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Learning Support for Adult Nontraditional Learners on Campus in a Southeastern University

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Walden University

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College of Education

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Philip D. Rausch

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2023

Abstract

Learning Support for Adult Nontraditional Learners on Campus in a Southeastern

University

by

Philip D. Rausch

MS, Sullivan University, 2013

MS, Sullivan University, 2012

BS, Sullivan University, 2008

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

May, 2023

Abstract

The problem at the southeastern university study site is that adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus are graduating at a low rate, which may indicate a lack of needed support services. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the learning support needs of adult nontraditional learners and institutional support provided and used as well as to make recommendations to eventually increase the graduation rate of this population at the study site. Tinto's theory of student retention, specifically the aspects of institutional experiences and integrations, was used as the conceptual framework. The three research questions focused on the learning support needs of adult nontraditional learners, support services provided and used, and recommendations of needed supports provided by the participants. Data were collected from semistructured interviews with 12 adult nontraditional learners attending classes at the study site. Data were analyzed using open and axial coding, resulting in five emerging themes. The five themes were: students are unaware of what services are offered by the university, the hours that the student support services are open are not conducive for adult learners, staff and faculty need to understand adult learners, increased mental health support, and additional support and encouragement. Based on these themes, a policy recommendation paper was developed to present to the chancellor and the Board of Directors that may lead to positive social change through the implementation of needed supports that result in increasing the graduation rate of adult nontraditional learners at the study site.

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Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral study to Jesus Christ, my savior and Lord. To my parents, Lannus and Anna Rausch, God rest their souls, for instilling in me the belief that all things are possible through God, for and giving me the foundation to know that anything worth having is worth working hard to achieve. Thank you to my seven brothers and two sisters who supported me through this journey. I also want to thank my two daughters, Dr. Stephanie Rausch and Savannah Dupree, and their families for their support and belief in me. Finally, thank you to my fiancée, Lynn Dean, for all the sacrifices and the support that she gave me.

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

Adult learners constitute a growing proportion of U.S. undergraduate students. Undergraduate students are expected to increase to 20.5 million between the fall of 2018 and fall 2027, 7.6 million (or 37%) of whom will be 25 years old and over (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Caruth (2014) noted that many colleges are not designed with adult learners in mind and confirmed the cruciality of understanding adult nontraditional learners' needs. By discovering the learning support needs of adult nontraditional learners' taking classes on a campus, the graduation rate of the nontraditional student population can possibly be increased. Understanding learning support needs is important because programs and policies can be developed to assist adult nontraditional learners who take classes on campus obtain their degree.

The problem at one local southeastern university was that adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus were graduating at a low rate, which may indicate a lack of needed support services. The study site and other universities have not adapted to keep up with the ever-growing population of adult nontraditional learners (Prins et al., 2015). 27% of students graduate at the study site within 3--6 years compared to 48% nationwide, and 33% of students at the study site graduate within 5--7 years compared to 49% nationwide. At the time of the study, the population at the study site was approximately 18,000 students, of whom 44% were adult nontraditional learners. According to the director of institutional research, planning, and effectiveness, of the adult nontraditional learners population, 70% were pursuing an online degree and 30%

were pursuing degrees through on-campus classes. The focus of this study was the nontraditional learners taking classes on campus. The reasoning for this choice was to narrow the study to only discover how to better serve adult learners taking classes on campus at the study site.

Merriam and Bierema (2014) and Kang and Binniecki (2015) stated that universities are working with a more culturally diverse adult learner population than ever before. During a leadership retreat at the study site in July 2018, the chancellor while addressing the attendees spoke about the need to understand the individual support needs of the student body and how important customer service was to the university. In an enrollment management meeting in March 2018, the associate vice chancellor of enrollment management addressed the concern that there is little or no differentiation made among students at the study site based on their backgrounds, professional roles, or the circumstances by which adult students decide to pursue education. Zalaznick (2017) stated that adult nontraditional learners have more responsibilities outside of school compared to traditional students. Chen (2017) and Simi and Matusitz (2016) observed that U.S. colleges and universities often neglected adult nontraditional learners. At the study site, adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus continued to be treated the same as traditional students and their individual support needs and many other commitments were not taken into consideration. The chancellor provided the example that services, such as advising, computer laboratory access, and assistance with class schedules, were only available during daytime hours, thereby limiting service availability to adult learners who attended on-campus classes in the evening.

The gap in practice was a lack of needed support for adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus at the study site, which may be contributing to the low graduation rate among this population. By determining the support needs and institutional support provided and used by the adult nontraditional learners who were taking classes on campus, it may be possible to help adult learners that take classes on campus at the local study site graduate at an increasing rate.

Rationale

While numerous studies exist about adult nontraditional learners and the many different issues that they face (e.g., Bohl et al., 2017; Hong, 2017; Jobe et al., 2016; Kallison, 2017; Kasworm, 2018; Osam et al., 2017; Quiggins et al., 2016; Rand et al., 2018; Risley, 2019; Sutton, 2017; van Rhij, et al., 2016; Wyatt, 2011), no studies have been completed at the study site on this population. The study site is a 4-year university in the southeastern United States. In the 2018–2019 school year, 44% of the students at the university were adult nontraditional learners. Per the director of institutional research, planning, and effectiveness, of that population, 30% of them were taking classes on campus. Forbes uses the graduation rate as one of the points to rank best value colleges and graduation rates have become one of the main indicators that adult learners look at when choosing a school to attend (Adams, 2018).

At the study site, there were many meetings in 2018 involving the associate vice chancellor of enrollment management and institutional directors regarding adult learners and the unique challenges that they experience. Following these meetings, few changes were implemented affecting adult learners. Nevertheless, there still needs to be more

emphasis on delineating the differences between traditional students and the adult nontraditional learners. In many of these meetings, the main topic was that at the university, adult learners were treated the same as traditional students and their unique challenges are not addressed. In these meetings, adult learners have been discussed, from their admission through graduation, as was the responsibility of the university to support these students to increase their success. The need to support adult nontraditional learners has been emphasized by the chancellor and several senior vice chancellors at the study site. With the data supporting the growth of adult learners in higher education (Prins et al., 2015), it is important at the study site to determine possible solutions to assist in meeting the needs of these students. The purpose of this study was to explore the learning support needs of adult nontraditional learners and the institutional support provided and used, as well as to make recommendations to eventually increase their graduation rate at the study site. The findings of the study might be used to potentially increase the graduation rate of adult nontraditional learners enrolled in on-campus courses at the study site, thereby addressing their problem with the low graduation rate of adult nontraditional learners.

Definition of Terms

The following terms and definitions were used throughout this study:

Adult learners: Students who are over the age of 24 years old (Kasworm et al., 2010).

Nontraditional learners: Students who meet one of the following criteria: delayed enrollment after high school, did not complete high school, part-time enrollment, full-

time employment, caring for dependents, or not relying on their parents for financial support (Choy, 2002, as cited in Rabourn et al., 2018).

Student engagement: The involvement and engagement of adult learners in effective educational activities (Rabourn et al., 2018).

Support services: Services offered by the university, such as nonacademic programs, administrative services, and advising, that are intended to help the student be successful (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019).

Significance of the Study

The study site and other universities have not adapted to keep up with the ever-growing population of adult nontraditional learners (Prins et al., 2015). The problem at the study site was that adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus were graduating at a low rate, which may have indicated a lack of needed support services. Upon completion of the study, it may be possible to recommend to university stakeholders some strategies to increase the graduation rate of adult nontraditional learners enrolled in courses on-campus. Students' needs are constantly changing, and universities are advised by Stevens (2014) to understand and respond to students' needs. The study is an original contribution to the local site, which has never explored adult learner support needs. This study may be significant in improving the services provided to adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus at the public 4-year southeastern university and in other similar institutions. Filling the support needs of adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus may positively impact the graduation rate of adult nontraditional learners.

College graduation improves students' position in society, thereby bettering families, communities, and lives (Merriam et al., 2007). Determining the support provided and needed will hopefully improve graduation rates, which will change the lives of those adult learners attending the study site, allowing them to possibly get better jobs, make more money, and improve their standards of living. This could also possibly raise the standard of living of the entire community by improving the family unit, education, medical care, services provided by the local government, and by building a growing economy improving the quality of life.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the learning support needs of adult nontraditional learners and the institutional support provided and used as well as to make recommendations to eventually increase the graduation rate of this population at the study site. The problem with low graduation rates among adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus required exploration to gain an understanding of the unmet learning support needs that might help more of these students graduate at the study site and possibly at other institutions that are experiencing similar problems. To accomplish this, I sought to answer the following three research questions.

RQ1: According to adult nontraditional learners taking classes at the study site, what are their learning support needs?

RQ2: According to the perceptions of adult nontraditional learners, to what extent do the support services provided by the university fulfill the needs of learners taking classes on campus?

RQ3: What recommendations do adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus suggest to improve the learning supports provided that may increase their chances of graduating?

Based on the findings, I developed recommendations for helping adult nontraditional learners graduate at a higher rate. By presenting the recommendations to stakeholders, my hope was that policies and programs would be considered for implementation to better assist adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus.

Review of the Literature

In this review, I examined extant literature on the topics of adult nontraditional learners in higher education taking classes on campus, their support needs, and the support that colleges and universities provided to assist them reaching graduation.

Search Process

To search for sources for the literature review, I used the following search terms and phrases: *adult learners, nontraditional learners, adult students, nontraditional students, adult nontraditional students, graduation rates, improving graduation rates, student's needs, adult student's needs, nontraditional students in higher education, adult students in higher education, and adult students*. The search was conducted between September 2018 and October 2019 using multiple educational databases accessible through the Walden University Library including ERIC, Educational Combined Search, ProQuest Central, SAGE Journals, Google Scholar, and SAGE Research Methods Online.

Bohl et al. (2017) found that adult/nontraditional learners credit their success to family. To expand the search for literature regarding family, I explored scholarly resources using the following search terms and phrases: *supportive family, family involvement, family support, parents support for adult learners, parents support for nontraditional learners, family support for adult learners, family support for nontraditional learners, support from immediate family for adult learners, and support from immediate family for nontraditional learners*. There were no results returned for each phrase searched. I found no articles in the databases on the support provided for adult nontraditional learners, which lead me to believe that there may be useful insights revealed as a result of this study.

Conceptual Framework

I used Tinto's (1975) theory of student retention as the conceptual framework for this study. Tinto's theory is the most commonly used model in student retention literature. The central point of the theory is student integration, about which Tinto postulated that a student's persistence is predicted by both academic and social integration into campus life. Six components comprise Tinto's framework used to understand student integration: (a) preentry attributes (i.e., prior schooling and family background), (b) goals and commitment in regard to student aspirations and the institution, (c) institutional experiences (i.e., academics, faculty interaction, cocurricular involvement, and peer group interaction), (d) integrations (i.e., academic and social), (e) goals in regard to intentions and external commitments, and (f) outcome (i.e., departure decision or graduation) (Metz, 2002). Tinto researched the support provided to students

by universities, such as teaching, learning support, and facilities. Tinto also studied the support from outside universities, for instance debt assistance, counselling, medical care, personal support, events for family, and other supports. In this study I focused on two components of Tinto's framework: institutional experiences (i.e., academics, faculty interaction, cocurricular involvement, and peer group interaction) and integrations (i.e., academic and social).

Tinto's (1975) theory uses a framework for examining desired services and support as well as the ways in which they can enhance persistence and degree completion. Within the framework, Tinto studied the support services provided to the students from the institution, faculty, and family as well as how these support services helped the student integrate into the university. Tinto posited that both academic and social integration are important for retention. I used Tinto's theory as a framework to guide my development of the research questions. The results of the current study were analyzed to formulate recommendations to possibly improve graduation rates of adult nontraditional learners. Tinto used this theory to look at the support provided to adult learners and how the support provided plays an important role in the success of these students. I based my research questions on these same concerns, which were student self-efficacy, perceived value of the curriculum, and sense of belonging. With the results of this study, I can provide stakeholders with a better understanding of these students' needs so programming can be considered and implemented to match their needs and possibly improve graduation rates among on-campus adult learners.

Review of the Broader Problem

Adult learners constitute a growing proportion of U.S. undergraduate students. Undergraduate students are expected to continue to increase in the upcoming years (Prins et al., 2015). Colleges and universities need to understand this growing population and their support needs to succeed. Adult nontraditional learners have to juggle many issues, such as full-time jobs, family, and only being able to take classes part time. From my observation these individuals struggle to meet all their commitments, and, in many cases, they do not make it to graduation.

In the following subsections, I discuss the growth of the adult nontraditional learners in higher education; the literature that has been produced that defines an adult learner; and the types of support that are provided, such as institutional and faculty support.

Growth of Adult Nontraditional Learners in Higher Education Enrollment.

The student body is changing in colleges and universities. According to Vidales (2018), no matter how old today's students are, they are changing every day, and in higher education, those who educate need to keep up with them. The largest growing population in colleges today are adult learners (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Previous authors have discussed how higher education has not adapted to support this growing population (Bohl et al., 2017; Bowers & Bergman, 2016; Edelman, 2018; Ellis, 2019; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Kasworm, 2018). A comparison of these articles is presented in Table 1 and synthesized in relation to this study.

Table 1*Adult Nontraditional Students Growth in Higher Education*

Author	Publication Year	Percentage	Source of data
Osterholt and Dennis	2014	Between 2000 - 2010 37%	National Center for Educational Statistics
Bowers and Bergman	2016	33%	Adult Learners in Higher Education
Klein-Collins	2019	30%	All Colleges in Higher Education
Alvarez	2017	40%	All Colleges in Higher Education
Bohl, Haak, and Shrestha	2017	Between 1999 – 2000 73%	U.S. Department of Education
Karmelita	2017	35%	National Center for Educational Statistics
Edelman	2018	30%	All Colleges in Higher Education
Kasworm	2018	75%	National Center for Educational Statistics
Rand, Herderson, Koti, and Nelsen	2018	40%	National Center for Educational Statistics
Ellis	2019	33%	National Center for Educational Statistics
Glowacki-Dudka	2019	40%	National Center for Educational Statistics
Risley	2019	36.2%	Chronicle of Higher Education
Sun	2019	85%	National Center for Educational Statistics

Note. Notice in the table that two authors used a time span for their percentages. Also, most authors used the National Center for Educational Statistics to obtain their percentages.

Between the years of 2000 and 2010, there was a 37% increase in total enrollments in higher education compared to the prior decade where there was only an 11% increase (Osterholt & Dennis, 2014). Karmelita (2017) stated that according to the National Center for Education Statistics, the enrollments of adult learners increased by 35% between the years of 2000 to 2015. The percentage of adult nontraditional learners in pursuit of an undergraduate degree varied depending on the article. The rates presented

by authors ranged from between 30% to 85% (Bohl et al., 2017; Bowers & Bergman, 2016; Edelman, 2018; Ellis, 2019; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Kasworm, 2018; Sun, 2019). Edelman (2018) and Klein-Collins (2019), using only the government's definition of adult learners, stated students over the age of 25 years old make up 30% of undergraduates enrolled in college today. Ellis (2019) stated that over 33% of undergraduate students fit the classification of a nontraditional student based solely on their age and not any other attribute used to define a nontraditional student.

Bowers and Bergman (2016) stated that adult nontraditional students have become the new majority among students in the United States in that they make up 50% of part-time students and more than 33% of total students. They discussed that 65% of jobs in the future will require some form of postsecondary education. The authors went on further to stress that colleges and universities need to be prepared to help this growing population. Risley (2019) stated that 36.2% of the total population of students were adult learners. The writer went on to say in the field of adult education there is still a lot of work that needs to be considered to optimally support adult learners. Both these articles stressed the importance of understanding the supports needed by adult nontraditional learners.

