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The University of Southern Mississippi

NONTRADITIONAL AND TRADITIONAL STUDENT MOTIVES
TO USE THEIR UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATION CENTER

by

Hannah Pritchard Rachal

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School
of the University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved:



Dean of the Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

NONTRADITIONAL AND TRADITIONAL STUDENT MOTIVES TO USE THEIR UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATION CENTER

by Hannah Pritchard Rachal

May 2012

Research indicates that nontraditional students differ from traditional ones in many areas of higher education. Recognizing these differences in this growing population of students could impact retention rates for universities. Also, these differences could influence how communication centers deal with nontraditional students in recruiting them for appointments as well as during tutoring sessions. This study explores possible differences in motivations to use communication centers using both traditional and nontraditional students who had used their university's communication center. Students took a survey based on Ajzen's theory of planned behavior to discover if any differences exist and what the differences are. Findings suggest that the nontraditional and traditional students do not differ in their reasons for using their campus communication center. However, results indicate the most important factor that motivates students to use their communication center is how easily they can schedule and keep an appointment. Findings from this research have implications for both communication centers and universities at large to improve services offered to both traditional and nontraditional students.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the late Dr. Susan Mallon Ross of the Communication Studies Department, who established the Southern Miss Speaking Center and was a constant advocate for students.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writer would like to thank the thesis director, Dr. Steven Venette, and the other thesis committee members, Dr. Wendy Atkins-Sayre and Dr. John Meyer, for their support during this research project. Special thanks to Dr. Steven Venette for his patience in answering and explaining many statistical questions over the course of the last few months. Without his guidance with the statistical analysis process, I would have been lost. Also, his constant positivity helped push me through many difficult times, which allowed me to see the "light at the end of the tunnel."

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Nontraditional students tend to have a different collegiate experience than their typical traditional counterparts (Brazziel, 1990). Although many definitions of *nontraditional students* exist, all focus on how this group differs from traditional undergraduate students. A nontraditional student is one who is 25 years of age or older (Brazziel, 1990) or fits one of the following requirements: delayed enrollment in college, part time enrollment and working full time, financial independence, has dependents, is a single parent, or did not receive a high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). Because of their stage in life, nontraditional students could have different motivations for coming back to school. Most nontraditional students have either not been to school yet or are returning after time off. They encounter different causes of stress, including spouses and children, and some may even have full time jobs.

Particular assignments could also present problems for nontraditional students. Public speaking courses can be very intimidating for many college students. The idea of speaking in front of their peers while receiving a grade can be difficult, given that most students experience at least some level of communication apprehension (Dwyer, 1998). Many of these nontraditional students have been out of school for many years and could feel out of place among younger people. These factors could make it even more difficult for nontraditional students to do such assignments as oral presentations and could ultimately affect their decision to stay at a university. These differences between traditional and nontraditional students could also play a part in influencing a nontraditional student's use of support services on campus such as a communication

center. The topic of this research will focus on the differences between nontraditional and traditional students in their decision to use communication centers.

Studying the differences between traditional and nontraditional students has an important role in the university setting. Discovering if these differences truly exist can help the university cater to each group's specific needs while at college, possibly increasing retention rates (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004). Because this project focuses on the difference between nontraditional students' and traditional students' use of communication centers, not only will it help universities at large, it could also be beneficial for communication centers to know how to target nontraditional and traditional students as individual groups, perhaps increasing retention rates for the university (Tones, Fraser, Elder, & White, 2009). However, without knowing the motivations of nontraditional students, centers cannot target them to encourage them to come in for appointments.

Another important aspect of this research is that it will explore whether inherent differences between nontraditional and traditional students influence their actions at a university, particularly the decision to use campus support services such as communication centers. This research adds to the growing literature about nontraditional students and their needs at universities. Knowing why these students use the resources they do on their college campuses helps increase the effectiveness of these services as well as increase the knowledge about nontraditional students. Nontraditional students may feel that a place like a communication center may not be able to help them at all; however, they also might feel that it is a resource that can truly improve their speaking skills.

Other than adding to the literature about nontraditional students, this research has importance in the field of communication specifically. Knowing what motivates these students to use communication centers provides guidelines for the communication tactics that tutors use in sessions. These tactics could include using a particular type of communication style for each group and considering whether or not these tactics need to differ depending on the specific student. Research on consultations suggests that more effective sessions occur when the tutor illustrates three traits: emotional intelligence, empathy, and interpersonal trust (Ward & Schwartzman, 2009). Thus, knowing more about students' motivations to use such services allows tutors to adjust to appointments with them. Specifically, nontraditional students should receive different pedagogical treatment in the classroom based on their motivations for learning (Justice & Dornan, 2001), and this same notion could carry over into tutoring scenarios. A seasoned tutor can judge what kind of communication style to use with a specific student during an appointment, but this research provides a guide for tutors on a broader basis.

This research also gives information about nontraditional students and communication apprehension, the latter being a commonly studied topic in the communication field. Tichon and Seat (2002) investigated how nontraditional students felt when placed on a team comprised of traditional students for a class project. The nontraditional students felt academically behind their traditional counterparts, and they were apprehensive about being on a team with the traditional students. This uncomfortable delineation between the two groups illustrates how nontraditional students could find it very difficult to adjust to college life, especially when they are surrounded by traditional students. This apprehension could become more pronounced when nontraditional students are placed in a speech class, because they will be in a situation

where most people experience communication apprehension (Dwyer, 1998), and they will be judged against traditional students (Tichon & Seat, 2002).

