

FEMALE NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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To Tex, Willie, and Annie

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Julianna Banks

FEMALE NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Current enrollment trends indicate that women now outnumber men in college enrollment among all racial/ethnic populations (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2002b, 2007), and that a large portion of these students are nontraditional (NT). Today, more than 73% of all students in undergraduate institutions are described as different from traditional college students (NCES, 2002b, 2007; St John & Tuttle, 2004; Wylie, 2005). Research on NT students suggests these students are more likely to be female (American Council on Education (ACE), 2004; Corrigan, 2003), a member of an ethnic or racial minority (ACE, 2004), and have limited resources for and knowledge of higher education's institutional practices and expectations. Consequently, they have more difficulty persisting in college (Corrigan, 2003; Pike & Kuh, 2006; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Their early and successful academic and social integration into the college environment is critical as the highest level of attrition occurs during the freshmen year (American College Testing (ACT), 2003; Duggan, 2001; NCES, 2002b; St. John & Tuttle, 2004; Tinto, 2000; Wylie, 2005). This investigation examined obstacles female nontraditional (FNT) students encounter as they enter and transition to college, described how they overcome them, explored background characteristics of those who persist, and looked at the relationship between having a career goal, motivation, and persistence. The qualitative case study focused on multiple cases within a bounded system. The study findings indicate that students who persist establish broad external networks of support, express confidence and goal clarity, increase self-efficacy, develop effective coping strategies, and learn to use institutional support systems. Findings did not support the

strong positive influence of having a specific career goal, but did underscore the importance of career value.

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## **CHAPTER ONE BACKGROUND, PURPOSE, AND OVERVIEW**

Over the last 30 years, the landscape of higher education has changed considerably. With the democratization of the American system of higher education, colleges and universities are evolving to serve a more diverse student population. One significant change has been in the growth of women's participation in college. Since the early eighties, women's enrollment in higher education has increased exponentially (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Nitiri, 2001; Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 2001; St. John & Tuttle, 2004). In fact, each year since 1980, women have outnumbered men in college enrollment among Asian, Black, Hispanic, and White populations (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2002b, 2007). A second major change is evident in the different life situations of students, with a shift away from the model of the traditional student, who came directly from high school, was single and financially dependent on parents, had no dependents, and had little or no outside employment. Today, more than 73% of all students in undergraduate institutions are not described as traditional students (NCES, 2002b, 2007; St John & Tuttle, 2004; Wylie, 2005). This shift has prompted administrators and faculty to seek innovative teaching and learning strategies to ensure the best possible learning experience for their increasingly diverse student bodies, especially in urban areas where university campuses are receiving large numbers of culturally and academically diverse students, many of whom have not been fully prepared for the rigors of serious academic study (Pike & Kuh, 2006; Rankin & Reason, 2005; St. John & Tuttle, 2004). The diversity of this student population is captured in the most current definition of, "nontraditional student." The phrase was

formerly used only to identify students who were older or mature (24 years or older), and later expanded to include students who were attending part-time, single parents, without a high school diploma (Appling, 1991), financially independent, married, attending a for-profit proprietary institution (U. S. Department of Education, 1994), first-generation (Hsiao, 1992), not seeking a degree (Hearn, 1992); or a military veteran (St. John & Tuttle, 2004). Currently, the term nontraditional refers to any undergraduate student who is financially independent, works more than 35 hours per week, attends part-time, is a single parent, has a dependent(s), is age 24 or older, has delayed enrollment, or does not have a high school diploma (NCES, 2002b).

The first significant representation of nontraditional student participation in college occurred during the turn of the twentieth century. During this period, a host of educational policies, programs, and new institutional structures were established and implemented to provide greater access and support to students who did not fit the traditional mold. Such endeavors were instituted through Land Grant institutions, a marked expansion of correspondence and evening course offerings, and a host of other educational innovations (Dyer, 1956; Portman, 1978; Shannon & Schoenfeld, 1965).

The period between World Wars I and II was a time for expansion of specialized programs that targeted adult students for women's interests and programs, teacher's institutes, labor education and industrial/vocational training, and summer school programs. After World War II and the Korean War, the "GI Bill" had a dramatic impact on adult enrollment in higher education. Similarly, U.S. participation in the Vietnam War, the recession, and the need to upgrade and/or change job skills all prompted institutions that had previously catered to traditional student populations to open their

doors to welcome this new student population (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Scholars have noted that the changing workforce has had much to do with the increased enrollment of nontraditional students in higher education. Horn (1996) determined that the end of the blue-collar industrial era resulted in the relocation of substantial numbers of workers, forcing them to choose between accepting low-wage, service-level employment or entering higher education to acquire the new skills for advanced employment opportunities. Moreover, the growth in female participation in the workforce has led to an increase in the number of older women either returning to the classroom to continue educational pursuits that had been previously interrupted, or enrolling in higher education for the first time (King, 2000; St. John & Tuttle, 2004). The women's movement also had a dramatic impact on women's participation. It was during that time that American women moved from merely raising consciousness about women's issues to examining their own education and the possibilities available to the next generation of women (David, 2009; Shavit, Arum, Gamoran, & Menahem 2007; Weiler, 2008). As a result, Title IX was passed in the early 1970s. The bill tied funding to gender equity in education and greatly affected the educational opportunities for women in higher education (Weiler, 2008).

As a result of changes in education policy, the economy, and social structures, the classrooms and halls of academia are becoming more diverse in terms of gender, race, culture, enrollment choices, and life circumstances. But what does this mean for a higher education system that has, for centuries, catered to "traditional," mostly male full-time student populations? What issues are unique to female student success, and specifically female nontraditional students (FNTs), and should be accounted for in crafting policies

and programs for success? And in view of continuing changes in the labor market and women's increasing role in the workforce, what impact does having a career goal have on FNT persistence in college?

Scholars have argued for more research on women's experiences in higher education in order to gain a better understanding of how the structures of higher education support or hinder their academic goals (Marshall, 2004; Mulinari & Sandell, 1999; Parsons & Ward, 2001). This study aims to expand the body of literature on female nontraditional students in higher education by illuminating how they manage issues that affect their persistence and the institutional resources that promote and facilitate their persistence. In the following sections, I further define the central problem, explain the purpose of the investigation, and present the guiding research questions.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Research on nontraditional students suggests they have characteristics that adversely affect their persistence and degree attainment (NCES, 2007; Riggert, Boyle, Petrosko, Ash, & Rude-Parkins, 2006; St. John & Tuttle, 2004; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Tuttle, McKinney & Rago, 2005). These students are more likely to have limited resources for and knowledge of higher education's institutional practices and expectations, and consequently have more difficulty persisting in college (Corrigan, 2003; Pike & Kuh, 2006; Rankin & Reason, 2005). In examining this phenomenon, St. John and Tuttle (2004) indicated that the single unifying characteristic that binds nontraditional students together is low socio-economic status, and noted that these students are typically *nontraditional* because they are from socioeconomic backgrounds



which did not afford suitable “resources, situational support, or educational opportunities during their formative teen years” (p. 9) when most are preparing for college.

Education researchers have long argued that access to and success in higher education is much influenced by pre-college factors including academic preparation (Arum & Beattie, 2000; Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000; St John & Tuttle, 2004). High school academic achievement, in particular, is a significant predictor of first to second year college persistence (Elkins et al., 2000; Wohlgemuth et al., 2006). However, researchers contend that secondary schools in minority and low-income communities are overwhelmingly unequal to those that serve middle to high-income populations (Anyon, 2000; Florea & Horvat, 2009; Leppel, 2002; McDonough, 1997). A significant body of research has developed over the last four decades that establishes that differences in school organization and the ways in which learning is designed can significantly impact student achievement. This type of research, known as *effective schools* research, considers schools as social systems that may be distinguished by their academic environments, the socio-psychological climate of expectations that exist for students and teachers, and the different roles that exist for students (Arnove, 1997; Arum & Beattie, 2000).

In discourse on equality of educational opportunity the metaphor of a *race* or *contest* is often used. “Is the race a fair one? Are all contestants running on the same track? The contentious issue is that school quality is significantly related to the different economic and ethnic groups a particular school serves. According to Jonathan Kozol (1991), funding and resource disparities are so great within and between school districts that it would be extremely difficult for neutral observers to determine that students from

different socioeconomic backgrounds are competing in a fair contest. Anyon's (2000), Florea and Horvat's (2009), and McDonough's (1997) research on K-12 schools illuminate this phenomenon. Jean Anyon's (2000) and Patricia McDonough's (1997) studies on social class and school structure are vivid representations of the educational disparities that exist in secondary education. Essentially, less effective schools fail to adequately prepare low-income students for the rigor, challenge, and expectations of college. Thus, when nontraditional students enter higher education, many are, from the beginning, considered at-risk for attrition.

In 2003, Melanie Corrigan reported that low-income college students differ from students from more affluent backgrounds in that they are more likely to be female, an ethnic or racial minority, older and supporting a family. Subsequently, the American Council on Education (ACE) (2004) reported that women made up 65% of the low-income adult student population in 1999-2000, and that they represented 61% of low-income adult students who were single parents. Therefore because today's population of undergraduate students is more female, more often nontraditional, and from less affluent backgrounds, a different paradigm for understanding what makes them successful and able to persist in college is necessary. Early and successful academic and social integration into college is vital as the highest level of attrition occurs during the freshmen year. In the mid-sixties, Rivlin, Fraser, Stern and Golenpaul (1965) determined that more students withdraw from college or are academically dismissed by universities in the first year more than any other year. In 2000, Tinto reported that 56% of all dropouts from four-year institutions occur before the start of the second year. The trend has been recently documented in national studies of public and private four- and two- year

institutions (ACT, 2003; NCES, 2002b). However, more troubling are the outcomes for nontraditional students. Their attrition rate is more than twice that of their traditional counterparts, nearly 40% versus 18% (King, 2004; Leppel, 2002; Milam, 2009).

While some research has produced inconsistent results regarding gender and persistence (Astin, 1993; Milam, 2009; Wohlgemuth et al., 2006), most studies indicate being female seems to compound the challenges nontraditional students encounter (Elkins et al., 2000; Janz & Pyke, 2000; Morris & Daniel, 2007; Shelton, 2003). The literature documenting the challenges of women students in higher education is extensive (Morris & Daniel, 2007). Much of it documents both overt and covert behaviors of male and female faculty and students that marginalize female students and minimize their intellectual capacities and contributions in and outside of the classroom. In addition to their being underprepared, the number and variety of external obligations these students have limit their presence and involvement in the academic community (ACE, 2004; Cook & King, 2004; King & Bannon, 2002). While students may not always identify ways to further their engagement in the academic community, Jacoby and Garland (2004) indicate that universities should create opportunities to enhance student participation in higher education and further suggest it is the university's responsibility to design solutions specifically and intentionally for improving student success and participation. However, developing and providing appropriate resources to facilitate participation and persistence is difficult without a thorough understanding of students' experiences, how they manage challenges, and what motivates them to persist.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the early educational experiences of female nontraditional college students and factors that facilitate their persistence to the sophomore year. The focus was on first-year persistence because the first year is the time when undergraduate students are most vulnerable (Duggan, 2001; NCES, 2002b; St. John & Tuttle, 2004; Wylie, 2005). Particular emphasis was placed on students' motivation to persist and strategies for successful academic and social integration into the institutional environment. I considered how having a career goal impacted their motivation to persist. For purposes of this study, successful integration and adjustment is demonstrated by persistence beyond the critical first year.

### **Significance of the Study**

Higher education scholars have long recognized the need for education research that provides an accurate depiction of the experiences of non-male, middle class populations (Mulinari & Sandell, 1999; Parsons & Ward, 2001). Parsons and Ward (2001) indicate that more feminist scholarship in higher education research is necessary in order to re-shape institutional policy. And given the continued increase in enrollment among women students and the high rate of attrition among those who are nontraditional, such research could play a vital role in guiding institutional efforts for achieving retention goals for this student population.

The persistence of FNT students are of particular interest for two reasons: first, because of the host of challenges women encounter in academic environments (Janz & Pyke, 2000; Morris & Daniel, 2007; Shelton, 2003); and second, because students who identify according to the criteria outlined in the NCES 2003 report on *The Condition of*

*Education* are more likely to be female, a member of a racial–ethnic minority population, and hail from first-generation or low-income backgrounds than traditional students (Corrigan, 2003; NCES, 2007; Tuttle et al., 2005); these factors are all associated with risk for attrition.

While there is a growing body of literature on nontraditional students, few studies have specifically focused on female nontraditional (FNT) students in terms of students who are not necessarily “mature” or “older,” but who have other nontraditional characteristics. This study focused on how students respond to first-year transition challenges, how they describe personal adjustments to college expectations, and the extent to which they engage in activities or behaviors that facilitate their persistence. Such decisions and choices are sensitive to institutional policy or interventions—programming and support services provided by the institution.

And unlike other research that compares nontraditional student performance with that of traditional students (e.g. retention or GPA) or simply describes barriers for nontraditional students, this study examined what facilitates their success by illuminating the experiences of those who have persisted beyond the freshmen year. Such an investigation aims to provide a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the challenges, motivations, and efficacy of this student population. For student affairs professionals, the knowledge and insights gained from the study would serve as a tool for further developing programs and policies, as well as influencing their own methods and practice.

Since this study also examined a specific theoretical proposition, it adds to an emerging body of literature in that domain. Existing research on nontraditional students

indicates that having a career goal orientation is a primary factor in their persistence (Hull-Banks et al., 2005; Quimby & O'Brien, 2004). Peterson (1996) proposed a Career-Decision Making-Self Efficacy model to explain nontraditional student persistence. This model is described in greater detail in the review of literature, but generally posits that nontraditional students who believe completing college affords a better career are more likely to persist. As the CDMSE model is fairly new, additional research supporting the claim is necessary. This research will gauge students' motivations for persistence and assess the relative impact that having a career goal has on students' persistence.

And finally, existing models for understanding nontraditional student success focus on older or mature students and largely exclude younger students who have nontraditional characteristics. The results of this study inform future models designed to describe early success and persistence for a broader population of nontraditional students.

### **Research Questions**

The early academic experiences of female nontraditional (FNT) students who have persisted to the sophomore year were examined and guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What obstacles do FNT students encounter as they enter and transition to college?
- 2) How do FNT students describe their ability to persist beyond the first year?
- 3) What are the background characteristics of those who succeed?
- 4) What is the relationship between having a career goal and FNT students' descriptions of their motivation and persistence?

## Study Design

To understand how FNT students successfully persist beyond the freshmen year and the factors they attribute to their motivation and persistence, I employed qualitative methods to collect, analyze, and report the findings. Qualitative methods are appropriate in this study because they allow for a more holistic understanding of the “how” questions, for example, how students engage in the academic community and the transition process (Merriam, 2009). They also allow investigators a better understanding of how students interpret or draw meaning from their experiences.

The research was conducted at a large mid-west public university. Participant interviews were the primary mode for data collection. The research site, participant selection, data analysis, reliability, and issues of confidentiality are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three. In the following section I discuss definitions that are key to understanding the population and sample for this study.

### Definition of Key Terms and Concepts

As mentioned above, the meaning of the term nontraditional student has evolved over time to include a broader range of students whose characteristics differ from the traditional college student. This study considered age, family status, and financial status as the criterion for identifying nontraditional student participants. Definitions of terms and concepts that are key in understanding the relevant issues are outlined below.

**Dependent:** Undergraduates who reported that they had a dependent(s) other than a spouse were classified as nontraditional. In addition to children, dependents may include siblings, parents, or other family members who were financially dependent on the student.

**Financial Independence:** Whether or not a female student relied on her parents to finance her college education was considered in assessing the student's classification as a nontraditional student. While parents of traditional (dependent) students are expected to contribute a portion of the cost of their student's educational and living expenses, independent students are generally cover their own college and living expenses. Consequently, independent students are often encumbered with a significant financial burden that dependent students avoid. Thus, financially independent students were identified as nontraditional students.

**Nontraditional:** The characteristics used to distinguish nontraditional students are often interrelated. Because of the nature of some characteristics, students may necessarily have more than one. For instance, a single parent is by definition, responsible for his or her dependent child and is nearly always an independent student; this results in a minimum of three characteristics. Horn (1996) suggested that a student with any nontraditional characteristic will usually have more than one. In her (1996) analysis of the undergraduate student population, she further characterized nontraditional students as minimally nontraditional (having a single characteristic listed above), moderately nontraditional (having two or three characteristics), or as highly nontraditional (having four or more characteristics). Considering Horn's observation that students generally have more than one nontraditional characteristic, this study focused on students who are moderately nontraditional. Additional details regarding the criteria for participation in the study are included in the methods section in Chapter Three.



**Persistence:** This study adheres to Adelman's (2006) expanded concept of persistence in which student persistence is evident in progress toward completion of academic credentials regardless of breaks in enrollment (Lufi, Parish-Plass, & Cohen, 2003; McIntosh & Rouse, 2009). This concept and its implications for future research are further explained in Chapter Six.

**Self-efficacy:** For the purposes of this study, self-efficacy is defined as an individual's beliefs about or confidence in their capacity to successfully organize and carry out tasks related to academic and career behaviors and achievements, including grades and persistence (DeWitz, Woolsey, & Walsh, 2009; Hackett & Betz, 1981; Hull-Banks et al., 2005; Peterson, 1996; Zagacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005).

**Single Parents:** If an undergraduate student reported that she was not married but indicated that she had a minor child, that student was identified as a single parent and nontraditional. A minor child includes any child under age 18 who was financially dependent on the student.

## **Summary**

Above I have outlined the rapid growth of nontraditional and female participation in higher education, noted some challenges associated with being both nontraditional and female in higher education, and briefly discussed issues related to nontraditional students' elevated risk for attrition. The combination of these issues necessitates a need to rethink what works for improving and facilitating persistence among this student population. In an effort to uncover and describe what enables their persistence, I conducted a holistic examination of their first year experiences through an investigation of their motivations

for attending college, their sense of self efficacy when entering college, and the external and institutional challenges and supports they encountered during the first year. In addition, I noted the effect of career goal presence as an influence.

### **Dissertation Overview**

The following chapter provides a detailed review of relevant literature on the theoretical and conceptual frameworks used to understand FNT student's participation, challenges, and persistence in higher education. Chapter Three details the methods used to execute the study including a description of participant selection, procedures used to collect data, and how the data were analyzed. Detailed descriptions of the personal backgrounds and educational profiles of the participants are included in Chapter Four. Chapter Five provides a comprehensive analysis of the data collected over the course of the study. Chapter Six concludes the dissertation with a summary of the major findings, conclusions, limitations, and implications for research and practice.

## CHAPTER TWO REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Theoretical Framework

This chapter provides a review of the relevant research that informed the development of the research questions. It more fully examines the changing enrollment and persistence patterns of nontraditional and women students, and it includes relevant theory on women and adult student transition theory to understand the psychological context in which FNT students enter and transition to college. This chapter also provides a review of the literature on the primary characteristics/patterns that significantly impact nontraditional student persistence: 1) family and financial status, 2) work patterns, and 3) enrollment patterns. The chapter concludes with a summary of relevant student adjustment, persistence, and attrition models to understand how researchers and administrators have framed students' interactions with institutions and the factors or behaviors that lead to persistence or withdrawal.

### Changing Enrollment Trends

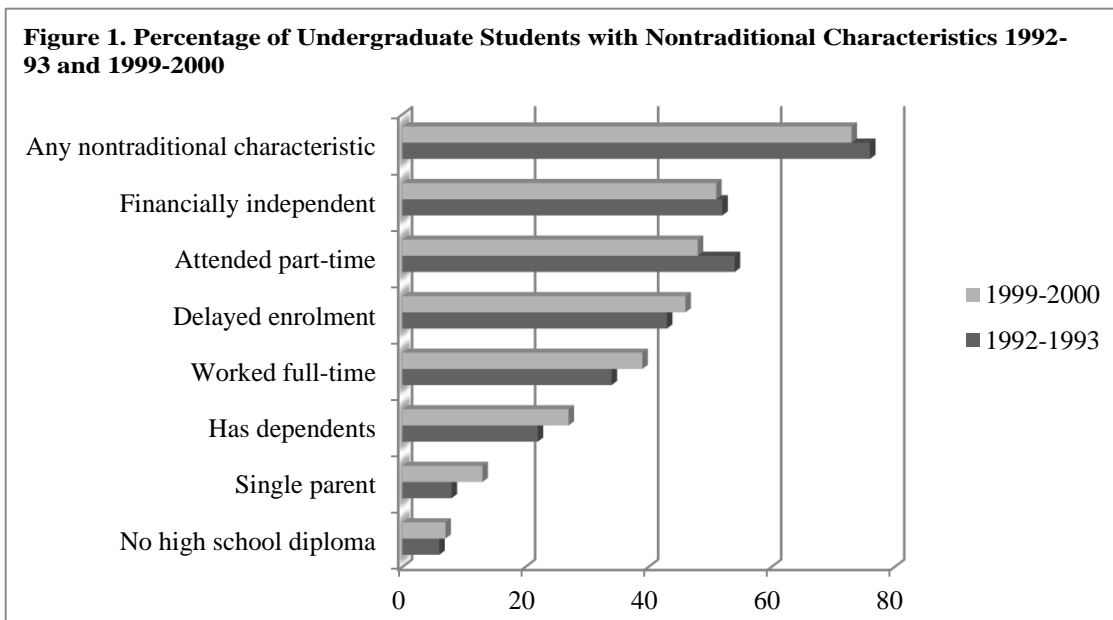
**Nontraditional student enrollment trends.** Current enrollment trends indicate a dramatic shift in the landscape of the American higher education system. During the period between 1970 and 2000, enrollment for traditional-aged students (aged 23 or younger) increased by 51 percent. The growth for nontraditional-aged students (age 24 and above) during that same period was nearly three times as large (NCES, 2002a). According to the *Digest of Education Statistics*, 45.1% of students entering higher education in 1995-96 were 24 years of age or older (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 2001), and this group is expected to grow

beyond 50% by 2012 (Reed, 2005). In an analysis of enrollment data from 2000, the NCES determined that 56% of undergraduates in two- and four-year universities were women, and that women exceeded men in enrollment among students over the age of 25, 50.5% compared to 44% (NCES, 2003; St. John & Tuttle, 2004).

While the average age of students entering higher education has been well-documented (Austin & McDermott, 2003; NCES, 2003; Reed, 2005; St. John & Tuttle, 2004), much of the previous literature on college attrition suggests age is not a primary factor in relationship to persistence, though factors that correlate with students' age, such as familial responsibilities and the number of hours students work are predictors of attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Lenning, Beal, & Sauer, 1980). In contrast, more recent literature highlights the significance of age. The older students are upon entry, the more likely they are to attend part-time, work, and have families during the critical transition period (Adelman, 2005; Calcagno, Bailey, & Jenkins, 2006; Milam, 2009). Adelman (2005) further suggests, "One demographic makes an enormous difference in the distribution of virtually any postsecondary outcome or process—age at the time of first entry to postsecondary education" (p. 119).

The largest growing student population is now characterized as: attending part-time, having delayed college attendance after high school graduation, being financially independent, having spouses, having dependents to support, working more than thirty-five hours a week, or being age 24 or older (NCES, 2002b, 2007). In 2002, the NCES published findings from a special analysis of nontraditional students. Below, Figure 1 compares the percentages of students who held these characteristics in the 1992-93

academic year to students in the 1999-2000 academic year. More than 70% of students during both periods identified, in some way, as nontraditional.