Alvarez (2017) ranked colleges based on their innovation to support adult learners. This ranking is important to understand because when deciding on a university to attend, adult nontraditional learners look at how universities support them and their success. Glowacki-Dudka (2019) studied how to engage adult nontraditional learners and the need to acknowledge them, while Rand et al. (2018) focused on how adult learners

choose colleges and universities to attend. In Glowacki-Dudka and Rand both found that adult learners look for program selection, the university's reputation, and convenience of classes. Both authors also stated that adult learners make up 40% of college enrollments. Bohl et al. (2017) stated that in the academic year of 1999 -- 2000, the undergraduate students who had at least one identifying criterion of an adult nontraditional student were 73%. This is when the growth of adult nontraditional learners began because the military raised their tuition assistance program to \$250 a semester hour and \$4,500 a year giving those that are on active-duty military, national guard, and the reserves the opportunity to attend college free (The U.S. Army, n.d.). Bohl et al. found that retention of these students was a challenge and that it was mostly due to the lack of support services provided. Kasworm (2018) reported a year later in 2018, that three quarters (75%) of total students fit one or more criteria of an adult nontraditional learner and stated that colleges and universities do not view adult learners as important and viable students. Kasworm also stated that 1 out of 3 colleges did not encourage adult learners to attend classes at the university; instead, they recommended them to take online classes.

The definition of adult nontraditional learners has begun to blur due to life roles and levels of maturity. Adult learners are parents, workers both full- and part-time, part-time attendees, and reentry participants not simply defined as over the age of 25 years old (Kasworm, 2018). Sun (2019) stated that only 15% of students were traditional, meaning that nontraditional learners comprised about 85% of the student body.

Despite the increase in adult learners, colleges have not adapted their policies to accommodate them (Barr, 2016; Caruth, 2014; Kasworm, 2018; Rabourn et al., 2018).

Hope (2017) stated that the policy architecture in higher education has been set up for first-time, full-time students, and adult learners find it challenging to achieve their postsecondary credentials. The support services for students at many colleges and universities are still developed with the traditional student in mind, with most overlooking adult nontraditional learners and, therefore, setting them up for failure (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Wyatt, 2011). An understanding of adult nontraditional learners and barriers to their success is needed prior to determining their support needs.

Adult Nontraditional Learners

Andragogy is the science of helping adults learn and is widely studied topic. The concept of andragogy was developed in 1833 by the German educator, Alexander Kapp (Loeng, 2017). Knowles (1980) took what was started by Kapp and developed a dynamic definition of adult learning that separates the field of children's education from adult education. Knowles introduced five assumptions about adult learning that are still essential today:

- Self-directed: Adults want to be viewed as capable.
- Accumulation of life experiences: Adults want to use their accumulation of life experiences in classroom experiences.
- The importance of subject matter: Adults want to understand why the subject matter is important to learn.
- Practical applications and solution oriented: Adults prefer practical applications that are oriented to solving problems.

- Intrinsic motivation: Adults are intrinsically motivated. They are naturally driven by personal rewards.

Holton et al. (2015) added one more assumption to Knowles's andragogy: Adults' readiness to learn depends on the immediacy of the need to learn that information (Miller, 2017). Knowles also noted that adults are not interested in the lecture/inquisition format, which is how most universities conduct their classroom teaching (Miller, 2017).

Knowles (1984) later developed the adult learning theory (Schultz, 2012). In this theory, Knowles clarified five major assumptions about adult learners stating that adult learners are identified by (a) experience, (b) motivation, (c) readiness to learn, (d) orientation to learning, and (e) self-concept. Knowles also studied the barriers of adult learning (Rabourn et al., 2018). Other researchers confirmed Knowles's barriers and listed the barriers for adult learners as risk factors and stated that they are the reason most adults withdraw or dropout. These barriers include enrolling in college later in life, working full time, caring for dependents, parenting by themselves, attending part time, and living off campus (Bowers & Bergman, 2016; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Rabourn et al., 2018; Risley, 2019; Zarifa et al., 2018).

Sun (2019), Raybourn et al. (2018), Sutton, (2019), and Byrd et al. (2018), studied adult learners and their problems in higher education. They all agreed that colleges and universities do not take the adult learner into account for their services provided. They pointed out that adult learners have more challenges, such as family responsibilities, job commitments, and inflexible course scheduling. They also highlighted adult learners' anxieties about interacting with younger students and their learning abilities.

They made the following recommendations to assist adult learners with support services:

(a) colleges and universities need to have extended hours at their campus offices to better support adult learners including the financial aid office, advisors, and admissions and (b) brought up the importance of community partnerships to assist with child-care and the like.

Another subgroup of adult nontraditional learners are active military and veterans, who deal with the above barriers along with additional barriers that come with being on active duty. Military students have been an increasing population in higher education since the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill (Brown & Gross, 2011; Sherbert et al., 2017). Developing a better understanding of adult nontraditional learners may possibly assist in determining what support services students serving in the military require to improve their chances of graduating.

Institutional Support

Wyatt (2011) and Rotar (2017) both confirmed how important it is for campus leaders to develop activities and functions that meet the needs of adult nontraditional learners. Karmelita (2017) observed that for adult learners to be successful, universities must assist them to transition to the demands and expectations of college, which requires support and services to help them. The author went on to state that institutions must connect with adult learners and give them a sense that the university cares about them. Sutton (2016) stated that when institutions make long term strategies, they should reflect adult learners and provide enough support to allow them to persist. Sutton (2018) described how important it is to prepare adult nontraditional learners for success at

orientation and how the adult nontraditional learner does not want the same information that traditional students want. Adult nontraditional learners were less concerned about their technological readiness; not interested in meeting new students, or being involved in student organizations, and were less concerned about paying for college (Sutton, 2018).

In the following paragraphs the authors addressed the support that is being provided to students in higher education. The main theme in these articles is that colleges and universities have not adjusted their support services to accommodate the adult nontraditional learner (Bowers & Bergman, 2016; van Rhijn et al., 2016; Zarifa et al., 2018). Bowers and Bergman (2016) explained that support services provided to students pursuing their undergraduate degrees are not geared toward adult nontraditional learners. They went on further to state that services like academic advising, faculty support, and financial aid affect the adult nontraditional learners' persistence and are factors contributing to their withdrawal or no longer continuing. The issue of these support services is that they are not provided at times that are convenient for the adult nontraditional learner. Ellis (2019) stated that the uniqueness of nontraditional learners contributes to their individual struggles with persistence.

van Rhijn et al. (2016) in their study researched the retention of the adult learner discussing Tinto's theory and how important it is to make sure that these students are integrated into the university fully, both socially and academically. Zarifa et al. (2018) studied the 4-year bachelor's degree taking 6 years to complete. They studied both traditional and nontraditional learners, and with the nontraditional learners they stated

that the “odds” on them completing their degree in 4 years is disproportionately stacked against them.

Witkowsky et al. (2016) studied how adult nontraditional learners felt about inclusion into their college. The findings showed that they felt included but believed that the institution did not take action to prevent or address discrimination against them. The needs of mature students are often overlooked and the policies and supports provided are inadequate or inaccessible (van Rhijn et al., 2016). Adult learners credit their success mainly to the support they received from their family and faculty, in that order (Bohl et al., 2017).

Faculty Support

Faculty play an important part in the adult nontraditional learners’ success in higher education. There have been many articles that address the importance of faculty involvement with adult nontraditional learners (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Green & Wright, 2017; Miller, 2017; Osterholt & Dennis, 2014; Perkins-Holtsclaw & Lampley, 2018; Rogers, 2018; Smith, 2017; Van Ameijde et al., 2018). Osterholt and Dennis (2014) have addressed how important it is for faculty to understand the diversity of the learners in their classroom and, by so doing, adopt methods to support their students. Miller (2017) also focused on the challenge of creating the optimal learning environment for adult learners. Miller stated that it is important to not only have faculty who are experts in their discipline but to have faculty who have been trained to understand adult learners and how they learn.

Rogers (2018) explained in 2018 that students are more diverse. They need professionals teaching them who create an environment of support and take into consideration that their students are mostly adult learners who have additional work and family responsibilities. Rogers went on to state that institutions need to provide systems for faculty so that they can demonstrate competence, assert their roles in decision-making in curricular and accreditation matters, and move beyond their disciplinary frames to understand the different students in their class and their knowledge bases. Smith (2017) advised that adult students want to be engaged with their instructors and they want to be educated by a topic expert. Green and Wright (2017) discussed the importance of student and faculty interaction and that it is important for the student to feel connected to the university.

Positive faculty and student communication and interaction improves the motivation and engagement of the adult nontraditional learner which, in turn, improves retention and graduation rates (Green & Wright, 2017; Perkins-Holtsclaw & Lampley, 2018). Van Ameijde et al.'s (2018) research confirms the relationship between communication and student success adding that quality communication between student and faculty was one of the key factors that kept students from dropping out and kept them working toward their degree. Glowacki-Dudka (2019) discussed how institutions, as well as individual faculty, prepare services and instruction with traditional students in mind not taking into consideration the adult nontraditional learner.

Implications

The problem at one local southeastern university was that adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus were graduating at a low rate, which may indicate a lack of needed support services. The purpose of this study was to explore the learning support needs of adult nontraditional learners, institutional support provided and used, and to make recommendations to eventually increase graduation at the study site.

I hope to provide stakeholders with a better understanding of the adult nontraditional learners' needs so programming can be considered and implemented to match their needs, and to possibly improve graduation rates among on-campus adult learners, the problem addressed by the study. The results of this study could have implications regarding what support services are provided to better assist with increasing graduation in the adult nontraditional student population at the local study site. It is important to understand the nontraditional adult learner population; what services are being provided and, of those services, which ones the adult nontraditional learners use and need. A policy recommendation paper may be created to use as a reference guide to better support adult nontraditional learners. Training materials may result from this study so employees of the study site can better meet the needs of the adult nontraditional learners. Ultimately, the implications of this study can lead to changes in the support provided to adult nontraditional learners by guiding administrators and institution leadership to implement the proposed policy recommendations to better support the adult nontraditional learners to increase their graduation.

Summary

In Section 1 I discussed that adult nontraditional learners were becoming the majority student in higher education today and are different than traditional students. The support services provided at the study site and at most institutions in the United States operate under policies and with support programs that do not account for the growing population of adult nontraditional learners. Institutional understanding of their adult nontraditional learners will assist institutional response to their needs. Understanding the services offered and needed will assist institutional response to the adult nontraditional learners.

Although the services provided at the study site have not taken into account adult nontraditional learners it is not known what services are provided. The purpose of this study was to explore the learning support needs of adult nontraditional learners, institutional support provided and used, and to make recommendations to eventually increase graduation at the study site. Through my research I hope to provide stakeholders with a better understanding of these students' needs so programming can be considered and implemented to match their needs, and to possibly improve graduation rates among on-campus adult nontraditional learners, the problem addressed by the study.

In Section 2 I provided the methodology for this qualitative research project study, the selection of participants, the collection of data, and the analysis of the data, with the focus on the adult nontraditional learners and the support needed to be successful in higher education. In Section 3 the project will be explained, and within it the existing problem and the evidence from the literature and research will help me in outlining the

recommendations to assist adult nontraditional learners. Section 4 will include reflections, project strengths and limitations, and recommendations for alternative approaches.

Section 2: The Methodology

The problem at the study site was that adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus were graduating at a low rate, which may have indicated a lack of needed support services. The study site and other universities have not adapted to keep up with the ever-growing population of adult nontraditional learners (Prins et al., 2015). The purpose of this study was to explore the learning support needs of adult nontraditional learners and the institutional support provided and used as well as to make recommendations to eventually increase the graduation rate of this population at the study site. I hope to provide stakeholders with a better understanding of these students' needs so programming can be considered and implemented to match their needs and possibly improve graduation rates among on-campus adult nontraditional learners. According to Creswell (2009), the research design is the procedures and plans for a study that include the detailed methods of data collection and analysis. The nature of the problem, my personal experiences, and the audience for the study guided the selection of the research design.

Research Design and Approach

In this study, I used a basic qualitative design to answer the research questions. According to Yin (2014), a research design should be selected based on the amount of control the researcher has on events, the amount of focus on current events, and the types of research questions. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that basic qualitative research is suitable for "understanding the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved" (p. 24). A qualitative research approach assisted me in providing rich descriptive information about

the research phenomenon (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell stated that a qualitative design is appropriate when the purpose is to interpret, explore, and gain insight into a phenomenon. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) added that qualitative research is helpful in studying a problem with unknown variables by exploring multiple perspectives. According to Wright (2016), qualitative research is broad and includes inquiry to gain a better understanding about a particular event or individual. Use of the qualitative method allowed me to use an investigative approach to gain a better understanding about a particular problem or topic rather than to measure something as done in quantitative research.

Qualitative research studies vary in complexity and may focus on exploring a problem by developing an understanding of a central idea (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Lodico et al., 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Traditionally, basic qualitative research follows an approach for which data are collected “based on words from a small number of individuals so that the participants’ views are obtained” (Creswell, 2012, p. 16). I used open-ended questions in semistructured interviews to allow for the free flow of information. Hedlund et al., (2015) stated that interviews are effective methods for researchers seeking to collect data. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that interviews can be used to collect data for a wide variety of ideas. Interviews provide a method of data collection in qualitative studies (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). According to Morse (2015), qualitative researchers should use semistructured interviews with open-ended questions to collect data. Semistructured interviews provide respondents the opportunity to answer the same questions, which increases the likelihood

of comparability (Patton, 2015). Using this method of interview structure resulted in the collection of rich data that allowed me to explore the patterns and themes that emerged during data analysis. Conducting these interviews has also provided answers that I would be unable to obtain by other means and has allowed me to actively communicate with the participants. In order to enable a deeper exploration of the problem and potential solutions, a smaller number of participants were used.

I considered other research designs for this study, such as phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, and narrative. While these designs are useful in different types of research, they did not fit the nature of the research questions in this study. For example, a phenomenological study requires the researcher to investigate the participants' lived experiences and the interpretation of those experiences over time (Creswell, 2014; Lodico et al., 2010; Patton, 2015). In this study, the research questions were not concerned with "uncovering and interpreting the inner essence of the participants cognitive processing regarding a common experience," which is how Merriam (2009) described phenomenological research (p. 26). The phenomenological approach requires the use of a more in-depth interview structure, and Seidman (2013) stated that this in-depth interview structure may require three separate interviews to fully explore the context of the meaning of the phenomenon. Ethnography is another design that was considered; however, ethnography is used to address a culture or group behavior (see Creswell, 2012). When using this design, the researcher must become fully immersed in the culture or group being studied (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Lodico et al., 2010). Grounded theory is a research design where

the data collection may influence a developing theory (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). In the grounded theory design, the outline of relationships, action, or a system of events emerges from data collection over time (Creswell, 2012). I did not select grounded theory because the goal of the study was not to develop a theory. Finally, narrative studies are used to explore a phenomenon using the participant's narrative and emphasizing the experiences of the participant (Patton, 2015). Narrative studies often require continued engagement to fully explore the phenomenon of interest (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). The information gathered in this type of design is often retold by the researcher, and in the end, the researcher combines their views with the participants' views of their lives in a collaborative narrative (Creswell, 2009). The purpose of this study was not to tell stories, and so the narrative design was inappropriate.

