

Additionally, older learners were discouraged if they were proactively seeking help from faculty and staff at the university who gave an impression they were too busy to be bothered. Some older learners perceived this as an indication that they should know better how to help themselves—in essence, that they were not meeting the expectations of a student. Others were discouraged feeling they were doing their part but not being supported on the other end, as if it did not matter whether they were students or not. They were just another number.

When I first enrolled in school, I was a forestry major, so I met with the advisor down there. It was really quick, in and out. I got my advising number, they gave me the classes I should take, and then I was on my way. I felt like when I went in there that they didn't really care. They were very cold-shoulder, very quick...they basically just wanted to give me what I needed and get me out. That's the impression I got. (Female, 26)

Except for discouragement connected with being “too old” to fit in and be a successful student, the previously mentioned discouraging messages did not appear to be unique to older learners. Traditional students may readily have shared similar experiences. However, since nontraditional students may be, to some extent, more sensitive to their ages, they may connect the discouragement with a deficiency due to age rather than other factors. Because age is not a factor they have any control to change, seemingly generic discouraging messages that could affect any student may be perceived as worse for an older student.

A final identity discouraging message more specific to nontraditional students was the assertion that being a student would or was causing them to neglect other critical responsibilities that they as adults should be regarding as their first priorities, not college. Typically, the responsibilities cited were family (especially children) and work. In terms of family, outside individuals urged that families would struggle and suffer as a result of the adult taking time and energy away to invest in homework instead of home life. With work, people in the social network stressed the importance of being financially independent and focused at work in order to

provide for self and family, again, something that college would undoubtedly interfere with.

Some suggested the investment of pursuing higher education would not even be worthwhile in the long run.

My mom. She said, “Why would you want to do that?” She referenced my circumstances as far as having to quit work. She was saying, “Why? You guys have it made? Why would you want to do this at this time in your life?” “Definitely” she said, “no one’s going to hire you. Once you hit a certain age, you’re gonna be unemployable.” (Female, 49)

These various messages from the self, society, and the network that focused on inability either raised or reaffirmed doubts that older adults did not have a place on campus, were incapable of living up to the academic rigors, would not be provided the assistance necessary to be successful as students, and were neglecting their responsibilities concerning work and family by going to college. In short, these messages were identity discouraging because they challenged and inhibited nontraditional students’ sense of competence and self-efficacy.

### **Counter-Discourse Strategies**

When nontraditional students received discouraging messages, the discouragement highlighted a couple of tensions. First, the messages created tensions between what these adults wanted to be capable of academically/socially and what they were actually capable of according to theirs and others’ perceptions based on age. Additionally, discouragement indicated a tension between what older learners were doing by engaging in the student role and what they thought they should be doing regarding other roles and responsibilities. Consequently, RQ 2 explored how nontraditional students manage these identity tensions. The prominent way of coping was utilizing counter-discourse strategies, meaning messages that students created and/or used to resist, negate, or cope with discouragement raised against their student identities. Five primary



counter-discourse strategies that emerged from the interviews were justification, rationalization, rebellion, reframing, and reassurance.

Justification involved messages that asserted a nontraditional student's right to be in college in connection with their ability to work diligently and be successful, despite age. In fact, older learners highlighted their age and experience as the major reasons why they would be successful academically. Justifying was by far the most common counter-discourse strategy employed, with all nontraditional students commenting on using justification at some point, if not multiple times throughout their college journey. They communicated this through multiple references to “being older and wiser due to life experience.” As a direct result of having “lived and worked in the real world,” they viewed themselves as “more focused and responsible” in their academic endeavors—more than they believed themselves to be earlier in life, and often more so than many of their traditional-aged classmates. As such, they believed their determination (linked to their age and experience) would and had enabled them to overcome academic limitations.

Additionally, nontraditional students credited their age and life experience with enabling them to be more persistent and proactive in terms of learning from mistakes, not being afraid to participate and ask questions, and searching out and utilizing every resource available to be successful students. Often they explained how their past experiences allowed them to more fully appreciate the ability to pursue higher education and the opportunities it provides to an extent that they believed many traditional students could not. Although approximately half viewed themselves as different from their fellow traditional classmates and half considered themselves students just like everybody else, all the nontraditional students maintained this sense of being older and wiser. Interestingly, whether they were consciously aware of making this distinction

or not, the common reference to traditional students as “kids” more visibly emphasized the differentiation occurring.

I do see myself a little differently versus traditional students. Basically, because of just life experience. These *kids* are just now getting their bearings and their social groups and limits with alcohol and partying and managing time. And for me, that was so long ago, and it is not a priority to me anymore. So I think that I probably take it more seriously in the aspect of, I wanna hurry up and finish this; I don't have as much time as you do to decide. (Female, 28)

Because they viewed themselves as older and wiser, nontraditional students sometimes expressed enjoyment in serving as mentors to younger, traditional students.

I like to talk and make other people feel good. So like in [my one professor's] class, for the guys who haven't done a lot of COMM stuff, he can be a little bit overwhelming. I'll say, “Relax, you know, this guy's fair.” Or, “Oh we've gotta write a paper,” and I'll say, “Listen, have your introduction, have your body. He's a stickler on that stuff. Make sure it's APA style; you'll be fine. I've had four classes from him; he's a fair guy. His exams are not too scary.” And so I always try to encourage people like that. (Male, 46)

This may further reinforce Goldsmith's (2004) assertion that those who are receiving support feel the need to reciprocate support as well in order to maintain a sense of equity.

Overall, nontraditional students frequently used messages of justification to counter negative messages they received regarding social and academic inabilities due to age. Justification was the most commonly utilized because inabilities linked with age were older learners' primary concern, as previously addressed. Instead of becoming disheartened, these students crafted messages that focused on the advantages their age and experience afforded them.