DATA SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000)

The following table (Table 1) shows the percentages of students who held nontraditional characteristics and situates those populations according to their measure on the nontraditional scale as defined by NCES. Today, essentially more than half of all students at undergraduate colleges are characterized as moderately nontraditional students (NCES, 2002b).

Table 1.

*Percentage of nontraditional undergraduates with each nontraditional characteristic, by nontraditional characteristic and status: 1999–2000*

<b>Nontraditional characteristics</b>	Financially Independent	Attended Part time	Delayed Enrollment	Worked Full time	Had Dependents	Single Parents	No HS* Diploma
Any nontraditional	67.8	63.8	60.9	54.0	35.8	17.7	8.7
Financially	100	66.2	66.4	57.3	52.8	26.1	10.1
Attended part time	70.3	100	58.8	62.0	36.2	15.7	8.0
Delayed enrollment	74.1	61.7	100	52.0	39.7	19.6	9.2
Worked full time	72.0	73.3	48.4	100	40.7	16.6	7.1
Had dependents	100	64.5	67.6	58.2	100	49.4	11.6
Single parent	100	56.6	68.0	55.4	100	100	14.1
No high school	78.7	58.6	76.1	46.2	47.6	28.7	100
<b>Nontraditional status</b>							
Minimally	15.2	36.2	22.8	22.8	0	0	2.2
Moderately	68.0	63.8	42.2	51.5	18.7	3.8	5.2
Highly nontraditional	99.4	80.4	76.3	75.0	79.6	38.6	15.1

\*Student did not finish high school or completed GED or certificate. Students may appear in more than one column.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS: 2000).

Nontraditional student enrollment also varies by institutional type. Below, Table 2 displays the composition of nontraditional students by institutional type during the 1999-2000 academic year. During that period, enrollment of highly nontraditional students (4+ characteristics) in public two-year institutions was above 60% while enrollment for minimally nontraditional students (at least 1 characteristic) was 41% at public four year institutions.

Table 2.

*Percentage distribution of undergraduates according to the type of institution attended, by student status: 1999-2000*

<b>Student Status</b>	<b>Public less than 2yr</b>	<b>Public 2yr</b>	<b>Public 4yr</b>	<b>Private not-for-profit less than 4yr</b>	<b>Private not-for-profit 4yr</b>	<b>Private for-profit</b>
<b>Total</b>	0.7	44.9	33.4	0.8	14.9	5.2
<b>Traditional</b>	0.2	17.3	52.1	1.0	27.3	2.2
<b>Minimally nontraditional</b>	0.5	39.3	41.0	0.9	13.5	4.7
<b>Moderately nontraditional</b>	0.9	55.5	27.2	0.6	8.6	7.1
<b>Highly nontraditional</b>	1.2	64.2	17.2	0.8	10.1	6.6

Note: Percentages may not add to 100.0 due to rounding SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, NCES, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS: 2000)

**Women student enrollment trends.** Horn (1996) noted that the changing workforce has significantly impacted enrollment among adult students in higher education. She reasoned that the increased level of female participation in the workforce was associated with the increased number of adult women returning to the classroom. Women returned to continue educational pursuits that had been previously interrupted, or enrolled in higher education for the first time. In addition to changes in the labor market, the women's movement and changing attitudes about the roles of women fueled women's college enrollment. A significant body of research suggests that other life experiences also compel women to enter higher education (Kahn & Polakow, 2004; St. John & Tuttle, 2004; Taniguchi & Kaufmann, 2006). In today's society, women are increasingly more independent and are increasingly solely responsible for their own and their children's financial well-being (ACE, 2004; Leppel, 2002; Shriver, 2009). Particularly among low-income and minority populations, women are more frequently the primary breadwinners and heads of households (ACE, 2004; Corrigan, 2003; Shriver, 2009). Such life changes and changing social structures have resulted in a steep escalation in women's enrollment.

Current enrollment trends indicate that women are outpacing men in enrollment and graduation rates among all racial and cultural or ethnic backgrounds. White women make up 55% of the White college population. Black women represent 62% of Black college enrollment; and Hispanic women constitute 56% of their group's college population (NCES, 2003; Ntiri, 2001). Each year since 1980, women have outnumbered men in college enrollment among all groups mentioned above. And for the first time, Asian women outnumbered their male counterparts in 1994 when their enrollment percentage reached 50.2% (Ntiri, 2001).

## **Nontraditional Students' Participation in Higher Education**

Prior to Horn (1996) and the NCES 2002 report, one study that is often referenced in research concerning nontraditional students is Kasworm's 1994 study of adult undergraduate students. The study focused on the dynamics of adult undergraduate student psychological involvement, interactions and perceptions within the undergraduate student context. Kasworm considered students' experiences in relation to persistence models and their perceptions about their experiences, and integrated Astin's (1993) theoretical work and research on involving colleges. Astin's writings proposed that quality undergraduate education occurs as a function of the individual's involvement in postsecondary education and the interaction of that educational setting with the cognitive constructions, perceptions, and actions of the undergraduate student. A student's cognitive and maturational development was theorized to be directly impacted by the duration, intensity, and quality of undergraduate experiences on-campus.

In examining the experiences and persistence of nontraditional students, Kasworm and Pike (1994) suggested that students who were 24 or older enter higher education with academic skills comparable to those of traditional students. Yet, other studies indicate that they are at an academic disadvantage because of delayed entry, are returning after stopping out, or are part-time students (NCES, 2007; Quimby & O'Brien, 2004; Zajacova et al., 2005). In the *High School and Beyond* study, in which a national sample of high school graduates were surveyed at two year intervals through 1986, Hearn (1992) concluded that having nontraditional student status was associated with weak high school academic performance and low educational aspirations. Similarly, in a study of 107 nontraditional college freshmen at an urban commuter institution, Zajacova et al. (2005)



found that full-time students earned higher grades and were more likely to persist than students who attended part-time.

Other research has found that in addition to being underprepared, the number and variety of external obligations nontraditional students have require them to spend significantly less time on campus and generally only to attend classes or to use educational resources (e.g., libraries, technology, etc.) (Reay, 2003; St. John & Tuttle, 2004; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). When entering four year institutions they are, from the beginning, “at risk” and face numerous obstacles. For example, in an analysis of a national sample of undergraduate students who completed the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) during the 1998–99 academic year ( $n = 3,774$ ), Lundberg (2004) found that the number of hours students worked off campus held a significant negative relationship with student engagement with peers and faculty in regards to peer mentoring, social interaction, peer relationships, and interactions with faculty. The relationship was most salient for students who worked more than 20 hours per week off-campus. Lundberg’s findings confirmed that for these students, there is very little time for social and intellectual interactions with peers and colleagues outside the classroom (Furr & Elling, 2000; Tuttle et al., 2005).

### **Women Students’ Participation in Higher Education**

A number of studies have focused on the experiences of women in college environments. Much of the literature suggests that the climate at American institutions is less supportive of female students than of male students (Janz & Pyke, 2000; Morris & Daniel, 2007). Although there are historical accounts of the challenges women encounter in educational settings, Hall and Sandler first reported on the climate for women in higher

education in the early 1980s, near the period when women's participation surpassed that of their male counterparts. In a 1982 report on the Status and Education of Women, Hall and Sander found the climate at coeducational institutions to be inhospitable toward women students, and coined the phrase "chilly climates" to describe environments where gender inequities exist (Hall & Sandler, 1984). These micro-inequities include everyday behaviors that devalue or disregard others on the basis of sex. Their research suggests such values and behaviors can also be observed in institutional practices and policies that discriminate against women, unequal representation in some areas and in student cultures and traditions that more clearly value men (Janz & Pyke, 2000). The overall climate was determined to be the result of a various overt and covert faculty and student behaviors (Morris & Daniel, 2007).

In an attempt to understand the implications campus climate has on college experiences of women, Hall and Sandler (1982) theorized that a chilly campus climate functions to inhibit intellectual development during college (Morris & Daniel, 2007). Their 1982 report entitled *The Classroom Climate: A Chilly One for Women?* stated that some faculty interact with male and female students differently in the classroom, often unknowingly. Overt discriminatory practices were generally observed in the classroom and included discouraging women's in-class participation; prompting them to change majors or withdraw from classes; making disparaging comments on their intellectual abilities and accomplishments; implying that they lack commitment; engaging in sexist behaviors; and ridiculing scholarship on women's perceptions and feelings (Janz & Pyke, 2000; Morris & Daniel, 2007). Other behaviors included singling out or ignoring women due to their gender; using patronizing tones with women; allowing a longer wait time for

men to respond to a question than for women; interrupting female students or allowing them to be interrupted more often than men; asking women lower order questions and men higher order questions that require critical thinking; and using gender stereotypes in classroom examples (Janz & Pyke, 2000; Morris & Daniel, 2007).

In examining how student perceptions of a chilly climate affect cognitive outcomes of first-year female students, Pascarella et al. (1997) administered the Perceived Chilly Climate for Women Scale (PCCWS) at 23 institutions in 16 states. Results from two-year institutions ( $n=176$ ) revealed that perceptions of a chilly climate had statistically significant negative associations with end-of-first-year cognitive development and self-reported gains in academic preparation for career. Similar results were obtained from four-year institutions ( $n=1,460$ ) which also indicated perceptions of a chilly climate had statistically significant negative associations with self-reported gains in academic preparation for career. After Pascarella et al. (1997), the PCCWS, which originally consisted of eight Likert-scale items and emphasized discrimination in classrooms, was expanded to incorporate non-classroom settings. Using the modified instrument, Perceived Chilly Climate Scale (PCCS), Janz and Pyke (2000) surveyed 488 students and analyzed data from 269 female and 57 male respondents. Their results revealed statistically significant gender differences in scores, with female students perceiving a chillier climate than male students. In a more recent study, Morris and Daniel (2007) used the same instrument with community college students ( $n = 403$ ) to determine how perceptions of a chilly climate differed between students in traditionally female-dominated majors (nursing and education) and traditionally male-dominated majors (engineering and information technology). Their analysis indicated that female

students found the climate chillier than male students, and that students in traditionally female-dominated disciplines perceived the climate chillier than students in traditionally male-dominated disciplines.

The social, academic, and organizational milieu of the academic community is often considered the campus climate, which includes interactions with other students and staff and experiences with support networks and service centers (e.g., financial aid, advising, residence life, and campus government and leadership, etc.), all of which could positively or negatively impact the overall climate of the campus (Janz & Pyke, 2000; Morris & Daniel, 2007). In their report, Hall and Sandler (1982) also noted that certain groups of women (e.g., minorities and older women) may especially be affected by a negative or chilly campus climate. Scholars theorize that exposure to such environments can trigger declining grades, physical infirmities, a host of psychological issues (e.g., feelings of anger, powerlessness, and loss of self-esteem), and even prompt withdrawal from the institution (Janz & Pyke, 2000).

Studies comparing male and female student outcomes and attrition have produced inconsistent results (Astin, 1993; Elkins et al., 2000; Milam, 2009; Wohlgemuth et al., 2006). In an analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDs) retention data for six states, Milam (2009) found that the overall “retention rate for female nontraditional students (63.3%) was higher than that for males (58.5%), but that the bachelor’s attainment rate was higher for men (10.9%) than for women (9.1%)” (p. 16). It is worth noting that some states in the study were missing retention data and that these figures represent an *overall* retention analysis, rather than an examination of *first to second year* persistence. Wohlgemuth et al. (2006) reported opposite findings indicating

males were more likely than female students to be retained, but less likely to graduate. The investigators further determined that being female was one of the strongest positive predictors of graduation, a stark contrast to Elkins et al.'s (2000) finding that being female was a predictor of early departure.

Other research specifically focused on *first to second year* persistence among nontraditional students has revealed no significant difference in persistence rates based on gender (Leppel, 2002; Wohlgemuth et al., 2006). In an examination of NCES data from the 1990 survey of Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS), information for 2,647 male and 2,737 female baccalaureate degree-seeking students was analyzed. There was no statistically significant difference in the persistence rates of male and female students (Leppel, 2002). Wohlgemuth et al. (2006) made similar findings in a study of the entering class ( $n = 3,610$ ) at a mid-western research university. Although women accounted for 44% of the entering class and were more likely to be retained, there was no statistically significant difference in first to second year persistence relative to gender. While persistence studies examining gender have produced mixed results, research on nontraditional student persistence clearly indicates that those who continue to the second year have a better outlook for degree completion as their persistence rates become similar to those of traditional students (Maehl, 2001; NCES, 2000b).

### **Women's Transition Theory**

It is important to understand the reasons and conditions under which women enter higher education because internal psychological and external social circumstances interact in such a way that they create the framework for an individual's experience. The following literature considers factors that may affect adult female students' psychological

processes as they enter higher education and develop as students. Much of it specifically addresses how female adults deal with the transition into new roles; however, embedded in these theories are general principles of human development—that individuals develop as they face new challenges and questions in life, and respond to those challenges by identifying ways or strategies to manage or work through them. Humans encounter and master new challenges by applying rules of behavior and ways of making sense of complex issues as they adapt to and organize each new environment. In regard to academic environments, students enter institutions, with “established sets of epistemological views or ways of knowing—how they construct knowledge or choose what they believe” (Medina, Banks, Brant, & Champion-Shaw, 2008, p. 9). Their individual views are based on their personal identity and stage of development according to their gender, race, age, and socio-cultural values. Each of these personal and developmental characteristics influence how they respond to environmental stimuli—in this case, their interactions and experiences within the academic environment.

**Role exit theory.** Expanding on the initial works of Knowles (1968), Kidd (1973), Cross (1983), and Cross and McCartan (1984), an extensive and diverse body of research has been compiled on adult female undergraduates’ development. Much of the research has focused on their characteristics (Ryder, Bowman, & Newman, 1994), multiple roles (Ross, 1992), perceptions of academic barriers (Bowl, 2001), institutional support systems that predict their persistence (Hazzard, 1993; Kapraun & Heard, 1994), motivations, self-identity, and career choices, (Ross, 1992). While each of these studies cover individual aspects of the plight of nontraditional students, very few offer a comprehensive review of the nontraditional student experience.

However, in their 1995 investigation, Bresse and O'Toole considered role exit theory (RET) as a framework for understanding the process of how adult women move from one social position to another, specifically from a previous role to the role of a college student. RET is the principal way in which adult development literature addresses this social phenomenon. The term "role exit" was first coined by Blau (1973). In adulthood, role exit refers to the process of leaving behind a major role or incorporating a prior role into a new identity. Blau outlined four types of exits: 1) an act of nature, such as the end of a role with the death of a spouse; 2) expulsion by a group, such as banishment; 3) involuntary action, which could include being dismissed from employment and 4) voluntary action, such as leaving relationship or making a career change.

Bresse and O'Toole's (1995) qualitative study examined the responses of 221 women at an urban commuter campus and used RET to explain why the majority of women who had experienced transition and consequently enrolled in college indicated that their past experiences (identities) influenced their decision to enter or re-enter higher education. Participants in the study responded to 32 open-ended questions that allowed them to elaborate on events that led them to college, their development of a student identity, life as an adult student, and their plans for changing or improving their circumstances. Seventy-five percent of participants in the study were married or divorced with children under 20 years old, married with no children, divorced and living alone, or single and living with adult relatives. Over 200 of the women were White (92%) and they represented 71 academic majors. The women in the study were categorized into two groups—those who experienced internal ( $n = 73$ ) and external ( $n = 148$ ) transitions.

Internal transitions were those produced through introspection and self-awareness and included committing to a long standing goal or self-improvement. External transitions were generated by exterior forces and characterized by a period of disorder.

According to Huber (1973), “in contemporary society, individuals constantly wrestle with unique situations and life events that force them to think and rethink how they define themselves in their daily lives. New role definitions emerge for adults, especially for women, and their identities change as a result” (Bresse & O’Toole, 1995, p.1). For women in Bresse and O’Toole’s study who experienced external life transition (such as unemployment; divorce and changing family roles resulting from illness or death, etc.), there was an extended period of personal change; thoughts of uncertainty, self-doubt, loss of self-confidence, and the tendency to false start.

A fundamental tenet of RET is that one’s past identity continues into the present. Bresse and O’Toole found that for 85% of the 148 women who experienced external life transitions, their lives and roles prior to attending college continued to affect their new student status. Often due to economic realities and difficult relationships, the women unexpectedly found themselves in transitional roles in the effort to improve their circumstances. Moreover, a key finding in the study was that the majority of participants cited external transition as the catalyst for becoming a student. These findings confirmed that these students face the additional challenge of incorporating a previous role or identity into their current self-concept. It is worth noting that as they moved through their transition these women acknowledged having a strong sense of powerlessness, loss of meaning, and a sense that their lives were directed by forces outside of themselves. In contrast, the researchers found that women who experienced internal transitions, had few,



if any, reservations about their abilities, possessed a stronger sense of self control over their lives, and had the ability to explore other opportunities before entering college.

**Adult transition theory.** The number of social and psychological concerns that influence the experiences of adults in higher education are of particular importance because FNT students are more likely than other students to underestimate their abilities and lack confidence in their ability to be successful (Bresse and O'Toole, 1995; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). Low self-confidence may trigger psychological distress and decrease the likelihood of persistence (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). Understanding how these students develop and adjust to new environments is essential to understanding how they make meaning of their experiences and make successful transitions.

In 1984, Schlossberg described four categories of adult development. This framework allows for a deeper understanding of adults in transitions and could provide insight on the types of support systems and programs that are necessary for this group's successful transitions. The four categories are:

1. The contextual perspective emphasizes the social environment on individuals' lives.
2. The developmental perspective highlights the sequential nature of change during the adult years and consists of three subtypes: a) age-related (Levinson, 1978), b) stage (Erikson, 1980), c) domain-specific development (Helms, 1993; Perry, 1968).
3. The lifespan perspective focuses on the individuality of continuity and change.
4. Finally, the transitional perspective emphasizes both cultural components (i.e. social norms and individual life events involving change (Schlossberg, 1984).

Schlossberg's theory describes a transition as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman., 1995, p.27). She emphasized the role of perception in such transitions, and pointed out that a transition exists only when the individual experiencing it defines it as such. While a transition may be triggered by a single event or nonevent, coping with a transition is a process that continues over a period of time. The amount of time necessary for successful integration varies with individuals and transitions. Such transitions may allow growth, may lead to regression, or may be viewed with ambivalence by those experiencing them. Drawing on the work of other researchers, Schlossberg et al. (1995) labeled the phases of transitions as "moving-in," "moving through," and "moving out." However, unlike, Bresse and O'Toole's *Role Exit Theory* (RET), Schlossberg's transition theory does not focus solely on exiting a role; instead it examines the psychological and developmental changes that occur when adults experience a life event involving change. These life events do not necessarily involve leaving a role behind, but may include adding or transitioning into a new role, as many adult students do when they decide to attend college.

When considering the added layer of transition on the process of becoming a student, both RET and Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) theory offer insights on the challenges women face as they enter, adjust, persist, or withdraw from academic institutions. However, they each apply to different student circumstances. For example, RET may be more relevant for students who may have left one role for another, such as when a newly divorced or unemployed woman becomes a student, while Schlossberg's theory would apply to those adding the role of student to other roles they continue. For many students,

assuming and maintaining multiple roles further complicates the already challenging first year transition process, particularly when these students are also financially independent.

### **The Nexus between Family and Financial Status, Work, and Enrollment Patterns**

**Family and financial status.** Unlike traditional students who primarily depend on their parents to support some or all of the attendance costs and provide general support and guidance, FNT students are often financially independent and frequently juggle their student role with those of being a parent or caregiver, and employee. Maintaining multiple roles is associated with negative educational outcomes as the time, financial, physical, and emotional care required for children, dependents, spouses, and employers are all negatively associated with persistence (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Reay, 2003; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005).

Findings from a number of studies suggest FNT students are often engaged in a delicate balancing act that significantly impacts their participation and integration in the academic community. For example, in examining differences in college persistence between men and women, Leppel (2002) determined that women, more often than men, had dependent children living with them, and that marriage and children together held a negative association with persistence. Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005) came to similar conclusions regarding the negative effect parenting young children have on women's persistence. Scott, Burns, and Cooney (1996) determined that the primary reason female students with children withdraw from college is their familial responsibilities; and that marriage offers only limited support for achieving educational goals (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). They further noted that when a marriage dissolves, women encounter significant disadvantages in educational attainment, "due to the loss of material, time,

financial and emotional resources” (p. 925). As a consequence, FNT students’ enrollment decisions are limited by external and financial responsibilities associated with supporting others and paying for school.

Their status as independent students is central in that it defines the options they have to cover the cost of higher education. In 2002, the NCES reported that 51% of students were independent (as defined for financial aid eligibility). Lapovsky (2008) suggested that these students are distinguished by factors that lower their chance of college completion more than dependent students. Their participation decisions more often involve part-time enrollment or additional hours working to offset the cost of attendance (Tuttle et al., 2005). In their 2002 report, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education noted that in 1980, tuition at 4-year public colleges represented 12% of the total family income for the lowest-income families. By 2000, tuition had risen to 25% of family income for this group (Riggert et al., 2006). While all types of financial aid positively impact participation for all groups, grant aid has not kept pace with the rising cost of tuition (Morgan, 2002). The market consensus is that families are aware of and are willing to incur student loan debt to cover educational costs. However, much research has decried the widening gap in access for low-income students, particularly because the trend in government funding has been to decrease student subsidies in grant aid in favor of loans that target middle class families. According to several studies on higher education participation (Advisory Commission of Student Financial Assistance [ACSFA], 2002; Morgan, 2002; Riggert et al., 2002), students’ inability or perceived ability to afford the cost of attendance much influences their decisions to enroll. The initial commitments students make to an institution are tied to their personal perceptions

about both the kinds of academic and social interactions they will have, and affordability (Braxton, 2000). Orfield (1992) further reported that for some low-income families a typical \$10,000-\$12,000 debt is larger than the family's entire annual income, and many students from low socio-economic backgrounds are reluctant to accept the burden of student loans (Burd, 2003).

**Work patterns.** Consequently, many students are now less able to attend full- or part-time, without working to cover the expense. In fact, during the 2003-04 academic year, 75.2% of dependent and 80% of independent undergraduates worked while attending college (Perna, Cooper, & Li, 2006). In a descriptive analysis of 2004 NPSAS data, Perna, Cooper, and Li (2006) found that 78.8% of all women students worked an average of 33.8 hours per week, and that 77.4% of independent students indicated they worked to pay educational expenses (Table 3). The American Council on Education (2004) and others reported similar findings with 85% of low-income adult students reporting that they, too, worked primarily to cover higher education costs (ACSF, 2005; Riggert et al., 2006).