Participants

The study site was an university in the southeastern United States that has four campuses. The basic Carnegie classification was as a Master's College & University: Larger Program, according to the Carnegie classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2017). The population of the university's campuses were comprised of approximately 18,000 students, of which 44% are adult nontraditional learners. According to the director of institutional research, planning, and effectiveness, 30% of these students are pursuing their degree through on-campus classes. For this study, I used purposeful sampling to recruit individuals who have knowledge of the study site and were attending classes on campus. Creswell (2014) stated that identifying participants in qualitative research involves purposefully selecting groups or individuals who will help

answer the research questions. Lodico et al. (2010) stated that the criteria for selecting participants of a qualitative study “involved selecting participants who have key knowledge related to the purpose of the study” (p. 37). Additionally, Merriam (2009) explained that for a researcher to successfully select participants, they must determine the criteria first for selecting the participants.

Criteria for Selecting Participants

I used purposeful sampling to select participants from the study site. Purposeful sampling allows researchers to select participants based on their knowledge, so the researchers can learn more about the local problem (Ford, 2016). The participant selection criteria for this study were (a) adult nontraditional learners, (b) currently attending classes at the study site, and (c) enrolled in an undergraduate degree program.

Justification for the Number of Participants

The sample size for this study was 12 current students attending classes on campus that met the criteria of an adult nontraditional learner. This number of participants provided sufficient depth to address the research questions. According to Creswell (2012), qualitative researchers typically study only a small number of individuals. Saturation occurs when new points or new themes have been exhausted, and rich, high-quality information has been gathered from participants (Fusch & Ness, 2015). In the event that saturation was not reached by interviewing 12 participants, the sample size would have been increased. The names of all interviewees were kept and will remain confidential.

Procedure for Gaining Access to Participants

To recruit participants for the study, my initial plan was to post a flyer around the study site campus at locations where adult nontraditional learners gathered. I received approval from the vice chancellor of academic affairs to post the flyers in classrooms, the library, and around the campus where adult nontraditional learners congregated. Once the flyers were posted, I waited for volunteers to contact me to express interest in the study. Once interest was expressed, the volunteers were to receive an email asking them to provide contact information so that I could call them to verify that they met the requirements of an adult nontraditional learner. In the event that I was not able to obtain enough participants I would follow the contingency plan provided below. Once confirmed that they met the requirements of the study I would have sent an email with the consent form for them to sign. The consent form explained each party's role, provided background information about the study, and described the measures taken for protecting participants' confidentiality and well-being. The interviews were planned to take place at times and in locations agreed on with each individual participant. The locations were going to provide quiet, comfortable settings that was to be free of disruptions and would protect the participants' confidentiality. Flick (2014) noted that a comfortable setting can contribute to a more relaxed interview session. After a location and time were agreed upon, I would have sent notices via email and text to the participants reminding them about the meeting details, the reason they were selected, and the purpose of the study.

Contingency Plan

In early 2020, the world was hit with the COVID-19 pandemic. In March of the same year, colleges and universities were required to shut their campus down to slow the spread of COVID-19. From March until August, most Americans worked and went to school from their homes. It was decided by the study site to open the campus back up for students and start fall classes in August 2020. In the event that I did not obtain participants from the flyers for all of the students needed for the study, I contacted the potential participants by email. I sent an email to institutional research, planning, and effectiveness (IRPE) to request if I could have an email sent to those learners that fit the adult nontraditional learner criteria as stated in this study. The IRPE sent the list to the study sites institutional review board, and they provided me with a list of over 1,000 students, along with their names and email addresses, so that I could email them and request their participation. This was after I had gone to the campus and put up the flyers and saw that very little students were attending class on campus at the study site. The IRPE department keeps data on all students to report to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. The data that they collect, for example, is age, first-time students, transfer students, taking online or in-class courses, degree/certificate-seeking, and additional information. The same inclusion criteria were met by all participants whether they were recruited through the flyers or emails.

Establishing a Researcher-Participant Working Relationship

Establishing a researcher-participant working relationship was essential to the progress and outcome of this study (see Glesne, 2011). My goal was to build a

relationship of mutual respect and understanding at the study site where the participants would feel at ease. According to Walsh (2014), the participant's perspective is one of the most crucial components of qualitative research, and the researcher must be respectful and positive about the participant's opinions while making every effort to build trust. I informed each participant that the information they provided me would be kept confidential, and at any time, they could contact me with questions or concerns. Prior to and at the conclusion of the interview, the participants were given my cell number and email address so they could stay in contact with me if they had any further questions. I informed them that the interview would be audio recorded for transcription, and the recordings would be kept in a safe and locked location that I am the only individual who has access to.

Protection of Participants

The ethical behaviors outlined in the consent form and the interview protocol (Appendix B) represented standards for doing what is morally correct in the course of research (see Stankiewicz & Lychmus, 2016). Specifically, these standards are intended to ensure that participants incur no harm from their role in the study (Stankiewicz & Lychmus, 2016). As the researcher, my role was to protect the participants' confidentiality and privacy (see Hampton, 2016). All data gathered were secured using an electronic database that is password protected and saved on a thumb drive kept in a locked safe at my home.

Data Collection

In this qualitative study, I collected data from participants in semistructured interviews and the data collection instrument was the interview protocol (Appendix B). As Pezalla et al. (2012) suggested, as the researcher, I also functioned as the data collection instrument. An interview is the most commonly used data collection instrument in qualitative research (Yin, 2017).

Interview Protocol

Yin (2017) suggested using an interview protocol as a guide during the data collection process. An interview protocol is a detailed plan of the data collection process, and the protocol enhances transparency and the quality of the research (Sarma, 2015). I used an interview protocol to implement the same interview structure for each participant. I followed the interview protocol by setting a time, date, and location for the interview that was convenient for the participant as well as answering any privacy questions to ease the concerns of the participants. A digital audio recorder was used with the participants' permission to accurately capture each word of the interviews to aid in transcribing the interview data.

Semistructured Interviews

After receiving approval from the Walden institutional review board (approval number # 01-07-21-0663580), I conducted semistructured interviews with open-ended questions that aligned with the research questions see (see Appendix B). The plan for the interview was to conduct it in an office on campus located at a multipurpose building at the convenience of each of the participants. Using the interview protocol, I hoped to

uncover information that answered the research questions and informed me of how the study site could improve the graduation rate of the population under study. As a contingency plan due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I ended up conducting these interviews via Microsoft Teams for the protection of the interviewees and myself.

The interviews were conducted virtually on Microsoft Teams, and the participants decided on the time and location where they were comfortable joining the meeting from. I conducted the interviews from my kitchen table, and the participants were in their places of residence.

Keeping Track of Data

The 12 interviews that were conducted were audio recorded during the interview and 48-72 hours later transcribed into a Microsoft Word document. The data were planned to be put into a computer-aided qualitative data analysis system, NVivo (Q. S. R. International, n.d.), and electronically stored. This data analysis system did not do what I needed it to do so it was decided to just use regular data analysis. Each interviewee was given a four-digit code to keep them confidential. A reflective journal of each interview was planned to be kept, recording the interviewee's reaction to each question. Because the interviews were conducted on TEAMS they were recorded and downloaded on a thumb drive and secured. This was used as the reflective journal and was labeled with the same four-digit code as the participant to coincide with the interview.

Role of the Researcher

I am currently employed by the university under study, working for the global campus. I have been with the university for the past 7 years in the same position. I work

with students, faculty, and staff outside of the state where the campus is physically located. While I had to go to the campus for meetings, I had no interaction with any of the students. The study site chosen is approximately 360 miles from where I reside and work. I had no formal or informal contact with any of the students at the study site. I established a professional, respectful relationship with the adult nontraditional learners selected for this study.

Data Analysis

The data analysis plan was to analyze the data from the one-on-one interviews using a computer-aided qualitative data analysis system, NVivo (Q. S. R. International, n.d.). At the end of each interview, within 48-72 hours, the interview would be transcribed into a Microsoft Word document to prepare for open coding at a later time. NVivo has a transcription mode from the audio but as a backup I transcribed the interviews into a Word Document that I could also upload into NVivo for coding. Again, this software did not work to do the transcription, so the data had to be transcribed manually, and the following were used to analyze the data.

Open coding or initial coding allowed me to fracture or split the data collected into individually coded segments. According to Creswell's recommendation (2012, p. 244), I identified text segments, placing brackets around them, and assigning a code word or phrase that accurately described the meaning of the text segment. After doing this for each interview the next step was to group the codes that were similar into categories that were common for axial coding.

Then using axial coding or focused coding, I reorganized, compared, or focused the open codes into categories, with the goal of prioritizing them into axis categories around which other codes revolved. I formulated those axis categories into a central or core category (Creswell, 2012; Saldana, 2016). This helped me to distinctly label and narrow down the emerging themes throughout the interviewees' responses.

Themes express an idea that can be used to develop meaning (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). As stated by Saldana (2016) "a theme is an outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection, not something that is, in itself, coded" (p. 198). Once all codes and categories were developed, the categories were grouped into themes, which aided in defining the recommendations for change to possibly help the adult nontraditional learners improve their graduation rates.

Evidence of Quality

In qualitative research the researcher must strive for validity or trustworthiness, as stated by Ravitch and Carl (2016). Validity has four constructs, and they are: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Ravitch and Carl explained that validity is the way that the researcher affirms their findings and that the findings are faithful to participants' experiences.

Credibility in a qualitative study considers all of the complexities that are presented in the study and deals with patterns that are not easily explained (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To achieve credibility in this study I conducted member checking. Member checking is a technique used to confirm the accuracy of data and the findings by returning to the source (Merriam, 2009). After completion of the interviews and the data

analysis, I provided each participant with their transcript along with preliminary findings to check for accuracy. The transcripts and preliminary findings were emailed to each participant with a request to verify their answers and ensure that they agree with my findings. Each participant was asked to return a response or corrections as soon as possible but not later than 2 weeks. If at the end of 2 weeks I had not heard from the participant, I assumed that no corrections were needed. By doing this I could make sure that the transcripts accurately conveyed the participants' answers to the questions, and that the findings reflected their intentions. This would confirm the credibility of the interview data collected and analyzed, keeping it aligned with the participants' input.

Transferability, as stated by Ravitch and Carl (2016), in qualitative research is to include detailed descriptions of the data and the context making it possible to form comparisons to other contexts based on the information. According to Pezalla et al. (2012), the interviewer must be considered in the interview process, understanding their unique characteristics and their potential to influence the collection of the data. As stated by Hallberg (2012), in order to replicate a qualitative study the researchers must have the same research questions, as well as the same methods of selecting informants, collecting data and data analysis, and the same theoretical perspective. In this study I provided clear and precise information to meet the criteria of "thick description" so that the readers, or research audiences can make comparisons.

Dependability is the method that is chosen to conduct the research and the stability or consistency of the process used to collect the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The data collection method chosen for this study was semistructured interviews. The

reason for this choice was that the best way to answer the research questions was to go directly to those involved at the study site. For this study to determine the issues of these adult nontraditional learners, they were the best source. I used a former Walden graduate as a peer debriefer, which also added to the dependability and the confirmability of this study.

Confirmability addresses the researcher's biases within the study. While conducting the study my plan was to continually ask myself the following adapted questions as suggested by Ravitch and Carl (2016):

- Am I influencing the findings by having my own agenda and am I imposing that on the data?
- Would someone else's conclusion differ from mine?
- Within the research process whom can I engage to challenge my thinking?
- Which points in the study should I ask partners concerning the issues related to my subjectivity?

By frequently answering these questions throughout the study, I was able to strengthen confirmability of the study. I also engaged a former Walden doctoral graduate to aid in answering these questions to ensure there was little to no researcher bias. While the study was in progress, I forwarded my preliminary findings and transcripts to my peer reviewer bi-weekly for them to review and give me feedback. Once sent, we agreed on a time to discuss their thoughts on a follow-up phone call.

Discrepant Cases

Discrepant cases occur when there are two or more conflicting or inconsistent findings between or among the participants (Yin, 2017). Once open and axial coding, looking for major themes, and member checking were completed, I looked for any discrepant cases. By doing this it further promoted the accuracy, quality, and credibility of the study. Creswell (2012) stated that the presence of major themes and contrary evidence of these themes provides the reader multiple perspectives that further indicate that the researcher has presented the data in an unbiased manner. There were no discrepant cases found in this study.

Data Analysis Results

The problem was that adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus were graduating at a low rate, which might indicate a lack of needed support services. The purpose of this study was to explore the learning support needs of adult nontraditional learners, institutional support provided and used, and to make recommendations to eventually increase graduation at the study site. Twelve adult nontraditional learners were interviewed and assigned a participant number. When referring to the participant, that number was used to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants in the study. Due to COVID-19, the recruitment of these 12 individuals was difficult. I had placed flyers on the campus, but because of the pandemic there were few students on campus when I started gathering participants. So, using my contingency plan I reached out to the study site's institutional review board for assistance. They provided me with a spreadsheet listing about one thousand names and email addresses to assist in gaining

participants. Then I developed a recruitment email to send to the students and attached the recruitment flyer that explained my study. That email message with attachment was then sent to potential participants. Using the study site's list, 25 individuals a day were sent the email until I recruited my 12 participants. There were 10 interviews done on the Teams website and another three interviews were conducted over the phone. One of the three participants on the phone calls were found to be unqualified for the study due to them being a graduate student.

From the analysis, five themes emerged that I discuss in this section. According to Creswell (2014) there are six steps for analyzing data in qualitative research. In this study the following six steps were used to derive the five themes: (a) collecting data, (b) preparing the data by transcribing notes to be analyzed, (c) reading through the data to get a general sense of the information, (d) coding and assigning labels, (e) coding text for descriptions, and (f) coding the text for themes (Creswell, 2014).

Creswell (2014) explained that data analysis is the process of interpreting the data and this analysis can occur simultaneously while other interviews are being conducted. However, in this study the data analysis did not occur simultaneously with the interviews. Once all interviews were conducted, they were transcribed and printed out to start the coding process.

The following themes were derived from 12 one-on-one interview sessions conducted on Microsoft Teams or over the phone due to COVID-19. Most of the interviewees stated (a) students were unaware of what services are offered by the university, (b) the hours that the student support services are open were not conducive for

adult learners, (c) faculty and staff need to understand adult learners, (d) mental health was an issue at the campus and, (e) additional support and encouragement for adult learners were needed to complete their degree.

These themes were developed from the coding process for the data collected. For each interview open coding was completed and noted on a spreadsheet. After each interview was coded the next step was to conduct axial coding that grouped the codes into specific like categories, and then from those categories, themes emerged that aligned with the research questions in the study.

After I completed data analysis, I performed member checking, engaging the participants to review my initial findings and provide feedback to the findings. Candela (2019) stated “Member checking provides a way for the researcher to ensure the accurate portrayal of participant voices by allowing participants the opportunity to confirm or deny the accuracy and interpretations of data, thus adding credibility to the qualitative study” (p. 620). After member checking I sent my findings to my peer reviewer to look at my codes and themes to make sure that I was on track. Next, themes are presented for each of the three research questions. Themes 1 and 2 were applicable to both Research Questions 1 and 2 and are presented to answer both research questions.

Research Question 1: Learning Support Needs

Research Question 1 was posed as: According to adult nontraditional learners taking classes at the study site, what are their learning support needs? The adult nontraditional learners did not know what their learning supports needs were. The

following was the information gathered from adult nontraditional students interviewed and their responses.

The adult nontraditional learners did not know what the university offered to help them in their studies. Of the participants interviewed none had been to an orientation. So, when asked what their needs were, they each needed to ask what was meant by needs. When they were told about the support services that are offered at the study site, they began to open up about what they thought could assist them at getting to graduation. They stated that they needed the university to provide the adult nontraditional learners the opportunity to attend an orientation so that they could learn what was offered to assist them while attending at the study site. Participant 001 replied when asked about what support was offered at the study site “Honestly, I don’t know of any. I have not been directly informed of any.” And Participant 004 stated, “I would say that I don’t know.” And Participant 007 stated “being told what support services are available would be a big help.” There were several other Participants, 002, 005, and 008 with similar comments when asked about what the university offered and what they needed.