To investigate this possible difference more closely, this study's main purpose will be to examine both traditional and nontraditional students' motivations for using their university's communication center. This study will be based on Ajzen's theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991). What follows will be a review of relevant literature on this topic, a discussion of the method and results, and the conclusions drawn from these findings.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

First, this review of literature will examine the theory that guides this research: Ajzen's theory of planned behavior. Second, a discussion of university support services provides insight into what these services entail and how students use them. Third, communication apprehension literature sheds light on this commonly faced issue in the university setting. Fourth, an exploration of nontraditional students illustrates the differences that prior research has found between the two groups.

Theory of Planned Behavior

To explore nontraditional students' motivations for using communication centers, the use of Ajzen's theory of planned behavior serves as a useful tool. Other research that has focused on student motivation to use communication centers has used this theory to evaluate those motivations (Clark-Hitt, Ellis & Bender, 2008; King & Atkins-Sayre, 2010). The theory of planned behavior articulates three types of beliefs: behavioral, normative, and control. It then looks at how these beliefs influence the intention to perform a certain behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

Behavioral beliefs are those that a person holds about whether or not an action will produce a certain outcome, which then positively or negatively influences the attitude toward that behavior. For example, if a student wants to improve his or her grade and thinks that a tutoring session in the communication center could improve that grade, he or she will be motivated to actually make an appointment with the communication center. His or her attitude toward the behavior would be positive.

Normative beliefs are perceptions about what other important people in that person's life—such as family, friends, or mentors—think about the behavior. Predictions

or experiences related to these important people's opinions combine to create the subjective norm. For example, if a student perceives that her mother, best friend, and teacher all advise her to use the communication center, then that student has an increased likelihood of using it.

Lastly, control beliefs include whatever factors a person thinks may facilitate or impede performing a certain behavior. More specifically, perceived behavioral control is a person's knowledge of whether or not he or she can actually perform a certain action. For example, a student judging whether or not he or she can physically have a tutoring session at the communication center is a control belief. The attitude toward the behavior, the subjective norms and the perceived behavioral control all contribute to the intent of the person to carry out a certain behavior.

The wide application of this theory is illustrated in its use in many different types of studies. The theory has been used to determine choice of travel mode (Bamberg, Ajzen, & Schmidt, 2003), hunting intentions (Hrubes, Ajzen, & Daigle, 2001), the decision of African American students to complete high school (Davis, Ajzen, Saunders, & Williams, 2002), as well as health related choices such as condom use in adolescents (Reinecke, Schmidt, & Ajzen, 1996). This theory's use in studies similar to this project illustrates its credibility in examining student motivation for going to communication centers (Clark-Hitt et al., 2008; King & Atkins-Sayre, 2010). These two studies must be explained to understand the background of the present study.

Clark-Hitt et al. (2008) focused on why accounting students used their university's communication center. They found using Ajzen's theory of planned behavior that students' attitudes, subjective norms, and control beliefs all play a role in what influences them to use the communication center. However, this research only

looks at accounting graduate students, making it difficult to generalize these findings because of the specificity of these students' rank and major.

King and Atkins-Sayre (2010) used the same model but expanded it with a two study research project. They looked at undergraduate students' and instructors' salient beliefs in the first study, and attitudes, subjective norms, and control beliefs in the second study. Instead of using graduate accounting students, participants included a group of undergraduate students from general education courses. Results indicate that students' motivation for using communication centers comes mostly from subjective norms, or the opinions of important people in their lives. More specifically, if the professor or instructor highly suggested or let it be known that he or she wanted the student to use the communication center, then the student would. Also important was the student's attitude toward going into the communication center. Students wanted to get a high grade on particular assignments, and they perceived that the communication center could help them achieve that.

Communication apprehension and improving speaking skills were not significant motivations. However, a possible explanation for why communication apprehension did not play a larger role in these students' motivations is that the researchers did not use students who were in a public speaking course. Therefore, an impending speech assignment was not a salient belief in their minds and the students probably did not experience the communication apprehension that comes along with speech assignments.

Also, one consideration for implications of this study is that these students were not specifically nontraditional students, who may have more trouble with communication apprehension than regular students because of their backgrounds. Therefore, assessing whether or not communication apprehension is a contributing factor in the decision to use

a communication center will be important in this study. Another noted delineation between the current study and previous ones is that the previous studies measured the intent to use the center, while this study will specifically measure the motivations for already using it.

Support Services

Support services are one of the key components of this research. For purposes of this research, support services include any service on a college campus available to the student to aid them with school related questions. These services could include advising, tutoring, or any type of guidance for the student and can be institutional or departmental.

Research in this field suggests that the availability of social support, like peer-tutoring in a communication center, is related to retention rates (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004). According to the National Association of Communication Centers website, currently 68 communication centers exist in colleges and universities across the United States (Center Directory, National Association of Communication Centers website, 2011). These can be considered part of a student support network because they exist to improve students' communication skills. Replacing high school support networks with new ones in college, including establishments such as communication centers, can help students feel more comfortable in college and ultimately increase the chance that they will stay in school. Peer support, like the support found in many peer tutoring sessions in communication centers, is also an important factor for students and retention rates (Tinto, 1997a, 2005). Tinto found that when students make more connections (both academic and social) with their peers, their rate of success is much higher. Thus, retention rates are better.

Furthermore, research indicates that many students are unaware of student support services and they need to be made more readily available for all students (Dhillon, McGowan, & Hong, 2008). Specifically, this study will employ a communication center, a support service that uses a peer-tutoring model to help students with oral communication projects. Communication centers serving as the foundation of the study of the differences between traditional and nontraditional students works well because the motivations behind using communication centers illustrate character traits of the student. These traits could include self-motivation to learn, wanting to improve communication skills, following instructions of their teacher, or receiving help for communication anxiety. For example, if a student comes in because he or she wants to improve his or her speaking skills, that may illustrate that the student is more self-motivated than those who might just come in because the instructor suggested it. Because both traditional and nontraditional students can experience communication anxiety, a likelihood exists that communication apprehension could affect students' use of the communication center. What follows is a discussion of literature surrounding that topic.