Table 3

*Primary Reason for Working among Undergraduates by Dependency Status: 2003-04*

<b>Dependency Status</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Earn Spending Money</b>	<b>Pay Tuition, Fees, or Living Expenses</b>	<b>Gain Job Experience</b>	<b>Other</b>
Total	100.0	24.2	63.4	7.3	5.1
Dependent	100.0	32.3	55.8	7.6	4.2
Independent	100.0	9.2	77.4	6.7	6.7

*Note:* Analyses are weighted by WTA00 study; *Source:* Analyses of NPSAS: 2004 Undergraduate Students

In 1993, Astin observed that "working full-time is associated with a pattern of outcomes that is uniformly negative" (p. 388). Since then, researchers have found that nearly 50% of all full-time students work enough hours to hinder their academics (King & Bannon, 2002). The findings of other researchers appear to further substantiate Astin's claim (Cheng 2004; Lundberg, 2004). In considering work intensity among different student populations, Tuttle et al. (2005) reported that because non-White students often hail from low-income backgrounds, they are more likely to choose alternative options to reduce the cost of attendance. They concluded that African American and Latino students are more likely to work beyond 35 hours per week. Not surprisingly, the literature indicates that students who work 35 or more hours per week are at highest risk for attrition (Kulm & Cramer, 2006; Perna et al., 2006; Tuttle et al., 2005). Yet, while much of the literature suggests negative associations between work and persistence, some studies have shown no significant negative impacts, and have suggested positive benefits of work on student persistence and on cognitive development when students work up to 15 hours per week on campus or 20 hours per week off campus (Cheng, 2004; King, 2002; Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1998). However, in their synthesis of prior research, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) determined that the relationship between student employment and work was ambiguous. The increasing number of first-year college students who work is troubling. In 2003, the ACE reported that 70% of all freshmen students worked while enrolled. The situation seems to foreshadow a continuing rise in part-time enrollment as an increased work load lends itself to a decreased course load. As shown in Table 4 below, in 2004, 83.6% of

independent students worked an average of 36.1 hours per week and enrolled mostly part-time (Perna et al., 2006).

Table 4

*Characteristics of Undergraduates Who Worked, by Dependency Status: 2003-04*

Characteristics	Percentage Who Worked		Avg. Hrs. Worked/Wk*	
	Dependent	Independent	Dependent	Independent
<b>Total</b>	75.2	80.0	24.1	34.5
<b>Sex</b>				
Male	73.4	82.1	24.6	35.5
Female	76.9	78.8	23.6	33.8
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>				
White	76.6	80.1	23.7	34.4
Black/African American	72.6	80.9	25.1	35.0
Hispanic/Latino	74.2	82.4	26.1	34.5
Asian/Other Pacific Islander	66.8	72.5	22.1	32.3
<b>Parent's Highest Education</b>				
Did not complete high	69.7	77.7	27.1	35.2
High school	78.5	79.7	25.5	35.4
Some college	79.4	81.3	25.2	34.0
Bachelor's degree	73.5	79.7	23.4	34.0
Advanced degree	71.1	81.2	21.6	33.1
<b>Enrollment Pattern</b>				
Enrolled mostly full-time	73.1	75.2	22.2	32.0
Enrolled mostly part-time	82.2	83.6	29.9	36.1
Enrolled FT & PT equally	80.2	77.0	27.2	33.3
<b>Residence</b>				
On campus	64.8	77.4	19.3	29.7
Off campus	78.6	79.9	25.2	34.9
Living with parents	79.7	81.5	25.9	31.9

*Note:* Analyses weighted by WTA00

\*Average hours worked does not include students who worked no hours.

Source: Analyses of NPSAS: 2004 Undergraduate Students

**Course Enrollment patterns.** As previously mentioned, enrollment has undergone a dramatic shift since 1970. The NCES (2007) report on part-time undergraduates indicates that part time students now account for a significant portion of the U. S. undergraduate population (Hussar, 2005). During the 2003-04 academic year, the beginning student population was nearly evenly split between students who enrolled full-time (53%) and those who attended part-time (47 %) (King, 2003). While part-time attendance provides benefits to students by lowering their costs, increasing access, and affording flexibility, much of the literature indicates that part-time enrollment is associated with behaviors that negatively impact persistence (e.g., stop-outs and excessive work) (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002; O’Toole, Stratton, & Wetzel, 2003).

Another important issue highlighted in the NCES (2007) report on part-time undergraduates is student employment. According to the report, 83 % of students who enrolled exclusively part time worked while enrolled, and 53% of them were employed on a full time basis. The report further described differences between the full-time and part-time student populations, indicating that students enrolled exclusively part-time were typically older, female, Hispanic, financially independent, first generation, from low socio-economic backgrounds, with weak academic preparation and lower expectations for higher education (Corrigan, 2003; NCES, 2007). These findings are central because they are factors that are negatively associated with student persistence.

In developing their model on nontraditional student attrition, Bean and Metzner (1985) highlighted the importance of alleviating the impact of external pulls or risk factors nontraditional students have that conflict with their academic responsibilities, attendance, and persistence. Bean and Metzner noted that regardless of students’



academic preparation, if they are unable to arrange adequate childcare, adjust their work schedules, or cover the cost of attendance, they simply will not persist. Their observation suggests a nexus exists between a student's family and financial circumstances, work, and enrollment patterns. A student's family financial status often determines if and how they can afford college, as their resources and knowledge of affordability options shape decisions to persist—to enroll full-time, part-time, or not at all (Braxton, 2000).

### **Models of Student Integration, Attrition and Persistence**

The inability to retain or ensure students persist can be damaging in that it results in reduced opportunities for occupational advancement, lowered self-esteem, and income losses for students. To improve and better support academic outcomes for students, institutions examine what occurs before and after students arrive on campus. In higher education, theories are often used to guide practice. Theoretical models are tools that identify important variables related to attrition or persistence and the relationships that exist between those variables. How each variable interacts with another is based on several theoretical models. Such models explain the challenges students encounter as they enter, integrate, and persist in competitive academic environments, and they are useful guides in developing and implementing appropriate programs that enhance student academic experiences.

Early models of student integration appeared before the early 70s. However the two seminal works often referenced in the literature were developed by Spady (1970) and Tinto (1993). Spady (1970) identified attrition as a result of incongruence between a student and an institution. According to his theory, individuals join social organizations—in this case, a place where students, faculty, and staff interact within

institutions of higher education—with varying background traits and experiences, as well as varying individual educational goal anticipation (goal commitment), and initial degrees of affinity for a specific institution (institutional commitment). As participants in the campus community, students interact both socially and academically. Over time, these variables—initial commitment, background, and interaction—result in varying degrees of social and academic acclimation which is related to adjustments in goals and institutional commitment, and eventually to persistence or exit from an institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Following Spady's work, Tinto's (1993) explanatory model of the persistence and withdrawal process has been the basis for leading research in the field of higher education student retention. According to Tinto (1993), limited or inadequate interaction results in weak peer associations and a lesser degree of integration, which has been shown to negatively impact adjustment and persistence, and increases the probability of withdrawal. Tinto's model has been extensively researched at various institutions and in diverse settings. Several studies indicate Tinto's (1993) model of integration has predictive validity and the construct of academic integration (rather than social integration) is more relevant to persistence at commuter institutions due to the number of external commitments and limited time those students spend developing relationships within the academic community (Peterson & Delmas, 2001; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Still, study results remain mixed—at times confirming the model's utility and contradicting it at others (Braxton, 2000). Updated versions of Tinto's model have provided useful data and clarity in the theoretical design (Braxton, 2000).

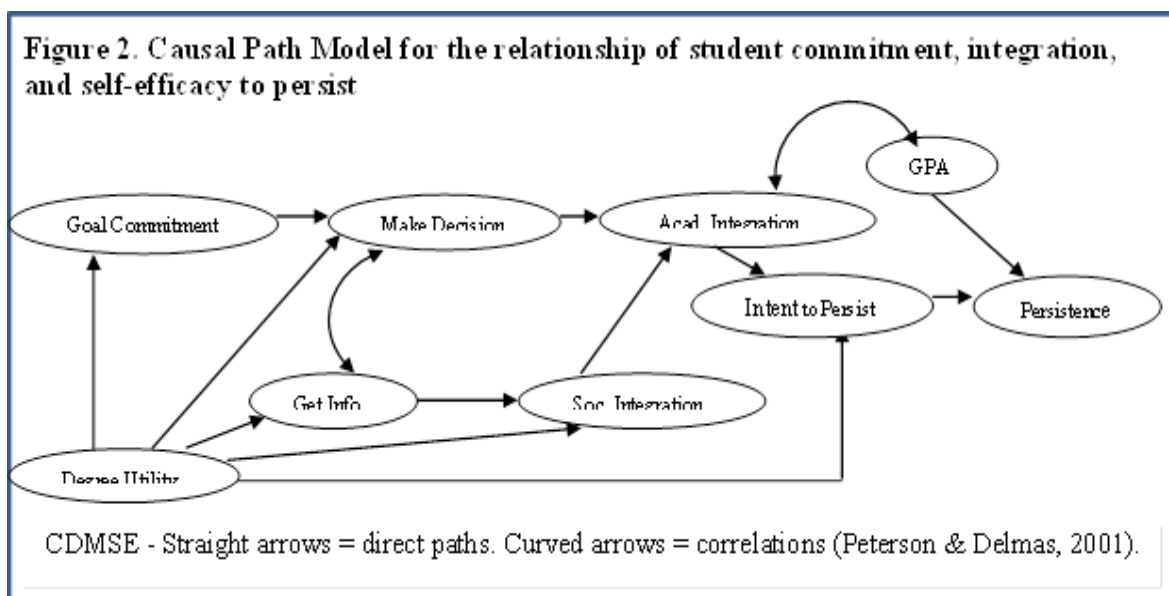
**Contemporary models.** Although Tinto's model (1993) has been held to be generally applicable, it failed to incorporate significant factors related to nontraditional students. Bean and Metzner (1985) introduced a Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition that incorporated "pull factors" and suggested that four sets of variables impact attrition among nontraditional students: 1) academic performance—GPA; 2) intent—which is influenced by psychological outcomes and academic variables; 3) defining variables—which include age, high school performance, ethnicity, etc.; and 4) environmental variables—those controlled and not controlled by the institution. Their work also indicated that nontraditional students are more receptive to academic integration than social integration and therefore institutional efforts should be directed toward moderating external risk factors (i.e., non-school responsibilities that conflict with attendance and progress—work schedules, childcare, ability to pay, etc.) (Eppler, Carsen-Plentl, & Harju, 2000).

More recent models have attempted to synthesize Tinto's (1993) and Bean and Metzner's (1985) models. More notably, Peterson (1996) indicated self-efficacy beliefs about one's capacity to successfully organize and carry out tasks is related to a variety of academic and career behaviors and achievements, including grades and persistence. Drawing a relationship between career decision-making, self-efficacy, and social and academic integration, Peterson (1996) suggested that having a career-focus or goal should be considered a key factor in nontraditional student persistence models because nontraditional students who believe that college will afford them opportunities for employment and better careers are more likely to persist than those who do not. Specifically, Peterson (1996) notes that adult students...

prefer to actively engage in their learning, participate in educational experiences that address specific problems or needs (particularly those that are career related), are motivated to learn when they perceive an immediate or practical application (in relation to getting a job or advancing in their career), and are increasingly self-directed (p. 3).

The utility of the Career Decision Making Self-Efficacy Model (CDMSE) has been affirmed in several studies (Hull-Blanks et al., 2005; Peterson & Delmas, 2001; Taniuchi & Kaufman, 2006). In their investigation of students' and career goals, Hull-Blanks et al. (2005) found that more female students had job-related career goals than value-related goals.

In 2001, Peterson and Delmas constructed a path model mapping the effect of Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy (CDMSE) and degree utility on persistence. The model includes a career planning and development concept with an underlying theory of self-efficacy and planned behavior. Their analysis of data from underprepared students ( $n = 418$ ) confirmed the CDMSE has a direct effect on academic and social integration and an indirect effect on persistence. In the model (Figure 2) below, straight arrows represent the direct impact some factors have on other factors within the construct. Curved arrows represent correlating factors. Peterson and Delmas reasoned that increasing student confidence in their ability to collect and act on information related to their career decisions enhances their development and creates students who become better integrated into the academic setting, which in turn makes them more likely to persist at obtaining their goal(s), as depicted in Figure 2.



Finally, Bean and Eaton (2002) proposed a Psychological Model of Student Retention that describes the psychological processes that lead to academic and social integration. Their model is founded on four psychological theories: 1) attitude-behavior theory—the extent to which an individual’s attitude about their experiences guides their actions, 2) self-efficacy theory—an individual’s belief in his/her ability to act in a certain way to achieve certain outcomes, 3) coping behavioral theory—an individual’s ability to assess and adjust to a new environment or situation, and 4) attribution (locus of control) theory—the degree to which an individual attributes past experiences or outcomes to internal or external influences. The model is intended to provide a fuller explanation of the traditional models and depict how academic and social integration can be viewed as a function of psychological processes.

**Model summary.** Early integration models have been criticized because they are limited in scope and do not fully incorporate the elaborate multifaceted aspects of the lives of today’s students. Tierney (2000) suggested they are mono-cultural and exclude non-dominant groups. Bean and Metzner (1985) assert that nontraditional student

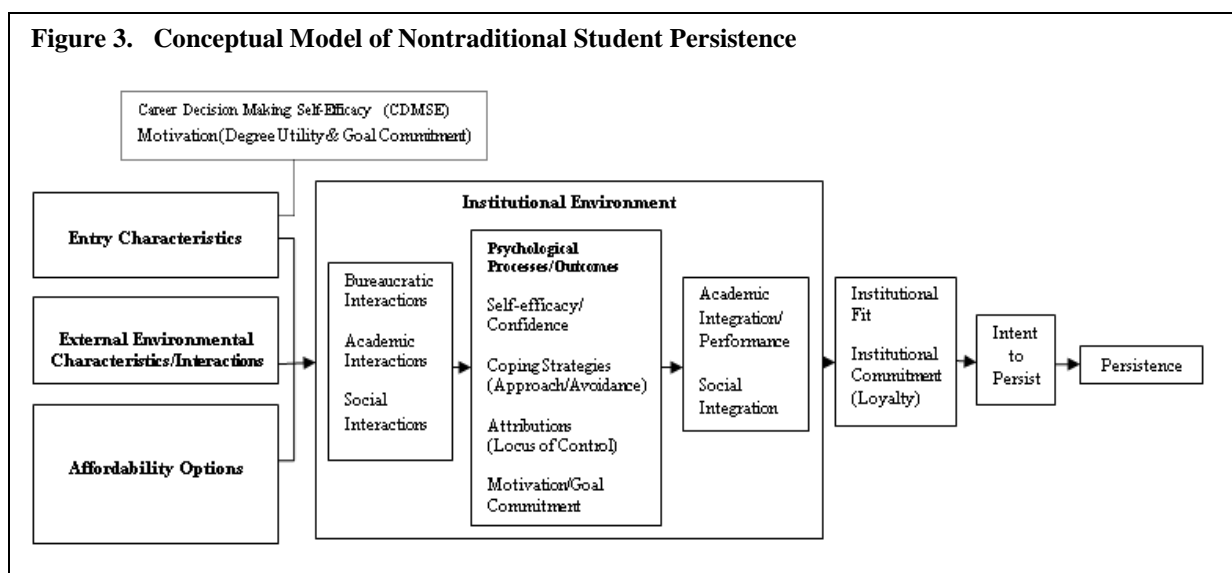
adjustment and persistence can be best served by attending to external risk factors—those that are not related to school, but have direct and indirect impacts on academic interaction and ultimately adjustment. In view of the recent shifts in the labor market and student rationales for entering or re-entering college, application of Peterson’s CDMSE model appears useful in analyzing students’ motivations for entering and persisting. Bean and Eaton’s Psychological Model of Student Retention also offers insight on the diverse, dynamic and multi-leveled lives of nontraditional students by testing new relationships between various and complex psychological frameworks that have not been previously examined (Braxton, 2000; Johnson, 2004). Such models attempt to address persistence and retention in a more holistic way, wherein the socially constructed context in which students make meaning is examined in association with students’ psychologically motivated behaviors and academic integration.

Among the existing models, there is a need for further analysis and refinement in order to construct and implement institutional initiatives that better serve the needs of nontraditional student populations during the crucial first-year period. As several studies have shown that having a career goal significantly impacts persistence for all students (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 2001; Hull-Banks et al., 2005; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2006), this study will consider the impact that having a career goal has on the persistence behavior of nontraditional students. The conceptual model for this study, described in greater detail below, builds on Bean and Eaton’s psychological framework, incorporates adult role transition for a fuller understanding of the layered transition process female nontraditional students experience, and addresses the impact of external interactions (pull factors) and students’ understanding of affordability.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Bean and Eaton (2000) introduced a psychological model of college student retention that demonstrated how academic and social integration can be viewed as outcomes of psychological processes. The conceptual framework for this study follows a similar construction, with some variation to account for the population of interest. Figure 3 provides a visual illustration of the overall concept, which allows for analysis of personal and environmental factors that encourage or moderate persistence. It suggests that both external and institutional environmental issues influence nontraditional student decisions to persist, and that the entry characteristics with which students enter college and issues of affordability play primary roles in mediating or enhancing their interactions within the institutional environment. While entry and external environmental characteristics are important factors associated with student motivation, efficacy, academic acuity, and time to engage in educationally purposeful activities; a student's understanding of her options to afford college plays a more significant role in that it ultimately determines her enrollment status and level of engagement within the academic environment. For instance, if a student already has significant financial obligations, she may choose to enroll only part-time and work full-time to lessen the expense, or might rely on a combination of loans and grants, rather than work, to cover the immediate cost of full-time enrollment and related expenses. This model includes career decision-making self-efficacy (CDMSE) and degree utility. As described by Peterson and Delmas (2001), career decision making self-efficacy (CDMSE) reveals the extent to which students are confident in their ability (self-efficacy) to engage in career and educational planning and decision-making to acquire better employment and career opportunities.

This conceptual framework also introduces a factor rarely considered in other models. While most traditional students enter higher education as *continuing* students immediately after high school and typically experience only the transition from one academic environment to another; nontraditional students enter higher education with other well-defined roles that necessitate an additional layer of adjustment. For example, many are adding the role of student to existing roles (e.g., employee, spouse, mother, caregiver, etc.) or leaving a previous role behind such as after the loss of a spouse or employment. Incorporating adult/role transition allows for a more comprehensive understanding of multi-leveled adjustment that occurs with nontraditional students. Because much research indicates that the initial commitments and enrollment decisions students make to an institution are tied to their personal perceptions about affordability (Braxton, 2000), this model also considers students' understanding of the costs and options for covering their college expenses.



Like Tinto's (1993) retention model, it suggests that the extent to which a student is able to successfully negotiate the new environment and resolve to persist depends



primarily on their successful academic and social integration within the college environment (Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2002), and that successful integration is essentially dependent on positive interactions with representatives of the university and peers (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Entry characteristics (demographics, motivations to attend, intellectual capacity, transition and psychological circumstances) with which students enter college largely determine how they respond to institutional issues and interactions.

Embedded in Tinto's theory of integration is the concept of *belonging* which Hausmann, Schoefield, and Woods (2007) assert is a central feature of student persistence. Bollen and Hoyle (1990) suggested that sense of belonging is the extent to which students feel they *fit in*, are *stuck to* or *a part of* particular groups (Medina et al., 2008). The strength of this group relationship strengthens or diminishes students' institutional commitment and persistence intentions. And finally, in accordance with research on affirming institutional environments (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006), the model assumes that campus administrative policies and structures, interactions on campus and in classrooms environments directly and indirectly influence students' sense of institutional fit or sense of belonging, their commitment to the institution, and their intent to continue enrollment (Hausmann et al., 2007; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). For purposes of this study, the *campus* or *institutional environment* consists of all physical and human resources, facilities, services, institutional policies, political and organizational structures, and students within the university. With attention to each of the issues outlined above, this study seeks to uncover FNT motivations and strategies for persistence beyond the freshman year.

## Summary

Research on FNT students has examined an abundance of issues related to being nontraditional and female, and a review of the literature suggests that as these students enter and adjust to traditional academic environments they face a number of challenges with managing multiple roles and maintaining balance between work, course loads and affordability. It is encouraging that models of student persistence are being reconfigured to better understand the diversity among students and what facilitates their persistence. Still, while a significant portion of the literature focuses on student characteristics and the behaviors and choices students make that negatively impact their persistence, there is a noticeable gap in the literature on the strategies these students employ to persist. The same is true for institutional responses to this growing student population and their unique needs. Researchers duly note that this population has now grown too large to be ignored. Thus, this investigation aims to both expand the literature on FNTs and to provide a tool for institutions and higher education professionals to better understand what external and institutional mechanisms promote and support persistence for FNT students beyond the critical first year.

## **CHAPTER THREE METHODS**

This chapter presents the research design that guided the study and describes the methods used to collect, organize, and analyze data. This chapter also covers the researcher perspective, participant confidentiality, and the way in which integrity of the data and findings was maintained throughout the research process.

### **Research Design**

The underlying design for the research was consistent with an embedded case study. It focused on 8 cases within a bounded system; a single four-year, public, commuter institution (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2005). The study drew inferences from multiple sources of data (in-depth interviews, data reports, and documents) to provide context and depth to the description and analysis of the bounded system (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009). This triangulation of data sources provided for a detailed description of FNT student experiences and persistence, an in-depth analysis of major themes, and a sound interpretation of the overarching phenomenon of interest in the case (Creswell, 2007).

Consistent with Attinasi and Richardson's (1983) view that persistence is considered a process in which individuals engage in an iterative interpretation of the meanings of people, things, and events encountered daily in the academic environment, this research focused on students' interpretations of their lived experiences. These emerged from daily interactions with others, in and outside of the university setting. "Examining the process by means of which the student formulates his concepts of the university and of himself in relationship to it has great potential for contributing to our understanding of the decision to persist or withdraw" (Attinasi & Richardson, 1983, p. 6). It was my hope that student stories of their experiences and interactions within and

outside the academic setting would uncover and highlight aspects of their academic and external lives that make their early persistence possible. Given the swell in enrollment among women students and their high rate of first year attrition, more research is necessary in order to develop and shape institutional policy that effectively addresses their needs. Such research could play a vital role in guiding institutional efforts for achieving retention goals for this student population.

The research method followed the tradition of narrative inquiry; participants shared their individual stories through a re-telling of their personal experiences in a higher education setting (Clandinin, 2007; Patton, 2002). Under this research approach, accounts of personal “experiences constitute the narrative ‘text,’ ...and the ‘text’ of the stories form the data set” that was analyzed in the investigation (Merriam, 2009, p. 32). Employing narrative inquiry was especially useful in this research as it gave voice to how women construct meaning (Clandinin, 2007). The narrative inquiry method was further informed by looking at women’s experience through a feminist theoretical lens: the narratives were considered within a social and historical context where the experiences of women have been largely ignored. Thus, the research was conducted through a critical feminist perspective as it sought to: 1) bring awareness to the unique experiences of female students as they transition to and persist in college, 2) reveal the impact institutional policies and practices have on their persistence, and 3) promote women’s perspectives through advocacy (Marshall, 2004; Sprague, 2005). The bulk of the data for this study evolved from the stories students tell of their first year experience, how they were able to persist, and the contextual factors (i.e., family and work) that influence their academic decisions (Clandinin & Huber, in press; Reissman, 2007).

The interview techniques that were used allowed participants to share both what and “how” they experienced their first year in their own voice. This was essential for two reasons. First, humans experience phenomena in different ways according to their individual perspectives, views, and ways of knowing. Polkinghorne (1988) suggested that by sharing stories of our experiences, we engage in a fundamental act whereby we assign “our own meaning (or [how] we know something) and communicate that knowing to others” (Boyle, 2003, p. 35). These methods allowed for an examination of the meanings that students assigned to individuals, their interactions, and experiences in understanding their motivations to persist.

Secondly, narratives of women are essential in giving voice and visibility to women’s issues (Andrews, 2007). Tinto (1993) underscored the value of qualitative methods in educational research and emphasized that researchers must be concerned with how individuals perceive “their” realities in order to understand the dynamics of interaction between them and the institution with which they are associated. This study sought to give voice to the experiences and persistence of FNT students and highlight how those experiences may differ from those of traditional students.