Once the participants were informed what was offered by the study site, they stated that they take night and weekend classes, and they need student services to be open when they are on campus. They went on to discuss that they needed faculty and staff to be more supportive of them because they have additional responsibilities that they also take care of, and that it would be supportive if the faculty and staff acknowledged that. Participants also stated that their responsibilities sometimes stress them out and it would be supportive to have mental health support on the university that they could use to help

cope with the issues of life. Finally, they discussed support from outside the university, from family and their places of employment.

For the first research question two themes emerged from participants' responses and are presented in the following sections.

Theme 1: Adult Nontraditional Students Need to Understand What Learning Support Services are Available for Students

From the 12 interviews I learned that many students did not know what services were offered by the university. Four participants knew of some services. Eight (75%) of the participants were not aware of what support services are offered by the university. Participant 001 tutored at the university and so was well-aware of the tutoring services being offered. However, as that individual stated "all of my students have been adult learners. So, I know that the adult learners suffer more and need a little more help." The individual also had a concern about who gets to use the tutoring services. Participant 002 stated that "student services provide resume help, help with writing papers, and studying for tests." Participant 010 knew about academic advising and the writing center.

Participant 012 informed me that they were in the TRIO program. They explained that they had a designated faculty counselor that they could reach out to any time they needed help. They also told me that they had access to a copier machine and were given one-on-one help with their assignments. They receive additional scholarships and grants and can get tutoring help whenever they ask for it. The TRIO program is part of the Higher Education Act of 1964 (U.S. Department of Education). This program was enacted to assist first generation students and students from lower- and middle-income

families. TRIO is made up of eight programs, each covering different situations. These programs were Educational Opportunity Centers, Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Student Support Services, Talent Search, Training Program for Federal TRIO Programs Staff, Upward Bound, Upward Bound Math-Science, and Veterans Upward Bound. This student is in the Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement, and the Student Support Services programs.

In the interview with Participant 008 this individual expressed that it was their responsibility to find out what was offered. Their answer to the question about support services was “I haven’t really sought any to augment my studies.” There were seven other participants who echoed this example. Participants 004, 009, and 011’s comments were that they were not aware of any services, or they did not use any services from the university. Participants 005 and 006 stated that they could always get a tutor and internet access was helpful. Finally, Participant 013 stated “I haven’t even interacted with any of them” referring to the student support services office. Some students even mentioned that the services provided were adequate or good, but when asked what services they were using they could not mention any, again revealing that they were unaware of the support provided by the university.

The second theme helps to understand why students were unaware of services and not using them.

Theme 2: Adult Nontraditional Learners Need Student Services to be Available at Times When the Students are on Campus

Some of the students interviewed knew of a student services department even though they were not aware of what it offered. In a majority of the interviews the participants stated that the support services department was closed when they arrived on campus for their class. Participant 013 stated:

I really haven't even interacted with any of them on campus. Because I take night classes after like most of the time if I try to do anything on campus most of the time it is closing as I am arriving to campus.

Participant 002 stated "I think weekend services would be helpful as well and in addition staying open later in the afternoon to maybe 7 or 8 o'clock." There were several participants who stated throughout the interviews that of the support services they knew about, the services are not convenient for them because of the hours that they are open. Participants 007, 008, and 009 all stated that the support services are "not convenient at all." Participant 008 went on to state "I feel like I am being treated like a traditional student." The participants stated that they have jobs, or children to take care of, so by the time they get to campus the offices are closed.

There were several of the participants who stated that the services were flexible, but again those participants only knew of tutoring and the library. Participant 011 discussed how student services are directed towards students that are just leaving high school and that they have never used them. Participants 004, 006, and 012 all stated that the services were flexible, but they were talking about classes being available during the

day or night and that they could get tutoring or use the writing center. Participant 001 discussed counselors and how they have never used tutoring or the writing center but for the most part the academic counselors were available when they needed them. Participant 010, who is a student athlete, stated that student services is open to them from 08:00 a.m. till 09:00 p.m. They went on further to say that they have never needed them, so they were fine. Finally, Participant 005 stated that they are “relatively fine” and went on to suggest the only thing to make them better is to have the professors available to help them on nights that they are not teaching.

Research Question 2: Fulfillment of Needs

Research Question 2 addressed how well the university was fulfilling needs: According to the perceptions of adult nontraditional learners, to what extent do the support services provided by the university fulfill the needs of adult learners taking classes on campus? To gain information from the participants I asked additional questions that helped me understand the students’ perceptions about the support provided. Two themes emerged in association with Research Question 2.

Theme 1: Adult Nontraditional Students Need to Understand What Learning Support Services are Available for Students.

In the 12 interviews that were conducted many students stated that either they did not use student services, or they did not use it much. However, financial aid did come up in many of the discussions. The perceptions of some of the students were that services are for the traditional students, and they were on their own. Participants 001, 002, 004, 006, 011, and 013 all stated that they were using nothing when it comes to student support.

Their perceptions were that student support services were for the traditional student because they were not open when they are on campus.

The perceptions of the students in TRIO, a program offered for low income and first-generation students as described above, were that the university is doing a great job at providing support. Participant 005 stated “I feel they are very supportive” and “after classes teachers are always there no matter how long it takes.” Participant 012 was also in TRIO and had nothing but great things to say about the program. Participant 010, a student athlete, has support services available when they finish practice, just in case they need help. These two students’ perceptions were that the university is doing a great job.

Participant 007 discussed how student services could only be accessed online. The participant was not aware of a student support service on campus. Finally, participant 009 was a veteran student using Veterans Administration (VA) benefits. They had nothing good to say about the student support services offered by the university. Their perception was that the VA does a great job at supporting them, but the university does not help in any way, and if it was not for the VA, they would not have a chance of graduating.

Theme 2: Adult Nontraditional Learners Need Student Services to be Available at Times When the Students are on Campus

Adult nontraditional learners revealed that the support services department was closed when the students arrived at campus, so it was not any help. Student 001 stated how they had to take off work to go to campus when student services were open and “I feel like every bit of information I got while I was there was like pulling teeth out of everybody.” There were four others, 002, 005, 008, and 007 who expressed that the

support services were not offered at a convenient time and that the support services should extend their hours and maybe open on Saturdays. Participant 013 stated, “I feel like there is not any support for those of us especially those of us that are attending evening classes.” Participants 004, 006, 010, and 012 all stated that the support services are flexible, however of the four of them two do not use any support and one is a student athlete, who has additional help available. Participant 011 stated “I have never needed them, so they are fine.” Finally, the participant using their VA benefits stated, “I do not feel like the timing is convenient.”

Research Question 3: Recommendations

Research Question 3 addressed recommendations: What recommendations do adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus suggest to improve the learning supports provided that may increase their chances of graduating?

To help answer this research question all five themes which emerged from the study interviews apply, the two that have already been discussed and the following three.

Theme 3: Faculty and Staff Need to Understand Adult Nontraditional Learners to Better Support Them

When conducting the interviews there were some comments made that surprised me. One participant, 006, who had a family with children and a full-time job stated “teachers don’t understand them” and the individual went on to say that “a teacher told them if you cannot separate your family issue then you should quit school.” This points out that the faculty need to have more understanding of what adult learners have to deal with as well as attend classes. Another participant, 008 stated “I would say as far as

faculty they are fine, but nothing spectacular.” When talking with this participant they stated that depending on the professor sometimes they had to wait for a response from them for a few days. There were also some comments about if you missed two labs you fail the class, and there were no exceptions.

Theme 4: Increased Mental Health Support for Adult Nontraditional Learners

The theme calling for mental health support as a recommendation was heard from most (8 or 75%) of participants interviewed. Participants mentioned the trials and tribulations they were going through and how COVID had only increased their feelings of depression. Most stated how there was no place on campus where they could go to just talk with someone about their feelings they were experiencing. Participant 003 stated “I was dealing with a bit of depression when I first started school. I didn’t really feel like it was worth it.” Participant 008 also stated

I had to quit school my sophomore year because my sister died and things like that kinda snowballed after that so if I had someone more willing on the faculty or someone that reached out to me that said hey we know you are going through something what can we do to help.

Of the participants interviewed, one half (6), discussed mental health and asked for mental health support.

Theme 5: Additional Support and Encouragement is Needed for Adult Nontraditional Learners to Complete Their Degrees

Throughout the interviews that were conducted there were many comments about the lack of support and encouragement from the university, faculty and staff, and

surprisingly family and friends. Participant 009 stated that “there should be more of an effort made for students not to feel inferior, or slow, or dumb.” They went on to state “I should not feel like I am bothering anybody.” Their recommendation was that the faculty and staff should make more of an effort to be more personable and that they should try to connect more with the students. This participant also stated that they were receiving no support from the university but they were receiving support from the VA and that is what was helping them complete their degree.

Participant 001 discussed how being a parent trying to complete a degree was difficult and that professors were not understanding. They went on to say that the university’s policy of getting extra time on assignments or tests was too strict. They suggested that the university come up with a designation for adult learners, something like that used to designate accommodations to comply with Americans with Disabilities Act. So, the adult learner “would have to meet 3 out of 5 criteria, for example they have children, they work a full-time job, you’re married, things like that.” With this system the professor could check to see if they are exempt when they ask for more time.

Participant 002 explained how student services should be opened longer during the week and it should be opened on the weekend. They recommended that, if possible, students could submit a question online and then someone could respond with a video chat to answer any other questions that came up. Participant 013 went on to expand that they “had such a negative experience that I have not tried to go further.” Their suggestion was a more flexible schedule for the support services.

Participants 007, 008, and 011 were not using any student support services and they did not know of any. One stated that those services were directed towards traditional students. The other two stated they did not know of any and they were not informed of any. These students mentioned some kind of briefing that could inform them of what is available would be helpful.

Summary of the Outcomes

I explored three research questions for this study. These three research questions addressed: what learning supports were used, what were the perceptions of the provided learning supports, and what were recommendations that will assist adult learners to reach graduation.

RQ1: According to adult nontraditional learners taking classes at the study site, what are their learning support needs?

Themes 1 and 2 indicated that the adult learners attending classes on campus were not aware of what services are offered or they were aware of just a few of the services offered. They also stated that in order to help the nontraditional learner more the support services department needs to be open longer and on the weekends. The services offered were tutoring, library, and of course financial aid. Students who were first generation or low income have a better support system then most nontraditional learners due to a program called TRIO, a program that is part of the Higher Education Act of 1964 that provides students with additional grants, additional support services, and a dedicated faculty member to assist them. TRIO students have a network of faculty and staff who are dedicated to helping them succeed.

RQ2: According to the perceptions of adult nontraditional learners, to what extent do the support services provided by the university fulfill the needs of adult learners taking classes on campus?

Theme 1 indicated that the adult nontraditional learners attending classes on campus were aware of none or only a few of the services provided by the university. Some of the participants felt that it was their responsibility to search out what help was available for them. One of the issues brought up was that for the traditional students there was a class offered to brief them about support services offered and for the adult learners this is nonexistent. Also, as for the advising, most of the participants were not aware that they had an advisor and the ones who were aware, stated that as an adult learner they had to reach out to the advisors for support. The university provided advisors for the traditional students who reach out to them each term. The university also puts the advisors in the classrooms with the traditional students.

RQ3: What recommendations do adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus suggest to improve the learning supports provided that may increase their chances of graduating? To answer Question 3, the five themes that emerged were combined. I have discussed Theme 1 and 2 above. Theme 3 and 5 indicated that faculty and staff need to be more supportive and encouraging to better support adult learners. There were a few of the participants who stated the support from faculty and staff was poor to nothing spectacular. However, there were a couple of participants who mentioned a few faculty members who supported them very well. Theme 4 brought out the need for increased mental health support. In almost every interview conducted, this issue was

brought up as either not knowing that the university had mental health support or they were unaware of how to get mental health support.

Based on the findings, adult nontraditional learners attending classes on campus at the study site need to have a better understanding of the support provided by the university. This could be accomplished by conducting an orientation when they begin their first class at the university similar to the one provided to traditional students. Because the university has different start times the orientation needs to be conducted at each intake of adult learners. The information covered would be tailored to the adult nontraditional learner. Nontraditional students need a thorough orientation to understand procedures and processes that are critical to their retention according to the Nontraditional Students Report (2009). In the same report discussed was how other colleges either make the orientation mandatory or voluntary. At one university the assistant dean of continuing education stated, “It’s important for adults returning to the classroom to be oriented on how to access various services, see counselors, etc. (p. 4).” In the same article another individual stated that their university encouraged adults to attend the orientation but, if they do not, the material was mailed to them. These are universities that are helping their adult learners understand what support services are there for them to use.

A policy recommendation paper could be prepared to brief the stakeholders at the university about what can be done to increase the learning support for adult nontraditional learners. The policy paper would include research about what other organizations are doing to support their adult nontraditional learners and assist faculty

and staff to understand and encourage adult learners at the study site. Brinthaupt and Eady (2014) discussed the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of faculty towards nontraditional learners. They wrote that very little research has addressed how faculty view and work with adult learners. In their study they found that the faculty treated the adult learner similarly to the traditional student. The faculty also expressed interest in learning more about adult learners. In the article written by Fahey and Ippolit (2014) examined was how educators need a learning practice as well as a teaching practice, and how adults' learning changes makes a difference in their teaching practice. In the article they addressed the learning changes that take place over time and that how adults learn is different from how younger students learn.

In a study conducted by Klempin et al. (2021) they focused on three areas (a) helping students choose and enter a program of study, (b) keeping students on their path and, (c) promoting adult learning through inclusive classroom practice. The student support started before students stepped foot on campus. They found that the onboarding process was a critical part for adult nontraditional learners who were just starting in higher education. After onboarding it is important to keep them on their path to success. This is done by the student advisors knowing and recognizing when a student is at risk. Policies and procedures need to be developed to track each student throughout their program. Finally, to keep students on their path learning must be promoted in the classroom. One of the most important parts is to promote pedagogical strategies designed to find the specific needs of the adult nontraditional learners and to build an inclusive environment for mixed-aged courses.

Finally, Theme 4 addressed the mental health program on campus. In a study conducted by Moore et al. (2020), they highlighted that campus counseling centers are describing an increasing rate of mental health issues on campuses and the increasing rate of mental health concerns is supported by observed trends in college student surveys conducted by the American College Health Association (2017). In their study they also pointed out the growing population of nontraditional learners in higher education. In the study they stated, “it is possible that the stress that accompanies returning to school while working full time or balancing a family may contribute to increasing mental health issues for adult nontraditional learners (p. 221).” This supports the data that my participants indicated during the study. During my study there were no discrepant cases found.

Findings from the current study supported the conceptual framework. Tinto’s (1975) theory posited that students arrive on campus from an array of backgrounds with various experiences. Retention of students is based on how well students integrate into the campus. My study addressed nontraditional student services needs to support them and enhance their integration and possibility for degree completion. My study uncovered specific needs and supports which were confirmed by previous research.