Communication Apprehension

Since most students suffer from some form of communication apprehension, or anxiety that increases when a speaking situation arises (Dwyer, 1998), that apprehension could be even stronger when a student is in a situation where he or she is unfamiliar with the surroundings, as in the case of a nontraditional student. McCroskey and Andersen (1976) reported that students with higher communication apprehension perform lower academically. McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield, and Payne (1989) also describe how communication apprehension is linked to student success and the likelihood that students perform better academically as well as remain at their university. The researchers also

present the idea that services provided by the university intended to decrease communication apprehension (such as communication centers) could improve their academic performance. In the present study, how nontraditional students feel about their communication apprehension rates when they first return to school and are in a speech class could illustrate which factor is most influential for their use of the communication center. This study looks at communication apprehension as a part of a student's attitude toward the behavior. If students perceive that the communication center could help them reduce their communication apprehension, and if they go to the center based on that attitude, then attitudes are a strong motivator to use the center.

According to Brazziel (1990), older students do not share the same college experience as traditional students (those 18-24 years old) do. Giancola, Grawitch and Borchert (2009) identify specific stress factors--such as spouses, children, and full-time jobs--that traditional students have not experienced. This research suggests that because of their stage in life, nontraditional students face very different challenges in college than traditional students. Tichon and Seat (2002) investigated how nontraditional students felt when placed on a team comprised of traditional students for a class project. Findings suggested that the nontraditional students felt academically behind their traditional counterparts and they were apprehensive about being on a team with the traditional students. This apprehension illustrates how nontraditional students could find it difficult to adjust to college life, especially when they are surrounded by traditional students. This apprehension could become more pronounced when nontraditional students are placed in a speech class because they perceive that they will be judged against traditional students.

Conversely, other research suggests that communication apprehension does not affect nontraditional students as negatively as traditional students (Elias, 1999). One

study concludes that nontraditional students actually have less communication apprehension than traditional students; however, this research used a sample of accounting students, in which oral communication skills are not used very frequently. Poppenga and Prisbell (1996) investigated the possible difference between traditional and nontraditional students and communication apprehension levels. Researchers employed the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension and the Situational Communication Apprehension Measure to measure participants' communication apprehension levels and found that nontraditional students did not indicate higher communication apprehension levels. Although prior research may imply that nontraditional students would have high communication apprehension, other research also suggests they do not. Thus, the present study will add to this literature to discover if communication apprehension is a high motivator to use a communication center.

Nontraditional Students

Enrollment of nontraditional students continues to rise in the university setting (Horn & Carroll, 1996; Thomas, 2001). Other than age, important differences are found between traditional and nontraditional students. Two important differences to consider are nontraditional students' likelihood of having non-university responsibilities, such as family or full-time jobs, and the minimal social acceptance they receive as an older student (Richter-Antion, 1986). Research focusing specifically on nontraditional students suggests that because many nontraditional students have full-time jobs and families, conflict can arise when they decide to go back to school, making school difficult for them (Fairchild, 2003). Because of this difficulty, nontraditional students have a higher attrition rate than traditional students (Horn & Carroll, 1996). Jobs, family, and other responsibilities outside of school add to the monetary and time demands of being in

college, making it more challenging for nontraditional students to receive their college degrees (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005).

Also, McClary (1990) suggests that to retain more nontraditional students, institutes of higher learning must take into account nontraditional students' needs and provide resources for their success. Bauer and Mott (1990) interviewed nontraditional students and discussed motivations for re-entering school and surmised that nontraditional students need more than just the simple intake of knowledge in school: "The challenge, then, is for educators practicing in a knowledgeable society during an information age to offer teaching and counseling that not only transmit facts but also promote human development as well" (p. 560). The extra support that nontraditional students crave could include programs such as communication centers, which provide support for their academic work. Further research supports this concept by illustrating the nontraditional students' enthusiasm for such provisions. Nontraditional students reported that it would be very likely that they would use campus services provided for them (Bauman, Wang, DeLeon, Kafentzis, Zavala-Lopez, & Lindsey, 2004). Bauman et al., along with previous studies, also present the main reasons that nontraditional students decide to return to college, which include career, self-improvement, and family problems (Padula, 1994). What nontraditional students encounter when they come to college could affect their motivations to use communication centers. Because their stressors are different than traditional students', they may have different reasons for using communication centers. Their subjective norms (influences from spouses or children) could highly influence them, but their perceived behavioral control (having time to use the center) could also be an indicator of motivations to use the center.

Another important aspect that illustrates the difference in nontraditional students is their self-motivation skills. Nontraditional students perform as well or better than their traditional counterparts (Cantwell, Archer, & Bourke, 2001). One of the main reasons nontraditional students report returning to school is for self-improvement (Bauman et al., 2004). Richardson (1995) states that one of the reasons that nontraditional students perform well academically comes from their stage in life: their experiences lead them to a deep learning approach. This approach suggests that nontraditional students strive to learn the knowledge on a deeper level rather than just learning the information quickly to get a grade.

Dibiase and Kidwai (2010) compared older and younger students and their performance measurement in online classes. The study used two sections of an online class, one with traditional students and the other with nontraditional students. The two classes were very similar and the findings indicate that adult students are more likely to perform better than younger students in environments where self-direction is crucial. They are more motivated and prepared. The comparison can be made between online classes and communication centers because online classes require the students to take initiative (signing in for class discussions, posting work online) outside of the regular demands of a traditional classroom setting. Similar to online courses, using communication centers takes extra initiative, suggesting that nontraditional students are better able to self-direct themselves in learning environments. Thus, nontraditional students may see the benefit of going to communication centers to improve their learning experience.