### **Researcher Perspective**

In their work, researchers Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (2000) suggest that all humans are storied individuals with a series of narratives that explain how they understand the world and make meaning from their experiences in it. Thus, in research, both the investigator and subject are, together, reconstructing and re-telling a story, and evidence of their individual stories can be found in field notes, journals, and even the research texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This raised an important question; how do I

simultaneously share parts of my story without unduly influencing how participants tell their story?

Reflexivity, or the process of critical reflection “on the self as a researcher” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 183), is described as a legitimate strategy to guard against misrepresenting a participant’s meanings and perspectives based on the researcher’s own worldviews or perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Merriam, 2009). This activity was important as it aids the reader in understanding the framework for the research and how the study will be conducted. It also allowed the findings and study conclusions to be presented in a more transparent way (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009). This process of critical reflection is one of several techniques I used to assure credibility of the data. In this section, I discuss personal experiences that have shaped my position and approach to this research.

During my undergraduate studies, I was a traditional college student. I learned early on that most of the students with whom I studied were not. My former roommate, suitemates, and a number of other female students within our circle of friends were nontraditional. They were all financially independent and usually had one or more family members who depended on them for their financial well-being. This is something I could not have imagined as an eighteen year old college freshman. Over the course of an academic session, I observed schoolmates work with as many as three employers to cover the cost of full-time attendance, support a parent, and often younger siblings back home. I admired their ability to perform well enough academically to achieve academic honors. However, all of this came at a price. While some, like my former roommate, were able to persist, many more did not.

Years later, while serving as an academic advisor, I advised several hundred undergraduate students. In that role I was familiar with their academic performance, the types and levels of aid they received, their family structures, commitments outside their roles as students, and institutional resources available to them for support. In my work as a graduate researcher, I have conducted research with female and nontraditional students to assess the academic climate and their development, and I have listened to their stories of the challenges that arise from the multiple roles they fill while attending college. I have become aware of the challenges women students encounter within the academic environment. These include resource disparities, the lack of appropriate programs and policies, and discriminatory and disparaging treatment.

When I consider the range of challenges students encounter during the first year of college, and add to that multiple roles, substantial financial responsibilities, external commitments, and the micro-inequities that exist within the academic environment, I question whether or not FNT students receive the institutional support they need to persist or if it is sheer self-determination driving those who do persist. Like Milam (2009) I do not believe that the stories mentioned above are unique or uncommon, but that they have...

been told in the description of differences in outcomes at commuter and urban institutions and in the stories of dissonance and alienation experienced...by nontraditional learners who do not fit the model of the [traditional] college age freshmen...[and that] nontraditional students are [often] failed by public institutions that perpetuate an educational system constructed to suit the needs and expectations of [traditional students] (Milam, 2009, p. 2).

I believe that American colleges and universities have a history of disregarding, marginalizing, and trivializing women; and that institutional needs are often different from and in conflict with the needs of students. Thus, it is necessary to consider how students interpret their experiences in order to better structure policies and practices that impact their persistence.

Bracketing my personal perspectives and assumptions was an important part of the data analysis process, as it allowed the findings to be presented as close to the participants' meanings as possible. While scholars note that one can never really capture absolute objectivity in re-telling another's story (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009; Wolcott, 2005), to control personal perspective, I engaged in reflective journaling. I regularly recorded research activities and my initial reactions to them—what they made me feel and think. To gain insight and self-awareness, I later reflected on why I responded in a particular way—what values, assumptions, and aspirations I held that elicited the initial response (Merriam, 2009). To ensure the evidence for the analytical findings existing in the data, I also enlisted peer researchers to analyze selected parts of the data collected in the study (Merriam, 2009; Reissman, 2007). The different interpretations were compared and reconciled. This process helped to maintain soundness and integrity of the research conclusions. And finally, the process of analysis was thoroughly documented so that the logic of the analysis could be traced (Reissman, 2007).

### **Trustworthiness**

There are strategies that may be used to increase the credibility of finding. This research followed rigorous and systematic data collection procedures by employing triangulation, member checks, and peer examination.



**Triangulation.** What participants reported in interviews was cross-checked between multiple data sources. For example, transcribed interview responses were cross-checked with field notes, artifacts, data reports, and other relevant documentation.

**Member checks.** Member checks were conducted to prevent misinterpretation of the meanings participants intend to convey (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009). The member checks were conducted at various stages of the research. During data collection, participants had the opportunity to review a summary of their responses at follow-up interviews, clarify issues that may have been unclear, and identify changes or adjustments that were necessary. During analysis, participants received a draft of their profile and preliminary analysis to provide feedback on the integrity of the analysis.

**Peer examinations.** Two peer investigators periodically reviewed portions of the data. During these peer examinations, each peer reviewer reviewed a portion of raw data and provided an independent analysis to determine whether findings were reasonable based on the data (Merriam, 2009). Peer reviewers were also asked to look for or consider data that supported alternative explanations. Their inability to identify data that were contrary to the original results increased confidence in the findings (Patton, 2002). Each of these processes helped to detect and adjust areas where my personal perspectives could have obscured the findings.

### **Setting and Participants**

**Setting.** The research was conducted at an urban, public, commuter institution in the Midwest which serves approximately 22,000 undergraduate students. The university has a considerable nontraditional student population (60%), which the university describes as any student beginning university studies after the age of 21. The average age

of entering freshmen is 23, and the female population (58%) is considerably higher than the population of male students (42%). Approximately 1,200 female sophomore students were enrolled when the study began.

The institution offers several social, academic and financial support services and resources to undergraduate students, and provides specific programs and services to students who are from the foster care system, have delayed entry, or who have dependent children. These support programs include the Volunteer and Community Involvement Scholarship program, Nontraditional Student Scholarship program, All Scholars program, the Service Association Scholarship program, the Metropolitan Rotary Club Scholarship. Each offers financial and/or academic support services. The institution also offers freshmen learning communities (LC) and themed learning communities (TLCs) to all incoming freshmen who are not directly admitted into academic schools. Both types of learning communities are designed to create a supportive educational environment by integrating student support services into the classroom. Each LC has an instructional team comprised of a faculty member, an academic advisor, librarian, and peer mentor who collaboratively provide wrap-around academic and social support to freshmen students enrolled in the course. Students may elect to enroll in a Thematic Learning Community (TLC). The TLCs are designed similar to LCs, offer a purposeful first semester experience for entering students, provide a comprehensive view of higher education, and help students connect their academic course work in their intended major with co-curricular activities and the world.

**Participants.** The sample for this study was selected by purposeful criterion sampling for an information-rich in-depth study (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling allowed me to study information-rich cases that would illuminate and provide an in-depth understanding of the central issue(s) under investigation (Patton, 2002). The sampling technique was similar to homogenous sampling in that selection was based on membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics (Creswell, 2007). This study relied on the NCES's 2002 definition of nontraditional students, which delineates seven characteristics that classify students as more or less nontraditional. This study specifically focused on students who were financially independent or who had a dependent(s). Sophomore female students, aged 22 to 29 years old, who were moderately nontraditional as freshmen students were invited to participate in this study. Sophomore students were invited because they had recently completed the freshmen year and were still "close" enough to the freshmen year experience to accurately recall the details of that experience.

University officials assisted in identifying and providing a list of students who might be eligible to participate. After obtaining human subjects approval to proceed, the university's Information and Research Services office supplied a list and contact information for female sophomore students who met the specified criterion. I also relied on student listservs and associations to post announcements about the study. To ensure students met the other study criteria, those who indicated interest in participating were contacted by phone to be screened before arranging an interview. And because research has shown that recruitment incentives facilitate study enrollment (Berger, Begun, & Otto-

Salaj, 2009), a small incentive, a \$20 gift card, commensurate with the time spent on the study, was offered as a thank you to students who participated in the study.

## **Measures**

Data collection for this study included in-depth interviews, artifacts, documents, field notes, and reflective journal entries.

**Semi-structured in-depth interviews.** The primary method of data collection for this study was two semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants. The two 60-90 minute in-person in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant to gather data about their first-year experiences. Glesne (1999) suggested that qualitative research aims “[to] understand the nature of constructed realities” (p. 5) by communicating with participants about their experiences. In comparison to survey questionnaires, interviews hold a number of advantages for communicating with and gathering data from informants in this study. Among these are that they provide greater flexibility in questioning study participants (Merriam, 2009). Exploration and discovery are essential in this kind of research. Therefore, it is important that the investigator has opportunities to probe and pursue clues that surface during the course of the interview. Also, face-to-face interviews allowed for extended opportunity and increased motivation for informants to share accurate and complete information immediately (Attinasi & Richardson, 1983).

Multiple interviews allowed for a comprehensive perspective of the student’s experience. This strategy reduced the possibility of missing or excluding valuable information. Mishler (1995) explained that single interviews with participants, whom interviewers have never met, do not provide an opportunity to fully contextualize meanings. In order to build a rapport and trust with participants, I shared parts of my own

story during the initial meeting with each participant. The interview questions focused on students' motivation to attend and persist in college, their self-efficacy, challenges and supports they encountered during their freshman year, and their strategies and support networks for success.

The first interview protocol consisted of nine overarching questions with one to six prompts for each. The first interview was designed to set the context of the participant's experience and allowed them to begin reconstructing the details of their first year. It also specifically targeted students' career motivations. Sample interview questions included: "Tell me what motivated you to attend college? Explain how you were able to manage school the first year? After you arrived on campus, how were your experiences different from your expectation?" and "Had you determined a plan of how you would go about achieving your career goals? If so, explain how you were able to develop that plan."

During the second interview, participants were asked to discuss their external influences and challenges and had the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of their experience as female nontraditional students. The second interview protocol consisted of six overarching questions with one to five prompts for each. Sample interview questions included: "What was the adjustment period like for you? Was there a time when you considered leaving school? If so, what made you decide to stay or describe your primary motivation(s) to overcome the challenges," and "What strategies did you use to persist to the second year?"

**Documents and artifacts.** I anticipated that students would report having received or been directed to written or published materials on university policies and resources to facilitate their acclimation to the academic community, administrative policies, procedures, services, and resources. Whenever possible, these materials were obtained and included as part of the data that were analyzed. Also, data reported on participant profile forms were used to document nontraditional student status and in triangulation. On the participant profile forms, students documented their enrollment classification, parent's educational background information, family's SES, number of hours employed, and number of dependents, etc. Data from their profiles were compared with enrollment data received from the university's Information and Research Services office. It was also verified with the information students reported in interviews.

**Researcher notes and reflective journal entries.** Researcher notes included: (1) my personal notes from interviews— describing my view of what occurred during interviews and interactions with participants; (2) my notes on methodology detailing my decisions regarding gathering, coding, and organizing data; and (3) my personal notes and journal entries describing my reactions to and challenges with the research process.

## **Procedures**

After obtaining contact information for potential participants from the office of Information and Research Services, I made initial contact with prospective participants via an e-mail invitation (with the study information sheet attached) requesting their participation. The study information sheet was attached to the initial e-mail invitation and detailed the voluntary nature of study participation, protections, anonymity, and associated risks. In the correspondence I introduced myself and the topic of the study, and

advised students that the study involved completing a short profile form and two in-person interviews. I also offered to discuss any questions or concerns that they had regarding taking part in the study.

A prospective participant may have also received an additional e-mail or phone invitation as a follow-up reminder. I posted hardcopy and electronic flyers (approved by Office of Campus Life throughout campus. After the initial e-mail invitation, students received up to three e-mail reminders and a final telephone invitation to participate. The telephone invitation indicated that I recently attempted to contact them by e-mail regarding participation in the research study and that I was following up with a call to determine their interest in participating. The script for the telephone invitation is included in the appendix.

Students who responded positively to the invitation were screened for eligibility. Specifically, I asked if and how they met the criteria listed in the invitation. If students indicated no interest in participation or that they were not eligible, they were thanked for responding, removed from the list of potential participants, and did not receive follow-up/reminder invitations. I asked students who were eligible and willing to participate to schedule an initial interview time and location. Interviews were scheduled at times and locations convenient for study participants.

Prior to the start of initial interviews, I introduced myself, briefly discussed the research topic and shared my interest and previous experience with nontraditional students. I reviewed the study information sheet with each participant and answered any questions students had regarding the study and their participation. The students then completed the participant profile form to document their nontraditional status. While the

student completed the profile form, I prepared the audio recorder to record the session. The interview protocol was used as a guide. The actual process and questions largely depended on the context and direction of the student's story. The interviews did not exceed 90 minutes. As we reached the end of the initial interview, the student had the opportunity to schedule the follow-up interview before ending the session.

All interview audio files were transcribed. The typed transcription files were loaded into NVivo 8.0 qualitative data management software for coding and analysis. Based on the preliminary analysis of the first interview no adjustments to the wording or ordering of questions were needed on the second interview protocol. The second interview session began with a review of the summary of the initial interview. This allowed the participant and me to clarify any points that were unclear and discuss any item(s) that needed to be changed or adjusted. The second interview resumed where the initial interview ended. Students signed for and received the \$20 gift card at the end of the second interview. Data analysis was conducted continuously and simultaneously with data collection.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was consistent with the constant comparative method as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This method of analysis involved sorting individual units of data, which are then grouped and categorized into more general conceptual themes. Data was initially coded using an open coding procedure. During this process codes were identified without restrictions and only to discover nuggets of meaning. I then returned to the coded data to consider how that data could be grouped into categories and sub-categories. I made connections between the data based on: a) causal conditions, b)



contextual factors, c) actions and interactions taken in response to the phenomenon, d) intervening conditions that assist or hinder actions and interactions, and e) consequences of actions and interactions as described by Corbin and Strauss (2008). As Patton (2002) suggested, this was a process of working back and forth, separating variables and complex, interwoven groups of variables in a continuous sorting-out and reconstruction process. This approach allowed me to construct evidence to support key themes, and when necessary, reorganize data as new themes or information emerged.

In addition to transcripts generated from recorded interviews, I collected and analyzed documents that were provided to and used by students to facilitate their orientation to the campus policies and resources. Analysis of these documents provided insight on the resources and strategies students used in learning to navigate the academic and social environment, as well as administrative domains. These documents were analyzed using content analysis and included a brochure on freshmen learning communities, and a campus orientation guide distributed to students during orientation visits (Jurafsky & Martin, 2000; Stage & Manning, 2003).

### **Internal Review Board and Participant Protections**

I also attended to the issue of confidentiality by providing the participant with a consent form that described, in detail, the use of and access to the data and the protocol for protecting the identity of study participants. To preserve participants' identities, pseudonyms were used for them and their institution. This method freed participants to provide open and candid responses.

The study information sheet also emphasized the voluntary nature of participating in the research and the option to withdraw from the study at any time. And finally,

participants were advised that they would have the opportunity to review the interview summaries to affirm or deny the investigator's interpretations of their responses; and that changes to those interpretations would be negotiated with the investigator.

## **CHAPTER FOUR PARTICIPANT PROFILES**

This chapter provides a review of the background characteristics of each student participant in the study. The purpose of the descriptions is to highlight aspects of each participant's life relative to their educational context. I interviewed sophomore female students between the ages of 22 and 29 years old, who were also 1) financially independent, or 2) had a dependent other than a spouse. The majority of the participants were Caucasian students ( $n = 6$ ). Two were members of a traditionally underrepresented racial/ethnic group. The majority of participants was working and enrolled full-time, and had parents who had acquired college degrees (Table 5). Half of the participants had at least one parent who held an advanced degree, and most had one or more siblings who earned a college degree as well. The majority was from working class or low-income backgrounds, and just more than a half reported having a child or dependent other than a spouse. Of the eight participants, five were single students, three were transfer students, and two were first generation college students. Participant descriptions are presented to assist the reader's understanding of the experiences that brought these women to their current status as sophomore students. Rather than providing a full account of their individual stories here, this chapter is meant to provide a context in which to understand the experiences outlined in their interview responses.

**Table 5.****Participant Background Information**

Stdnt	R/E	Age	Fam (SES)	Mar Stat	Chd/ Dep	F's Ed.	M's Ed.	Maj	Entry Status	Wk Hrs.	Hrs. Enr	Tuition Pd By
Ashley	W	26	Md Cls	M		Comp Coll.	Comp Coll.	P-Nurs	R-entry	20	PT	Trust
Caroline	W	27	Md Cls	S	1	Comp. Coll.	Comp Coll.	Org Ldship	R-entry	35	PT	Tuit Rmbrs
Dulce	L	28	Wk Cls	S	1	Some Coll	Comp Coll.	Elm. Ed.	Delayed Entry	36	FT	Wrk/Lns
Elena	L	22	Wk Cls	S			Middle Schl	Span/El. Ed	R-entry Trans.	35	FT	Wrk/Lns/ Fd. Grnt
Jenny	W	26	Low Inc	S	2		Some Coll.	Gen. Studs	R-entry	40	FT	Wrk/Lns/ Fd. Grnt
Kim	W	24	Wk Cls	M	2	Comp HS	Comp Coll.	P-Nurs	R-entry/ CC	40	FT	Wrk/Lns/ Fd. Grnt
Sam	W	29	Md Cls	S		Comp HS	Comp Coll.	P-Nurs	R-entry/ CC	25	FT	Wrk/Lns/ Fd. Grnt
Sandy	W	28	Wk Cls	M	2	Comp Coll.	Comp Coll.	P-Nurs	Delayed Entry	20	FT	Wrk/Lns/ Fd. Grnt

## Dulce

A native of the Dominican Republic, Dulce is a (ESL) student with a lively, vibrant personality. She is a resident of the mid-western city where the university is located. She comes from a working class, single parent household, and is the youngest of three siblings. Dulce's older brother is an architect. Her mother and father both attended college. After completing high school at what she described was a competitive Catholic institution in the Dominican Republic, she decided to travel to America to continue her studies. She described her journey to the states and her pursuit of higher education as part of her destiny. She strongly believes that our lives are directed by a spiritual force. She made the journey with her mother, who later returned to their home after experiencing culture shock and feeling displaced. Upon her arrival in the states, Dulce lived on the east coast amidst a variety of cultures and languages, and later traveled to the mid-west. She and her significant other believed she could more quickly gain command of the English language if they lived in a place where most people spoke English. She described this as sort of immersion experience in the English language. However, shortly after her arrival, Dulce's focus shifted away from her educational goals for a period of time. After experiencing some unease with the new culture and language, she focused on more immediate employment and financial concerns. Because of her discomfort with her English language skills, she initially became reclusive and avoided contact and interaction with the public. She feared becoming lost and being unable to communicate with those around her. However, she did develop a friendship with a friend at a local gym who spoke multiple languages (other than Spanish) and who vowed to help her learn English. Since neither spoke the other's language, they began with sign language, and so

began her first course in English instruction. Dulce supplemented her instruction by watching television and videos like *Finding Nemo* in English and Spanish. And although she eventually became proficient in spoken English, her English writing skills remained a primary concern. Four years after her arrival, Dulce revisited her interest in obtaining a college degree. With little knowledge of the requirements and expectations of American higher education, she began her freshman year at age 26 as a full-time student studying education. She continues to work 36 hours per week as a full-time sophomore student in Elementary Education. Due to limited financial resources and knowledge of available grants and scholarships, she relies on loans and employment to cover educational expenses. Dulce is now 28 and provides primary financial support for her mother in the Dominican Republic.

### **Ashley**

Ashley is a second year pre-Nursing student. She comes from a middle class family, is the youngest of three siblings, and completed her high school studies at a private Catholic high school. She is originally from a suburb of the metropolitan area where the university is situated. Long ago, her grandmother established several trusts to cover educational expenses for Ashley and her siblings. However, unlike most of the people in her family, Ashley has not yet earned a baccalaureate degree. Both of her parents and two older siblings all earned baccalaureate degrees directly after completing high school. In fact, her mother, brother and sister all hold master's degrees. She described herself as unmotivated when she was younger. She acknowledged that her performance in high school left much to be desired, and confessed that her confidence in her ability to be successful was fairly low. She further described herself as being very

outgoing and popular in high school. At the time, she had been seeing a young man, who was a year behind her in school (who would later become her husband). In many ways, she remained quite attached to the high school environment, attitudes, and social connections, and admitted that she was overly “care-free” and never fully considered the consequences of her actions at that time. Ashley initially began her college career directly after high school as a full-time student, but quickly decided that she was not ready. During that time she was 18, living at home, and working between 20 to 25 hours each week. She later re-entered college at age 25, married, and is still somewhat unsettled about her abilities and motivation for higher education. When she returned in Spring 2009, she was still classified as a freshman student. At age 26, she continues to work 20 hours per week and now attends college part-time and is a sophomore student planning to enter the nursing program.

### **Kim**

Originally from a small city centrally located in the state, Kim is a 24 year old pre-nursing student. She is from a working class, two parent home; and is the youngest of five, with two sisters and two brothers. She acknowledged that her family has never held significant financial resources, and particularly not during the time when she and her siblings were preparing for college. Her oldest brother received funds and attended college through military service. Her other brother received a full scholarship to a private four year institution and now teaches chemistry in Texas. Neither of her sisters attended college, but her mother had earned a master’s degree at a local four year institution. Kim described herself as a decent student in high school, and at the time planned to pursue a career in Nursing. However, immediately after graduating high school, she felt she

deserved or needed a break from school. Still, her parents urged her to go to on to college directly afterwards, and offered to cover the expense. Wanting to please them, she agreed, but chose a community college to lessen the financial costs. She began her college career as a full-time student, but was soon disenchanted with the institution she had chosen. At that time she was 18, living at home, and working full-time to acquire a place of her own. After a year, she had lost interest in her course work and the college environment in which she studied; and not long after, discovered she was expecting a baby. She married, stopped attending college, and had two children before deciding to return. At age 23, she re-entered college and was still classified as a freshman student. She continues to work full-time while attending classes full-time, and covers the expense with a combination of grants and loans.

### **Sandy**

It was clear from the beginning of our interview that Sandy is an energetic and independent thinker. She is originally from the city where the institution is located. She is from a two parent working class family, and is the middle child of three girls. Both of her parents earned college degrees, as have both of her sisters. Her husband had also attended college, but discontinued his studies after three years. He is a musician and owns and operates a small music label, and often works on the road with his band. When she was in her teens, Sandy was expelled from high school during her senior year due to incidents for which she assumes responsibility and deems regrettable. She admits that she was never much concerned with attending college, and that she had always held distaste for the social and structural hierarchy of schools. She never struggled academically and always knew that school was something she could do, if she so desired. And though she



was a very good student, she did not feel school matched well with her personality, and thus rebelled against it. Consequently, for some time, she avoided college and did not attempt to obtain a GED after leaving school. She believes her people and communication skills are directly associated with involvement in the theatre. She also seemed to command a fairly high level of surety and self-confidence. It was not until she was 22 that she decided to pursue a college degree in Theatre. By this time, she was married and had decided that if I she were going commit time, funds, and effort toward higher education, it had to be toward a field about which she was absolutely passionate. She obtained her GED and subsequently enrolled as a full-time student. Near the end of her second semester, she discovered that she was expecting a baby. She took time off from her studies to spend with her new son. When she was again ready to return to school, she found out that she was pregnant again. At that time, she and her husband were acquiring custody of her step son, and she worked only sporadically as a part-time nanny. Now, at 28, with three children, Sandy is continuing as a full-time pre-nursing student, and covers the expense with a combination of grants and loans.