Closely connected to justification was rationalization. If nontraditional students felt or heard they had fallen short of theirs or others expectations—academically or otherwise—they would reason out why this occurred and why it was acceptable. This rationalization was an important means of striking a balance between multiple, competing roles, such as that of parent and student.

Yeah, well, I mean, you wanna do your best, but sometimes you have to be satisfied with—Look, if I wanted to sit down and just go crazy studying, I could get straight A's, but then I'd have to compromise other things like family time. So you have to find a balance that works, and what you're satisfied with. Okay a 3.25, I'm okay with that. I guess I know myself and I know my potential...I guess in some respects, I'm happy with being on the high side and sometimes just being mediocre. You don't have to be the best at everything. Our society is like that, you know, you gotta be the best at everything, but you don't, you don't. You have to be satisfied with who you are. (Male, 46)

Another response to identity discouraging messages was rebellion in the form of, "I don't care what anyone else thinks." In this case, nontraditional students described themselves as proud to be stubbornly determined despite others doubts about their abilities and their choice to return to school. As such, they did not try to justify why they were returning to school or why they would be successful, but rather that, once they decided to go, they were going to do it no matter what. Moreover, they were going to prove everyone who doubted them wrong.

Like I said before, I'm hard-headed and stubborn so... if somebody did say something, it might have gone in one ear and out the other. I probably just blew it off. I mean, what the hell do they know? They don't know me. They don't know nothin' about my life. They can make all the judgments they want, but they don't know anything in my eyes." (Male, 33)

Ironically, this same rebellious nature now credited as inspiring persistence was also cited as responsible for nontraditional students not completing their educational pursuits earlier.

In addition to justifying, rationalizing, and rebelling, older students also reframed negative messages received from the network in a number of different ways in order to understand and cope with the discouragement rather than allowing it to dissuade them from being a student. The basic counter message imbedded in reframing was, "So-and-so isn't really discouraging me from being a student; their negativity is directed at something else." To illustrate, offering benefit of the doubt was a common manner of reframing. If a faculty member seemed impatient, nontraditional students would provide possible reasons for it (e.g., they were having a rough day) and not take the message as a personal attack against their identity as a

student. When friends, family, or co-workers attempted to deter them from being a student by citing inabilities or referencing neglected responsibilities, adult learners reframed this as concern for them, their financial well-being, and their families. In some cases, they even reframed discouragement as motivation. As one nontraditional student explained it, “The negativity was kind of a bad thing, but after you think about it, you realize it’s more of a push” (Male, 44).

A fifth counter-discourse strategy was reassurance which involved supportive messages that countered doubts raised by the self and others. Sometimes, these doubts were regarding previously mentioned fears of fitting in as an older student.

And my daughter was very encouraging, the one who’s a student here. She goes, “Mom, there’s gonna be at least 1 or 2 other people in your classes up here that are gonna be your age. Either they’ll be your age or older, so don’t feel weird. You’re not gonna be the only mom sitting in the room.” (Female, 43)

In other cases, reassurance countered doubts raised about academic abilities.

...he [professor] said basically, “I think you have a lot harder perspective on yourself than other people do.” He says, “You’re fine. You do really well. There are some things you can do if you feel you can do better, but you’re fine.” And so he kind of helped me through that little bit of self-doubt. (Female, 41)

Unlike the other counter-discourses, reassuring messages were not typically generated by the nontraditional students themselves but by members of their social and academic networks. The reasoning behind this will be addressed in greater detail in the discussion section. Again, credible others were the most effective sources of reassurance.

### **Age, Sex, and Circumstance**

Considering sex (RQ 3), age, and circumstances (RQ 4), this study was interested to observe if and how these factors influenced differences in the types of identity support nontraditional students utilized and the way older learners related to their student identities. In terms of the identity support used based on sex, men and women across age groups indicated

relying on numerous encouraging messages from a variety of sources. In this respect, there were no striking gender differences. However, there was a disparity in terms of how nontraditional students expressed the value of received support. Men were more likely to reference self-talk and personal drive as being the most critical motivators, despite acknowledging and appreciating support received from others.

Just keep trucking. You know, no matter how hard it gets, it's going to end sooner or later. You just gotta stay motivated, whether it's telling myself to do it or finding stress relievers to stay motivated... Just talk to myself, I guess. (Male, 26)

My own personal drive is what keeps me going. That's the main factor. It's nice hearing other people's critiques of me of what I'm doing and what I've done, but it's primarily—I don't wanna sound selfish, but me. I keep myself going. (Male, 33)

I guess it's partially a combination of everybody—I just am pretty independent when I wanna do something. My wife will tell you. She always says, "Well, you're gonna do what you wanna do anyway." {*laughing*} That's not a good thing in some aspects, I suppose, but I can self-motivate pretty well. (Male, 38)

Mostly it's from myself. I can't do anything cuz somebody wants me to do it. If I'm gonna do it for someone else, then I'm not doing it for the right reason. (Male, 41)

Women, on the other hand were more likely to reference identity support from others outside of or in connection with themselves.