Another aspect of nontraditional students that is relevant is their motivations for being in school. Nontraditional students' motivations appear to differ greatly from the

traditional student. Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007) examined this difference using 300 undergraduate participants with an age range of 18 to 60 years. The researchers measured the students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations on learning, interests, and positive affect. Overall, higher levels of intrinsic motivation to learn were observed for nontraditional students. Intrinsic motivation was a significant predictor of positive affect. This study is important because it illustrates how nontraditional students are motivated by different factors than traditional students, and it supports the idea that nontraditional students appear to be motivated by different factors to use their university's communication center.

However, for some nontraditional students, using support services on campus is not easy. Nontraditional students from low economic backgrounds as well as those over the age of 45 report a lack of awareness of the availability of such services on campus and that they are unsure of academic expectations (Tones, Fraser, Elder, & White, 2009). This same study did, however, recognize that some nontraditional students took advantage of services provided on their campus:

Usage of these services was relatively high for mature-aged students within the present study; with 33-50% of respondents indicating that they had used each academic study related support service. Nonetheless, students with a higher need for support services appeared to be inhibited by the lack of availability of services, time, poverty, and lack of awareness of support services. (p. 525)

These findings suggest that while some nontraditional students do use support services on their university's campus, some still struggle with knowing how to navigate college life. Findings also show that nontraditional students sometimes did not use support services because they were not available during hours in which the student could use them.

Because of nontraditional students' busy lives outside of college, perceived behavioral control could be the main factor influencing their decision to use a support service on their campus.

Summary

The main components of this review include literature investigating Ajzen's theory of planned behavior, student support services, communication apprehension, and nontraditional students. Prior research using Ajzen's theory suggests that one of the main reasons for students to use their university's communication center stems from their instructor's attitudes toward it. If the instructor encouraged use of the center, the students would more than likely use it. However, this prior research focused on future appointments, whereas the present study focuses on students who have already come in. For many students, thinking about making an appointment and physically going in for an appointment are two very different things. Thus, motivations could be different using participants who have been in for an appointment and could lead to alternative results. These prior studies also illustrate the usefulness of Ajzen's theory of planned behavior for determining students' motivations to use support services such as communication centers.

Support services on university campuses can include many different types of services, one being a communication center. Research shows that students, especially nontraditional students, would use services on campus if the services were more readily available. Although nontraditional students are more predisposed to encounter communication apprehension because of their commitments outside of school, some research supports that nontraditional students have less communication apprehension than traditional ones. Thus, the present study will discover if nontraditional students'

attitude towards the center's ability to reduce their communication apprehension is a high motivator.

The previous studies on this subject do not specifically look at nontraditional students. The literature discussed also explains that differences do exist between traditional and nontraditional students. Their motivations for learning are different, so it is possible that their motivations for using services such as a communication centers will be different as well. Because nontraditional students face many outside stressors, such as families, jobs, financial and community commitments outside of school, their lives are significantly different than that of a traditional college student. Commitments to family members, such as spouses and children, might be influential in their decision to use communication centers, making subjective norms their main motivator. Also, nontraditional students feel as if they are being compared to traditional students, so they may be motivated to use the communication center to reduce their speech anxiety and to improve their overall speaking skills, not just because their teacher recommended it. If a student used the communication center for this reason, then attitude toward the behavior would be the main motivator. However, because they are at a different stage in life and can have many other commitments like family or careers, it may not be possible for them to use the communication center as easily as traditional students, making perceived behavioral control the main motivator. Based on the relevant literature, one hypothesis and one research question arise for this study.

H: A statistically significant difference exists between nontraditional and traditional students' motivations for using their university's communication center based on their attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control.

RQ: Based on the attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, what are nontraditional students' main motivations to use their university's communication center?

CHAPTER III

METHOD

Participants

Seventy-seven college students from a large southeastern university who use their university's communication center completed an anonymous survey about their motivations to use the communication center. This sample included 55 traditional students, age 18-24, and 22 nontraditional students, age 25 or older as defined by Brazziel, (1990). The NCES definition was also used when analyzing the data to determine if the operationalization of the concept is valid. Again, this definition states that a nontraditional student is one who fits one of the following requirements: delayed enrollment in college, part time enrollment and working full time, financial independence, has dependents, is a single parent, or did not receive a high school diploma (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). Other demographics (such as gender) were not considered because they are not pertinent factors in this study. Participants must have used the communication center at least one time to be eligible to participate.

Procedure

All participants were asked by the principal investigator at the university communication center to voluntarily complete the survey in a private practice room at the end of their appointment. The sample included 55 traditional students and 22 nontraditional students. The paper survey (see Appendix A) took approximately five minutes to complete. Getting information from both types of students allowed for comparisons of each group's motivations, which determined whether or not there are statistically significant differences between nontraditional and traditional students in their reasons for using their university's communication center.

Instrument

After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board, all participants completed a confidential survey based on Ajzen's theory of planned behavior to discover the motivations of students to use their university communication center. The two previous studies that used this same method found that students' perceived behavioral control, subjective norms, and attitudes as the most influential motivator in their decision to use the communication center (Clark-Hitt et al., 2008; King & Atkins-Sayre, 2010). The present survey consisted of thirteen questions that asks students about their motivations for using a communication center (Appendix A). This survey was constructed based on Ajzen's (2006) suggestions for building a survey based on this theory. Also, the questions used were based on King and Atkins-Sayre's survey (2010) with minor adjustments that are addressed in the discussion of the pilot study.