### **Caroline**

A product of a nearby farming community, Caroline comes from a fairly large two parent middle class family with seven siblings; six older sisters and an older brother. Both of her parents earned degrees, as did an older sister who holds a master's degree from Caroline's current institution. Her mother worked as an elementary librarian and her father as an architect. She attended a small school with fewer than 70 classmates in her senior class. When she graduated from high school, she was reasonably confident in her academic skills. Although she had always been open to the idea of attending college and

had taken the appropriate course work and tests, she had not seriously considered the process of choosing, applying, and paying for college. Her boyfriend at the time convinced her to attend an institution that was close to the school he was attending. He even helped her work out how she could afford tuition through a local employer. She determined it was a suitable plan, found a place in the city, and attended college on full-time basis. During this time she worked part-time for an employer that offered tuition reimbursement to students. While she was excited about living and working in the city, the college environment seemed incompatible with her rather shy, soft-spoken disposition. And after being challenged academically, in a way that she had not been in high school, she questioned her abilities, began to withdraw from her studies, and eventually left the institution. She remained employed with the same employer who by this time had given her a promotion and expanded responsibilities. It would be seven years before Caroline reconsidered pursuing her education. By that time she was 25 and had a two year old daughter. She is now 27 and is enrolled part-time as an organizational leadership supervision student. She works full-time, is enrolled part-time, and supports her four year old as an unmarried mother.

### **Jenny**

Raised as an only child in a small town in the northwest portion of the state, Jenny is now 26 years old. She grew up in a low-income single parent home in a rural farming community. Although neither of her parents completed college, she grew up in an environment that emphasized the importance of pursuing higher education. She had an uncle who taught at a nearby four year institution. He initially inspired her to pursue a degree in nursing. However, she attended a public high school that offered limited

support for students, like her, who were interested in higher education. While she did eventually acquire the information she needed to enroll, she was unable to enroll at her institution of choice. She began her college studies immediately after graduation. At that time, she was 17, living at home with few responsibilities, and enjoyed spending time with her peers. Reflecting on her past, Jenny recalled that she was not yet comfortable in her own skin, somewhat naïve, and shy. The new college environment could not have been more unlike the life, surroundings, and people she knew. Consequently, her induction to college was very brief as she stopped attending three weeks into her first summer course. Since that time, she has had two sons and is now more focused on providing a better more stable life for her children. As a single mother of two, she currently receives some assistance from the state, but primarily covers the cost of enrollment through grants, loans, and her full-time hourly position. Currently, she works and is enrolled full-time as a sophomore student in the General Studies program.

### **Elena**

Twenty two year old Elena was the youngest participant in the study. She comes from a working class, two-parent household. After completing high school and her first year of study in the southeast, she and her parents relocated to the mid-west to join her older sibling who lives there. Back in the southeast, she attended a public high school that offered AP courses and had a full-time college advisor and scholarship coordinator. Although neither of her parents completed high school, the importance of higher education was emphasized in her home. Elena is a first generation Latina student, who was primarily responsible for making sense of the college going process with little parental guidance. She began full-time studies immediately after high school. She

initially chose a major based on what seemed popular among other students, and confessed that she was somewhat of a follower during that time in her life. During that time she also worked full-time to cover educational and personal expenses. And while she shares a residence with her parents, she is required to contribute to the cost of the home. This has been a requirement since her early teen years. Like many students, she was uncertain of a career field when she began her studies and has taken a more exploratory path during her first semesters in college. After her first year, Elena took a year off to assist with the moving process and to gain clarity on the academic path she would take. After a more detailed assessment of her skill set, she has decided to pursue a dual license in Middle School Spanish and Elementary Education. She currently works and is enrolled full-time. Her income combined with grants and loans makes college affordable for her.

### **Sam**

Before relocating to the mid-west, 29 year old Sam grew up on the east coast. Due to the changing economic status of her family, Sam has experienced a unique educational trajectory. At age one, she lost her father in an automobile accident. At that time her mother returned to school and received a bachelor's and master's degree in nursing, and has since achieved a certain level of distinction in the nursing field. Though she was afforded the opportunity to attend a private high school, Sam chose to attend public school. She had experienced lean times with her mother and did not care to burden the family with that expense. And while she and her siblings all attended secondary schools on the east coast, her educational path has been very different than that of her two siblings. Her younger siblings both attended private high schools, continued directly on to

four year institutions, and eventually earned college degrees. But Sam, still concerned with the family's financial resources, chose to attend a community college after high school. Even when she attended high school, Sam identified herself as a feminist. When she initially enrolled full-time in college, she intentionally chose a major in a male-dominated field to debunk gender stereotypes, but she found the field uninteresting and a poor fit. At that time she was working about 10 hours on weekends. She recalls feeling lost, unready for and uninterested in continuing her academic studies, and she soon stopped attending. Years later, on the recommendation of a long-distance suitor, she relocated to the mid-west for a fresh start. However, after their relationship ended she faced economic uncertainty and decided she was ready to acquire a college degree. At 27, she re-entered a local community college and later transferred to a nearby four year institution. To cover her educational expenses, Sam receives loans and works part-time, about 20 hours per week with a non-profit conservation agency.

### **Summary**

The participants described in this chapter had several similar characteristics, with some differences in backgrounds. Some of the characteristics were consistent for half of the group, for example: 1) half of the participants had minor children for whom they were responsible; 2) half of them based their initial decision to enroll or where to attend on the advice of a male suitor; 3) half of them expressed initial self-doubt about their abilities to be successful in college; and 4) although most indicated that several immediate family members held degrees, only three reported they received assistance or coaching from family when they were initially applying to college. All but one of the participants expressed the need for work to help cover educational expenses, and six of the eight

participants indicated the need for loans. All the women in the study with one exception were re-entry students. More surprising, half of the participants held four or more nontraditional characteristics which distinguished them as highly nontraditional. These concepts will be explored in greater detail in the following chapters.

## CHAPTER FIVE FINDINGS

In this chapter I report the findings from the sample identified by purposeful selection (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). Each student described their experiences and shared their perspectives on how they were able to manage their freshman experience and progress to the sophomore year. This approach allowed me to examine and understand their persistence patterns and strategies. The results of this investigation emerged from the stories students told of their experiences generally and particularly about their persistence as freshmen students. After completing the initial interviews, I transcribed each of the interviews verbatim. I also conducted the in-person follow-up interviews with each student. With each participant, I reviewed their transcripts from the initial interview during their follow-up session to get feedback and to make necessary adjustments.

Each of the women in the study were identified as nontraditional because they were between the ages of 21 and 28 years old, were responsible for their own educational and living expenses, or had a dependent as they completed their freshman studies (Table 5). According to research (NCES, 2002b; St. John & Tuttle, 2004), students with one or more of these characteristics experience a number of challenges that traditional students rarely encounter. During the interviews, the participants revealed that they had other nontraditional characteristics. More than half of the eight students had worked full-time; six had re-entered college as freshmen students, and two were delayed entrants. Participants who shared similar characteristics described common experiences. For example, among those who were re-entry students, four of them were also mothers. These students often reported similar challenges and strategies for persisting. The findings

detailed in this chapter illuminate unique and common challenges, and their strategies to overcome them. These are the reflections of FNT students who entered college with varying life circumstances, but had several factors in common. For example, all of the participants were in their twenties as they completed their first 24 credits and earned sophomore status. Variation in the ways in which they described their persistence stories was associated with differing life circumstances, previous schooling (high school and/or college) experiences, as well as their levels of cognitive and intellectual development at the time of the interviews. Their responses provide answers to the guiding research questions and are presented in the following sections.

To illuminate and better understand FNT student adjustment to college and the extent to which these students engage in activities or behaviors that facilitate persistence, interview excerpts are included to highlight their experiences as freshman students. The analysis of interview transcripts produced a total of 39 common patterns which were then subsumed under the six primary themes during the final wave of coding:

Theme #1: Encountering Early Challenges

Theme #2: Establishing External Networks of Support

Theme #3: Developing Coping Strategies

Theme #4: Utilizing Institutional Support Systems

Theme #5: Gaining Confidence and Goal Clarity

Theme #6: The Gendered College Experience

These six themes are examined in detail with supporting data from the participant interviews. Passages from interview transcripts that capture the sentiment of each theme



are included to illuminate and strengthen the veracity of each of the themes outlined below.

### **Encountering Early Challenges**

Over the course of the interviews, the participants indicated a host of challenges that negatively affected their freshman experience. Many of the challenges were associated with pre-college issues including, knowledge of the college choosing and college going processes, academic preparation, understanding of options to pay for college, and self-efficacy upon entering college. There were also adult transition and institutional issues that further exacerbated the challenges students encountered. The combination of these factors limited student engagement and ultimately created serious academic challenges.

### **Limited Knowledge of the College Choice Process**

All of the participants had grown up in families in which college attendance was encouraged, and all had immediate family who had previously attended college. Yet, five of the eight participants had little or no guidance on how to choose a college or what to expect. An unexpected finding was that even though other family members had attended college and promoted college attendance, there was little or no direct support or assistance provided in helping the students understand how to prepare for, decide on, apply for, or acclimate to college. Particularly, participants from working class or low-income families generally indicated that they rarely, if at all, received assistance from family or school officials in figuring out what they needed to do in order to prepare for or choose a college. For example, Sam had grown up and attended public school on the east

coast. Her mother had earned a master's degree in Nursing. In describing how she obtained information on going to college, Sam explained:

My mother was very driven to stand on her own feet, so she believed you have to take the initiative. She would be there to answer questions, but if you don't know what kind of questions to ask, you weren't going to get an answer. I think she relied on the school system to help with that.

Upon their initial entry into college, several participants and their parents entrusted public schools to provide vital college preparation and application information. However six of the eight students reported that their schools did not intentionally or overtly offer that information, even when there was a resource specifically designated for that purpose. Jenny, described how even when she initiated contact with the appropriate school official, she was unable to obtain necessary information.

For some reason, in high school I never found out about the SATs or ACTs or anything like that. My counselor, he just told me I didn't need to worry about it. He couldn't be bothered. So it kind of came down to the point where I'm trying to figure out all this stuff out on my own, and it just wasn't possible for me to apply at [the school I wanted to attend]. I had all the courses done. I wasn't worried about that. It was just finding out how to sign-up for the SATs. Where they were? finding test booklets, stuff like that. I ended up going to the school psychologist and she helped me figure it out, how to sign-up for the SATs and stuff. By that time it was too late, so I just enrolled here. I planned to transfer to [my preferred school] later.

Although her quest for information led her to other people and resources, assistance came too late and resulted in her inability to apply at her college of choice. Consequently, she enrolled at an institution that she did not feel was the best choice or *fit* at the time.

Unfortunately, Jenny's story was not unique. Other students told similar stories of having to assume a posture of self-reliance to acquire needed information and make decisions.

Caroline had been reared and attended high school in a local farming community. In preparing for her interviews with me, Caroline mentioned,

I was trying to think of things that helped me, and I didn't really, I mean there were all these pamphlets and things from different schools. And you know I was getting mail from colleges everywhere. I just took, read through them all and just kept the ones that I thought were best and kept narrowing it down. I don't remember anything beyond those things in the mail that really helped me or brought me here.

While it was important and helpful for them to take initiative in the process, this *self-reliant* posture would also work against them, an issue that will be more fully addressed later in this analysis. Without proper guidance and knowledge about funding opportunities and other aid, they often made unfavorable college choice decisions to fit their family's financial circumstances. For example, Kim and Sam originally chose community colleges solely to keep the educational costs at an affordable level. Sam noted,

I'm the oldest and I grew up remembering what it was like to not have clothes or a lot of food in the house. And so there was this part of me that didn't want my parents to have to sacrifice to put me through a private school. So, I went to

public school. When it came time for college, again there was this childhood feeling of not wanting my parents to struggle. And so I decided to go to a community college on the east coast.

At that time, neither had inquired about or had knowledge of federal or state educational grants that were available to undergraduate students. While their choices initially seemed appropriate in regards to affordability, both later determined that those institutions were not appropriate for them. They found that the physical campuses, academic environments, and institutional barriers left much to be desired. As Kim described it,

It was a lot like high school.... It seemed like at [the community college], people were just taking classes to take classes. That's how I felt. Like, oh well it's just [a community college]. Well 20 bucks a class, I might as well take a class or two, and that's just how it felt there. I talked to no one there. I made no friends....A lot of my teachers there just...I would sit in class and think like how did you get a job here. Cause, not to be mean, but a lot of them didn't seem like they cared or you know didn't really know what they were doing or anything like that.

Kim indicated personal disappointment in the academic milieu, peer interactions, and the quality of instruction at the institution she chose. According to Sam, few people she knew had attended the community college she chose, and those who did frequently engaged in activities that were not conducive to college success. In fact, her early interactions with students more often entailed distractions from academic and intellectual integration. Both Kim and Sam suggested that the overall academic climate of the institutions played a negative role in shaping their initial *sense of belonging* (or *fit*) and *commitment* to the colleges they chose.

The remaining students were less active in their *choice* process and allowed others to direct them to Midwest Metropolitan University. Caroline mentioned that her boyfriend, who was going to a school in town, convinced her that she should attend Midwest Metropolitan University so they could remain close and continue their relationship. On her return to college, Sam followed a similar course on the advice of a male suitor. Ashley's experience was somewhat different. Her academic performance in high school did not convince herself or her parents that she would fare well at a more prestigious four year institution; and she partly chose Midwest Metropolitan University to remain close to her then boyfriend who was still attending a local high school. Recounting a discussion with her parents, Ashley conveyed,

It was just sort of uhmm, this is basically where you're going, in so many words. I mean it was like, we all kinda knew that my grades probably weren't that great, and I kinda thought I'd just end up getting rejected by you know, [State University], so I was just kinda like okay we'll try [Midwest Metropolitan University] to see if I get in.

Ashley also knew there was limited funding available to cover her educational expenses. Her grandmother had established a trust for her college expenses, and she was certain that her parents would not supplement those funds to cover the cost of a more expensive institution. Without considering other reasons why she should attend a different university, Ashley chose Midwest Metropolitan University based on a mediocre high school performance and a desire to continue a budding relationship. As she discussed her decision to attend Midwest Metropolitan University, she noted,

I had a guy that I had been dating for a little over a year. He was a year behind

me, so he was still in high school. I wasn't a very motivated person when I was younger. Like I said I had no idea of what I wanted to do. I was just kinda was there [at Midwest Metropolitan University] hanging out... kind of along for the ride. I still had my friends from high school who I hung out with, so I really didn't spend a lot of time on campus or effort in trying to make new friends.

Ashley had not considered the influence of high school acquaintances on her development as a student. Attending a local institution ultimately preserved those high school connections and allowed behaviors she indulged in during high school to continue. The decision to attend a local institution allowed for distractions from serious academic engagement and did more to strengthen high school associations and weaken her connections to the university and academic community. Selecting a suitable college was among several issues that served as early challenges for the students in this study. There were concomitant issues of under preparedness, unclear expectations, self-efficacy, and goal ambiguity that caused early difficulties for these students.

### **Culture Shock**

All participants reported having experienced a kind of cultural shock when they initially entered college, as they had not anticipated or been prepared for the level of academic challenge they encountered. They generally assumed that college academic work and expectations would not be dramatically different from that they encountered in high school. Ashley noted, "I just expected to go to college for 4 years; that I would come in and kinda get by if you will and be done and graduate from college. I thought that was really the extent of [it]." As the following excerpts illustrate, the other students made

similar assumptions; however, they quickly realized that their expectations differed from their early experiences in college.

Kim: I thought it was gonna be, I didn't really think high school was easy, but that's kinda what I figured it would be like. You know, cause it's a community college. I just thought I would go in and pretty much ace everything which did not happen.

Sam: I found out very quickly that the level of work I needed to get As and Bs in high school was not the same level of work I needed in college."

Caroline: In high school I never really had homework; I just got As and Bs. If I did, I just did it with half the effort. I did that when I first started at [Midwest Metropolitan University]. I guess I felt I never had to do that before because I never had to do it in high school. Everything always seemed so easy in high school, and it wasn't really a challenge. I wasn't used to being challenged.

Jenny: No one ever said to me, this is what college is going to be like. My mom never discussed it.

Not all of the participants felt that they were underprepared. Three participants, Elena, Sandy, and Dulce indicated they had completed more rigorous coursework in high school. Dulce described high school students in her homeland, and particularly at her private Catholic school, as very academically competitive. She further indicated that it was socially unacceptable to fail to meet or exceed the educational achievements and expectations of one's parents. She mentioned:

You need to [earn] like a good grade or more because my mom was a teacher, and you don't want to disappoint her. She attended college and was a professor there.

It was like you don't want people to say, "oh, it looks like she's the daughter of her and she don't know nothing." It push[ed] me to have a good grade.

Dulce is an English language learner who was a delayed entrant and the only participant who reported no significant academic issues. While the other seven participants experienced academic challenges that resulted in dropped or failed courses, academic probation, and stop-outs, Dulce did not experience the same challenges. She was also the only participant who progressed from the freshman to sophomore year according to the traditional academic schedule (24 completed credit hours within an academic year).

Sandy, too, was a delayed entrant and had been away from academic environments for nearly seven years before obtaining her GED and entering college. Although she was expelled during her senior year of high school, she appeared very confident of her academic abilities both in high school and in college, and indicated that she never really had academic difficulties until her sophomore year of college. When she did return to school, she was unsure of what to expect, but was surprised at how much she enjoyed being in school. In her words, "It was nice just to be intellectually stimulated again. It had been so long. There's so much out there that I don't know and can't teach myself; I'd forgotten that. So it felt really good to be in school again." Upon entry, she expected and welcomed the opportunity to be challenged academically. Elena, however, did not expect to be meaningfully challenged. She had completed advanced placement courses in high school and seemed quite confident of her abilities as she entered college. She indicated, "I didn't really have to work very hard [in high school]. Initially I thought it would be a continuation of high school." Elena quickly recognized the level of work and time required for college academics were very different. For six of the eight participants in the



study, the level of academic preparation and lack of information about college resulted in an incongruence between their expectations and the realities of college studies that contributed to their early academic difficulties.

### **Self-Efficacy Upon Entering College**

In addition to being under prepared (academically or via a disconnect in expectations), more than half of the students reported low levels of self-efficacy and uncertainty about their academic and career goals as they entered college. Like other participants, Ashley indicated that she did not have a high level of confidence in her academic skills and social competencies as she entered college. She indicated,

My confidence level was pretty low that I could go off to school somewhere and I think my parents also kinda felt I wasn't motivated enough to...I don't know if this is quite the right word, but that I should deserve to go to like [a big ten] or even like [a more reputable state institution]....and I don't know if I necessarily felt confident about making friends. I obviously wasn't confident about my ability with classes. I guess I was just a little bit hesitant about how well I could really do academically.

Dulce was concerned about her ability to be successful for other reasons. More than nine years had passed since she completed high school and she was still learning the English language. As she put it,

I always wanted to go to college and did everything back home to go. I was afraid because I didn't speak English that well. I thought, oh my God, I finished high school ten years ago or nine years ago. And now, I don't know if I gonna remember everything and if it's different than back home and everything. I know there are a lot of obstacles. For me, the first thing was the language.

Ashley, Caroline and Jenny also indicated that they were out of their “comfort zones.” Classroom interactions, campus, buildings, and simply finding their classes posed significant challenges because of the sheer size of the campus and student population. They lacked confidence that they could overcome anxieties associated with being in unfamiliar environments and successfully manage the social and academic challenges they would face. Describing her difficulty adjusting to and interacting in the classroom, Ashley indicated, “If I had questions, I would just never even ask. I think it was sort of intimidating.” Similarly, Caroline expressed,

I was very scared about being in a place that was so big because I had been in a place that was so small. And even though Midwest Metropolitan University is a smaller campus in comparison to some of the larger ones, I was just so nervous. I mean my classes in high school were like 15 to 20 people max. And then I had this speech class I think my first semester or my second semester, and I was supposed to like give all these speeches in front of like 35 people. And I know that really scared me.

Jenny was also immediately overwhelmed with both navigating campus and acclimating to college courses. She described how she quickly became distressed, and how that distress led to hopelessness.

I was so lost here, basically I wasn't comfortable being here, as it was I wasn't comfortable being myself let alone being thrown into a completely new situation with absolutely no one that I know, in an area that I don't know. I didn't know how to get from or to anywhere, cause the building was here and I ended up parking all the way down by the hospital cause I didn't know where to park. And

I was completely clueless and didn't know any better. I signed up for a semester and made it about 3 weeks. I had to go sit in the same chair for three hours during the summer session. I was like, okay, I can't do this.

It was a combination of apprehension with navigating the physical campus, social interactions, and academic abilities that contributed to the students' initial sense of being mismatched with the academic environment. Concerns about their academic competency grew steadily after their arrival on campus.

### **Academic Challenges**

As I previously mentioned, only two of the eight students did not experience significant academic difficulty during their time as freshmen students. For the other six, the challenge of college level work soon became overwhelming. Only one of the students indicated that she was unable to comprehend course material. The others more often indicated that the required amount of work, reading, and study made the courses challenging. It was primarily an inability or disinterest in fitting all of their academic work into their existing schedules. Their struggles with managing course loads are illustrated in the following responses:

Sam: I didn't manage the first year very well, the reading, course load and home work was very different here than it was at [the community college]. The expectations at [Midwest Metropolitan University] are much higher. My efforts to balance my personal interests with going to school weren't working out. I thought my strength was my ability to time manage. I thought I would be able to juggle all these balls at once, but I realized those are skills I needed to develop more. I have struggled with time management and with keeping up in my courses. If I got on track with one class, the rest would suffer.

Ashley: I was on academic probation for one semester I think. I think my lowest GPA was like a 2.2. I just thought this was like a waste of money. I think when I came back my cumulative GPA was like a 2.45 or something, and I don't know how I even did that well. Homework didn't exist for me. In English W131, we had to do papers, so I would do that, but I didn't read. So, I was like, no, this isn't working out.

Four of the students who were struggling were also working full-time during their freshmen studies. At the time, Kim worked full-time with two employers to save for a place of her own. She experienced stress from attempting to balance school work with full-time employment and noted how those external obligations affected her ability to focus on her academics. She said, "I don't think I was really focused. I didn't do so well. It was stressful too. It's like, in one of my classes, I had homework before school even started. I was like wow, this is new." Even among those who were more confident in their academic skills and goals upon entering, the initial academic challenges they encountered eroded their confidence in what they could achieve. Kim revealed that she "did think about leaving a few times." She thought "maybe I wasn't supposed to become a nurse." After experiencing academic difficulties, Sandy also disclosed that she "just gave up." She mentioned, "It tore me up. I felt like a failure, like what am I doing. I can't do this."

For others, the classroom became more intimidating as they, for the first time, experienced being the little fish in the big pond. Sam reported realizing that:

I was no longer the smartest person in the room or the most well-read. There was a bigger diversity in the room and that fascinated me and terrified me all at the

same time. It terrified me that I couldn't keep up with them. I started to feel self-conscious, self-doubt, if my questions were way off base, that kind of thing.

Caroline was the only student who cited difficulty comprehending course content. Here, she recounts her struggles with the course that eventually led to her decision to withdraw.

I'd taken math before. I stopped going. I just quit going to class, and so I failed out of the class. And I'd kind of given up then. I had taken it twice. I took it one semester and stopped going and took a semester off and thought that was going to be enough time for me to recollect myself to pull myself together, and then I went back the following semester and took it again, and I just stopped going again.