I definitely would say it's all inclusive. It's a combination. I don't think that one works without the other. I could have all the encouragement in the world from myself, but if I have no strong support system, then that's hard. If I have a strong support system and myself, but I don't have any encouraging instructors, that's doesn't work either. (Female, 28)

I honestly think it's a little bit of everything. You know, I think it's hard for people my age to meet people and have friendships, so it was really important for me that my friends supported me in what I was doing because I feel like I have really good friends, and I don't wanna find a whole new group of friends because I'm going to college and not working at a bar. That's important to me, like you are really my friends. And like I said, my dad. That was very, very encouraging. And I think all of it, a combination of all of it. Nontraditional students I think need everything to work out all at once or it doesn't work out. (Female, 32)

Yeah, there's a combination. Part of it is my family cuz they're in WA. As soon as I was registered and had those classes, I texted my mom and sister, and I'm like, "I'm a student! Can you believe it?" And my sister texted back and said, "Oh my god, I'm so proud of you." And my mom and dad were proud, and I got emails from them saying they were really proud of me. And my co-workers are like, "Oh my gosh, I'm so glad." A couple of them said, "Well, it's about time! You've been talking about it for awhile." And as far as being in the classrooms, my speech instructor is very encouraging. (Female, 43)

In relation to the support utilized, there was a difference based on circumstances.

Nontraditional students who were working and/or who were parents (including single-mothers) relied more heavily than the others on rationalization as a counter-discourse strategy. As previously discussed, rationalizing enabled these students to cope with multiple, competing roles by regarding deficiencies in one area or another as a natural consequence of multiple role demands.

Just like not having enough time now cuz I feel like...if I had the time and the motivation to just put the energy into it, I could ace anything. I really feel like there's...I can grasp most topics. I don't feel like there's much that would stop me if someone took the time to explain it to me. But this last year it's been more of a just getting it done. I've been rationalizing that C's are okay, and that doesn't feel good cuz I know I could get A's easily. It's a balance, cuz 8-5 I do try to focus all on school but when I'm not at home, I'm not focusing on my kid, and I feel like I'm missing that too. (Female, 26)

All nontraditional students spoke of returning to college as a critical opportunity for a second chance, either to get back onto "the right path," to start over, or to fulfill long-awaited academic aspirations. This was particularly true of single-mothers, divorcees, and those who were laid off from their jobs. In terms of how nontraditional learners related to their student identities, there were a few interesting differences based on age and circumstances.

Nontraditional students in the older age bracket viewed being a college student as revitalizing, a means of recapturing their youth or catching their "second wind" in life.

When you go after something and you are actually able to achieve it, it really gives you a boost in life. I mean, you get to this age in life, and you're kind of at a lull, and you know, you're just doing. And it just rejuvenates you and makes you feel alive again, and

it makes you look forward to a future again, like there is a future to look forward to, versus just sliding into home plate and saying, “I’m 80 years old, and I made it. Time to lay down die.” (Female, 49)

For the younger age group, college was considered more of an expectation, a marker of social status. As expressed by younger nontraditional students, not having that marker was frowned upon, resulting in a stigma against those without college degrees. Accounts from younger nontraditional students suggested that negative societal messages may be particularly salient to students closer to the age range of traditional students. As a result, these nontraditional students expressed feeling pressured as they saw their same-age friends graduating.

[I]t was definitely catching up to me the fact that people—my elders coming into a retail situation like that—kind of looked down on people my age who didn’t have an education farther than high school. I was just tired of people thinking that I was uneducated, that I had no drive, things like that. (Female, 26)

Some described experiencing degree envy.

It was a combination of me meeting a lot of people who had a degree, and what they were doing. And they were doing all these great things with them. And it was like, “Oh, you have your degree. Well, if I would’ve went another year, I would have mine too.” (Female, 27)

Stigmatization and degree envy increased the sense of pressure on younger nontraditional students based on the perception that college was an expectation—something they should have already done—not an option. This perspective may actually reduce a younger nontraditional student’s image of his/her competence (e.g., Something is wrong with me that I didn’t finish college yet.), thereby increasing pressure, reducing success, and inhibiting identification with the student role. As such, identity support from credible others may be highly critical for younger nontraditional students.

Considering increased pressure on younger nontraditional students, young, single-mothers may be some of the students in need of the greatest identity support. From their

accounts, these women constantly struggle to balance how they view being a student, between an opportunity and a necessity for survival. Focusing on the necessity aspect often detracted from the student experience which resulted in half-hearted identification with the student role.

I would be a life-long student if I could. But since my son's been born this last year it's been more about cracking down and getting things done, which is a lot harder to do with my son. And I definitely lost the ability to sit and enjoy my learning, and that's frustrating 'cuz like I feel like I'm powering through it and just trying to get the grades, and as long as I get out at this point... I'm already halfway through it; I paid for half of it. If I don't get anything from this, I'm going to really be hurting. (Female, 26)

Regarding the student role as an opportunity—to be and do more with their lives—was a motivating force. However, doubts about financial and child welfare while pursuing education, concerns regarding the commitment required to be a successful student, and worries about the likelihood of securing steady employment upon graduation provided constant, harrying reality checks—reality checks that potentially threaten identification with the student role.

I went for my own reasons, but I definitely felt like it was where the rubber met the road in order to provide for my son. ... he's really the one that's paying the price, and he's also the reason that I'm doing it, hopefully for the future of him, but there's no guarantees of that. We could go through all of this and who knows what could happen with the economy or anything. So, yeah, probably the main influence that makes me question if I'm doing the right thing is him. (Female, 28)

Consequently, young mothers single-handedly shouldering the responsibilities of their children may greatly benefit from identity support encouraging them to persist in their academic endeavors, especially from credible others.

She's just such a huge inspiration, and she's always said, "You can do it. You've got this." She's been a huge factor for me. It makes me feel like absolutely I can. I kind of refer an example like this to, it's easy for us all to feel sorry for ourselves and feel stressed out and that we have so many problems, but it's amazing how our perspectives can change when we see someone that's worse off than us. And at the same time, it's very sad that it takes a tragedy or something awful to be like, "Wow, I'm really lucky." So in those moments, I think, "You know, if she can do it, I for sure can do it." (Female, 28).