In Section 3, I will use the information from my findings to develop a project (Appendix A) that offers a policy paper to inform the stakeholders at the university and to hopefully assist faculty and staff to better understand and become more supportive of adult nontraditional learners. I provide a review of the literature of what is currently being done to improve the support to the adult nontraditional learners in higher education. Finally, I provide a project evaluation plan and the project’s implications.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

While working for the study site with adult nontraditional learners attending classes on campus, I observed that these students were graduating at a low rate (i.e., about 33% in 2016). I discovered that the student population of the university was shifting to more adult learners than traditional students. Reviewing the literature, I found that this trend was happening throughout academia (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), and most universities have not done anything to address this issue (Gulley, 2021; Jitendra Singa, 2019; Lin & Wang, 2021). To assist these adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus, I conducted this study to discover their learning support needs. Understanding this population's learning support needs is important because programs and policies can be developed to assist adult nontraditional learners who take classes on campus obtain their degree.

Five themes emerged from data analysis in this study. The adult nontraditional learners who were interviewed shared their concerns about the support services that the university offers. Some of the participants stated that while they were not informed of the support services, they felt it was their responsibility to find out what was offered by the university. These students and the other participants interviewed in the study concluded that the university could develop a class or orientation for adult learners to inform them of what services are available for them. The university could also extend the hours that the support services office is open and include weekends for those adult learners who work and have children. The participants of the study suggested that faculty and staff

needed to treat adult learners differently than traditional students. It was also suggested that the university provide more mental health support for adult nontraditional learners.

I decided to write a policy recommendation paper to summarize the findings of this study and provide recommendations to the chancellor and the board of directors of the campus study site with the goal of supporting adult nontraditional learners and possibly improve their chances of graduating at a higher rate. In alignment with the research findings. In this section I describe the project as well as provide the rationale for choosing a white paper as the project genre, a review of the literature that aligns with the study findings, an evaluation plan for the project, and potential implications of the project.

Rationale

The purpose of this study was to explore the learning support needs of adult nontraditional learners and the institutional supports they were provided and used as well as to make recommendations to eventually increase the graduation rate of this population at the study site. The problem with low graduation rates among adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus required an understanding of the unmet learning support needs that might help more of these students graduate at the study site and possibly at other institutions that are experiencing similar problems.

Based on the findings, I first considered developing a professional development project for faculty and staff. A professional development project distributes information to interested and invested participants, encouraging changes in conduct or program delivery (Canaran & Mirici, 2020). I believe that this genre of project would have only

addressed a portion of the issues at the university and would not have resolved the problem. Using a professional development project format would have addressed only one of the themes that emerged in the study. While a professional development program may be required at another time, the study findings suggested a broader approach was needed to address the problem.

I also thought of conducting a program evaluation, but no student support program existed at the study site for nontraditional students. Program evaluations are used to assess the effectiveness of an existing program designed from the perspective of an objective person or persons (Masehela & Mabika, 2017; Webber et al., 2019). In this study, the findings had nothing to do with a particular program but rather the support services provided to adult nontraditional learners.

The third project genre considered was a white paper, also known as a position paper or policy recommendation paper. The purpose of a white paper is to detail an organization's needs, including the historical background of policy conflicts and a literature review of the problem with recommendations for policy changes (Adkins, 2019). Completing a white paper was the most appropriate way to present the findings from this study because this format allowed me to present the adult nontraditional learners' perceptions and needs to the appropriate stakeholders. Harding (2017) revealed that a white paper or policy paper can be effective for a particular group of individuals, stating that a policy paper is most often used to address an issue of concern with an organization. The current study findings addressed the gap in practice, which was a lack

of needed support for adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus at the study site that may be contributing to the low graduation rate among this population.

The findings of this study will hopefully be beneficial to the administration of the southeastern university study site to use to develop better support services for the ever-growing population of adult nontraditional learners at the study site. Sharing the findings of this study in the form of a white paper for the chancellor and the board of directors was an appropriate project genre. One of the purposes of a white paper is to address certain problems and advocate for certain solutions (Purdue University, n.d.). In this study, problems and potential solutions to those problems were identified at the study site. Bringing these problems and potential solutions to the attention of the chancellor and the board of trustees may help improve the support services that are provided to adult nontraditional learners, helping them to achieve higher graduation rates. Based on the findings of this study and the current literature and research, the white paper will hopefully provide a mechanism for ensuring the appropriateness of the solutions that are proposed.

Review of the Literature

In this study, the problem under study at one local southeastern university was that adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus were graduating at a low rate, which may have indicated a lack of needed support services. From the participants' interview responses, five themes emerged that guided the development of the project. I believe that the best project to resolve the problem was a policy recommendation paper or white paper. A one-time professional development program would not be a sufficient

project to address the problem at the study site. To create sustainable change, the board and the chancellor must look at adapting policy that will establish a continued commitment to ensure adult nontraditional learners are receiving the support needed to achieve a higher graduation rate.

In this literature review, I examine several key areas related to the project. To establish the structure for the project, the first section includes information on policy or white papers. Because the policy paper focuses on the five themes, there is a section for each theme that emerged from the study. Researching deeper into each theme assisted me with developing the policy paper and making recommendations.

I used several databases to search for literature for this review, including the Education Resources Information Center, Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, SAGE Journals, SAGE Knowledge, and ProQuest Central. The following keyword search terms were used: *white paper, policy paper, position paper, support services, adult learners, nontraditional students, student services, orientation, mental health, faculty support, family support, and graduation support*. The information that is cited in this literature review all came from peer-reviewed sources.

Policy Papers

The project document in Appendix A will be used to share information about my suggested recommendations for assisting the adult nontraditional learners attending classes on campus at the study site. Policy papers or white papers can be effective for a particular group of individuals (Harding, 2017). The U.S. government was the first to use white papers as an instrument to defend a policy standpoint (Stelzmner, 2010). White

papers have been used by writers to argue a specific position or propose a solution to a problem, addressing the audience outside the organization (Purdue University, 2020). My policy paper should be helpful to the stakeholders at the study site through educating them on the steps that could be taken to better assist adult nontraditional learners. One of the essential functions of a policy paper is the capability to impact personnel who are involved in the decision-making process. According to Youshida and van de Walt (2018), a policy or white paper is an instrument used to explain information to specific individuals.

Why a Policy Paper?

To address higher education stakeholders, a policy recommendation paper is an effective avenue to share data-driven results (Parker-Young, 2017). At the national and local levels of education institutions, policy papers have been demonstrated as positive and effective means of change (Nehring & Szczesiul, 2015; Shannon, 2019). Policy papers that have been properly developed encompassing the universities' values tend to be motivational and encourage action on the part of faculty and other invested stakeholders (Christensen et al., 2020). A good policy paper should be based on well-researched, factual data and be communicated clearly and concisely (Helgetun & Menter, 2020; Herman, 2018). The policy that needs modification or implementation should be obvious based on the data provided (Leonard, 2018).

While the data from policy recommendation papers can point to best practices and make policy recommendations, this is not always enough to move an institution towards a solution. Providing access to slightly simplified evidence or even raw research evidence

is not generally an effective way of using the information (Gorard et al., 2020). Herman (2018) suggested that policy papers should be used to progressively lead the reader to the recommended solutions the policy would yield, using the significant findings based on the data. By the end of the policy paper, the readers should not only understand the problem, but they should also understand how the recommendations will lead to solutions. When using evidence-based policymaking, policy decisions are expected to follow rigorous and accurate uses of scientific evidence (Parkhurst, 2017).

In higher education, along with transparency, sustainability, efficiency, integrity, and people centricity, evidence-based policymaking is considered a component of good governance (Bojtor & Bozsó, 2020). Providing guiding reasoning for the policy direction tends to motivate the stakeholders who will be putting the policy in place and be met with less resistance (Parkhurst, 2017). Evidence provides the foundational information a policy recommendation rests upon. To make quality decisions there must be clear, substantive evidence, and decisions cannot be made without that crucial data (Bennett, 2019; Parkhurst, 2017). There are many institutions, like the police, the judiciary, and the military, that cannot function properly without the security evidence provides (Fleming & Rhodes, 2018). This need for substantiation led Helgetun and Menter (2020) to suggest that society is in an evidence era where a dominant thought centers on the use of evidence to justify a policy.

Policymakers should always try to use evidence wherever possible to guide how they design and implement their policies (Bennett, 2019). Additionally, data should be used as a benchmark to measure the effectiveness of the policy as it moves forward

(Beerrens, 2018). To describe the effectiveness of the policy recommendation in the future, the data provide a placemark to provide quality assurance. Not only does data-based evidence enable policy recommendations, it is also used to measure the future progress of that policy change (Hollands et al., 2019).

To develop the policy paper recommendations, the data provided by investigating the research questions of the study are used. For policy recommendations to create change, they must be followed (Fisch, 2017; Herman, 2018). To create a call to action and to persuade those involved, evidence is needed. Carrier (2017) developed six categories of persuasion criteria to be used in the creation of policy recommendation papers: compatibility, accessibility, practicality, evidence, credibility, and appeal. Parkhurst (2017) explained that clear, concise, credible evidence is necessary to convince stakeholders to support a policy change. Without evidence, political or positional influence is more likely to create policy than rational, investigative data (Fleming & Rhodes, 2018; Parkhurst, 2017).

Policy papers provide stakeholders and decision makers with best practices that are based on the research (Cheeseman et al., 2019; Crews, 2016; Kogan, 2018). The data will not only communicate needed changes in policy, but will also provide a base to compare to other studies and policies to discover commonalities and best practices (Crews, 2016; Kogan, 2018). When creating a policy or white paper, it is important to understand the group of stakeholders the policy will affect (Caputo et al., 2018; Suldovsky et al., 2017). Three stakeholder groups will be affected by this policy recommendation paper: administrators, faculty, and staff.

The messaging needs to be delivered in an engaging, impactful manner that is easily absorbed by the recipient (Butt et al., 2016; Caputo et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2017). According to McIvor (2018), an effective policy paper consists of a short, concise brief, typically between two to four pages, which provides practical and feasible solutions to an issue. Because of their condensed format, policy briefs have the potential to reach large audiences through different networks, increasing the opportunity of the research being read and acted upon (French-Constant, 2014). According to Meador (2020), it is essential to have policies and procedures that are current and up to date for the governing of day-to-day school operations.

Support Services for Adult Nontraditional Learners

The first theme that emerged in the current study was that the individuals I interviewed knew very little about the support services that are offered by the university. According to Holzer and Baum (2017), institutional barriers, in the nature of their structure, hinder nontraditional adult learners' progression towards degree completion, and as a result, low completion rates continue to be a problem in higher education. This is a problem not only for the university but also for the communities around them. As a result of low completion rates, employers who rely on having an educated workforce to hire may experience a shortage, which also affects local and state policymakers whose responsibilities include bringing in business and industries to the area that will boost the economy (Holzer & Baum, 2017).

There are many obstacles that are faced by adult nontraditional learners that impede them from reaching their goals, and they may not see the value of achieving them

and, therefore, decide to drop out. To stop this from happening, universities' completion rates must be improved. To improve completion rates, institutional structures and the barriers they present must be addressed to allow for more successful degree completion for adult nontraditional learners (Kerby, 2015). Changes must be made to help more adult nontraditional learners enroll, persist, and succeed as well as to improve the process through providing clearer pathways to student success (Kerby, 2015). At some universities and colleges academic programs and support services have been redesigned, which has led to guided pathways to meet student goals (Kezar & Holcombe, 2018; National Orientation Directors Association, 2017).

Ruppert and Meadows (2017) corroborated the findings of Fittler (2016) regarding the behaviors of college students seeking help. Fittler divided the student behaviors into five help-seeking constructs: formal and informal help-seeking, help-seeking threat, help-seeking avoidance, and instrumental and executive help-seeking. In the study, each construct was interrelated, and the results indicated that students with lower grade point averages (GPAs) were less likely to seek academic assistance. Fittler stated that students may underutilize academic support services because they do not want others to see their need or may underestimate their need for support. Student support services' unreliable or inaccurate assessment of academic needs increases students' vulnerability for low educational success. Other concerns for students are also confidentiality and privacy issues, which make the students who need assistance reluctant to seek them.

Student engagement is a critical indicator of success, and students' effort and involvement in classes they are taking are important determinants of persistence and success (Gallimore, 2017). There have been many studies in higher education on persistence and success. These studies indicated that greater persistence from the student is associated with higher level of engagement inside and outside of the classroom (Jacobs, 2017). Adult nontraditional learners' persistence is affected by numerous internal and external factors. Researchers have indicated that orientation is a critical factor in students' decisions to actively engage in their college experience (Chan, 2019; Jacobs, 2017; Ribbe et al., 2016). Floyd (2018) stated that the people who have constant and face-to-face contact with students have the responsibility of developing effective strategies to retain students to completion. Academic and student affairs divisions are extremely important to students and their educational success. Within the shifting educational market and governmental setting in order to increase effectiveness the student affairs specialist must quantify and articulate the retention and completion outcomes of students (Floyd, 2018; McCarthy, 2018).

Orientation, or first-year seminar, is an introductory class offered to first-year students, mostly freshman. Over 60% of colleges and universities offer first-year experience programs for freshman students (Alamuddin & Bender, 2018). Focusing on the 1st year of college and student and faculty engagement outside the classroom, freshman orientation, freshman seminars, and various extracurricular programs have been introduced by researchers (Roksa & Whitley, 2017). According to Xu et al. (2018) and Hope (2018), student persistence and vulnerability at the beginning of college is the

reason it is so important to help them persist. These are vital to the retention and success of reaching graduation for college students. Studies have shown that 1st year students who have attended a first-year seminar have stated that the program was beneficial to acquiring more information about the institution, realizing study resources, choosing classes that relate to their program, and collaborating on team projects (Tharp, 2017).

Services such as freshman learning community, peer mentoring, and student engagement offer opportunities to assist students to acclimate to college culture and thrive during their first year (Frischmann & Moor, 2017). The operations and reputation of the university are dependent on the retention of students (West & Williams, 2017). The most impactful and important year is the 1st year of the students' life in academia and is essential to academic performance and retention (Rossbach et al., 2018). In some universities the leaders developed and implemented 1st year programs that included freshman learning communities (Flores & Zhang, 2019). In these communities students are placed in cohorts to encourage them to actively contribute to the learning environment (Frank et al., 2019). This practice was recognized by The Association of American Colleges and Universities as one of the 10 fundamental practices that produce positive results in an array of educational outcomes (Kern & Kingsbury, 2019). Similar to the many studies that have preceded this one, the findings suggest that student orientations and first-year seminars increase the likelihood that students will be retained (Mi, 2019; Villano et al., 2018).

The more the leadership of colleges and universities work on supporting adult learners' needs, the more adult learner satisfaction will increase, and that will also

increase their retention (Anderson, 2019). Those individuals who work closely with students, associate their success with retaining students until graduation (Lane et al., 2019).

Access to Services

In an article by Gulley (2021) it stated that in higher education there is an assumption that most students are traditional students, aged 18 – 24. Iloh (2018) stated that “While these studies and efforts have provided substantial information to guide our field, they are inherently limited by their intentional and narrow focus on younger student populations with traditional educational trajectories” (p. 25). A focus on traditionally aged students results in several things, the first of which is creating “work-day” hours for educational support, and it also hinders the higher education institutions from offering the most quality learning environments (Gulley, 2021). My study revealed that support services need to be offered beyond work-day hours.

Remenick (2019) discussed how the nontraditional student population is growing and how nontraditional students face greater barriers to success than traditional students. Remenick stated that it is important to support these individuals, however accessing the resources and support services for nontraditional students is “difficult for nontraditional students who have multiple responsibilities, are enrolled online, commute to the campus, or are unable to get to campus during working hours” (p. 24). In my interviews there were several participants who echoed this very comment. Remenick stated that if accessibility is an issue, then it might be necessary for campus leaders to look into new

ways of providing student services that will meet the needs of adult nontraditional learners.