Caroline emphasized that it was her initial difficulties with this course that was the primary reason that she lost interest and confidence in her ability to do well in school.

Not only did she stop attending the math course, she stopped attending all of her courses.

Her repeated disappointing performance in math shifted her attention and focus away from academics and toward those things in which she experienced greater success. At that time, those things involved work place activities. Caroline stated, "I solved problems at work and that made me feel better. I mean I really enjoyed my job and wanted to do that more. And I guess I just kind of gave up." Caroline had been recognized for her outstanding work, given greater responsibility, and offered a small promotion at work.

Unlike at school, her efforts at work were being positively validated. This was also true for other participants. After Sam described her struggles with managing her academic workload, she further explained that she too, "started cutting back hours at school and just started working more because those were projects I could complete with a start and an end. With school, I just couldn't do all these things and keep up." The positive

validation students received in the workplace often drew the students away from their academic work and away from the academic environment in general. As commuter students, they were at additional high risk for academic and social disengagement.

### **Engagement in Educationally Purposeful Activities**

For six of the eight participants, their limited academic engagement and interaction within the academic community resulted in weak peer associations and a lower degree of academic integration which negatively impacted their adjustment and initial persistence. Kim was more and more unable to complete her work. She stated that at the community college, she was “like, well I’ll just do it later, then later comes and it’s too late.” Elena also expressed “I took attending class for granted in [another state] and only attended the ones I liked. I was not very much into school and slacked off a lot.” Caroline explained how she gradually moved further into the work domain and left her academics behind:

The first semester I worked about 20 to 25 hours per week. Toward the second semester, it was more like 30 to 35 hours per week, and that was affecting my school work that second semester. And I didn’t do very good that second semester. And I’m not quite sure if I failed one or two courses because I just stopped going, and I got a promotion at work, and that is what killed it. The more I worked, the less I came to school. Initially, work was supposed to support my being in school, but at some point that changed. Work was more interesting.

For each of the six participants who had limited participation in educationally purposeful activities (EPAs) (Kuh, Gonyea, & Palmer, 2001), there was an eventual total withdrawal. In addition to work and other external pulls that diverted their interest away

from the academic community, each reported being unaware of campus activities that were geared toward engaging students like themselves in a more meaningful way.

Caroline indicated, “I wasn’t involved in any student activities. When I first came, I didn’t see or hear much about them. Maybe because I wasn’t looking or listening or whatever; so, I was just here for my classes and then I’d leave.” Other participants were aware of such activities, but that those activities did not seem intended for their involvement. According to Sam,

Much of it seemed to be for traditional students who were on campus during the day. Midwest Metropolitan University always did well educating students, but it didn’t do nearly as good a job creating a place where students wanted to be and get involved. I got e-mails in my box every week that this and that was going on on-campus between 10am and 2pm, and those weren’t hours that I was on campus. So I didn’t get the feeling of being included. The blood drives, games, career fairs, pizza socials; they were all middle of the day stuff, for those who were on campus at that time. I think most things were just geared toward traditional students who had all the time in the world. I was never that student.

Jenny expressed similar reactions to the campus activities and resources for involvement.

Midwest Metropolitan University was not a campus of traditional college students. They’ve always been mostly nontraditional commuters. [The university] didn’t gear stuff more toward students in the older age ranges and parents, no activities for kids. There were a lot more of those students who were parents and needed to bring their kids to campus. I brought my kids today. They’re out in the courtyard playing with daddy. Having more areas like that on campus where they can go play. It would’ve helped to know they were here and safe. It seemed like

more of the resources, support systems, and traditions were geared toward traditional students.

Their responses suggest that not enough was done to keep the students on campus and actively and meaningfully engage them.

### **Understanding Affordability: Choices and Consequences**

While financial aid programs were available to allow students to more fully engage in EPAs, only two participants in the study indicated they had some knowledge of funding opportunities and financial aid as they entered college. Although Elena was a first-generation college student she had access to a college advisor and scholarship coordinator throughout her high school years. Elena had a brother who had just graduated from college help her understand how to complete the FASFA. She noted, “That was the only one I didn’t quite understand, so he helped with that the first few times. He was the only one that really helped me.” Caroline received scholarship information in her SAT packet and some assistance from her dad who completed the FASFA and provided tax information when she originally entered college.

My parents, like my dad went through and did [the FASFA]. He filled in all the information from the tax return and all that business. The scholarships were in some big book in my SAT packet. It was a big book on scholarships about an inch and a half thick. I think it encouraged you to go to an online website to see the scholarships that were available.

While Caroline was somewhat familiar with financial aid, she originally did not qualify for many grants based on her parents’ financials, and she was concerned about accumulating a significant student loan debt. As she put it,



My sisters had student loans that they were still struggling to pay off. My sister's 37 now and still paying on her student loan. And she's got a good job too, and I didn't want to get involved with that if I didn't have to. I mean now that I have a child, I do get a federal [Pell] grant. I was aware of grants back then, but I had to file with my parents' information and I didn't qualify for anything. I did have a scholarship that first year, I think the scholarship was automatic based on my grades or because I graduated with core 40.

Six of the eight participants were unfamiliar with funding opportunities and financial aid when they initially applied to school. Their parents had not actively sought aid information or shared what they knew about obtaining aid to assist them. None of these students reported having discussed financial aid options with a financial aid counselor; rather they relied on information from friends and what they could discover online on their own. For example, Sam indicated:

When I initially enrolled, I paid out-of-pocket. I had no concept of how the student loan system worked or work-study. Work-study's something I just found out about a month ago. I had no idea. Initially, I only received loans because I simply applied for them online. The loans covered the cost of tuition. What I made working covered everything else. I went into [the financial aid] office a few weeks ago, and that's when I noticed the work-study pamphlets. I asked if I qualified for it, she checked my account and said "yes." I knew you could schedule an appointment with an 'academic' advisor, but I had no idea you could sit down and talk with a 'financial aid' advisor. My academic advisor never mentioned I could visit the financial aid office to discuss options for covering

tuition expenses, and I would never just offer information about finances. I'll always find a way to make it work. So, they wouldn't know it, if I were struggling in that way. I never considered work-study, and I just discovered Jag Jobs on my own.

Other students consulted with university staff (not financial aid counselors) and other students who had experience with financial aid. The following passages highlight how students used personal contacts and networks to obtain important aid information.

Dulce: The Instructor was helping me in the beginning with the application and financial aid. S/he told me about the scholarships, and another friend told me about them. No one in the financial aid office ever mention how to fill out for the scholarship or nothing like that. The instructor told me they have to see my GPA after the first semester to apply for the scholarship.

An instructor, who had an interest in Dulce's educational development, encouraged her to apply and guided her through the aid application process. Caroline relied on aid information from an acquaintance.

My boyfriend advised me about the tuition reimbursement [with a local employer]. So I got a job there. I was being reimbursed through a tuition reimbursement. I got the tuition reimbursement at the end of the semester only for the classes I passed. I mean, it covered most of [my tuition] once I passed the classes.

Some students were not aware that they could meet with a financial aid counselor to review aid options that were available to them, and simply submitted loan applications they found online. Since the loan applications were easy to complete without assistance,

the students simply depended on student loans. Caroline had made all practical cost-free aid choices. However, she was largely uninformed about other assistance available to her based on changes in her family structure and academic achievement. She stated,

It didn't cover books or anything like that, so I have to pay for books and other supplies myself....After I didn't qualify back in 2002, I just never thought of it [financial aid] until after I'd been back for about a year. I just applied for it last year on the advice of a girl at work who was receiving financial and in the same situation I was, you know an unmarried mother and going to school.... My grades are fantastic, like all A's. I don't think I ever have talked with a financial aid advisor about grants or scholarships that might be available to me based on my grades. Why did I never think about that? It never even crossed my mind.

It was only incidentally that she learned of the Pell grant option available to her. While the students were being resourceful, their limited knowledge of aid types and eligibility criteria minimized the funding opportunities they were able to access. As a result, several paid out-of-pocket, amassed loan debt, or worked to pay educational expenses that might have been covered by grants, scholarships, or work study.

Only one student met with a financial aid counselor for a more complete analysis of her financial circumstances and the funding options available to her. Jenny noted that her mother was unable to provide guidance or assistance in funding her education and that she initially had no understanding of how financial aid worked. She reported,

We didn't really go over covering the costs. [My mother] was a single parent and worked 60 hours a week. I didn't know how [financial aid] worked when I came in. They (university representatives) told me when I came in "You could come in

sit down and talk with a person before you apply.” When they gave me the application form for aid, it was so easy. I just filled it out on my own. I get the full Pell grant and the O’Bannon grant. I’ve applied for a couple of scholarships, but they’re like \$500 scholarships. I’ve gotten those and the rest of it is loans.

Jenny’s willingness to seek institutional assistance in understanding the aid process resulted in a diverse funding package that minimized what she needed to borrow. She continued to work full-time in order to cover childcare expenses for her two children. Other students who relied on their personal knowledge and networks were encumbered with outstanding educational expenses or high loan balances. In addition, five of the eight students indicated they worked full-time during their freshmen year. Their work schedules played a significant role in limiting their time on campus and engagement in educationally purposeful activities.

### **Adult Student Transition Challenges**

In addition to limitations on students’ physical presence on campus, there were also psychological and emotional issues that inhibited their full participation in academic endeavors. These issues were usually related to stress and tensions associated with adding the role of student to an existing role(s). Half of the participants in the study were full-time employees and parents or caregivers; and three were married with children. Those who maintained multiple roles described the physical and emotional challenges of incorporating being a student into their lives. In detailing the hardships she encountered Sandy explained:

My husband and I were going through a really, really rough patch and my youngest son had to start both speech and physical therapy, and I was just being

pulled in all sorts of directions, and I could not focus on my school work. I mean like my marriage was falling apart. My kids weren't only yelling that they need their mom, my youngest was starting physical therapy and I had to work outside the actual sessions with him, and I couldn't fully focus on that and be a full-time student especially with these classes that the stuff doesn't just come easily for me. It's not really resolved at all. I just changed my perspective on what I needed to do. I'm still having marital issues [her voice shakes as she struggles to withhold tears]. But we're try...we're making a point to work on that. It's just really hard without crying.

Sandy's husband is a musician who owns and operates a music label. He often worked or performed out of town. At the time, they had three children in their home. Sandy's return to school disrupted the normalcy in their schedules, roles, and responsibilities. Kim also discussed challenges with blending motherhood and full-time employment with student life.

It was hard. I was still employed full-time. That's what made it so rough, was to find time you know to study outside of the study groups and outside of class. You know I would take my school bag to work, try to study as much as possible at home, but with two toddlers running around, it was not that easy. I mean it was definitely a challenge. I was actually here in class [no online courses].

Jenny spoke of challenges dividing her time between being a full-time employee, a caregiver to family members with mental and developmental issues, and a student:

My grandmother has dementia and it's really bad. It has become somewhat difficult lately since I'm in school and working full-time. I try to get over there [to

a nearby town] at least once a week. I'm their midnight call when she wants to go to the hospital because she has chapped lips. My oldest son also has developmental speech delay. He's in school over in [another nearby town]. I need to be there with him through all of his speech therapy sessions.

Each of these students spoke of the having very complex and structured work, home, and school schedules (noted later) to accommodate their multiple roles. And while most indicated that their return to school was a mutual decision between themselves and their significant other, they each reported having had varying levels of support from their partners after enrollment. The shift in their schedules often created difficult and unexpected changes in their partners' schedules and responsibilities. Four of the participants had children under age five, and three had at least two children. All spoke of challenges with childcare while they were in classes or studying. They typically spoke of difficulty identifying an affordable option for childcare in proximity to the campus. Kim mentioned,

Well, they [the kids] go to a pre-school during the day.... Providing affordable day care on campus would be a big help cause finding good childcare is hard. I know we probably went to twenty different daycares and preschools on the Westside until we actually settled on one. It's much less expensive than the one on campus. It [the one on campus] wasn't affordable, and then like having to drive to and from the one we chose is a huge inconvenience. Just the driving back and forth there alone uses up so much time.

They also had feelings of guilt for their inability to devote necessary time and attention to their roles as partners, mothers, and students. Those with children often indicated that

more institutional support for students with small children could reduce emotional stress, lessen time off-campus, and facilitate more on-campus engagement. There were other issues and areas in which students felt their institution(s) created or allowed obstacles to impede their participation.

### **Limited Institutional Assistance**

A number of offices and support services are available to assist students with the transition to college. However, several participants reported having received little or no support from student administrative and support offices when they initially enrolled. Sam described a feeling of being “lost in the system” at a two-year college. As a new student, she was not accustomed to the language and resources in higher education environments. In describing her initial bewilderment with the Bursar’s Office, Sam mentioned that there were student advisors at the two-year college she attended, but that she did not know how to access them. She also reported that the institution’s orientation process did not include information on how to cover the cost of tuition. She noted, “They were like here’s your bill and the student aid office is down there. I didn’t know what the student aid office was.” There was an assumption that she knew how that office served students.

There were mixed responses regarding academic advising services, with some participants reporting less than positive experiences with their academic advisor. Two participants indicated they did not receive appropriate assistance when they attempted to obtain course enrollment information at Midwest Metropolitan University. Ashley and Jenny received incomplete or vague answers when inquiring about appropriate courses for their majors.

Ashley: I was talking to the advisor and she was like this is all that you need to do...I needed to retake finite because it had been so long. She’d ok’d my

schedule. I said okay that's great I'll go ahead and sign up when it's my turn and I couldn't sign-up for finite because it had been seven years since I'd taken a math class. I had to take a placement test which she never told me about. There was no time to prepare. I ended up having to retake [two introductory] algebra courses which set me back an entire semester in the application process.

Jenny: When I go in and say, do I have to take this or can I take this instead.

They won't actually answer my question. They'll say you can choose the courses you want to take, and I'll go, well what do I need?

Jenny received minimal assistance from advising and other enrollment support offices and was frequently misdirected to other offices. In describing an attempt to find out why she was unable to enroll, Jenny mentioned, "When I tried to re-enroll, I'd get a message that there was a SAP hold on my registration. I had to call like six different times just to find out what that was." Feeling a need to be more self-reliant, most students would often seek information through other sources—personal contacts and networks, co-workers, other students and their institution's web site. As Sandy explained,

Once I went online, I kind of worked it out myself from there. Decided I was a big girl and needed to figure this out. I just have a hard time asking for help in many areas of my life. I'm trying to get better at that. I would never think to ask for help. I had other support networks that I would utilize.

However, while it prompted students to be more involved and proactive in managing their academics, the information from students, the web site, and other external sources was not always current or comprehensive. When the students did experience academic difficulty, there was usually no outreach from the university. Most indicated that there



were work, financial, time management, and personal challenges that impacted their academic performance, but that these issues were never mentioned or addressed in advising sessions. From their view, advisors were there strictly to discuss what classes to complete. Kim mentioned, “Not really anyone at school provided support through those difficult times.” Jenny, too, indicated, “There was no discussion of how I was getting along or how the classes are going. The first time I stopped attending class no one called to find out why.” She further indicated that her interactions with support offices often left her feeling as if she were of little or no importance to the institution. In describing her interactions with an academic advising office, she stated, “I’m my ID number and nothing more. That’s what I feel I am here. I’m sure there are overworked people. That’s a part of life, but at the same time, you kind of feel like they don’t care.”

Collectively, their responses indicated they received inadequate information, were neglected, and received little or no support during a difficult adjustment period. Half of the participants indicated that their interactions with university support staff left them feeling lost, unsupported, and unimportant to the institution. It is not surprising that most developed their own capacity for gathering information and sought other avenues of support.

### **Establishing External Networks of Support**

External encouragement and support networks, coping skills development, and institutional resources and support systems all contributed to students’ abilities to persist. The study participants frequently described how friends, family, co-workers, and employers all provided aid, advice, inspiration, and reassurance that they could be successful in their academic pursuits. Not only did their workplaces provide emotional

and financial assistance and other practical support (e.g., scheduling flexibility) they also allowed students to develop professional skills and habits of mind that were useful in the classroom and academic environment. Students also discussed how peer networks, faculty and staff, and technology systems aided in their learning, development, and ultimately in their persistence.

### **External Encouragement and Support**

**Family and friends.** Students consistently reported the positive impact of having encouragement from family and friends. The participants noted that early encouragement compelled them to matriculate, re-enter and persevere during difficult times. Elena mentioned that because her parents were not well-educated, they always gently nudged her to complete college during times when she was uncertain of her goals and abilities. She recalled, “My mom said I don’t expect you to get all As, I just expect you to pass.” Similarly, Dulce indicated that it was her mom and siblings who provided encouragement. She explained, “My mother told me it’s better if [I] go study in the United States. I say okay, let’s do it. All my family encouraged me to study. Like, it’s no way you can say, ‘Oh, I wanna drop out of school.’” Some students indicated having received more aggressive encouragement from several family members. Sandy explained,

It was more so my dad than anybody else who was constantly on me to at least get [a degree] and then do something with it. My dad was the main one to push me to just do it. My mom did too, but my dad would make a point to bring it up all the time. My mom and my grandparents offered to pay for school if someone wanted to go into nursing. That was kinda nice, but they’re not paying for school.

Because they rarely interacted with university staff regarding personal struggles most students turned to friends, family, and co-workers for emotional support and guidance when work, school, and home schedules became overwhelming. Kim described how her husband would often provide a great deal of support and encouragement.

Some days I just felt like giving up. Like, I don't know why I decided to come back now. He would just always encourage me and reinforce and help me. He would always take care of the house, help with the kids. He was very supportive, cause he knows like this is what I've always wanted to do, so he's helping me get there. He's been right by my side through this whole process.

Sandy relied on family and friends to get through the really tough times. She stated, "I have a good core group of friends. I have another girlfriend who's a single parent and was going through the same thing I was. So we teamed up and helped each other out, like we'd babysit for each other. Others received academic support from friends as well. Dulce's friends frequently offered to help her with math, the subject she struggled with most. In describing the amount of support she received she said,

They say you know like, "If you don't understand let me know. I'll get with you and help you to do it an easy way." They're not even people I know from class. They're like from another class, another major, but they understand pretty well the math. They teach me and push me. Even though I just doing my homework people just come to me and say, "Are you fine? You need some help? Everything is going fine?" I say, yeah or I have some question and somebody just appear from nowhere.

Students believed that their persistence would have been jeopardized without encouragement and support of family and friends. In addition to that support, the participants received unexpected support from employers and co-workers.

**Supportive work environments and developing coping strategies.** Student workplaces provided invaluable support and development. This support came in the form of scheduling flexibility. All of the participants' employers were willing to work around school schedules. Kim suggested it is common practice in her office as several employees are students. As she explained it,

My job, occasionally if I have to leave early or if tell them I have an exam tomorrow and I needed to study, they're like "oh, okay we'll cover your shift."

They're always willing to work my work schedule around class, and I know I'm not the only one. It seems like everyone up there now is like in school for nursing or for education. They're just so, so accommodating.

Similarly, Jenny's supervisor goes a step further to help working students arrange a schedule that allows the best balance between their academic needs and the needs of the organization. She stated,

My HR person helped me figure out my school/work schedule. She asked me how things were going, and I told her. And she just started talking about well why don't you consider doing it this way because you can still get the same number of hours you'd just get it in four days instead of five, and I was able to free up that time during the school days.

Jenny noted that the resulting schedule eliminated work on the days she was in class and how that allowed her to fully focus on academic work. The schedule she previously

followed did not allow her to concentrate in class as pending tasks at work were a constant distraction. Both Caroline and Jenny discussed how co-workers helped one another with academic work and how their employers promoted college attendance in effort to develop leaders within their organizations. Jenny's supervisor focused on helping employees finish their baccalaureate degrees so they could apply to their organization's business college. Dulce was the only participant who worked on-campus. Although her job was not an official work-study position, she reported having received a tremendous level of support and encouragement from her employer and co-workers who were also students. In her response, Dulce explained,

They[re] helping me. Plus they know sometimes the job is kind of low. Like it's not busy, so they say, "Oh, you can do your homework. It's okay." On another job, they say, "No book, no nothing." They tell me, "If you have free time, you can bring your laptop, you can bring your homework." And when I need something, that push[es] me too. I don't want to lose my job, so they helping me. My peers and friends are working with me too, like with my homework. I can ask them if my writing is good, or like if I have some issue.

Dulce's position allowed for development in other areas that were also useful in the classroom. As she is an English language learner, she continued to work on her language skills for greater proficiency in reading, speaking, and writing. Her position required that she interact and communicate in English with a large population. Her employer intentionally challenged her to improve those skills by having her work in high traffic areas like the information desk. She recognized and welcomed those challenges as opportunities for growth.

### **Developing Coping Strategies**

All of the participants identified some aspect in which their roles at work enhanced their development as students. Most indicated improvements in practical and professional skill sets which included increased assertiveness, self-reliance, and time management. After having worked with a local library foundation, Ashley reported feeling “a bit more responsible, mature, and more comfortable interacting with people.”

Other students spoke of similar progress in their responses:

Caroline: I’m in a leadership position now. It’s made me more confident, I realize what I’m capable of doing. Initially when I started I was really shy and quiet and soft spoken and people couldn’t hear me when I spoke. I was just nervous and I tried not to be seen—to stay out of the way—I guess. But because of my job, I’m forced to lead meetings and things like that. It’s my responsibility to make sure everything goes alright, so I have to talk to everybody, be seen, and they have to know who I am. And that was really hard for me cause it was not something I was ever used to doing before that point. And that was really helpful for me.

All participants developed practical skills in verbal communications, writing, editing, prioritizing and completing tasks and assignments in the workplace. Practice in these areas helped in their classroom activities and with their assignments. For example, five participants said:

Sam: I’m a project assistant. Interact with a lot of clients and do a lot of work with electronic data, so it increases my professional and communication skills.

Dulce: I talk to a lot of people. Last semester I started working in the Campus Center. People come into school wanting information and I give it to them [in English], and they understand it.

Ashley: One of the things I did at the foundation was assist the Director of Development there. She does a lot of grant proposals and things of that nature. So I did a lot of proof reading. Writing was never a skill of mine. I was terrible at it, but doing it more and more at work was actually helpful.

Caroline: There's a list of tasks I have to do at work, just like there is with every assignment, and you prioritize and just start knocking them out.

Jenny: They help me figure out what order to do things in to get them accomplished. The friendships I've developed there are just very supportive. I mean I have a friend who works there who is good with math and she helps me with my Math 110 class.

Caroline's work was directly related to her educational pursuits and how the connection increases her interest in the subject matter and course reading materials.

Now that I've changed to the organizational leadership supervision, that's directly related to work. The classes I have to take I really like, and I can directly relate it to what I do at [my company] because [my company] is company that really does everything by the book the way they're supposed to. One of the last classes I took I was reading a lot of OSHA policy, and I could go to work and I could see things actually at play. I feel it's exciting to be able to relate it to work, to actually know what I'm reading about and not be confused.

Whereas the majority had indicated low-levels of assertiveness (nervousness and timidity) when they initially enrolled, most developed more confident, outspoken, and self-reliant dispositions. In addition to developing professional attitudes and project management skills, Sam was no longer intimidated by administrative and bureaucratic processes. As she put it,

I was more persistent. I utilized the search engine. There was no one from the institution guiding me at that point. I did that and just started calling offices before I came down here because I don't live very far from campus. So I'd just come down to the office cause I'd find that I'd get a lot more done from standing there in front of someone rather than on the phone, and they are very nice to me here while I'm standing in front of them.