For the present study, reliability and validity of the survey scales were calculated. To ensure validity, a factor analysis was used to confirm that each subscale loaded on a single factor (at the traditional .3 level). All items for each subscale did load onto one factor. To ensure reliability, a Chronbach alpha was calculated for each subscale. Each was found to be sufficiently reliable: .75 for perceived behavioral control, .73 for subjective norms, and .68 for attitudes was secured. Although .68 is recognized as somewhat low, the loadings were deemed adequate in the factor analysis. The items on each subscale were summed to create each composite variable for perceived behavioral control, subjective norms, and attitudes towards the behavior. Each item breaks down as follows. The first nine questions ask the students to rate their feelings about a statement from strongly disagree to strongly agree on a five-point Likert scale, with question one through three asking about their perceived behavioral control, questions four through six

asking about their subjective norms, and questions seven through nine asking about their attitudes towards the communication center. Then, the last four questions serve as demographic questions. These last four are important because knowing the participant's age, year in school, number of children and number of work hours will determine whether or not he or she is a nontraditional student.

Analysis

Whereas previous studies suggest that the main factor that influences the intention to use the communication center is teacher recommendation (subjective norms), nontraditional students may place more importance on their perceived behavioral control or attitudes towards using the center. To test the hypothesis, a one-way ANOVA was used to determine if differences exist between traditional and nontraditional students' motivations to use their university's communication center. King and Atkins-Sayre (2010) used this approach successfully in their study. Also, because literature presents many different definitions of a nontraditional student, two separate analyses were performed to account for both Brazziel's age definition as well as NCES's definition that includes other factors such as dependents and job hours.

Knowing what motivates the students to use the communication center is still important. Thus, to answer the research question and discover what the most influential factor for using the communication center is, frequencies and descriptive statistics were analyzed. These statistics illustrate which questions received the highest percent of students responding *strongly agree* to a question, showing what students perceived as the most important motivator.

Pilot Study

A pilot study, including 27 traditional and nontraditional participants, established the validity and reliability of the instrument. The pilot study led to minor changes on the survey. Question five, which asks the students about their parents' influence on their decision to use the communication center, was changed to a broader label *family* to include spouses and children. This change would better include the important family members of an older student's lifestyle. Additionally, the pilot study had implications for how the survey was issued. To ensure that the student took adequate time and did not feel watched by the principle investigator, the student was allowed to use a private practice room adjoining the university's communication center main room. Using a private space to fill out the survey allowed the student to answer more honestly and thoughtfully.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The hypothesis posited that nontraditional students and traditional students would differ in their reasons for using their university's communication center. However, this is not supported with either definition of nontraditional student. The results of the one-way ANOVA using the NCES definition show no statistically significant difference between traditional and nontraditional students' motivations to use their university's communication center for perceived behavioral control, $F(1, 75) = .01$, $p = .93$, for subjective norms $F(1, 49) = .15$, $p = .70$, or for attitude towards the behavior, $F(1, 75) = .65$, $p = .42$. The results using Brazziel's definition also show no statistically significant difference between traditional and nontraditional students' motivations to use their university's communication center for perceived behavioral control $F(1, 75) = 1.11$, $p = .30$, for subjective norms $F(1, 49) = 2.34$, $p = .13$, or for attitude towards the behavior, $F(1, 75) = 2.44$, $p = .12$.

The research question aimed to discover what factor influenced students the most to use their university's communication center. An examination of frequencies and descriptive statistics provides this answer. Perceived behavioral control (questions one through three) was the first scale used and it consistently has the highest number of students responding that they strongly agree to each question. Thus, approximately 40.3% of students strongly agreed with the three perceived behavioral control questions. Descriptive statistics also provide the average for each of these questions (respectively, the means were 4.4, 4.4, and 4.3).

Subjective norms responses (questions four through six) were not as consistent. Although question six had the highest amount of students responding *strongly agree* out

of all the questions, the other two questions for this factor were determined to be the least important. Overall, 13.7% of students strongly agreed that subjective norms are the most important factor in the decision to use the communication center. Descriptive statistics also provide the average for each of these questions (the means were 2.6, 2.9, and 4.7 respectively).

Lastly, attitudes towards the behavior also show somewhat mixed results. Questions 7 through 9 indicate that 35.1% of students strongly agree that attitudes towards the behavior are the most influential factor when deciding to use the communication center. Descriptive statistics show the averages for these three questions (the means were 4.5, 4.4, and 3.8 respectively).

In sum, the data suggest that students' perceived behavioral control is the most influential factor in students' motivation to use their university communication center. The second highest motivating factor is students' attitude toward the behavior (the use of the communication center). Although subjective norms is the lowest motivator overall, one of the three factors on this concept had the highest average of all questions, question six, which asked students' about instructor influence to use the center.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that statistically, there are no differences between traditional and nontraditional students' motivations to use their university communication center. Although research indicates many differences exist between these two groups, both types of students are motivated by the same factors to use communication centers. Ajzen's theory of planned behavior provided a theoretical base to discover what the motivations for these students are. The theory's usefulness is seen in the results of this study. First, two main motivators found in this study were also found in a previous study using this same theoretical background: attitude toward the behavior (receiving a higher grade) and subjective norms (instructor approval) (King & Atkins-Sayre, 2010). The difference in importance of perceived behavioral control as a motivator could be accounted for because of the different samples of the two studies—one had used the speaking center and one had not. Thus, for the present study's participants who had already used the center, convenience was the most influential motivator. However, possible alteration to the subjective norms used in the present study's survey could explore other motivations including people such as the student's advisor's approval. Overall, though, Ajzen's theory proved to be helpful in exploring the three main motivations in student's lives: convenience, influential people in their lives, and how they feel about the action. To explore the results more fully, this section will detail the findings from both the hypothesis as well as the research question and discuss possible future research in this area.