To assist both nontraditional and traditional students the information presented by Barret et al. (2019) about artificial intelligence (AI) is one way to provide a different kind of student services. The authors described exactly what AI is and stated that there are three levels of AI. The basic level is considered conversational interfacing. Conversational interfacing involves surface-level interactions. Conversational interfacing “lets students interact with often complex services via messaging, something they do every day” (Cheston & Shock, 2017, p. 4). Contextual user interface, the next level, blends the conversational interface with graphic user interface to allow more precise support for students. Graphic user interface allows the student to be more self-directed based on the information gathered from the conversation and reduces the frustration of lengthy textbot chatter. Textbot tools perform automated tasks that facilitate conversations without the involvement of a human.

The last level of AI connects the contextual aspect of conversation with the ability to interpret the unstated needs of the student. The way this works is it integrates the student’s behavior, curriculum pace, and progress. AI will intervene and “nudge” the student toward their next, best action or refer them to their advisor.

At Georgia State they lose between 10% and 20% of students to summer melt, which is the loss of students between when they enroll to when they actually begin class, i.e., they decide not to attend (Page & Gehlbach, 2017). Georgia State started using a chatbox (Pounce), which successfully reduced the melt by 20% in the first year of

implementation (Page & Gehlbach, 2017). “Pounce,” the chatbot used by Georgia State, has directly impacted student access to higher education. AI collects students’ interaction data from a number of sources and then uses the data to “learn” which students are at risk of not staying enrolled or reenrolling (Kim, 2018). AI can also determine the “good” behavior of students and relay the information to counselors, advisors, faculty, deans, etc. (Page & Gehlbach, 2017). Additionally, AI will be able to alert faculty or staff members if a student is in danger of withdrawing a lot quicker than traditional advising meetings (Page & Gehlbach, 2017).

Using AI will afford the opportunity to immediately impact student experience in regard to student affairs. “Chatbots are great tools to communicate with customers” (Page & Gehlbach, 2017, p. 69). With the feedback they collect through simple questions, they can make improvements on their services/products, they can also get them to track patterns and behaviors by monitoring user data (Olawale, 2019 p.1). AI has potential for supporting nontraditional student needs identified in my study.

Faculty and Staff

During my interviews one of the themes that kept arising was the lack of support from faculty and staff. One individual stated that it was like pulling teeth to get information when they went into the student services department. Another participant stated that a professor told them they had to make a decision, either their family or school and that they needed to get their priorities straight. While conducting research I learned there were other universities with the same issues. In an article by Marade (2019) a student described an interaction with a professor similar to the one above. In fact, the

student stated that the professor made her feel like an imposter in the class they were taking (Marade, 2019).

Levett-Jones and colleagues, as referenced in Law et al. (2019), stated that student-staff relationships are “a key influence on students’ experience of belongingness” and that “staff inclusivity and legitimization with support” encourage a sense of belonging (p16). In the same article Law et al. stated six experiences correlated with positive long-term outcomes in college. Two of those were about relationships and long-term success of students. Correlated with long-term success of students were questionnaire items. “My professors at [college] cared about me as a person” and “I had a mentor who encouraged me to pursue my goals and dreams” (p. 10). In conclusion, this part of the article stated that colleges should create an environment that fosters stronger student-faculty relationships (Law et al., 2019).

Law et al. (2019) discussed mentoring by faculty and staff. First, they explained the definition of mentoring as the “personal and reciprocal relationship” involving the more experienced, who serve as a guide and teacher for a less experienced mentee (p. 14). In examining the success of mentoring relationships in a comparison of two groups of students, one group with mentors and one without, they found that the one with the mentors was positively correlated with persistence and the greater the interaction with the mentor the stronger the correlation. In the same study they found that informal interactions between students and faculty in which faculty were perceived as approachable and available emphasized that the student’s academic self-concept was positively impacted.

Adams et al. (2021) produced a playbook with six recommendations to care for students. They started with faculty reworking their syllabus content, giving faculty examples on ways to make their syllabus more friendly and easier to read, and writing with a caring voice. By making these changes, this provides clear expectations, reducing jargon, and appealing to and motivating students. They recommended that faculty look at course content again, giving examples of how to make the course more interesting and motivating. Still focused on faculty the next step is to assess students with care. They again gave examples on how to give students multiple ways to demonstrate their knowledge during the course. Finally, to help faculty develop and enact a communication plan, they recommended setting up a communication plan with the students so that they can have their questions answered quickly. This makes the class warmer and gives a sense of caring for the student. Relationships at the study site could be monitored so students feel welcomed during every interaction.

Mental Health

Another recurring theme in my study was mental health issues and that participants did not know where to go to get help with some of their issues. One participant had dropped out of school because of the death of their sister. They stated that if the faculty or staff were paying attention, perhaps they could have received some help and stayed in school. Mental health is a big issue in higher education and there are a multitude of articles stating the rise in mental health issues (Brio et al., 2019; Edwards et al., 2020; Gatto et al., 2022; Smith & Applegate, 2018; Stegenga et al., 2021; van Agteren et al., 2019). Most of these articles discussed the issues involving mental health

(Gatto et al., 2022) stating that college is a critical transitional period and is associated with unique stressors. Gatto et al. explained these stressors result in physical and mental vulnerabilities and that students do not access the help they need.

Three areas that college students deal with are depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation or self-injury. These three areas are the most prevalent among college students pertaining to mental health issues. Depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation or self-injury can impact college outcomes such as GPAs, persistence, retention, and graduation rates (Kwakye & Kibort-Crocker, 2020; Smith & Applegate, 2018; Stegenga et al., 2021). Kwakye and Kibort-Crocker (2020) stated that close to a third of students reported experiencing depression and around a fourth experienced anxiety. It is imperative that colleges and universities address these issues and find ways to assist students in coping with mental health.

How can institutions of higher education assist adult nontraditional learners with their mental health? A small college library set up a meditation room for their students, as a temporary relaxation space in a large meeting space to hopefully help students cope with the end-of-semester stress (Bremer, 2019). They monitored the use for a complete semester in the summer to determine if it would be used. The results were evenly spread between days of the week as well as times of the day and night. To their surprise the usage did not pick up towards the end of the semester. They also put comment cards in the space to gather data on how this was helping students cope with stress and anxiety. They received glowing remarks about how the space helped them throughout the semester. One card even stated that “this room is the best” (p. 341).

Additional Support

There are a multitude of items that can relate to the theme of additional support: babysitting, help from employers, help from family and friends, and additional financial support. One of the additional support issues is receiving credit for life experiences.

While the study site offers credit for military members if they have their Service Members American Council on Education Registry Transcript transcripts, there are others who could be receiving credit for work or classes they have taken at their places of employment.

Garcia et al. (2020) discussed the current state of higher education policies in regard to experiential learning. In their brief they discussed the policies that some universities are using and how states can help universities by providing guidance. Currently there are four ways to give students credit for prior learning and they are: (a) standardized examination credit by successfully completing advance placement, College Level Examination Program, International Baccalaureate, Excelsior exams, Subject Standardized Tests and others; (b) faculty-developed challenge exams; (c) portfolio-based and other individualized assessment for which students create a portfolio that is evaluated by faculty; and (d) evaluation of noncollege programs in which students get credit based on recommendations from American Council on Education or National College Credit Recommendation Service that evaluate training offered by employers. In Indiana students are allowed to use financial aid to pay for the credit received for experiential learning credits.

The last two recommendations are for staff, the first being to integrate institutional supports. They recommended that the institution take a look at their support services. There are five areas the authors put support services into, and they are:

1. Administrative services (course enrollment; fees and payments; financial aid).
2. Academic services (tutoring; library services; bookstores, technical support, and testing).
3. Personal services (career services; military and veterans; health care needs, childcare).
4. Communications services (social networking; messaging).
5. Student community services (student activities; clubs; mentorship and volunteer groups); (Adams et al., 2021).

The second recommendation for staff is self-care, making sure the staff take care of themselves. As discussed in the previous theme students are experiencing mental health issues at an increasing rate. Recommended by Adams et al. (2021) was for staff to examine themselves and determine their energy levels. The staff must look at their sleeping and eating habits to determine if they are eating right and getting enough sleep. The staff must find time to unwind and take care of their mental health. The authors also give examples of different things to help with mental health issues (Adams et al., 2019).

Conclusion

In this literature review I researched the five themes that were developed from my research findings based on the interviews that were conducted. The relevant literature and the research results guided me in the development of the project which is presented in Appendix A. A description of the project, an evaluation plan, and implications of the project are discussed in the next three sections.

Project Description

The project that was developed from this study was derived from the study itself. A policy recommendation paper was developed based on emerging themes from research through semistructured interviews. In Appendix A the policy recommendation paper lists the recommendations that arose from the study to better help support the adult nontraditional learners at the study site.

Needed Resources and Existing Supports

There may be some additional individuals needed to extend the hours of operations for support services if it is decided to use the recommendations of the project. These individuals could be fourth year students with the supervision of a student services employee to reduce the cost. It might be possible to have faculty assist in the new orientation program for adult learners. At the study site the existing support such as students, faculty, and staff, are in place. Using the staff and faculty to help conduct a formative evaluation of the recommendation paper will make the recommendations stronger.

The relationships with the staff and faculty that were built while working for the study site will assist in selecting the individuals to participate in the recommendation paper evaluation. Once the evaluations are returned the recommended changes will be implemented. To get the recommendation paper in front of the chancellor and board of directors a Power Point presentation has been developed to present. Again, using the contacts at the study site an appointment with the chancellor will be arranged to present the Power Point presentation. After that presentation the next step is to present the recommendation paper to the board of directors.

Potential Barriers and Potential Solutions

Potential barriers to the project are minimal. The relationships that were established while working for the study site will make it easier to gain an appointment with the chancellor and attaining the appointment should not be a problem. It is not expected that the recommendation paper's implementation be seamless, nor automatically successful; accepting new ideas or innovations rarely are (Magana, 2017; Serdyukov, 2017; Stowell et al., 2018). Once an appointment is scheduled, a Power Point presentation will be delivered to the chancellor with copies of the recommendation paper. At the end of the presentation a question-and-answer session will be conducted. In the event there is a problem making an appointment with the chancellor, the chancellor's secretary will be contacted to set up an appointment. The chancellor is a very open-minded individual and is always looking for ideas to better the university.

Implementation and Timetable

In order to implement these recommendations as soon as possible, there will need to be multiple stakeholders involved. The study site's Board of Directors meets quarterly, and my number one goal will be to try and be invited to the meeting. With my relationships that I have developed at the university I should be able to make an appointment with the chancellor. Once I present my recommendations paper, my goal is to work with the chancellor to obtain an invitation to the Board of Directors meeting.

Should my recommendations be accepted, the timeline for implementation could start in the fall 2024 term. Departmental budget proposals are always due in February, and new budget cycles begin in July. Thus, the Academic Support Center and Counseling Center will need to complete budget proposals that include additional staffing to accommodate extended hours to better serve the adult nontraditional learners.

Table 2*Timetable for Implementing the Project*

Required step	Month	Result
Step 1: Send formative evaluation sheet to selected evaluators.	February 2023	Wait for the responses from selected evaluators.
Step 2: Receive responses from selected evaluators.	February 2023	Rewrite policy recommendation paper with input from evaluators.
Step 3: Schedule meeting to present policy recommendation paper to the chancellor.	March 2023	Introduce the Powerpoint presentation to obtain a meeting with the Board of Directors.
Step 4: Schedule meeting to present the project to the Board of Directors.	March 2023	Present project to the Board of Directors.
Step 5: Await the Board's recommendations.	April 2023	After receiving the Board's recommendations, assist with the implementation of the recommendations.

Roles and Responsibilities

My primary role in this project is to try to present a Power Point presentation to the chancellor and Board of Directors to present my recommendation paper, to assist adult nontraditional learners to possibly be more successful and to achieve higher graduation rates. Once this is accomplished, it will be possible to start the project moving. With the help of the study site staff and faculty an orientation can be developed for adult learners to be presented on the time that the adult nontraditional learners are on campus. The responsibilities of the chancellor and the Board of Directors are to keep the needs of the adult nontraditional learners in the forefront.

Project Evaluation Plan

To determine the effectiveness of a project, an evaluation plan is essential. My primary goal for this policy recommendation paper is to increase graduation rates at the study site for adult nontraditional learners. A formative evaluation of the project will begin the evaluation process. I will choose specific members of the study site's community to review and evaluate the policy recommendation paper because they work closely with the chancellor. These associates are campus vice chancellor, senior vice chancellor for academic affairs/chief academic officer, chief marketing director, director of international enrollment management, and assistant director of student professional development.

These five stakeholders will be distributed evaluation sheets (See Evaluation Sheet at the end of Appendix A) that ask open-ended questions about how to improve the policy recommendation paper's clarity and logic, and the evaluations will be completed

confidentially. According to Linfield and Posavac (2018), formative evaluations seek ways to improve current programs. Using this type of formative evaluation should provide honest and expeditious feedback that will be considered prior to implementing the project. For the implementation of formative evaluations, self-reflection, actionable feedback, open dialogue, having clear criteria, and the collection of useful information to give constructive feedback are recommended (Trumbull & Lash, 2013). I will use the information gained from the formative evaluation to strengthen the project for the stakeholders.

To conduct this evaluation, I will email the evaluation sheet to each individual. In the email I will ask them to send their response to the senior vice chancellor for academic affairs/chief academic officer so that they will remain anonymous. I will ask the senior vice chancellor for academic affairs/chief academic officer to collect the evaluation sheets and email them back to me, keeping them confidential. This should not be a problem because of my relationship with the senior vice chancellor for academic affairs/chief academic officer.

Project Implications

Local Implications

Local positive social change resulting from this study could include better student support services for adult nontraditional learners, which may result in increased retention and graduation rates for adult nontraditional learners. By providing timely support services this could possibly increase graduation rates that could strengthen student satisfaction levels and likely lead to more referrals and potential students. Also, by

providing more timely support this could increase student commitment. By using 3rd- and 4th-year students as mentors to assist student support services it could provide more job opportunities for students and the local community.

According to Holzer and Baum (2017), institutional barriers in the nature of their structure, hinder nontraditional adult learners' progression towards degree completion. As a result, low completion rates continue to be a problem in higher education (Holzer & Baum, 2017). Alvarez (2017) ranked colleges based on their innovation to support adult learners. This ranking is important to understand because adult nontraditional learners when deciding on a university to attend look at how universities support them and their success.

Extensive Implications

Low graduation rate is a problem not only for the university but also for the surrounding communities. As a result of low completion rates, employers who rely on having an educated workforce to hire may experience a shortage, which also affects local and state policymakers whose responsibilities include bringing in business and industries to the area that will boost the economy (Holzer & Baum, 2017). The positive social change resulting from this study could include an increase in satisfied, higher education graduates that could possibly improve the local community. This could improve health care, bring in more businesses, and provide more resources for the community.

Summary of Section 3

Section 3 of this project study contained a literature review related to the position paper genre as well as the five themes that were developed in the study. Additionally,

descriptions of the project's implementation, evaluation, and implication plans were explained. The final Section of this study will present my reflections and conclusions. Section 4 will focus on project strengths and limitations, alternative research approaches, project development, reflection on importance of the work, directions for future research recommendations, and conclusion.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

In Section 4, I discuss my reflections on and conclusions of this project study. This section includes recommendations for future research on nontraditional adult learner persistence to degree completion and improvements in services provided. I also discuss the strengths and limitations of the project and the project development. Recommendations are also provided for alternate approaches, leadership and change as a doctoral candidate, and continued research on the topic towards positive social change. The study's implications for positive social change are also provided.