Consistently, students' real world professional experience improved their confidence, self-efficacy, communications, and leadership skills. The participants' work experience helped them develop skills in prioritizing tasks and managing time which was useful in better managing their academic work and balancing it with home and work life. Like the others, Jenny had a very complex and structured schedule and made sure that all of her classes were on certain days of the week, and that those days were entirely reserved for school work. She explained, "From the time I got up till the time I went to bed. Things are more structured now." She also noted having planned out her semester, "I've got all of my tests highlighted in my planner. I've got all of my papers, everything. I sit down and do that every semester, so I can look ahead and say I've got this this day, this this day..." The coping strategies that students developed helped them to better balance work, family, and school activities and to better manage their academic lives.



### **Utilizing Institutional Resources and Support Systems**

Although half of the participants reported challenges with services, facilities, and engagement activities at Midwest Metropolitan University, they all indicated that Midwest Metropolitan University did provide resources and a level of support that allowed students to achieve success in resolving issues and in developing socially and academically. These institutional resources and support networks included the general campus community (faculty, staff, and other students) and technology systems.

### **Campus Environment and Peer Support**

Students repeatedly indicated how Midwest Metropolitan University's overall campus environment contributed to their sense of fit and belonging. Being among similar students made attending college less intimidating and more palatable. Kim, Dulce, and Caroline each implied that the focus, maturity, and diverse characteristics of the student population at Midwest Metropolitan University allowed for suitable and comfortable peer and learning groups. The following quotes capture their individual perspectives on the campus environment and fit.

Kim: Here, it seems like, 90 percent of students are all focused and motivated. I mean like they're the same pretty much as me now. They see where they wanna be in five years and they're doing every possible thing they can to get to that point. I've made friends now. The kids (here) are just motivated and ready to learn. They're here because they want to be here.

Dulce: When I went to my first classes, there was a lot of international people. So I wasn't like the only one. There was all of us who speak different language. So that helped. I didn't think it would be that bad.

Caroline: It was where I wanted to be. It wasn't just a bunch of young kids. Like my family, sisters, and friends were all older. It was people I was used to being around. There were more older people on campus, and everybody seemed to get along really well. It was nice and more interesting that way to know that there were actually people who were more than just students here. So I really liked it. I felt really comfortable here. It probably helped even more when I came back, because I was a mother and I had a job that required a lot, so it helped knowing a lot of other people were in the same position.

Other students also contributed to their learning, development, and in helping to negotiate campus bureaucratic structures. Dulce recounted, "With my first class [ESL] there w[ere] a lot of international students and we all ha[d] the same struggles. We work[ed] together and they push[ed] me because they have the good grade. So we say, okay let's all work together and all pass the class." Sandy, who delayed obtaining her GED and attending college for several years, relied heavily on the knowledge and assistance of her friends who were also students at Midwest Metropolitan University. Sandy explained,

I had lots and lots of friends who were students. So I kind of just relied on them for information for like where do I go, who do I talk to. I had one friend who actually literally took me here to fill out the initial application, walked me through the FAFSA, everything. My friend, literally on the day that I came to apply to school was like here's the FAFSA stuff. This is what you need to do. So she walked me through it. I also had lots and lots of friends who were students. So I kind of just relied on them for information.

Five of the eight participants developed meaningful social connections with other students. The social interactions with other students occurred in and outside of class. Caroline felt that relationships with other students encouraged her to be present for class during times when she was feeling less motivated to attend. She stated, “Some days when I didn’t want to get up to go to class, I’d think well I’ve already agreed to meet my friends for lunch, so I gotta go now; so they encouraged me to be here sometimes.” While the participants typically identified other students as primary information and support sources, they did report some benefits from interacting with faculty and staff.

### **Faculty and Staff Support**

Students primarily reported having had interaction with faculty solely in classroom settings. Only three of the eight students spent significant time interacting with faculty outside of the classroom while they were freshmen students. Jenny met often with her instructors after it occurred to her that she could increase her learning and development if she approached them with questions about material she did not fully understand. Her meetings with instructors allowed them to better gauge how much she gained and understood from participation. This was useful because what she comprehended was not always evident in her in-class responses or presentations. As she described it,

I found that I would learn a lot more if I actually talked to the instructors, so I’m not afraid to go to them and ask questions, especially if it’s something that I’m interested in. Like one of them, I had a huge project I had to do and I’m not a public speaker. I cannot get up in front of a class and talk to people and that was the project. It was over a ten minute speech when I did it at home, but it was 2

minutes when I did it in the classroom. I left out so many pages. It was ridiculous. But the fact that I'd gone to her beforehand and talked with her. I mean I'd gone over everything with her and made sure I was doing what she wanted. She knew that I knew the material and had it prepared.

Kim also interacted somewhat regularly with a few instructors. Her interactions with faculty encouraged her to do well and persist. For example, she worked at a local teaching hospital along with an instructor from her school. Kim mentioned, "She works on my unit so you know that helps cause she knows I go here and she knows I wanna go for nursing. And I don't wanna drop out and have her go like, what happened?" While few students had out-of-class contact with faculty, all indicated that faculty at Midwest Metropolitan University were receptive and accessible.

More students accrued benefits from interactions with academic advisors. While a few participants mentioned negative incidents with advising matters, interactions with academic advisors provided adequate support in choosing classes, answering questions regarding programs of studies, and instilling confidence in students in their ability to be successful. Even students who were adamant about resolving issues on their own felt that their academic advisor provided better, more reliable information. Caroline noted, "Talking to advisors made a big difference. It really helped. I tried to figure it out on my own, but I'd call and they had answers right away. I was like, why didn't I just call in the first place." Other students who were more reluctant to ask for help, waited until matters were critical before seeking counsel from advisors. Near the end of a grueling semester, Sandy decided to disclose her difficulties to an advisor during an office visit she scheduled to withdraw from a course. She explained,

I did ask for advice from an advisor when I went to drop my math class. She was really nice. I just kind of laid stuff on the line. I didn't know what to do. I had to take my kids with me. I didn't have a sitter. It was just a big chaotic mess....I saw another advisor later and just said this is what I'm going through and he laid everything out on the line.... This is what you need. And even tried to help me figure out which classes to take when so I don't get too stressed out and freak out taking classes that are too hard for me.

Sandy discovered that asking for assistance was not as difficult as she had imagined. Like several other students, she had minimal interaction with other administrative and support offices. The few who did indicated that their interactions with staff in those offices were usually with student employees who seemed appropriately prepared to respond to requests and provide information. Sam noted, "They have a way of understanding your needs and directing you to the appropriate office or resources. And that can make a huge difference." Although some students noted challenges with support offices and the level of assistance they provided, most indicated satisfaction with the quality of care and information they received when interacting with university staff. Nowhere was this more evident than with technology services.

### **Technology and Support Systems**

In discussing what was the most useful tool or resource that allowed them to persist, seven of the eight participants referred to Midwest Metropolitan University's website and technology services. Students indicated that the web site was the first place where they sought information regardless of the issue or subject matter. In fact, the majority of students indicated having completed the college search, application,

enrollment, financial aid, and payment processes online all before ever making contact with live personnel. Because of very complicated schedules, most said they rarely used physical library resources. Since most of what students needed for courses could usually be accessed electronically, Jenny never visited Midwest Metropolitan University's library. She would simply go to her public library and access online resources when papers or research were due. Caroline indicated, "I mean I used the website a lot. Every time I came to campus. Even today, I knew where this building was but I went online just to make sure it hadn't moved since the last time I was here." Students also noted that online courses allowed greater flexibility. Caroline's online courses allowed her to stay home with her daughter. Because her daughter was not yet school aged, she felt the only way she could attend was through distance education courses. Half of the participants completed at least one online course each semester. Two students mentioned the convenience and usefulness of the free software, and one praised the technology support staff for outstanding support.

### **Gaining Confidence and Goal Clarity**

This section addresses both the characteristics of those who persist and the relative impact of having a career goal on students' motivation to persist. Such factors are related to the students' cultural habitus, and self-attributes. Because goals and motivations are personal attributes, they are addressed here under self-attributes. In exploring issues related to student characteristics and their persistence, the more prominent themes were increased confidence and goal clarity.

## **Cultural Habitus**

Interactions with family and others within various social, cultural, political, and educational environments influence the knowledge and resources available to students. As a result, some students are better prepared academically and are more confident in their ability to be successful (Kuh et al.,2006). The influence of students' home, social, and school environments were evident in their responses.

**Resources to afford college.** As previously mentioned, seven of the eight study participants received federal and state grant aid to cover their educational expenses. Six of the eight also obtained student loans to pay remaining costs the grants did not cover. While these students usually indicated that their family's financial background was not one of wealth and affluence, they did suggest that the environments in which they were reared valued and promoted college attendance.

**Educational attainment of immediate family.** The mothers of the women in the study had all attended or completed college (see Table 5). In addition, six of the participants had one or more other immediate or close family members who had completed college. Sandy indicated both parents and her two siblings graduated college. Sam's brother obtained his master's degree, while her younger sister earned a bachelor's degree. Kim's father and two brothers also earned bachelor's degrees. Having one or more siblings with degrees was common for most participants in the study, and these siblings were usually additional sources of encouragement and support for students in the study.

The participants frequently indicated that they received both direct and indirect messages that earning a college degree was an expectation. In discussing why she thought

it was important to earn a degree Jenny mentioned, “it was mainly because it was just what you were supposed to do. I’ve always thought it was important to earn a degree. My uncle was a professor at ISU. I was raised that that’s just what you do.” Ashley expressed a similar understanding:

Both my parents went to college. They both had their master’s. My brother and sister both went to college....They now both have their masters. I guess the reason that I went to college is because I felt well, that’s what you did when you were done with high school is you went on to college. That was just expected.

For the majority of the participants, earning a college degree was not only valued and encouraged in the home, but also in their school environments. Dulce mentioned that academic vigor and college attendance was highly regarded and was a primary focus at the Catholic high school she attended. Kim discussed how school counselors, peers, and her siblings, together, routinely promoted college attendance.

Umh yeah, counselors talked to me and all my friends were going on to colleges except they were going on to like more traditional type live-in type colleges like living on campus and stuff. I have two older sisters and two older brothers. Both my sisters were talking like they wanted me to go to college, so you know, so one female could finish college.

Although students did not receive more salient information regarding college choice, affordability and the college-going process, they did convey that the expectation for earning a college degree was pervasive in their home and school environments. Students who were employed full-time explained that their workplaces also encouraged and supported employees who were enrolled in college. The participants frequently noted



how their employers and coworkers provided academic assistance, scheduling flexibility and developmental support to facilitate the success of students. The confluence of messages and support students received at home, school, and the work place instilled the value of earning a college degree in the students who participated in the study.

### **Self-Attributes**

To further identify background characteristics of FNT who persist, this inquiry also examined students' self attributes. These included their confidence levels, readiness, locus of control, self-efficacy, motivation, and career goal clarity. There were positive changes in student confidence and self-efficacy during their time as freshmen. Most had stopped-out during their freshmen year and devoted more time to professional and work activities.

**Locus of control and readiness.** All but two participants demonstrated they had an internal locus of control. For these six, performance was a direct result of their capacity to adjust to the new academic environment, their choices, and actions regarding their academics. Sam and Dulce were the only students who frequently referred to external agents that determined their academic outcomes. Dulce attributed her persistence to fate or direction from God. In describing her academic challenges, Sam discussed behaviors she engaged in and decisions she made, but implicated others as being partly responsible for the challenges she experienced. For example, when she discussed support from her mother she mentioned, "she helped me out, but then when my grades started slacking, it was like, we're going to pull away. If you're not going to take advantage of the opportunities we're giving you.' So then I dropped out of college." She further stated that she felt her mother did not provide the level of support that her brother received.

Seven of the eight persisters were re-entry students. While they wanted to attend college, they were not *ready* for college when they initially entered. Most of the students were not ready in terms of being emotionally or developmentally ready for the rigors, expectations, and discipline of college academics. Kim felt that she needed a break before beginning serious academic study. She mentioned, “I just felt like I just graduated high school. Like, I just felt like I deserved a break.” Caroline said, “I always ways wanted to go [to college]....I just felt that that was something that I wanted to do. I just don’t think I was ready to do it then.”

During the interviews, Ashley and Sam described how their lack of maturity and enthusiasm for college was reflected in their attitudes and behaviors at that time.

Ashley: I didn’t really think about I guess consequences of maybe the way I acted when I was that age. Just kinda care-free.... I really didn’t apply myself that much....I was always that kid that was in the back of the class—always in the back, talking to my neighbor, just kinda like zoning out. I didn’t even meet with [faculty] back then.

Sam: I just, my heart wasn’t in it. I just...I would sleep in the parking lot and not go to class just to get the time away from my parent’s house so they would think that I was going to class. I just wasn’t happy.

Each of these students withdrew after their initial enrollment, worked during their absence, and later returned to school. Six re-entry students indicated that the time they spent working allowed for personal growth and development. With the development of certain skills and competencies, changes in their attitudes, perspectives, and outlooks on completing college usually occurred during that time.

**Attitudinal changes.** The majority of participants had low self-efficacy when they initially enrolled in college. With one exception, all of the students were more certain of their ability to successfully complete their degrees. Particularly for those who achieved high levels of academic success upon their return to school, their achievement fueled their confidence in their ability to do well. Kim was among the five students who did excel, she indicated, “I did well in my classes and that gave me more motivation and more confidence that I was gonna succeed.” Ashley also did well and boasted of a 3.8 GPA. She insisted, “This time I’m just more confident in general and in being responsible. I mean I knew I was going to take it seriously and do the homework and participate in class. Ashley credits her hands-on work experience in the real world as the source of her more mature attitude regarding personal responsibility and hard work. She suggested,

Work experience helped me develop responsibility. I mean, I grew so much from when I worked at the library foundation those three years. I mean with donors, you have to be responsible to work in a setting like that.

Jenny also indicated a change in her disposition toward education. She recalled, “Since I initially left, I’ve re-taken that same class that I couldn’t sit through seven years ago, under the same instructor even. She remembered me, but I was a completely different person now.” In describing how she was different now Jenny noted:

I looked at it like, I have no choice... I have to be here. I just had more confidence and am more sure of myself this time. Even if I’m not the smartest person, at least I know what I’m doing. If I don’t, I can find someone to help me figure it out one way or another.

In addition to a change in confidence, there were also changes in perspectives about the importance and utility of higher education. Dulce and Sandy had maintained high levels of confidence regarding their academic skills throughout their time as freshmen. Dulce's initial concerns had focused primarily on her language skills. After she crossed that hurdle, she experienced minimal serious academic challenges. She maintains an unwavering belief that she will be successful because of the events that have brought her to this place in her life. As she puts it, "I'm here. I'm going to finish. It doesn't matter if it takes me ten years; I will finish. The hardest step is the first, the decision to go to college. This is my destiny."

**Motivation and career goals.** Dulce and Kim were the only two participants who seemed to have clear and consistent career-related goals. Kim maintained that her dedication to her career goal had much to do with an "internal" desire. She insists, "I always felt like I was just called to be a nurse and so that drove me." She further noted that her increased motivation partly stems from now being so close to her goal. She continued, "I'm more focused and more driven. I just, I told myself that this time was going to be different. My career goal has definitely become more realistic, you know it's at arm's length." For five of these students, uncertainty about career-related goals continued. While this was not unusual for freshmen students, it compounded the other issues with which they were dealing. The following responses illustrate how unclear the students were about their goals:

Elena: I wasn't sure what I wanted to study in the beginning. I switched my major a lot. I wanted to be an archaeologist at one point, a psychologist later.

Then, when I finally got into college, I wanted to go into nursing. I was somewhat

of a follower. Everyone seemed to be going into nursing, so I was too. Well, it turns out that wasn't so easy.

Ashley: I was hoping to complete a degree in four years even though I had no idea of what I wanted to do, and it was like okay, well, we'll see.

Caroline: I started off studying engineering. I had kind of initially wanted to do architecture. And I don't know it was kind of between the two. It was a toss-up, and I went with engineering. I think I was just 18 and I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. I didn't know what to major in. I didn't know what classes I wanted to take. I didn't know anything. I still feel uncertain.

Jenny: I started out as a nursing major and obviously didn't get the grades I needed for that, so I switched majors and found something I love even more than nursing, sociology. It just depends because if I change my major to what I'm thinking about then I would go back for a master's in that. I haven't considered planning everything out because it changes from day to day what I want to do.

Of the eight participants, five indicated that they initially enrolled in college because it was simply the next step. The majority had not given serious consideration to what they would study and how to go about moving toward a career. Ashley and Sandy indicated that they were following a nursing degree plan solely because nursing is currently a high interest field. Both indicated they would make different choices if the economy were to soon turn around. Even Caroline, who has had a fairly long tenure with her current employer indicated uncertainty, and Jenny was still weighing her options.

Participants indicated they had value-related (i.e. "I want to provide a stable lifestyle for my family, be able to afford or inspire my children, etc.") rather than career-

related (i.e. “I want to be a teacher, social worker, or nurse, etc.”) goals for attending and persisting in school. Their responses were similar in that they typically centered on becoming financially secure. Most of the participants had long term goals to obtain a position that would afford a comfortable and stable lifestyle for themselves and their families. For Elena, it never mattered much what she studied as long as the degree allowed her to obtain a better career. As she put it, “Getting a degree is important. I never cared where I would work. That wasn’t as important. I thought I’d have a better chance of getting a better job with some type of degree.” Some participants indicated that obtaining a degree was their only option for a stable life, and that it was this realization that compelled them to persist. Sandy explained, “I was tired of the paycheck-to-paycheck kind of job. I’m from a poor family, a poor neighborhood. This is my money and time. I’m borrowing and paying it back the rest of my life. It’s easy to give up; I can’t.” While Kim indicated internal motivations for choosing the nursing field, she asserted that that her family was at the heart of her motivation to persist. As she described it, “My family, I wanna provide them a better life. Right now we’re in a two bedroom, one bath apartment. It’s tiny, but affordable. I don’t wanna be there the rest of my life. So, my family is all of my motivation.” Caroline mentioned similar motivations,

I felt like I needed to do more for my child. When I was younger I thought I wasn’t going to have kids until I was financially in a position to completely support them. And I am now, financially I can handle the rent and all that other business, but at some point I’d like to be able to buy a house and you know have all those things to make sure she has stability. And I also want to be an inspiration

like my parents were. I want her to know that her mom's got a degree and made it through. I mean it's basically all for her.

Caroline had reached a ceiling at her work place. In her view, obtaining a degree is her only option if she is to have the life she envisions for her family. She states, "I've reached the furthest I can go at [my organization] without a degree. The only way to get further is to get more of an education." Finally, Sam had a rather unique perspective regarding the importance of completing her degree. She indicated that it was simply time to be done with school. Her siblings had completed baccalaureate degrees and her brother was completing his master's. She explained, "Their educational success has really put it things in perspective for me. It is my time now, so I've been very determined." Sam had previously discussed how she had made less selective educational choices, so her family would not experience undue financial hardship. She later expressed having a feeling of having been left behind. So rather than for economic gain, her motivation for persisting had more to do with gaining the respect of her family which she felt had in some way diminished.

### **The Gendered College Experience**

Seven of the eight participants in this study were returning students leading me to critically examine issues relevant to re-entry decisions for FTN. Six of the seven students who returned were married, married with children, or were single heads-of-households. These characteristics are often associated with being a *re-entry* student (Tittle & Denker, 1980), and accounted for a number of psychological challenges the participants faced while they completed their freshmen studies.

Enrollment decisions often revolved around the expansion of students' families. Two of the four students who had children before completing their freshmen year

reported they withdrew after learning of their pregnancies. Both Kim and Sandy mentioned that they wanted to continue but did not after realizing they were pregnant. Kim indicated, "I still tried to go but....that's when I got pregnant and never went back until this past fall." Sandy also noted how her growing family resulted in further delaying her participation,

At the end of my second semester, I found out I was pregnant, wanted to take some time off. I got to the position where I was ready to start school again, my son was old enough and I found out I was pregnant again. So it kind of set me back all over again, and at that point, we were just getting custody of my step son who we now have.

Sandy and Caroline mentioned how caring for their children was the top priority and how enrollment decisions were made according to their abilities to fulfill parenting/care giving responsibilities. Sandy mentioned, "I decided to just do part-time, focus more on my kids, cause they really need me." As Caroline's young daughter grew up and entered pre-school, Caroline was able to see a future that was more fully engaged in educational pursuits.

My daughter's four, so she's got one more year of pre-school. I am looking forward to when she goes to first grade, so I'll be able to get more school done....When I started again in 2008, I was just taking one class per...I did that for three semesters, then moved up to two per semester, and just this last semester I did three classes... Taking the online courses allowed me to stay home with my daughter. I felt that was the only way I could do it. I don't want to take away from my time with her.



Jenny experienced many challenges associated with being a full-time employee, full-time student, caregiver to an elderly grandparent who has dementia and the care giver for two children, one of whom has developmental speech challenges. Sandy's marital relationship combined with parenting/caregiving obligations created multiple challenges (also mentioned above under adult transition challenges).

I was full-time. That with everything, you know, my young children, and everything else going on was really difficult.... We were going through a really really rough patch and my youngest son had to start both speech and physical therapy, and I was just being pulled in all sorts of directions, and I could not focus on my school work. I mean like my marriage was falling apart. My kids weren't only yelling that they need their mom, my youngest was starting physical therapy and I had to work outside the actual sessions with him, and I couldn't fully focus on that and be a full-time student.... I'm still having marital issues (her voice shakes as she struggles to withhold tears). But we're try...we're making a point to work on that.

The participants who had children were working students and noted that they maintained very structured and busy schedules in order to manage their school, work, and domestic responsibilities. Caroline's supervisory work position is a high volume and high stress position that requires significant time and attention. She discussed how she's adopted a *just do it* approach to regulating her schedule and responsibilities.

Caroline: The work group I'm in now is pretty high stress.... I got this cool calendar on my phone. It tells me what I have to do next, and then I just do it. I

take care of my daughter and I go to school, you know whatever. I just do it. I do a million things every day, every week.

Jenny: It was kind of rough because I'm balancing work, kids, and school. But I've kind of got into a routine. I make sure that all of my classes are Monday/Wednesday. I've got breaks between the classes where I can work online homework and stuff. And that entire day from the time I get up till the time I go to bed it's school... Things are more structured now.

More than half of the participants felt that gender had some impact on how they experienced the *transition* to college and their overall college experience.

Kim: I personally don't think it's the same. I'm not sure. I feel like men have less responsibilities. I mean I guess there are some men out there who are like stay at home dads and like to stay home with the kids and like to clean house and stuff like that, but you know women are natural multi-taskers. That's how I view it. I'm not saying a man can't do it, I'm just saying it might be a little bit easier for a woman (to juggle it all).

Sandy: There are more single mothers than single fathers, especially in the whole nontraditional world. That's so much harder just witnessing my girlfriend who's a single mom, and how difficult that is...with everything I've experienced in life, women just have to work twice as hard for everything you know. Part of it has to do with the multiple roles they have, but it's part of the way our society is set up.

Sam: Yes, there is a difference [in how men and women experience college], women take on many more roles that men don't have to be concerned with.