Hypothesis

Results from the one-way ANOVA show no statistically significant differences between traditional and nontraditional students. Thus, the hypothesis was not supported. Essentially, the data suggest that each group of students comes to the communication center for the same reasons. Research indicates that nontraditional students differ from traditional students in many ways, including motivations for being in school, life outside of school, and how they perform in school (Brazziel, 1990; Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009). However, these differences do not carry over to use of this support service on this particular campus. When using a communication center, students in this study view using the center as a place where outside differences such as family or jobs do not matter. As the results illustrate, the students' perceived behavioral control was the highest motivator for students. Instead of focusing on differences in attitudes (factors such as learning styles) or influences of subjective norms (factors such as spouses), nontraditional and traditional students alike were most concerned with their ability to physically or logistically get into the space for an appointment. Although differences in life outside of school and learning styles might alter how each group of student functions in the classroom, both groups seem to liken using a support service on campus to other types of appointments they have to make in their lives, like doctor's appointments or meetings related to jobs. Because these types of meetings can be difficult to fit into a full-time student's schedule, participants in this study place high importance on the ease with which they can schedule and get to an appointment.

These findings have implications for universities and retention rates. Because support networks on college campuses can improve retention rates (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004), knowing more about why students use these services is crucial for

improving these numbers. Without understanding why students choose to use support services such as communication centers, universities will not know how to specifically promote these services to prospective and current students. Thus, better promotion leads to increased usage, which could improve retention rates. As nontraditional students' numbers are growing in the university setting (Horn & Carroll, 1996; Thomas, 2001), universities must pay attention to this growing demographic and cater to their needs. The present research suggests that because there is no statistically significant difference between the two groups' motivations to use their communication center, the university can advertise the communication center and possibly other support services in the same way to each group, emphasizing convenience to the students as their perceived behavioral control was the highest motivator to get them in the communication center. Doing so might increase student use of these services, which could help universities retain more of both traditional and nontraditional students (DeBerard, Spielmans & Julka, 2004).

The present study also adds to previous research that relates to nontraditional students' use of support services on campus. Tones et al. (2009) reported that nontraditional students sometimes have a difficult time navigating college life, which includes the use of campus support services. The present study suggests that universities can promote their university support services, including communication centers, in the same manner to both traditional and nontraditional students. Doing this would help nontraditional students as well as traditional ones know about the support services on their campus. The more students know about services such as these on their campus, the easier it will be for them to use them.

Research Question

Because the results of the hypothesis indicate that there is no difference between the two groups of students and their motivations to use their university's communication center, the answer to the research question applies to both traditional and nontraditional students. Overall, this question aimed to determine the most important motivator for students' use of their university communication center.

Perceived Behavioral Control

Perceived behavioral control is the most influential factor with 40.3% of all participants responding *strongly agree* to each factor within perceived behavioral control, which is a composite of how easy it is to make an appointment fit into their schedule, the center having many available hours, and the center being in a central location. Contrary to previous studies where subjective norms and attitude towards the behavior were most influential (cf. King & Atkins-Sayre, 2010), participants in this study were motivated by how feasible it was for them to actually perform the behavior of coming in for an appointment at the center. Examining the sample of each study could account for this difference. Participants in King and Atkins-Sayre's study were not in speech classes and did not have an upcoming speech assignment. Thus, going in for an appointment at the communication center was not a salient thought for them at the time they took the survey. However, in the present study, the students must have visited the communication center, meaning they had an impending speech assignment or were working on a project with a speaking component. Although instructor support is also an important motivator in this study, overall, perceived behavioral control was the most influential motivator. Whether or not the student could actually make it in for an appointment when they had an

upcoming speech or presentation was the driving factor for usage, which presents important information for support services.

Each question on the perceived behavioral control scale received approximately equal ratings. Question One, which dealt with how easy it is to make an appointment fit into the student's schedule, had an average of 4.4 out of a five point Likert scale. For many students who participate in extracurricular activities or have many hours of class, fitting an hour long appointment into their schedules could be difficult. Thus, communication centers and other support services on campus should take this into account when creating their scheduling techniques. For example, having many ways for the student to initially create the appointment could be beneficial for a student with many other activities in his or her daily schedule. Scheduling methods could include online scheduling, calling to set up an appointment, or physically stopping by the space to make an appointment with a worker in the center. Also, because students placed high importance on scheduling ease, being able to reschedule appointments is also something for centers and other support services to consider. If a student cannot make the initial appointment, having all of the same scheduling methods available could make it easier for him or her to reschedule as opposed to simply canceling the appointment altogether.

Question Two, which dealt with the number of hours available for a student to make an appointment, relates closely with the discussion from question one. Students felt that it was important for the communication center to have many hours available for them to come in for an appointment with an average of 4.4. Therefore, support services should consider the hours they offer for appointment slots. If these times are not convenient for students, they will not be able to come in for appointments. Support services should take into consideration popular class hours as well as their target

demographic student. Some students work during the day and take classes at night, leaving little time for appointments, whereas some students do the opposite. Thus, having both day and evening hours could be a solution for such situations.

The last question on the perceived behavioral control scale, question Three, dealt with the communication center being in an easy to reach central location. The 4.3 average for this question is consistent with the responses for the other two questions on this scale. Students found it important that their communication center be in a location that they could reach easily, which relates to other support services on campus as well. For example, having a support service located far away from student parking might deter students' motivation to use it. These data suggest that having the service in an easily reachable location that is centrally located on campus is a highly motivating factor.

The data suggest that students are motivated mostly by how easily they can physically make it into the location of the support service for an appointment. Universities and support services specifically can take this information and use it when promoting these services, highlighting how easy it is to make an appointment as well as the location and hours available. Because students appreciate convenience, online tutoring is also an option for advertising to students. Online tutoring could be an area that communication centers and universities develop to cater to students' need for easier access to the center. Doing this would illustrate that the service is easily accessible to their daily schedules and could increase usage.