### University Messages

Discussion thus far has focused on the individual and societal messages nontraditional students received and utilized regarding their student identities. In addition, this study was interested in exploring how the university at large is communicating to nontraditional learners about being students and their place on campus. According to the interviewees, there were no widely recognized institutional messages of support. Instead, identity supportive messages welcoming older learners and encouraging them to embrace the student role were manifested in terms of the resources made available to them (in addition to support received from advisors and professor). Students sang the praises of programs such as TRIO (a federal program designed to assist low-income and first generation college students), DSS (Disability Student Services), Study Jam sessions (to prepare for upcoming exams), and free on-campus tutoring.

I've been to the Writing Center. I've been to—all the different self-helps that are in school are great. I would recommend two for a nontraditional student. To go to the TRIO. I took the TRIO. It's one of my classes, and it's a great class for learning how to study and learning how to do different writing and, you know, how to look at your textbook, and how to communicate with your professors. All the different kinds of references that you can use around the campus, and all the different things that are helpful. (Male, 44)

Students also referenced the importance of university staff—particularly in enrollment, financial aid, and advising—who thoroughly handled their questions and concerns. In some cases, specific departments were noted as being highly supportive and helpful to their students.

Programs and people such as these, that assisted students in their transition to academic life and the challenges throughout, positively impacted nontraditional students' overall impressions of the college experience and encouraged them in their roles as students. The underlying message conveyed to older learners was that, not only were they welcome, the university also wanted them to be successful students and would provide basic resources

necessary to do so. Arguably, resources communicate a similar message to traditional students. However, traditional students may be interested in any number of other aspects of the university (e.g., sports teams, Greek life, recreational and social events) while nontraditional students seem to focus primarily on resources providing financial and learning assistance. Furthermore, nontraditional students are more often considered a minority of the student body, hence the reason they are referred to as “nontraditional.” Therefore, if there are resources and programs that more specially assist individuals resuming college after an extended absence, this communicates to nontraditional students that their needs as students are taken into consideration at the university level. In essence, it demonstrates that universities expect them to be students, which then further encourages older learners to see themselves as college students as well.

While the resources expressed an identity supportive message, recognition of nontraditional learners occasionally conveyed the opposite. As one student explained it, “We [at the university] kind of operate on, ‘We accept diversity.’ But do we really? What is the definition of diversity?” (Female, 28). She and other students described experiences that suggested a subtle, inadvertent type of discrimination. For example, one of the commonly referenced incidents occurred during orientation. Most of the nontraditional students—even those who found aspects of orientation helpful—noticed that it was more geared towards traditional students and even their parents at times. Older students explained that certain parts (e.g., visiting the dorms, learning about meal plans) were irrelevant to them and basically a waste of their already limited time. Additionally, several talked about being overwhelmed by the fast-paced, online enrollment session, suggesting that people who have been out of school may need more time to make up for the technology gap.

But I will say just like in the beginning when a person is just coming back to school as a freshman for the very first time, that would be nice to have some kind of advisor to sit

down and talk, to explain the whole entire thing for you rather than a wham, bam, thank you, ma'am in a two-day orientation that's four days before the start of spring semester. (Male, 44).

Orientation represents a critical time in a nontraditional student's journey. It is the time when they are the most unsure about themselves as students, but also a time when they will be highly receptive to any aid or encouragement. Some of the more experienced nontraditional students suggested that having a separate orientation or at least a more group-specific orientation (e.g., orientation for off-campus students) with advisors specialized in the needs and concerns of older students might facilitate a smoother transition and, consequently, a more positive response to the student role.

Another commonly addressed area of inadvertent discrimination was the lack of recognition in terms of campus events and activities. One student mentioned an age cut-off for a study abroad trip she was exploring. Other students with children wanted to attend campus study sessions to prepare for exams, but the timing was not conducive to their schedules. Nontraditional students (both male and female) with spouses and children also noticed a lack of family-friendly events that would help them feel more personally connected and invested in their college community.

And more networking events would be helpful, particularly for students with children or older nontraditional students who may want to get to know other students their age. I know a lot of students that are older that feel really outta place. They just don't fit in anywhere. If there was some kind of event for people like that, then we might get to see a familiar face or meet someone new, and then just feel that much more a part of the fabric of the university. (Female, 28)

While many students did their best to connect with fellow students, traditional and nontraditional alike, some such as the previous student and others expressed the desire to be able to network with other nontraditional students.

I do think the university does have area to improve. Campus life for nontraditional students—there really isn't any socialization. To develop a network of people that are your own age is important. I do think that's important, to go out of the classroom and what you're studying. I also think it's important to have a network of people your own age because, for myself, even though I have great friends that have been there forever, I really don't have a lot of socialization outside [of school], and to have that here is very important. (Female, 49)

A few of the students even suggested that it would be beneficial to have a nontraditional webpage on the university website with frequently asked questions and an open forum for communicating with other nontraditional students. In this way, older learners could connect with credible others and further expand their resources and social support networks.

A final area where nontraditional students experienced discrimination was during certain professors' lectures. Although instructors accounted for racial, religious, and sexual diversity in the classroom, they sometimes failed to afford age the same recognition.

They're [professors] using examples during lecture and they refer back to their [the traditional students'] parents as an example. And it's all about attitudes of someone coming straight out of high school. And it does make me feel uncomfortable, and I think, "Oh, you guys need to come around here because there's becoming a healthy mix of ages here, and you're not just talking to young people anymore." And I do get uncomfortable sometimes during those lectures. And I'm unsure how much I should participate in that class. (Female, 49)

Such slips, while unintentional, reinforced a subtle message that nontraditional students are somehow a temporary fixture on campus, otherwise there would be greater awareness and sensitivity to their presence in the classroom. Although this type of discouragement was not as commonly discussed as the others, it is undetermined whether this was due to its limited occurrence or a result of older learners simply accepting themselves as anomalies in the classroom.