What prompted this study was while working at the study site, I noticed about two thirds of the adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus were graduating at a low rate. I used a basic qualitative research design to determine if the cause of the low graduation rate was because of a lack of support. Tinto's student integration model was used as the conceptual framework to guide the inquiry. The research questions focused on the perceptions and experiences of the adult nontraditional learners attending classes at the university. Twelve nontraditional adult learners aged 25 years old and over attending classes at the study site were chosen to participate in the study. Data were collected from semistructured interviews with the participants.

Project Strengths and Limitations

Project Strengths

The problem under study at one local southeastern university was that adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus were graduating at a low rate, which

may have indicated a lack of needed support services. The study site and other universities have not adapted to keep up with the ever-growing population of adult nontraditional learners. I chose to do a recommendation paper as the project for this study. Researchers use recommendation papers to make strategic decisions based on a fact-based, detailed report (Anderson, 2020; Butler, 2017). Often, a recommendation paper is used to argue that a particular position is suitable for solving a problem (Purdue University, 2018). I determined that a recommendation paper was the most effective tool to address this problem and highlight the findings from the data analysis. In the recommendation paper, I provide an overview of the study, my suggested recommendations to help to solve the problem based on the findings from the data, and the research regarding each theme that emerged from the data. Bala et al. (2018) stated that the benefit of a recommendation (i.e., position) paper is that it examines a specific problem and suggests an approach to resolve the problem.

Another strength is the actual recommendations that were developed from the semistructured interviews responses of the participants. According to Hilton and Anderson (2018), change is facilitated when members of an organization who are most familiar with the problems contribute to the solutions. I researched the participants' recommendations to determine what other universities are doing to assist adult nontraditional learners stay committed to education and graduate.

The number of recommendations in the policy paper are manageable, which will help the leaders at the university determine which recommendations they would like to implement. The leadership, Board of Directors, and the chancellor need only to read the

recommendations and not the full study because the recommendations are a result of the study and provide possible solutions, which reduces the amount of time the leadership needs to spend on these issues. Using a recommendation paper allowed me to share the issues and solutions in an easy to read and understandable format.

Project Limitations

One of the limitations of the recommendation paper to address the needs for adult nontraditional learners is the possible acceptance of these recommendations by the Board of Directors and the chancellor. There is a possibility that the Board of Directors and the chancellor will not act upon one or more of the recommendations. I am optimistic that the Board of Directors and the chancellor will consider and implement these recommendations to help the adult nontraditional learners attending at the study site.

Another limitation is the possible cost to implement the recommendations. While the cost should be minimal if the leadership decides to increase the support staff, this increase would still be an additional cost. If they implement the full recommendations in which students are used to support the additional hours of available services, this will reduce the cost for the study site.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

Although there are other methods that might have been used to conduct this study, I chose a qualitative method with semistructured interviews. The reason for this choice is stated best by Moalusi (2020) who stated that after a research topic is chosen and the research problem is formulated, the researcher determines how they will collect and

analyze the data to answer the research questions using what they determine to be the best method.

The same study could have been conducted using a quantitative method by developing a survey to send to a larger group of students to obtain even more data about the support services available to nontraditional learners. The survey could have been sent to both students taking online courses and those taking classes on campus. Once the surveys were completed, there could have been more data collected that could show what support services the adult nontraditional learners attending at the study site and those taking online classes knew about and used.

Instead of a recommendation paper, another approach to address the study problem could have been a 3-day professional development program for the faculty and the staff of the study site. This could have been developed to teach the faculty and staff about adult nontraditional learners and how to better serve this population of students at the study site.

Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change

Scholarship

This has been a very educational journey, and with the help of my committee, I have learned many additional skills and increased my knowledge, which has prepared me as a professional scholar. Scholarship refers to human nature and learning, which applies to knowledge acquired through advanced schooling (Louis et al., 2016). I have learned about different research methodologies; data collection; analysis techniques; and much about research. I have researched, reviewed, and evaluated many studies and theories,

which have greatly influenced this study. Completing this study has allowed me to examine the experiences and perspectives of adult nontraditional learners and their needs to be able to reach graduation. I have achieved considerable growth in my research skills, contributing to a higher level of learning throughout this doctoral journey.

Project Development

To address the study problem, I decided to use a recommendation paper. I have learned that there were other ways to mitigate the problem, but I believe that this was the best. To develop the recommendation paper, I first started by conducting 12 semistructured interviews to gather the information needed to answer my research questions. Next, the data were analyzed to determine the emerging themes. Once the themes emerged, I researched the relevant literature about them to determine if there were other universities with the same issues, and if so, how those universities were handling them. This process guided me when developing my recommendations for the project. I created a recommendations paper to detail new and improved practices for nontraditional adult learners at the study site in an effort to focus on providing better support services to improve student persistence, retention, and ultimately adult nontraditional learner degree completion.

Leadership and Change

Leadership is extremely important, especially in higher education. In the military, leadership is the ability to influence others to do things they do not want to do. In the civilian community, it changes to mean being able to inspire and lead change. Receiving my doctoral degree will provide me with more opportunities to influence and inspire

others to know that they can make a difference. There are many opportunities for me, whether in higher education or government contracting, to use what I have learned to create positive change. This journey has taught me that.

Analysis of Self as Scholar

I learned that being a scholar is not just being a student but that it is looking deeper into yourself and the material that you are reviewing. It is looking for problems and researching to find the possible solutions. Completing this journey was a true test of endurance, commitment, determination, patience, perseverance, persistence, and most of all, a heightened ability to conduct the research and maintain the integrity of the study.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

When starting this journey, I was working for higher education at the study site. I was able to learn about of the struggles of adult nontraditional learners when it came to support services and the barriers that are placed in their way. While working at the study site, this new information allowed me to present ideas regarding the creation of an adult nontraditional admissions policy to help adult learners be admitted easier to the university to the admissions department and to assist in developing an adult admissions policy that eliminated some roadblocks. The information I have gained will help me continue to grow as a practitioner to better understand adult nontraditional learners and help me gain the knowledge to become a more skilled practitioner in the future.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

As a project developer, I had to first look at the problem, determine the best method to evaluate and investigate the problem, and then determine the best way to deliver possible solutions. I conducted a qualitative study to explore the problem and used the results to develop a recommendation paper with the possible solutions. The knowledge and the skills I have acquired through conducting this study have bestowed upon me the ability to accomplish the development and completion of this doctoral study.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

When I began this journey, I wanted to make a difference for the adult nontraditional learners attending the study site. Working for the study site, I witnessed the struggles that the adult nontraditional learners had to deal with on a daily basis, and this is what drove me to conduct this study. I hope that this project study will add to the scholarly knowledge on adult learners. I have been afforded greater knowledge and skills at conducting research, writing the study, improving my scholarly voice, and creating a recommendation paper. What I would ultimately like to see is that the recommendations that have been presented be used to assist these learners to reach graduation and use their degrees to improve not only their world, but the world around them, thus creating a positive social change that results in the improvement of human and social conditions (see Walden University, 2013).

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Implications

This project study can potentially create positive social change for both students and the surrounding communities. Increasing the support provided to adult nontraditional learners can create a better college environment in which nontraditional adult learners can improve their chances of graduating, which will contribute to a better educated society. Increasing the education levels of the communities where these adult learners live will also create a positive social change by bringing in more employers and more organizations that are looking for a more highly educated community.

Applications

In higher education, the student has many universities and colleges to choose from. Improving the learning support provided to adult nontraditional learners will improve their learning experience at the study site and improve the chances that other students will select the study site to attend based on their research of universities. Therefore, if the recommendations made in the project are implemented these initiatives could increase the graduation rates of nontraditional learners. Students who are better educated could increase the education levels of their communities and potentially be of significant benefit to society, resulting in improved personal lives for the students, economic growth, and civic participation as well as higher earning potential and better career opportunities.

Directions for Future Research

My first suggestion for future research is to expand this study to several universities with a much larger participant pool. It would also be beneficial to include those adult nontraditional learners who are attending online because they could provide more information about whether there is a difference with the services provided for individuals attending in person and those attending online. If my recommendations are implemented, then after a year, I would suggest conducting another survey to determine if the improved support services have created the positive social change that was hoped for. The survey could also determine whether the changes improved the graduation rates of the adult nontraditional learners and if so, how much improvement was created, or if not, be used to investigate to determine what went wrong.

An institutional need exists to determine how the factors of intention, commitment, adjustment, difficulty, congruence, isolation, obligations, finances, and learning all come to affect student departure (Tinto, 2016). A future study could be conducted with all these factors as variables. While the current study only looked at the support services, a future study with more variables could go deeper.

Conclusion

This project study began with my observation of adult nontraditional learners attending the study site at which I was employed. I witnessed their low graduation rate and how these learners were being treated as if they were traditional learners. This fact, along with this population's high transfer rate away from the university, sparked my curiosity. I wanted to see why they were transferring and why they were not graduating at

a higher rate. In talking with a few students, I listened to how the study site was not providing the same services that they provide to the traditional student. This is what prompted me to conduct the study. I constructed three research questions that were used to guide the data collection process. To collect data, I conducted semistructured interviews with 12 participants. Upon completion of the interviews, coding was used to organize the data and identify patterns, resulting in several temporary themes. Patterns were identified across the temporary themes and five final themes emerged that were used to construct a recommendation paper for the Board of Directors and the chancellor.

I selected a recommendation paper as the project format to address the gap in practice at the study site. In this paper, I shared research on how to better provide support services to the adult nontraditional learners and recommend the best practices. My goal was to provide a more supportive environment at the university for the adult nontraditional learners and improve their graduation rate. Accomplishing this goal contributes to positive social change by improving the lives of the adult nontraditional learners and their families as well as improving the communities that they are a part of and live in.

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Appendix A: The Project

Introduction

In higher education the face of students is changing. Current research reveals that the largest growth in new students is now comprised of adult nontraditional learners (Surdick et al., 2022; Remenick, 2019). While the majority of new students are adult nontraditional learners there is little that universities and colleges have done to change their processes or their support services. Adult nontraditional learners' needs are different than those of traditional students. The majority of adult nontraditional learners who want to be face-to-face in the classroom with the professors attend on campus, taking classes during the evening or on the weekend. The possible lack of support services for adult nontraditional learners is an issue because while working at the study site it was observed that adult nontraditional learners are graduating at a very low rate and there is little being done to assist these students.

I decided to conduct a qualitative inquiry as the most effective way to answer the research questions and determine the best way to assist these students. There were three research questions that was used to determine the problem at the study site and they were:

RQ1: According to adult nontraditional learners taking classes at the study site, what are their learning support needs?

RQ2: According to the perceptions of adult nontraditional learners, to what extent do the support services provided by the university fulfill the needs of learners taking classes on campus?

RQ3: What recommendations do adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus suggest to improve the learning supports provided that may increase their chances of graduating?

In my study I conducted 13 semistructured interviews with adult nontraditional learners. To determine who these adult nontraditional learners were, I used the following criteria: delayed enrollment after high school, did not complete high school but received a GED (General Education Diploma), part-time enrollment, full time employment, caring for dependents, or not relying on their parents for financial support, and are over the age of 24. The purpose of the research was to explore the learning support needs of adult nontraditional learners, institutional support that was provided and used, and to make recommendations to eventually increase graduation at the study site.

I developed the three research questions above to explore the problem at the study site of the low graduation rate among adult nontraditional learners. I developed a series of interview questions for each research question to better define the research questions with the hope of answering them. I used Tinto's theory of student retention (1975) as the conceptual framework for the study. I conducted the semistructured interviews asking the same questions to each interviewee. Once completed I analyzed the data and looked for themes. This produced five themes. I then researched the themes to see if there were any other universities and colleges dealing with the same issues. What I found is that the study site was not the only university with these issues. There are many other universities with the same issues. I then researched how those other universities were handling these

issues. As a result of that research a policy recommendation paper was developed from the findings.

This policy recommendation paper is intended to be given to the Chancellor and the Board of Directors for them to see how they can assist the largest growing population at the study site, adult nontraditional learners. The recommendations presented in this recommendation paper were designed to assist the adult nontraditional learners who are attending the local university to increase their persistence and continue to graduation. This will help not only those learners but also the study site by increasing graduation rates which will improve the campus and the surrounding community.

My goal for the recommendations that are presented are that, while I understand some will not be implemented, I would like for most of them to be implemented to provide a better learning experience for these adult nontraditional learners. By implementing these recommendations, the adult nontraditional learners who are currently attending classes and those in the future who will attend at the study site will understand more of the services provided, creating a positive learning environment.

Policy Recommendations Paper

Recommendation 1:

Provide Information About Services

Theme: Adult Nontraditional Learners Need to Learn What Learning Support Services are Available for Students.

To start my study, I comprised several interview questions to ask the participants, the first of which was to determine what support services the adult nontraditional learners attending classes knew were offered at the study site. According to Holzer and Baum (2017) institutional barriers, in the nature of their structure, hinder nontraditional adult learners' progression towards degree completion. As a result, low completion rates for adult nontraditional learners continue to be a problem in higher education (Holzer & Baum, 2017). There are many obstacles that are faced by adult nontraditional learners that impede them from reaching their goals and they may not see the value of achieving those goals; therefore, they decide to drop out. Of the 13 semistructured interviews only two students knew what support services were offered. Those two students were part of the TRIO program, which is a program to assist disadvantaged students to access college, at the study site. The other eleven students knew of some of the services but not many of those services. They knew of the library, and some knew about tutoring, one student was a tutor which is why they knew about it. When asked if they had attended an orientation the answer was the same in most cases, no, which brings me to my first recommendation about information sharing, orientation.

Offer Orientation to Adult Nontraditional Learners

Adult nontraditional orientation is recommended, as most adult nontraditional learners have additional issues that they must take care of when the normal orientation is going on; therefore, they cannot attend. Also, the adult nontraditional learners are not interested in the same information as the traditional students. Researchers have found that orientation is a critical factor in students' decisions to actively engage in their college experience (Chan, 2019; Jacobs, 2017; Ribbe et al., 2016). Floyd (2018) stated that the people who have constant and face-to-face contact with students have the responsibility of developing effective strategies to retain students to completion. In my research I have found that other universities have created orientations that meet the adult nontraditional learners' needs at times and days when it is easy for them to attend. To begin my research of the other universities, the first item that stands out from the study site is the universities' web sites. In over fifteen other universities that are about the same size or bigger than the study site, they each have a page dedicated to first, orientation and second, adult nontraditional learners.

On their web sites for orientation, they have three items: traditional students, transfer students, and lastly, adult nontraditional learners. Their web sites explain that the new student orientation is mandatory, and all students must attend. They then show the times of the orientation and in some of the universities the orientation is held in the evening and on weekends. They give the schedule of events and what will be covered in the orientation. The ones that are held in the evenings are on Friday night and Saturday and consist of activities that last about a day and a half. The orientations include student

services, financial aid, a trip to the library, explanation of available tutoring, faculty in attendance to meet the students, availability of babysitting, and the student's advisor. During this orientation the students set up their classes.

My recommendation is to first set up the orientation that will work for the adult nontraditional learners. That involves finding the ideal time for the adult nontraditional learners who are attending at the study site. One way to do that is to ask the adult nontraditional learners when they enroll what is the best times to attend an orientation. Once that has been established then it will be easier to set up the orientation. In my experience it would be best to give them a choice of days and times. This way they would pick what best fits their schedule and the study site could set the orientation up to best suit the student.