Attitude Towards the Behavior

Although perceived behavioral controls received the highest overall percentage for students' motivating factors, students' attitude towards the behavior is also important. Overall, 35.1% of students strongly agreed that attitudes towards the behavior was the

most important factor, which include improving their speaking skills, receiving a better grade, and reducing their speech anxiety. Whether or not a student can easily make it in for an appointment is the most important factor, but students also took into consideration what using the communication center could do for them. This result mirrors that of King and Atkins-Sayre (2010), who also found that students' attitude towards the behavior was a strong motivator. Specifically, the previous study found that students believed that the communication center could help them get a better grade, which motivated them to use the center. However, the data suggest that students also place high importance on improving their speaking skills, though whether they see such improvement as inherently valuable in itself or simply as a means to a higher grade is unclear.

Question Seven asked students to rate the importance of improving speaking skills as a motivator. With an average of 4.5, this question was rated the second highest of all questions. Participants in this study felt that the communication center could help improve their speaking skills, and that motivated them to use the center. Thus, when campus support services provide skills that students perceive as useful, it motivates the students to use that service. These results also have implications for communication centers specifically. Within appointments, tutors can use this information to appeal to students. As opposed to just working on the assignment at hand, possibly presenting the information in a way that the student can apply it to other situations could give the student more satisfaction. Because students see the communication center as a way to better their communication skills, tutors should not only help with specific assignments, but also give the students the chance to see the information applied in many other aspects of their lives. These other aspects could include speaking engagements at work or other community events.

However, question Eight illustrates that students also perceive that communication centers can help them improve their grade, which is also a high motivator at an average of 4.4. King and Atkins-Sayre (2010) also found possible grade improvement as a high motivator. Students seem to appreciate not only intrinsic rewards such as better speaking skills, but also extrinsic rewards such as better grades. Thus, support services should acknowledge that students need both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. If students perceive that a service will provide these rewards, they are more likely to use it.

Communication centers specifically can make adjustments to communication during appointments. To give the student the possibility of a better grade, the tutor should be as familiar as possible with specific assignments. Although this process may take time to implement, establishing a concrete system for tutors to know more about incoming assignments could help them better assist the students during appointments. Being able to give advice catered to the specific assignment could result in a better grade for the student. Also, communication centers could ask more of students coming in for appointments, making it a requirement for them to bring in assignment sheets help tutors adapt advice for the particular context. These suggestions for tutors and centers could also transfer to other support services on campus that provide help with specific assignments. If a student thinks a service will improve his or her grade on an assignment, he or she has an increased likelihood of using that service.

Out of the three attitude towards the behavior questions, question Nine scored the lowest with an average of 3.8. Communication apprehension reduction was the third lowest scored motivator on the entire survey. This question, which pertained to how communication centers can reduce speech anxiety, was not rated as high as its two

attitude towards the behavior counterparts. The results of this question counter what most literature has found about students and communication apprehension. Although research supports the idea that almost everyone suffers from some form of communication apprehension (Dwyer, 1998), reducing speech anxiety was not a high motivator in this study for both traditional and nontraditional students. Some literature also suggests that nontraditional students may suffer from more communication apprehension than traditional ones (Tichon & Seat, 2002); however, the present study's findings do not support that research. Instead, the present study's findings support research that indicates both traditional and nontraditional students report having the same amount of communication apprehension (Poppenga & Prisbell, 1996). Although students may have levels of communication apprehension, the participants of this study did not believe that their communication center could reduce those levels enough to have this factor as the highest motivator to use the center. King and Atkins-Sayre (2010) also found that speech anxiety is not a high motivator.

Students may not use reduction of speech anxiety as a motivator for two reasons. First, students may not think that speech anxiety is a problem that they can fix, either with or without the help of a communication center tutor. Second, it is possible that the students who have high speech anxiety are too anxious to come in for appointments; thus, those students did not participate in the study. These findings suggest that communication centers should not focus on speech anxiety reduction as a primary advertising tool. Thus, using communication apprehension as a primary theme for communication center advertising is not supported by these findings. Although an average of 3.8 is not the lowest average for all the questions on the scale, it is the lowest

of the attitude towards the behavior questions. Students are more concerned with the grade on the assignment and improving their speaking skills.

Subjective Norms

The least important motivator for student use of the university's communication center was the students' subjective norms. With 13.7% answering *strongly agree* to these questions, students did not use their subjective norms, including family's, friend's, and instructor's support of the center, as motivations to use the communication center. However, it is important to remark that one of these questions received the highest average of all the questions on the scale. Instructor support of communication center use has the highest average at 4.7. Thus, students do not highly value their family and friend's support of communication center use, but instructor support is important. King and Atkins-Sayre (2010) found similar results. One of the most important motivators reported in their data was also subjective norms in the form of instructor support of communication center use. This support could come in the form of suggesting students use the center or in the form of requiring the students use the center.

Implications for communication centers as well as support networks at large include working more closely with teachers to garner support for using campus support services. If students perceive that their instructors or professors want them to use the service, the students are more inclined to do so. This desire for instructor approval could relate to students also ranking improvement of grade relatively high with an average of 4.4. Students could see a relationship between usage and grade, leading them to believe that if their instructor knows they used the service, they might receive a better grade. Yet, even without this relationship between grade and instructor support, support services should not underestimate the power of instructor approval of the service. Students place

value on their instructor's opinions, and if support services can promote themselves among faculty, then students are more motivated to use the service.

However, also important to mention is how students regard family and friends' opinions when using their university communication center. Friends' opinions received a 2.6 average and family's opinions received a 2.9 average, the lowest averages on the scale. Therefore, students do not frequently use their family and friends as guides to their academic choices such as using a communication center. Although traditional students may value what their parents think and nontraditional students may value what their spouses think, overall, students do not appear to apply those opinions when deciding to use a support service on campus. For these services, these results could mean devoting less time to promoting services to family members, but instead, focusing that time more on developing relationships with faculty.