Due to its inadvertent nature, nontraditional students discussed not taking these types of discouragement personally, despite expressing that changes would make them feel more included

as students. Often they reframed negative messages and situations to put them in a more positive light. For example, several of the students discussing orientation improvements suggested that the university did not have separate sessions for nontraditional students because they did not want to ostracize them by highlighting a distinction between them and traditional students. In terms of issues with events, some students argued that the university tried its best, but practically and monetarily, it could not do everything. Based on these and other examples, these students, for the most part, demonstrated great resilience and positivity. When discouragement from the university arose, they preferred to brush it off as an isolated incident, rationalize it, or reframe it in a more positive way. Ultimately, it appeared that nontraditional students who are persisting in college are those who focused on the positive points of their college experiences and the rewards possible upon reaching their end goals, again through a combination of personal agency and identity support.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study posit both theoretical implications for the fields of interpersonal and organizational communication as well as practical suggestions for universities working to better accommodate nontraditional students. To begin with, the results indicate that resuming education as a nontraditional student is indeed connected with satisfying identity related goals. Therefore, identity support is a critical component of nontraditional learners' identity work because supportive messages serve as discursive resources, or "concepts, expressions or other linguistic devices, drawn from practices and texts, that explain action" and "construct and maintain preferred visions of selves" (Kuhn, 2009, p. 684). As such, identity support facilitates identification with the student role. Therefore, identity support is a unique form of social support that merits further exploration.

Additionally, although generic encouraging messages from anyone in the network enhanced a general perception of support, messages from credible others provided the greatest sense of identity support. Furthermore, the greater the variety of identity supportive messages, the better the repertoire for generating effective counter-discourses essential to balancing identity tensions. Consequently, this research also indicates that counter-discourses are co-constructed from messages generated by the self and others, supporting the notion that identification with the student role is a combination of agency and identity support. Whether a nontraditional student emphasized greater reliance on agency or greater reliance on identity support appears to be a gender-related difference influenced by societal discourse. In terms of relating to the student role, perceiving college as an expectation also indicates a societal shift that is influencing the pervasive mentality regarding higher education—a shift that will influence future students. Finally, the results highlight meaningful adjustments academic institutions are making to accommodate the nontraditional student population and potential improvements to be implemented.

### **How and Why Supportive?**

Based on the findings of this research, it became increasingly evident that identity support is a critical piece of the puzzle in terms of nontraditional students' ability to identify and persist in the student role. To begin with, nontraditional students indicated that resuming educational pursuits was deeply intertwined with identity concerns and goals. They encountered first hand the distinction that is made both socially and occupationally between those who have obtained a college education and those who have not. They experienced the subsequent limitations preventing them from achieving the lives and identities they had always envisioned or, through experience, realized. Consequently, the conclusion they reached was that college

was the key to unlocking not only more desirable occupational opportunities, but a missing part of their identities.

The majority of people who come directly from high school...don't understand what they have to lose. They don't understand how important this is. I do. I do. I know exactly what happens if you don't get a college education. I know what the playing field looks like. But [after college] the playing field changes entirely, and your tool belt changes. If you don't step into this world, if you're only here in the capacity to receive a degree—there's just so much more to it. If you're paying attention, you can grow as a person.” (Male, 28)

While this personal revelation went a long way in strengthening their resolve to be successful students, we know from the literature that even an individual with resolve is subject to the influence of interpersonal, organizational, institutional, and social discourses surrounding him/her. As such, receiving identity supportive messages promoting the student role does provide a crucial element in the identity management process of nontraditional students.

Considering the larger picture, the various supportive messages from the network and societal discourses were seen as encouraging first because they fulfilled the critical aspects defined by identity support, and second, because they restored a sense of personal competence. Recall that identity support involves believing that another person understands, accepts, or provides instrumental support for a valued social identity, such as the role of student. Reviewing the encouraging messages received (e.g., positive reasoning, votes of confidence, recognition of efforts, showing the ropes), it is apparent that each demonstrated some or all of those aspects. These messages indicated that others accepted and understood the importance of pursuing higher education, and that they were willing, to varying extents, to help make that possible. When encouragement came from family members or employers, it also expressed a desire to help nontraditional students achieve that careful blending of their academic, occupational, and personal spheres (Bryant, 2001; Goldsmith & Archambault, 1997). This cooperative blending is

crucial because it reduces potential inter-role conflicts within a nontraditional student's organizations (e.g., work, home, school), which ultimately relieves some identity tensions. Relieving these tensions enables a returning adult to more fully embrace their identity as a student, thereby increasing identification with the student role

Some might argue that fleshing out what makes an encouraging message an identity supportive message is unnecessary because any encouraging message is ultimately identity supportive. I would agree partially, but hasten to ask, "Supporting which facet of identity?" As previously illustrated by the early example of Wesley and Olivia, Wesley was supporting Olivia's identity as a capable, hard-working individual, but not encouraging her identity as a student, suggesting that she drop out. This lack of identity support for the student role can result in nontraditional students experiencing a fractured sense of identity (increasing identity tensions, reducing identification, and hindering success as a student) rather than viewing their identity as a more cohesive, crystallized sense of self.