After that is established, the next step would be to set up the agenda. This too could be done by giving the student a choice of what they would like to know about support services. Detail what will be offered and ask if there is anything else they would like information on. According to most of my research, the items that should be discussed are student services, financial aid, a trip to the library, explanation of available tutoring, introduction to faculty, babysitting availability, a presentation from the health services offered by the university, and the student's advisor. Doing this would make sure that the study site is covering all their needs. Also, by doing this the institution can gather information and see what is asked for the most, and any of those single issues can be answered one-on-one to increase student satisfaction. This should reduce the attrition of first year students. Tinto's theory that was used as the conceptual framework for my

study discusses how important it is to integrate the student into the university and the best way to do this is by the support services provided to the student.

Recommendation 2:

Create an Environment of Inclusion

Assist the nontraditional learners to feel they are as important as the traditional students. Providing them the services they need and expanding the support services will establish a college environment more conducive to persistence and degree completion.

Theme: Access to Services.

An article by Gulley (2021) stated that in higher education there is an assumption that most students are traditional students, aged 18 – 24. Gulley (2021) continues that this research in most cases supports that colleges and universities' administrations use this information to manage institutions. Remenick (2019) discussed that the nontraditional student population is growing and that nontraditional learners face greater barriers to success than traditional students. The author stated that it is important to support these individuals, however accessing the resources and support services for nontraditional learners is “difficult for nontraditional learners who have multiple responsibilities, are enrolled online, commute to the campus, or are unable to get to campus during working hours” (Remenick, 2019, p. 24). In my interviews there were several participants who echoed this very comment. Remenick (2019) stated that if accessibility is an issue, then it might be necessary to look into new ways of providing student services that will meet the needs of nontraditional learners.

To support this recommendation, establish a few days a week to extend the hours of student services so that the adult nontraditional learners can seek the assistance that is needed. This would not be difficult to do and if done correctly would not cost the university any additional money. By setting up flex schedules for the student services department the university could allow a few individuals the flexibility to come in later on specific days to extend the hours. For example, if they are coming in at 07:00 AM, allow them to come in at 12:00 PM. This would extend their hours from 3:30 PM to 8:00 PM making it easier for the adult nontraditional learner to work with the student service department. There are some universities that have extended student service hours every day so that their adult nontraditional learners can seek assistance anytime they are on campus. I realize that this would be expensive for the study site which is why I recommend a couple of days a week. In my interviews some students mentioned that it would be nice if student services were there when they were there. They stated how difficult it was to arrange for baby sitting or taking a day off from work to go to the campus when student services was open.

Artificial Intelligence

Another way to assist both nontraditional and traditional students is by using artificial intelligence (AI). The information presented by Barret et al. (2019) about AI is one way to provide a different kind of student services. There are three different levels of AI that could be used to assist students: Conversational Interface, Contextual User Interface, and AI that connects the contextual aspect of conversation with the ability to interpret the unstated needs of the student. Other universities have begun to use AI to

assist students when student services are not open. Conversational interface allows students to interact with complex services via messaging, “something they do every day” (Cheston & Shock, 2017, p. 4). The second level of AI allows more precise support providing students more self-direction reducing frustration of dealing with a textbot. (Textbots are tools that perform automated tasks that allow students to facilitate conversations without the involvement of a human.) The last level of AI integrates the student’s behavior, curriculum pace, and progress. AI will intervene and “nudge” the student toward their next, best action or refer them to their advisor.

Georgia State started using a chatbox (Pounce), which successfully reduced the melt, which is the loss of students between when they enroll to when they actually begin class, i.e., they decide not to attend, by twenty percent in the first year of implementation (Page & Gehlbach, 2017). Pounce the chatbot used by Georgia State has directly impacted student access to higher education. Artificial intelligence collects students’ interaction data from a number of sources and then uses the data to “learn” which students are at risk of not staying enrolled or reenrolling (Kim, 2018). AI can also determine the “good” behavior of students and relay the information to counselors, advisors, faculty, deans, etc. (Page & Gehlbach, 2017). Additionally, artificial intelligence will be able to alert faculty or staff members if a student is in danger of withdrawing more rapidly than traditional advising meetings (Page & Gehlbach, 2017).

Using AI will afford the opportunity to immediately impact student experience in regard to student affairs.

Chatbots are great tools to communicate with customers. With the feedback

they collect through simple questions, you can make improvements on the support services provided to students; you can also get them to track patterns and behaviors by monitoring user data. (Olawale, 2019, p. 1)

Using artificial intelligence like at Georgia State will have an immediate impact on retention and student satisfaction.

Recommendation 3:

Train the Staff

The staff needs to better understand the needs of adult nontraditional learners. Also, begin training faculty and staff about nontraditional learners to help them understand these students and request staff members volunteer to be specifically assigned to nontraditional adult learners. By assigning staff members to the adult learners this will begin to give these students the feeling that the university understands them and is there to support them through their journey to degree completion.

Theme: Faculty and Staff.

During my research interviews one of the themes that kept arising was the lack of support from faculty and staff. One individual stated that it was like pulling teeth to get information when they went into the student services department. Another participant stated that a professor told them they had to make a decision, either their family or school and that they needed to get their priorities together. While conducting research I learned there were other universities with the same issues. In an article by Marade (2019) a student described an interaction with a professor similar to the one above. In fact, the

student stated that the professor made her feel like an imposter in the class they were taking (Marade, 2019).

Levett-Jones and colleagues, as referenced in Law et al. (2019), stated that student-staff relationships are “a key influence on students’ experience of belongingness” and that “staff inclusivity and legitimization with support” encourage a sense of belonging (p. 16). In my time in higher education, I have seen great faculty and staff, those who will go the extra mile to assist their students. My recommendation is to first start a training program to educate faculty and staff on the adult nontraditional learners. This could be as easy as a three-day training with one session having adult learners from the study site participate in a panel discussion. The insights that would be gained would be priceless. In this training the topics covered could be: What are some of the barriers for adult learners, how can faculty and staff assist adult learners to persist, how to increase accessibility to adult learners, and finally how to be understanding. Faculty and staff need to learn that emails and text are sometimes the best way to communicate with adult learners. The most interaction that the students have is with the faculty and staff within the university, due to the students attending their classes. I have seen students drop out because of an interaction with a faculty member. I have also seen that a faculty or staff member’s interaction with a student has kept that student enrolled, again proving that the faculty and staff need to better understand adult nontraditional learners.

Another way to help faculty and staff to understand adult nontraditional learners is to develop a mentoring program in which a professor or staff member is assigned a few new adult nontraditional students to mentor through their freshman, or first year, at the

university. This will give the professor or staff member first-hand experience working with the adult nontraditional student, building a better understanding of the challenges and barriers they must face. There have been other universities that have done this, and it has increased retention. In a study by Law et al. (2019) they stated that two of six positive long-term experiences with students and mentors who participated in their study were about relationships between staff and students, and resulted in long-term success. The comments that resulted were “My professors at [college] cared about me as a person” and “I had a mentor who encouraged me to pursue my goals and dreams” (p. 10).

Law et al. (2019) discussed mentoring by faculty and staff. First, they explained the definition of mentoring as the “personal and reciprocal relationship” involving the more experienced mentor, who serves as a guide and teacher, for a less experienced mentee (p.14). In examining the success of mentoring relationships in a comparison of two groups of students, one group with mentors and one without, they found that the one with the mentors was positively correlated with persistence and the greater the interaction with the mentor the stronger the correlation. In the same study they found that informal interactions between students and faculty in which faculty were perceived as approachable and available emphasized that the student’s academic self-concept was positively impacted.

Recommendation 4:

Mental Health Services

As part of the new student orientation, it is recommended that the new students be taken to the health services building. Another recurring theme in my study was mental

health and that participants did not know where to go to get help with some of their issues. One participant had dropped out of school because of the death of their sister. They stated that if the faculty or staff were paying attention, perhaps the student could have received some help and stayed in school. Mental health is a big issue in higher education and there are many articles stating the rise in mental health issues (Biro et al., 2019; Edwards et al., 2021; Gatto et al., 2022; Smith & Applegate, 2018; Stegenga et al., 2021; van Agteren et al., 2019). These articles discussed the issues involving mental health. Gatto et al. (2022) discussed how college is a critical transitional period and is associated with unique stressors. They also stated these stressors result in physical and mental vulnerabilities and that students often do not access the help they need.

The research that I conducted showed that there are three areas of mental health that college students deal with: depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation or self-injury. These three areas are the most prevalent among college students pertaining to mental health issues. Depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation or self-injury can impact college outcomes such as GPAs, persistence, retention, and graduation rates (Kwakye et al., 2020; Smith & Applegate, 2018; Stegenga et al., 2021). Kwakye et al. (2020) stated that close to a third of college students reported experiencing depression and around a fourth experienced anxiety. It is imperative that colleges and universities address these issues and find ways to assist students in coping with mental health.

For this theme I have two recommendations. The first ties in with the orientation for adult nontraditional learners. When conducting my interviews almost every participant brought up mental health issues. For the orientation if there could be a

representative at the new student orientation to discuss where the health center is located, and what is offered to students that are attending, they then would know where to go for help. This would give students the information that they currently do not know about. It would be nice if at the orientation a tour to the health services building could be incorporated. This would give the students the information they need for when they need it. Most participants did not even know there was a health services at the university. To go along with this, in the faculty and staff training it would be good to give a class on how to get to know the students and watch for signs of change in their actions, attitudes, and just their normal being. By the faculty and staff paying attention and getting to know the student it would help with these issues and possibly increase retention.

The second recommendation I make is based on my research. I know space is an issue, but one university set up a meditation room for their students, as a place for temporary relaxation space in one of the large meeting spaces to hopefully help students cope with the end-of-semester stress. The university monitored the space to determine if the students were using it. The results showed that the time was evenly spread throughout the days of the week as well as the times of the day and night. They received glowing remarks about how the space helped them throughout the semester (Bremer, 2019). This could be done at the study site, and it would help both traditional and adult nontraditional learners. This could be accomplished by taking just a small room with a couple of comfortable chairs and a few tables with access to power so that the students could plug in their laptops if needed or charge their phones. By providing this get-away allowing the

student to destress it would build more connection with the university and give the student time to relax.

Recommendation 5:

Additional Support and Encouragement

Adult nontraditional learners need additional support and encouragement to assist them in obtaining their degrees. Additional support came up a lot in my interviews with the adult nontraditional learners, everything from help from employers, babysitting, help from family members, and help with financial support. One way to assist these learners is by offering Prior Learning Assessments. I know the study site gives the military credit for what they have accomplished while serving. A service member needs only to supply the study site with their SMART transcript and based on the American Council for Education they are given the proper credit. This is great for military members but what about those who have never served in the military.

In researching the phrase Prior Learning Assessment, I found that a lot of universities have different methods of giving non-military students credit for what they have learned while working in the civilian communities and for different employers. Some give their students challenge exams that are developed by the faculty. Some use evaluation of noncollege programs in which students get credit based on recommendations from ACE (American Council on Education) and NCCRS (National College Credit Recommendation Service) that evaluate training offered by employers.

My recommendation is to use a portfolio-based individualized assessment. To do this the university could create a class that assists the students to put together a portfolio

of the trainings and the classes they have taken while working for organizations. This class could be optional, and the university could charge the regular cost for the class. At the completion of the class the student would have a binder with the information of all the trainings and classes that they have taken with their employers. This will then be submitted for credit to the department heads for evaluation. If the portfolio is strong enough to meet the requirements of a certain class or classes, the student could then request the credits be applied. The university could charge half price for the credit given saving the student money in the long run and providing a better service to the adult nontraditional learner. The university could request that the additional credits be covered under FASFA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid), which will also assist the adult learner to pay for the credits. Or the university could request that the state cover the cost of the credits granted under an adult nontraditional scholarship. In my research one university did in fact get these classes covered under a scholarship program so that the adult nontraditional learner did not have to pay out of pocket.

Summary of Recommendations

In this recommendation paper my intentions were to provide to the Board of Directors, Chancellor, and faculty and staff ideas that will better assist adult nontraditional learners at the study site. In meetings that I attended while employed at the study site one common theme was always discussed, and that was how the student body was getting older and how at the study site more and more students were adult nontraditional learners. In these meetings the discussion was how can we treat the adult nontraditional learner differently than the traditional students. One of the solutions that

was developed was the adult admissions requirements. We took into account that these students had been out of school for a while and did not have access to their ACT or SAT scores and we waived that requirement. We also have a policy to look at the transcripts and determine how old they are to make a better admissions decision.

This is a great start, however, that is all it is, a start. There are many universities that have adopted policies and procedures to assist the adult nontraditional learners to persist at their universities. My recommendations are not mine, they come straight from the students who are attending at the study site and the literature that was researched. The students want to be successful and they want to graduate. As an adult learner they have additional barriers that keep them from being successful. The recommendations that I have made in this paper will assist the adult nontraditional learners to remove some of those barriers and should help them achieve their goal of graduation. I ask that these recommendations will be strongly considered and applied at the study site to show the adult nontraditional learners that they are important and are cared for. Many people want them to succeed. By making these changes there is a possibility that the surrounding areas as well as the families of these nontraditional learners will be improved creating a positive social change.

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Appendix B: Interview Protocol

These questions will be used with adult nontraditional learners attending on campus classes during the semistructured interviews to address the research questions.

Date: _____

Time: _____

Location: _____

Interviewee: _____

Consent form will be signed at time of the interview _____

Part 1: Background Information

1. Are you currently attending the University?
2. Are you an adult nontraditional student and if so how do you fit into this criterion?
3. Are you in an undergraduate degree, and if so, what is your major?
4. Is this the only university you have attended?

Part 2: Interview questions

Research Question #1: What are learning support needs of adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus at the study site and do these learners feel that the support provided helps reach graduation?

1. How do you feel about the learning support services provided to you from the university?

2. What are the learning support services offered at the university and do you feel that they are being offered at a time that is convenient for you, if not what would you recommend?
3. What support do you receive from your Family and does it meet your academic needs?
4. What support do you receive from Faculty and does it meet your academic needs?

Research Question #2: What support services that adult nontraditional learners perceive to be provided by the university are used by these learners taking classes on campus, and how effective do they perceive these services to be?

5. What learning support services provided by the university are you currently using?
6. How do these learning support services meet your academic needs?
7. What are the learning support services you are receiving from outside the university?
8. How do these learning support services meet your academic needs?

Research Question #3: What recommendations do adult nontraditional learners taking classes on campus suggest to improve the learning supports provided that may improve their chances of graduating?

9. What learning support services do you think the university should provide to help you succeed?
10. What are some support services you feel others could provide to help you succeed?

Part 3: Closure

1. Is there anything else that you would like to share that would improve your chances of graduating?
2. Do I have your permission to follow-up with you regarding your responses to these questions?

Thank you for your participation.

Let me remind you that your responses are confidential.

Appendix C: Evaluation sheet

To:

From: Philip D. Rausch

REF: Evaluation of Recommendation Paper

Thank you for your cooperation and evaluation of the enclosed document. I have conducted an investigation to determine the needs of our adult nontraditional learners. The attached are the results and the recommendations that I plan to give to the board of Directors and the Chancellor in hopes to improve the support services that we offer these students. Your assistance in reviewing the attached and providing recommendations on how to improve it are greatly appreciated.

EVALUATION SHEET

1. What is your overall evaluation of the recommendations, and do you believe there should be changes made?

2. These recommendations are based on my findings. Do you believe that from your experience and knowledge of the study site these recommendations cover all the issues that adult nontraditional learners are facing at the study site, and have I presented them in a way that you believe will be conducive?

3. In your opinion do you believe that this plan if implemented will improve the graduation rate of adult nontraditional learners attending at the study site? If not what would you recommend to improve the plan?

4. Is there anything else you would recommend that would assist at getting this recommendation paper to the Board of Directors and the Chancellor?