Summary

These findings suggest many improvements or changes for communication centers that could carry over to other support services on campuses to increase usage. Prior research links the use of support services to better retention rates for universities. Because no differences in motivations to use these services exist between traditional and nontraditional students, universities can promote them in the same way based on these results. First, students place most importance on whether or not they can actually make it in for an appointment. Thus, ensuring that students can easily make and reschedule appointments, having many hours available, and having a good location is key for the success of a campus support service. Second, other important factors to consider are how well the service emphasizes help with important skills (such as speaking) and improving grades. These results suggest that both traditional and nontraditional students respond

well to intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. During appointments, tutors could improve how they work with students to accommodate each of these reward types. Lastly, support services should consider building strong relationships with faculty and staff. If students have the support of their instructor or professor, they see more benefits of using the service. Based on the data from this study, support services may want to consider reevaluating time and energy spent publicizing to family and friends. Also, communication centers specifically should reconsider emphasis on reducing speech anxiety, as that was not a high motivator.

CHAPTER VI

LIMITATIONS

The present study had limitations that should be considered. The most challenging limitation was the collection of data. Since the participants had to be students who used the communication center, ensuring that there were enough eligible students coming in to the center was crucial. Data collection for this survey took place at a time when the center did not see many appointments with nontraditional students. For many communication centers, appointment influx occurs when an oral communication course speech is impending. Thus, planning data collection during this busy time would facilitate data collection.

Also, many students did not respond positively to taking a survey after their appointment simply because of time issues. Since the current study used handwritten surveys filled out at the end of appointments, some students may have rushed taking the survey and not answered thoughtfully. Having an online option could allow students to take the survey on their own time and possibly provide more accurate responses. Also, allowing students to answer open-ended questions about their use of the center might provide more insightful answers as to why they choose to use them. Lastly, although the surveys were confidential, they were not completely anonymous. Because students filled them out after appointments, the investigator knew who the student was. This tends to create responses deemed as satisfying to the researcher or socially acceptable. Thus, altering the data collection process to make the survey completely anonymous, perhaps using an online survey, would eliminate this possible limitation.

CHAPTER VII

FUTURE STUDY

Three areas for future study arise from the present research. First, because perceived behavioral control was the highest motivator overall in this study, more research in that area could benefit support services. For example, knowing the easiest method for making appointments and then implementing that method could lead to an increase in use if that knowledge is used strategically. Some services may only allow appointments to be made over the phone, but students respond well when making appointments is very easy. If they have many options, such as phone, internet scheduling, or stopping in for a walk-in appointment, they may be more inclined to use the service because they see that it is a simple process. Because the center in this study uses all three scheduling methods, that could account for no differences found between the two groups. Nontraditional students might appreciate using the phone to make appointments, whereas younger traditional students may find using the online scheduler as an easier method. Future research could break down the types of scheduling to see which group uses which method the most, and then could use those results for advertising purposes. Also, future research could investigate more closely what hours support services should be open. For example, knowing what hours most students take classes and go to work could lead to what open hours a service provides. Also, checking past appointment schedules to see what hours are most frequently used by students for appointments could help to discover what hours are the most popular and convenient for students.

More specifically for communication centers, a second area of further study focuses on speech anxiety. Since communication apprehension is a common issue for

most students, communication centers could evaluate what they do to provide help in this area. The data from this study suggests that students recognize that the communication center could help with their speech anxiety; yet, this factor was not one of the highest motivators. Future research might entail asking more questions about speech anxiety during appointments or getting feedback from them about their speech anxiety before and after appointments. This feedback might determine if high communication apprehension students are using communication centers. If these students are not coming in, communication centers should perform research to discover ways to encourage those students to use the center.

The last area of future study that could benefit from more research includes support services connecting with faculty. The present study's findings mirror those of King and Atkins-Sayre (2010) that also found that students respond well when their instructor supports use of a service. More research could determine what type of support (verbal, written, required, or extra credit incentive) influences students the most to use support services. Working with faculty to discover and then implement this type of support for services on campus could improve student success for both traditional and nontraditional students. As research suggests, using support services on campus improves student success, which then improves retention rates for universities (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; Tinto, 1997a, 2005). Thus, future research in this field could provide valuable information for support services as well as universities at large.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

Overall, statistically significant differences do not exist between traditional and nontraditional students when they are making the decision to use their university's communication center. Previous research states that differences do occur between the two groups in other aspects of their lives, but the choice to use a support service on their campus rests with their perceived behavioral control. Both groups of students appreciate having an easily accessible center and many scheduling options. Also, students seem comforted by the notion that a communication center can help them improve their grade as well as their speaking skills. The results of this study could improve communication centers and how they cater to students. Universities could benefit from applying this information to the promotion of support services on their campuses. Support services, such as communication centers, are integral parts of a student's collegiate life. Information that can help better these services could lead to a better support network for students as they work their way through their college careers.

APPENDIX A

SURVEY

Please rate the following statements from strongly disagree to strongly agree with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree.

- 1) **I use the Speaking Center because it is easy to make an appointment fit into my schedule.**

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

- 2) **I use the Speaking Center because it has many hours available for me to come in for an appointment.**

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

- 3) **I use the Speaking Center because it is in a central location that is easy to get to.**

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

- 4) **I use the Speaking Center because I know that my friends would like me to use it.**

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

- 5) **I use the Speaking Center because I know that my family would like me to use it.**

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

- 6) **I use the Speaking Center because I know that my instructor would like me to use it.**

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

- 7) **I use the Speaking Center because I think it will improve my speaking skills.**

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

- 8) **I use the Speaking Center because I think it will get me a better grade.**

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

- 9) **I use the Speaking Center because the tutors help me with my speech anxiety.**

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

10) Age: _____

11) **Classification** (*Circle one*): Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior

12) How many hours a week (if any) do you work? _____

13) How many children (if any) do you have? _____

Thank you!

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