Ultimately then, the messages that were most successful in encouraging these returning adults to identify with the student role were those that endorsed the endeavor and the individual because together, they communicated an empowering message to nontraditional students, namely "You are competent and capable." For example, by others expressing that they believed returning to education was a valuable cause worth supporting, they were conveying the sentiment that, "You are smart and sensible for going back to school." Additionally, and most importantly, endorsing the individual created, renewed, and promoted nontraditional students' sense of competence by communicating that others believed these nontraditional learners were capable of being successful as students, with the necessary resources and assistance available to them.



In essence, these messages were effective as identity support because they served as critical resources for nontraditional students' positive identity work regarding the student role. In other words, nontraditional students drew upon identity supportive messages from their network and society at large that promoted them engaging in the student role, reflected on these messages, combined them with their own estimations, internalized them, and ultimately were motivated and encouraged to return and persevere as nontraditional students with renewed conviction in themselves. This conviction in their own abilities may have been particularly important for adults who experienced feelings of inadequacy due to their lack of higher education. As Goldsmith (2004) suggests, "Successful support must avoid or minimize undesirable threats" to an individual's image as a competent person (p. 22). Again, this restored feeling of competence was largely due to supportive messages from the network rather than the self or society at large because this faction was the source of support which endorsed the student as a capable individual.

Another interesting finding concerns the number and type of supporters. Receiving encouraging messages from several network sources naturally increased nontraditional students' overall perception that they had a generally supportive network. Although this finding may seem obvious, on a deeper level, it may suggest that individuals in any minority group require greater identity support because they are anxious about being relative outsiders. Being part of a minority can be challenging and even undesirable because one's voice and power are vastly limited; however, many have no choice (e.g., born into an ethnic minority). Consequently, choosing to engage in a social role that places an individual in the minority (e.g., choosing to be a nontraditional student) may require greater support from the social network reassuring that individual that the benefits of engaging in the role outweigh the costs.

On the other hand, nontraditional students implied that, while multiple messages of generic support did enhance a general feeling of support, the most impactful identity support was more a product of quality than quantity. In other words, messages from credible others who were knowledgeable about the endeavor and the nontraditional student were the most effective in providing identity support for one primary reason. Credible others (especially other nontraditional students) could more fully appreciate both the struggles and the benefits of being a nontraditional student and, therefore, could provide objective support in a timely manner that promoted a sense of autonomy.

For example, as the results indicate, credible others (primarily from personal relationships) improved persistence. In their 2009 study on student academic support, Thompson and Mazer reported a similar finding in that support from interpersonal relationships greatly aided retention. They concluded that the more individuals knew one another, the more effectively they could provide support. Based on this nontraditional study, I would further add that the more the individual understands the situation and circumstances (e.g., what college entails), the better s/he is able to issue effective support. This may be largely due to the fact that supportive messages from credible others—such as issuing a vote of confidence or showing a new student the ropes—reduced adults' uncertainties about being students because they enabled returning students to learn what was appropriate and expected behavior of someone in the student role, which as demonstrated earlier, is critical to identification (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2003; Kuhn & Nelson, 2005; Scott, 2007). In essence, support from credible others provided practical resources that facilitated a sense of self-efficacy and empowerment, resulting in greater identification with the student role. Furthermore, during difficult times, credible others issuing praise or acknowledging an older learner's abilities helped the nontraditional student reclaim a

sense of agency because s/he believed these messages were genuine and legitimated by credible knowledge and experience.

In so saying, it is not the case that advisors and professors are incapable of offering this level of support, but to do so typically requires a more personal connection to the student over time, which is not really practical or possible for every faculty-student relationship.

Consequently, it may be more likely that nontraditional students rely more regularly on encouragement from credible others within their interpersonal rather than academic networks (e.g., friends who are fellow students over professors). However, this may be the result of accessibility, not necessarily preference.

### **Identity Discouragement and Counter-Discourse Strategies**

Although identity discouraging messages were impactful, they did not appear to be as overtly prevalent as the supportive messages nontraditional students received. In fact, several of the nontraditional students interviewed had difficulty recalling any unsupportive messages, except personal doubts that surfaced. This may indicate that nontraditional students who are returning and persisting in college are, in fact, those receiving more identity supportive messages than discouraging ones. This finding may be linked to what Gottman (1994) discovered in terms of marital relationship satisfaction. Gottman's (1994) basic assertion is that for a relationship to be satisfying, couples should maintain a ratio of five positive behaviors for every one negative. In terms of identity, the same may hold true. Successful identification with a role (leading to personal satisfaction) may depend on the individual receiving multiple identity encouraging messages and fewer identity discouraging message. While this is a possible explanation, it is difficult for this study to verify since no drop-out nontraditional students were interviewed to determine if they received more negative than positive messages regarding their student

identities. Consequently, this indicates a limitation of this study, one that can be accounted for by future research.

While the ratio of encouraging to discouraging messages may be part of the explanation, another possibility is that successful nontraditional students are those who are more skilled at coping by developing and utilizing effective counter-discourse strategies. However, these skills may still be connected to the number of identity supportive messages received as well as the variety. This connection becomes more apparent when considering reassurance as a counter-discourse strategy. At first glance, reassurance appeared to be a unique because it was most typically generated by the network, not the nontraditional students themselves. However, upon examining the other counter-discourse strategies (e.g., justification, rationalization, rebellion, reframing) in connection with prevalent encouraging messages, it became more apparent that older students were actually adapting encouraging messages they and others produced in order to create counter-discourses to cope with discouraging messages they encountered. For example, a nontraditional student returned to school following a personal encouraging message of “I’m doing this for reasons of personal fulfillment.” Later in response to discouragement, this message was adapted into the counter-discourse strategy rebelling, “I don’t care what anyone else says to discourage me returning to school because I know what I want; I’m doing this for me.” Nontraditional students also adapted supportive messages received from others. To illustrate, when a supporter issued a vote of confidence, s/he often qualified the statement by explaining why the supporter felt the nontraditional learner would be more successful as a student at this current age.

Yes, yes, and a lot of people that are educated said, “As soon as you start school, you’re gonna fall right into a groove, and you’re gonna find you do better this time around than you did in high school because you’re gonna know how to study and how to balance your time.” (Female, 43)

Analyzing the statement carefully, a connection emerges between this supportive message and the counter-discourse strategy justification (being older and wiser from experience, thereby increasing the chances of academic success). This indicates two important findings. First, supportive messages are adapted as counter-discourses. Second, seemingly self-generated counter-discourses and even self-generated encouraging messages are really co-constructed from identity supportive messages received from those in nontraditional students' support networks, as previously alluded to in the results.

The connections between encouraging messages and counter-discourses lend support to the earlier claim that nontraditional students use agency (their knowledge and reflexivity) in combination with identity support (encouraging messages received from others and society at large) for identity work that promotes successful identification with the student role (e.g., attending to specific identity supportive messages, internalizing them as their own, and adjusting those messages into effective counter-discourses to overcome discouraging messages from the social network and society at large). Moreover, it may suggest that the greater the variety of those messages, the better equipped nontraditional students are to develop a repertoire of effective counter-discourses fundamental to successfully coping with identity discouraging messages. Consequently, students receiving fewer encouraging messages may be handicapped during the identity management process, limiting their ability to successfully identify with the student role. Again, this assertion could be more strongly verified through a comparison of successful and unsuccessful nontraditional students.

### **Sex and Circumstances**

Based on the results, there were differences that arose in terms of expressing the value of received identity support, utilizing certain types of support, and relating to the student identity.

However, there was only one obvious difference due to gender. The disparity was connected to how nontraditional students expressed the value of received support, with men more commonly referencing agency and women referencing a combination of support. Again, this was not the result of having received different types of identity support since both men and women cited a similar variety of supportive messages. Additionally, the difference between being a younger or older nontraditional student influenced the relation to the student role either as an expectation or a source of revitalization.

When analyzing these differences in connection with discouraging messages received, societal discourse emerged as a salient influence. Recall that nontraditional students commonly had difficulty pinpointing direct messages of discouragement, yet their accounts indicated they experienced self-doubts and feelings of pressure. This speaks directly to the assertion by Alvesson et al. (2008) that cultural underpinnings subtly influence the norms and pressures that, accordingly, we as human beings experience. In this case, prevalent societal messages regarding expectations linked to gender and age influenced nontraditional student views of support and the student role.

**Gender.** Society promotes adhering to gender-specific expectations (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004), and throughout history, men have been socialized to be strong and independent. Therefore, while it may be socially acceptable for women to acknowledge relying on support from others, men may feel socially discouraged from admitting the same. After all, needing support can imply “a loss of independence, control, and competence” (Goldsmith, 2004, p. 22), socially undesirable traits, perhaps particularly for men. Furthermore, Settersten and Lovegreen (1998) assert that men may be afforded less flexibility in terms of returning to school due to their roles as providers. Based on this role expectation, men may prefer to highlight their reliance on

themselves to combat feelings of being a limited provider. Emphasizing their personal agency may enable them to regain a sense of competence and control, especially during times when they perceive they are not meeting societal expectations.

That said, female nontraditional students who were in situations that reduced their sense of competence and control (e.g., single mothers, divorcees) also cited the importance of personal agency, albeit to a lesser extent than their male counterparts. Furthermore, as indicated by the discussion on counter-discourses, supportive messages are co-constructed, even when individuals (men included) regard a counter-discourse as a product of their personal conception (agency). Ultimately then, emphasizing personal agency versus identity support appears to be influenced by circumstances reducing a sense of independence, control, and competence—areas that men may be more sensitive to. Once again, this finding reaffirms Goldsmith's (2004) assertion that successful support minimizes threats to self-competence.

**Age.** Older nontraditional learners viewed the student role as a source of revitalization while younger nontraditional students considered it an expectation. In the context of current economic times and occupational requirements, viewing college as an expectation seems a natural perspective for the younger generation. Moreover, it highlights a shift taking place in American society and discourse, that having a college education is no longer optional and for the scholarly-inclined, but mandatory for society at large. In previous times, apprenticeships, trade school, and homemaking were acceptable alternatives to having a college education, but today, the pervasive expectation is that everyone coming out of high school should pursue a college education.

As a result, society sends different messages to nontraditional students, with older students more often experiencing a “Good for you!” message and younger adults a message of

“It’s about time.” This type of subtle discouragement was more salient to those just outside the traditional student age range, as examples in the results indicated. For this reason, younger nontraditional students may experience an increased sense of pressure as students, during which their desire for learning and personal fulfillment may be overshadowed by their desperation to obtain a requisite credential. In other words, the mentality of “getting the piece of paper” gradually replaces the desire of getting the learning experience. The residual effects of this perspective on student identities may serve as an intriguing point of interest for future research.

### **University Improvements**

While the merits of verbal identity support have been discussed, it is important to clarify that identity supportive messages alone are not enough to carry an older learner through college. As any nontraditional student will explain, financial concerns, family circumstances, and other practical difficulties play a determining role. Therefore a combination of identity supportive messages and practical instrumental support is necessary. Considering this, academic institutions are critical in terms of the support they offer through resources (e.g., financial aid, scholarships for nontraditional students, online classes, campus childcare). Based on these resources, older adults are better able to visualize the possibility of becoming students on campus, the first step necessary for their identification with the student role. However, it is not sufficient to simply have these resources available. Academic institutions can be more “nontrad-friendly” by advertising these resources and programs more effectively, perhaps (as some students suggested) through a nontraditional student webpage. Additionally the webpage could be used to connect nontraditional students with their peers, providing an excellent source for support from credible others.



Universities must also be mindful not to send contradictory messages. Failure to truly recognize the place of nontraditional students on campus may reinforce the long-held societal impression that education—while it will tolerate the older—is really designed for the young. As a result, nontraditional students may have difficulty identifying with the student role, instead perceiving themselves as perpetual outsiders. Even on a campus that was overall considered to be highly supportive, there was still this underlying sense at times. Additionally, the various counter-discourse strategies created and utilized demonstrated nontraditional students' need to justify why they belong as students. Consequently, academic institutions can be more effective resources of identity support for nontraditional students. In other words, they can better train student service personnel to generate supportive messages such as, "You're never too old to learn" and "Being a successful college student depends on effort, not age." College promotional materials can communicate similar sentiments. Even university paraphernalia can uplift older learners with slogans such as "Making a Comeback: Nontrad and Proud." By academic institutions taking a more active role in generating encouraging messages, they may positively influence societal discourse related to returning learners as well as provide nontraditional students with another powerful source of identity support from which to draw from.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, this research has demonstrated that identity supportive messages are a critical component in the identity work process of nontraditional students. Supportive messages have the potential to help motivate older adults to resume their educations, to persist through challenges and doubts, to develop counter-discourses to cope with discouragement, and to focus on the positive aspects of their educational experiences. More specifically, encouraging messages help alleviate inter-role conflicts that emphasize identity tensions which hamper

identification with the student role. The variety of that support equips nontraditional students with a repertoire of messages that can be used to create identity preserving counter-discourses. Furthermore, identity support—primarily from credible others—is essential to persistence, not only in terms of providing fodder for counter-discourses, but also as a means of practically empowering older learners as they engage in the student role. As a result, although understudied, identity support is a unique form of social support that is particularly salient to nontraditional students. On a larger scale, this study may also indicate the importance of identity support for marginalized individuals in general who may be in the greatest need of being supported in their identities because they are less recognized.

As with any research, there were limitations involved in this study. The primary limitation that can be addressed by future research regarded the lack of information from unsuccessful nontraditional students, meaning those who withdrew from the university prior to completing their programs of study. Without these accounts, there was an inability to compare successful nontraditional students with unsuccessful adult learners. Therefore, we can only speculate whether older learners not granted the same quality of support are among the students adding to current retention concerns. A comparison would be highly useful for indicating how identity support differed between these two groups and to what extent the presence or lack of identity support contributed to retention or attrition.

In the end, completing academic aspirations was so intertwined with achieving identity goals, that the students of this study were not easily dissuaded by discouraging messages, even from the university. Rather, they were ready and willing to overlook or reframe these messages. However, universities can do more in terms of fully recognizing nontraditional students and promoting their place on campus, although strides are being made in that direction. Fortunately

for the adults interviewed in this study, the overall perception of extensive identity support for the student role contributed to their ability to move forward and more fully develop into the people they ultimately desire to be.

I really enjoy it [college] like you would not believe. It's the greatest thing in the world! I haven't had this much fun—I haven't been more myself in so long than what I am right now. (Male, 44)

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## Appendix

### Narrative Interview Guide

#### 1. Demographics

- How old are you?
- What do you classify your race as?
- Are you currently employed?
- What is your major?
- What year of school is this for you?
- How many credits are you enrolled in?

#### 2. Return to School

Think back to when you first considered returning to school.

- What was going on then?
- What encouraged you to attend college?
- What discouraged you?
- Did anyone say anything to reinforce your decision?
- Discourage your decision?
- How did that encouragement/discouragement affect you?
- What helped you make the final decision?

\*Possible probes (Tell me a little more about... What did that mean to you? Did anyone say anything else...? What happened next?)

#### 3. Enrolling

Let's move on to when you first started coming to campus to try to enroll.

- Can you describe for me what it was like enrolling in classes?
- What were you thinking/feeling at that time?
- Did anyone say anything that really helped you with the whole process?
  - How did that affect you?
- Did anyone say anything that really made you unsure about becoming a student?
  - How did that affect you?
  - How did you overcome that?

#### 4. Being a Student

Okay, you've been a student for some time now.

- Can you describe for me what it's like being back at college at this point in your life?
  - Do you view yourself as a student any differently from other students because of your circumstances?

- How so?
  - Than other nontraditional students?
- Was there ever a time either in a class or during an assignment or something when you questioned yourself as a student?
  - What was going on at the time?
  - Did anyone say anything?
  - How did that affect you?
  - How did you try to overcome that?
- What about a time when you felt really good about yourself as a student?
  - What was going on at the time?
  - Did anyone say anything?
  - How did that affect you?
- So far during your time as a student, did anyone ever say something to you that really made you step back and question whether you should be a student?
  - How did that affect you?
  - How did you try to overcome that?
- What about someone who said something that really encouraged you to press on as a student?
  - How did that affect you?
- \* (Optional) If you knew someone who was considering returning to school, what would you tell him/her?
  - Would you encourage them to become a student?
  - What would you say?
  - What would you warn them about?

## 5. The University's Role

Now I want you to think about your experience with the university.

- Did or does the university do anything to make it easier for you to be a nontraditional student?
  - Do they do anything to make it harder?
- Does the university say anything to make you feel welcome as a nontraditional student (Prompt: pamphlets, letters, encouragement from advisors)?
  - Anything that doesn't make you feel you belong?
- Does the university do things specifically geared to you as a nontraditional student? (Prompt: events, activities, clubs, support groups, etc.)
  - Are you involved in any of those things?
- What is something you think the university could do to better meet your needs as a student?