Caroline: It seems that there is a difference. Most of the men I knew who went to college have degrees now and the women don't fare as well as the men. Some of the women do have degrees, but a lot of them are in the same situation as me, where they went, didn't finish and now they're going again. I don't know any men who are in school and have children or had children while they were attending school; maybe there is something to it.

Dulce: I think for men it's easier.

Most of the participants felt that men have fewer domestic/care giving responsibilities and roles beyond work and school. Even among those who were unable to identify specific reasons why, students generally noted that men appear to have fewer obligations and challenges than women in completing their undergraduate degrees.

### **Summary**

FNT students encounter a number of obstacles that negatively impact their freshman experience. While many of the challenges are associated with pre-college issues, several are related to institutional and external factors, and issues of affordability. The participants had little knowledge of the college going process, were unprepared for the rigors of college, had low self-efficacy and minimal understanding of affordability options upon entry. Because most had a limited understanding of student aid options, full-time work was common during their time as freshmen students. Significant workloads combined with familial obligations, under preparedness, and limited engagement and institutional supports for FNT students often led to an initial withdrawal. However, with more practical, problem-solving, and communication skills, all who stopped-out eventually returned to complete their freshman studies. And they did so with

increased sense of self-efficacy their academic abilities, higher levels of self-efficacy, and long-term value-related goals. Few had solid career-related goals, while all had value-related goals. All of the participants were sophomore students and credited their ability to persist to broad networks of external support that included family, friends, employers and co-workers. In addition, they also cited institutional resources that were key in their learning and development. Such resources included faculty, staff, students, technology and related services.

Understanding the common challenges, resources, strategies, goals, and characteristics of FNT students who persist to the sophomore year provides insight on how institutional programs and policies might be structured to facilitate greater efficacy among this student population. In the following chapter, I provide an analysis of the findings, discuss what conclusions can be drawn from the study, of what concern these issues are to institutions, how institutional policies could be shaped to enhance FNT engagement and persistence; and implications for theory and research.

## **CHAPTER SIX DISCUSSION**

This study was designed to share the stories of the early persistence of eight female nontraditional students. I was interested in understanding how these women experienced their freshmen studies and persisted to the sophomore year. This chapter provides a brief summary of the study, a discussion of the key findings and ways in which the experiences of the eight participants were consistent or not with existing research. Following the discussion, I offer conclusions, consider the implications for theory and research, and offer recommendations for practice.

### **Summary of the Study**

My primary interests in conducting the study were related to my curiosity about the experiences of female nontraditional students during the critical college transition period; the scarcity of research and literature on what allows some to persist while others prematurely and permanently end their academic pursuits; and the limited information regarding institutional responses to offset increasing first year attrition as record numbers of FNT students enroll in college. A number of studies have reported the increasing enrollment of female students (ACE, 2004; Austin & McDermott, 2003; St. John & Tuttle, 2004) and the corresponding rise in the number of those who are also nontraditional (ACE, 2004; NCES, 2007; St John & Tuttle, 2004). Previous research on nontraditional students suggests their socio-economic backgrounds, work status, and attendance patterns adversely affect their persistence (St. John & Tuttle, 2004; Tuttle et al., 2005). Their early persistence is a primary focus as their first year attrition rate is more than twice that of traditional students (King, 2003; Milam, 2009).

While there is a growing body of literature on nontraditional students, much of it has focused on older or mature students (Horn, 1996; Kasworm, 1994; Milam, 2009).

Few studies have focused on FNT students in their 20s, and existing models for understanding student persistence largely exclude younger nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1993). Accordingly, the focus of this study was on the first-to-second year transition and persistence of FNT students aged 21 through 29.

This study focused on first-year persistence because the first year is the time when undergraduate students are most vulnerable (Duggan, 2001; NCES, 2002b; St. John & Tuttle, 2004; Wylie, 2005). Student background characteristics, strategies for successful academic and social integration, and motivations to persist were the primary

considerations for this study. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to examine the early academic experiences of FNT students who have persisted to the sophomore year.

This study relies on Adelman's (2006) expanded concept of persistence to accommodate a larger, more diverse student population whose enrollment patterns differ from that of traditional college students. According to Adelman (2006), "it is no longer about

persistence to the second term or the second year following postsecondary entry. It is about completion of academic credentials—the culmination of opportunity, guidance,

choice, effort, and commitment" (p. 40). Continuous enrollment is no longer a practical means of measuring persistence for a growing population of students whose enrollment

patterns dramatically differ from that of traditional students. Other scholars have assumed a similar position on this expanded concept of persistence (Lufi et al., 2003; McIntosh &

Rouse, 2009). Thus, for this study, persistence referred to earned 24 credits at Midwest Metropolitan University, whether or not there was a break in enrollment. The objectives

were to: 1) identify the obstacles FNT students encounter as they enter and transition to college; 2) portray how FNT students describe their ability to persist beyond the first year; 3) identify the background characteristics of those who persisted; and 4) determine the relationship between having a career goal and FNT students' descriptions of their motivation and the persistence.

The underlying research design was consistent with an embedded case study. It focused on multiple cases within a bounded system (a single institution). Qualitative methods were used to collect, analyze, and report the findings. Inferences were drawn from multiple data sources (interviews and documents) to provide context and depth to the description and analysis of the bounded system. These methods were useful in this study because they allowed for a more holistic understanding of the "how" questions, for example, how students engaged in the academic community and the transition process. The use of qualitative methods also allowed me to examine the meanings that students assigned to individuals, their interactions, and experiences, and understand how they perceived "their" realities.

The research method followed the tradition of narrative inquiry; participants shared their individual stories through a re-telling of their personal experiences in a higher education setting (Clandinin, 2007; Patton, 2002). The inquiry was conducted through a critical feminist perspective in order to: 1) highlight the unique experiences FNT students encounter as they transition to and persist in college, 2) shed light on the impact of institutional policies and practices on FNT student persistence, and 3) support women's perspectives through advocacy (Marshall, 2004; Sprague, 2005). As the narratives of women are essential in giving voice and promoting women's issues

(Andrews, 2007), this study sought to give voice to FNT student experiences and persistence and emphasize how their experiences may differ from those of traditional students. The following is discussion of findings for each of the guiding research questions.

The study revealed a number of salient themes regarding the background characteristics, challenges, coping strategies, and persistence motivations of FNT students who persist. Those themes are discussed in relation to the questions they answer below.

### **Background Characteristics of First-to-Second Year Persisters**

The profiles of the participants suggested FNT students from various backgrounds can persist. While most participants were Caucasian, two were from a traditionally underrepresented population, and one was a first generation student. There was also a range in the family socio-economic status of the group. The participants hailed from middle class, working class, and low-income families. There were, however, common characteristics among them. Most noticeable was a shared personality trait. Nearly all seemed to have an internal locus of control. They generally felt their initiative, motivation, skills, abilities, and behaviors were what influenced their achievement or ability to achieve certain outcomes. They also demonstrated greater independence and self-direction in managing their academic affairs. This finding is consistent with Hall, Smith, and Chia's (2008) research that followed freshmen students through graduation and found that internal locus of control significantly contributed to their persistence. Other research has shown that locus of control, along with self-esteem, are two of the



most important internal motivational factors that correlate with engagement and academic success (Sisney, Strickler, Tyler, Wilhoit, Duke & Nowicki, 2004).

Most of the participants had also chosen majors in female-dominated disciplines (i.e., nursing and education), had at least one dependent, and were both working and attending school full-time during their time as freshmen students. The participants with dependents also possessed a common *motivation* for persisting, their dependent(s). Other research on FNT students has made similar findings regarding a mother's motivation for completing a four year degree program (Kahn & Polakow, 2004; St. John & Tuttle, 2004; Tittle & Denker, 1980).

All of their mothers had attended or graduated college, and they were all reared in home environments where college attendance was highly valued and encouraged. This follows previous findings that a mother's level of education correlates with her children's educational aspirations (Kahn & Polakow, 2004). Suitors, Plikunh, Gilligan, and Powers (2008) found that mothers' completion of college was the most important factor for children's educational outcomes when fathers were less educated. Research on educational aspirations and expectations suggests parents' social and interpersonal resources are a primary factor in the intergenerational transmission of educational values and attainment. (Andres, Adamuti-Trache, Yoon, Pidgeon, Thomsen, 2007; Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005). Fay (2005) found that values and what it meant to be successful or not were transmitted from mothers to their daughters through messages devised to purposefully push their daughters toward success, which they believed began with a four-year college degree. And while Fay's study revealed that working-class mothers were their daughters' first educational role models, it also determined that the

mothers demonstrated passivity in assisting their daughters in obtaining information that would help them prepare for college.

In summary, in addition to having an internal locus of control, regardless of their socio-economic status, the persisters were: 1) the offspring of women who had attended college, 2) influenced in the home to value higher education, 3) motivated by their status as mothers/caregivers, and 4) seeking degrees in female dominated fields of study. These background characteristics suggest students who strongly value higher education and have an internal locus of control may be more motivated to persist, particularly when they have strong networks of support (Christie, Munro, & Fisher, 2004; Christie, Munro, & Rettig, 2001).

### **Obstacles FNT Students Encounter as They Enter and Transition to College**

The data highlighted a number of substantive issues regarding the challenges FNT encounter upon college entry. Some of their initial struggles were associated with pre-college issues which included: 1) a lack of knowledge regarding the college choice and college going processes, 2) a limited understanding of college affordability options, 3) being unprepared for the rigors of college, and 4) low self-efficacy and motivation. Students' lack of knowledge regarding college choice, expectations, and affordability resulted in their choosing institutions that were a poor fit, and that ultimately diminished their interest, involvement, and academic engagement. Their limited understanding and access to information was, in part, due to their socio-economic status (SES) and social networks (Horvat, 2003; Kuh et al., 2006; McDonough, 1997).

**Under preparedness and incongruent expectations.** The majority of the students reported being substantially under prepared for college. Most had not completed a rigorous high school curriculum and found that the learning curve was significant, as their high school instruction had not positioned them to do well in college. This, too, had much to do with their family's SES. The chances that students have appropriate academic preparation and support increase as their family's income increases. In other words, a family's SES provides direct resources at home and indirect social capital required for educational success (Archer & Hutchins, 2000; Christie et al., 2004). It determines the kind of institution and educational environment to which students have access (Kuh et al, 2006). This finding was consistent with research regarding social class and cultural habitus and college choice/fit (Horvat, 2003; Kuh et al., 2006; McDonough, 1997; Palmer, 2003).

Most of the participants in the study had little or no guidance on how to choose a college and were largely unfamiliar with the academic milieu and expectations of the institutions they chose. After their initial arrival on campus, the disparity between their expectations and experiences became a source of the students' dissatisfaction, disengagement, and eventual withdrawal. More than half of the students initially withdrew from college because they felt they did not "fit" or "belong" socially or academically at the institutions they chose. A significant body of literature suggests students from working class backgrounds who identify problems with their institution's ethos, culture and traditions feel a sense of cultural dislocation (Christie et al., 2004). This was evident in student comments about dissatisfaction with the quality of instruction and campus milieu, their discomfort with classroom interactions, and their reluctance to

establish connections with peers. Their lack of tacit knowledge about college life made them less prepared to handle the challenges they faced. This, in turn, had a negative impact on their ability to perform academically, adjust to the new social environment, and persist. This was not unusual as students' whose expectations differ significantly from those of their institution are less likely to persist than students with expectations that are more aligned with their institution (Braxton, Vesper & Hossler, 1995; Kuh et al., 2006; Tinto, 2001).

**Understanding of college affordability.** Similarly, students' modest understanding of college affordability options limited their opportunities for funding. Students who were unaware of the difference between merit and need-based aid often missed opportunities to obtain scholarships based on their academic performance. They were also uninformed about options for federal work-study and how changes in their family structures affected their eligibility for grant funding. Their ignorance of funding opportunities led them to make decisions about loans and work that had far reaching impacts. At least two students indicated they were comfortable with acquiring loans because the application process was quick and user-friendly. The simplicity of the loan application system itself is not a problem, but students did not seem to consider the long-term impact of amassing high student loan debts. And because most were unaware they could meet with a financial aid counselor to discuss aid options, their uninformed choices extended beyond the freshmen year.

Their understanding of affordability options also led most students to seek full-time employment during their time as freshmen. Most of the participants in the study were working fulltime off-campus to pay costs not covered by their financial aid. Half

had children under age five and were responsible for their childcare expenses. Their significant workloads along with familial obligations contributed to limited engagement within the academic environment and educationally purposeful activities (EPAs)—reading, writing, preparing for class and interactions with faculty, etc. According to Maslow (1954), it is only after the basic or primary needs are met that individuals can enthusiastically pursue higher order needs or those related to self-esteem and self-achievement. For these students, primary needs consisted of housing, meals, tuition, books, childcare expenses, etc. The theory asserts that the urgency to fulfill such primary needs subjugates higher order needs. Thus, students' need to cover living and dependent care expenses often overshadowed their educational pursuits, causing them to spend more time physically and mentally detached from the academic environment (St. John, Cabrera, Nora, & Asker, 2000). There is robust evidence that student off-campus employment diminishes the time that students are involved in critical learning experiences, such as interacting with peers and faculty and participating in co-curricular activities (Furr & Elling, 2000; Perna et al., 2006). As participants in this study worked more hours, they more often indicated their employment limited their studies. Perna et al. (2006) confirmed working a significant number of hours off-campus limits students' capacity to successfully integrate academically and socially into the campus, weakens their commitment to the institution and their persistence, and consequently increases the probability of their permanent withdrawal.

**Self-efficacy.** Most of the students reported low self-efficacy upon entry and did not feel confident about their social or academic skills and abilities. More specifically, they were not confident they had the capacity to perform or adapt certain behaviors that

were required for academic success in college (Hull-Banks et al., 2005; Meier & Albrecht, 2003). According to research, students with higher self-efficacy tend to attempt certain tasks or behaviors and persist longer when they encounter adversity than those with low self-efficacy (Meier & Albrecht, 2003). The concept of self-efficacy differs from locus of control (LOC) in that LOC refers to whether or not students view consequences as a result of their own behavior. Although these students lacked confidence, they did have a sense of control within their surroundings and felt that they needed to take action to pursue their goals.

**Disengagement.** Inadequate engagement in EPAs, under preparedness, and low-self efficacy and motivation resulted in academic difficulty for most of the participants. All but two students reported having dropped or simply stopped attending courses, being on academic probation, and having completely withdrawn from school for periods of time. While one cited an inability to comprehend course material, the other five indicated an inability to balance homework, study, class attendance, employment, and their home lives. Their responses implied a level of under-engagement that was significant enough to negatively impact their academic performance and initial motivation to persist.

**Adult transition challenges.** The findings also revealed adult transition challenges and limited institutional supports for FNT students further exacerbated the academic difficulties students encountered. The conceptual model for this study suggested nontraditional students undergo a layered transition process. In this conceptualization, not only do they experience the transition into an academic environment, they also undergo a role(s) transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). This occurred when the role of student was added to existing adult roles (e.g. full-time

employee, mother, spouse, etc.). Those students who were married with children indicated they experienced or were still in the process of such a transition. Unlike traditional students, nontraditional students have added responsibilities of careers and family life that often result in demand overload and inter-role conflict when combined with college attendance (Fairchild, 2003; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). The scale or amount of demands are significant, but are distinct from the inter-role conflicts that they experience while they manage the demands of each domain (Fairchild, 2003). For example, Sandy discussed how she was being pulled in multiple directions with marital (spousal), childcare (mothering), and academic (student) issues. She described a conflict in roles that produced psychological stress. This is different from physical exhaustion. The external demands and conflicting roles frequently create time restrictions that traditional students rarely encounter (Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009; Lundenberg, 2003). Nontraditional students' environments—work, personal, and social contexts—may promote or inhibit their learning and development (Donaldson, Graham, Martindill, & Bradley, 2000).

**Limited institutional support.** The nature of the social, physical, and psychological context in which students experienced their freshmen studies was often influenced by their perceptions of institutional support. For example, participants with children indicated a desire to be more actively involved on campus, but felt such opportunities were unavailable due to a lack of institutional resources (i.e., child-friendly spaces, affordable childcare facility) that would facilitate their participation in on-campus activities. While they felt a type of social and physical exclusion from campus, they also encountered psychological stressors associated with maintaining a degree of normalcy in

their day-to-day lives while balancing work, mothering, and being a student. Students who worked during the day also indicated feeling a sense of exclusion, as activities were often geared toward traditional students who did not work. Students said that their institution did not allocate necessary resources or services to make them feel they *mattered*. The issue of mattering also arose in discussing the quality of service participants received from support offices. Two students described interactions that left them feeling under-valued or mishandled by the university. This finding is consistent with Tinto's (2001) conclusion that such interactions and perceived lack of support generally diminish students' sense of commitment to an institution, particularly when they feel marginalized and unconnected (Tinto, 2001).

**Self-reliance.** While these students typically had scarce resources for making appropriate decisions regarding institutional choice and aid, the external networks of support they established provided encouragement, resources, and development that allowed them to persist, often with minimal support from the institution. The self-reliant stance they assume in managing their lives as students appears to be one born out of necessity. From the time they were preparing for college, most had to take ownership of information gathering and decision making activities. The university support structures appear to place a greater portion of the *figuring out* process on students, as students frequently reported finding information on their own and having had little guidance from the institution regarding funding opportunities, counseling, and other support. It was students' own initiative and efficacy that allowed them to seek and acquire necessary information regarding their academic studies. The participants noted they received written materials during orientation activities, but rarely any significant direction from



university representatives afterwards to handle or respond to matters that arose during their freshmen studies.

### **The Impact of Gender and Re-entry**

The findings suggest there are a number of psychological challenges for re-entry female students. These barriers included attitudes regarding appropriate roles for females and males, the socialization process and support from spouses and domestic partners. Each of these psychological barriers has a cultural base. The nature and variety of roles women assume in different cultures underscores the cultural context in which attitudes about appropriate behaviors and roles for males and females are formed (Tittle & Denker, 1980). Recognizing the cultural origins of these *psychological* challenges allows for an understanding of the common experience of re-entry female students and the uniqueness of their individual experiences that are the result of greater or lesser internalization of gendered roles (Tittle & Denker, 1980; Ward & Westbrook, 2000). The psychological challenges discussed below are based on traditional views of appropriate roles for women.

The findings regarding the psychological state, responsibilities, and needs of female students were consistent with that of previous research (Kahn & Polakow, 2004; Ward & Westbrook, 2000). From a life-cycle perspective, women who re-enter higher education in their twenties, married, and/or with young children, encounter a different set of psychological barriers than those who return in their thirties, forties, or later, married, with children who soon leave home. Women in their twenties have young children and have significant demands placed on their roles of student, homemaker, and mother. These demands can be physical and psychological in nature. Previous research has shown that

these women express the greatest need for childcare facilities and assistance in time management (Bowl, 2001; Kahn & Polakow, 2004).

Students who were married with children or heads-of-households were often engaged in a delicate balancing act or tug-of-war or between the expectations they encountered at the university and the ways those expectations challenged their traditional roles and socialization. Such conflicts presented psychological dissonance for students as they sorted out how to respond and transition to the various dimensions of college life. The dissonance stemmed from social/cultural constructions of gender that are deeply ingrained in society. For instance, in regards of domestic responsibilities, and child rearing in particular, research has shown that husbands, family, friends, and women themselves often express that an ideal mother dedicates full time to rearing children (Ward & Westbrook, 2000). Students in this study typically responded to such role obligations by limiting, discontinuing, or postponing enrollment for several years.

In addition to perceptions of gendered roles and related psychological challenges, the level of tangible support (e.g., assistance with child care, educational expenses, and other domestic responsibilities) for re-entry female students from spouses and domestic partners was limited. Schiebinger and Gilmartin (2010) reported that most American women continue to be primarily responsible for household tasks (i.e., cooking, housekeeping, grocery shopping, and laundry, etc.) and that such activities consume nearly twenty hours per week. Their report also indicated that women assume a disproportionate share of child and elder care which expend physical, psychosocial, and intellectual energy.

Of the four students with children in this study, two were working full-time, primary breadwinners, attending school, and providing primary care for children. Neither cited tangible support from their domestic partner, and only one of the four students with children identified measurable support from her spouse. This finding was consistent with other research that found while spouses of re-entry female students *expressed* strong support for their wives' returning to college, there was ambivalence in their *actual* support (Katz, 1976; Tittle & Denker, 1980), indicating that marital relationships may create additional challenges for re-entry female students.

While the participants in this study continue to make progress toward their educational goals after re-entry, most experienced significant challenges that might have dissuaded others. Their pre-college (e.g., knowledge and preparation), internal (developmental) and external challenges (i.e., work and family) severely limited their initial engagement and participation in the academic environment. In reflecting upon student populations and how institutions respond to their needs, it is important to consider whether or not all students receive the same ethic of care. Are colleges and universities responding in a way that creates and maintains caring relationships (Noddings, 2005, 1995)? It is the ethic of care similar to the concept of "mattering," which is the perception that others are interested in us and concerned with our fate (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989)? This notion of "mattering" has been applied to higher education in determining the extent to which "policies, practices, and classroom activities are geared toward making adult students feel that they matter" (Jacoby & Garland, 2004, p. 66).

The ethic of care concept is future-oriented and assumes that decisions and actions will impact what occurs in the future. In discussing how institutions build

mutually beneficial relationships with students Ackerman and Schibrowsky (2007) discusses a related concept based on trust. He notes, “students are more likely to remain when they believe the school is acting in their best interests, is committed to keeping its promises, and meeting its obligations” (Berger, 2001; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004). A salient finding in the study was that FNT students’ employers were skillful in building trusting, caring, and supportive relationships (social bonds) with student employees, the kind of relationships institutional representatives should strive for with students. It is not surprising that students sought assistance in the workplace where they received an ethic of care and felt that they mattered. While students mentioned they received adequate assistance from university representatives when *students* initiated contact, there was little indication of an attempt by school representatives to establish consistent social or developmental interaction with students.

Considering the stages of female student development and FNT students’ reported low levels of self-efficacy and uneasiness in classrooms and new environments, their reluctance to engage with campus representatives to identify resources is not unusual. Yet, there appeared to be an expectation that students would seek and initiate contact with staff when needed. Parenting students expressed the greatest need with childcare and noted the institution’s remedy has been to make a facility available but not accessible to working class students, who most need the services. Most of the participants who discontinued attendance received no follow-up from the institution. What does it suggest to students when there is little or no response on the part of the institution to recognize their needs or respond to their departure?

The introduction of this work indicates that research on women's experiences in higher education is necessary to gauge how the structures, policies, and programs of higher education support or impede their participation and educational goals. As Jacoby and Garland (2004) suggest it is the university's responsibility to intentionally design opportunities and solutions to improve student success and participation. In doing so, higher education officials should be cautious of creating policies with gender-neutral perspectives that do not consider the lives of women. Listening to the ways in which FNT students describe their experiences helps in developing fuller, clearer understanding of the ways in which institutional policy function within the contexts of women's lives.

### **Summary**

When considering the background characteristics of the study participants, it is understandable that they experienced a significant level of challenge when they initially enrolled in school. Modest financial circumstances limited their educational resources as they prepared to enter college. Inadequate academic preparation, knowledge of college choice issues, and financial support for college influenced their decisions to attend institutions that were not a good fit. The early academic difficulties and withdrawal were a result of incongruent expectations and poor social and academic integration, which were negatively affected by full-time employment. Upon returning, students who held multiple roles experienced an additional and sometimes extraordinarily challenging layer of transition as they struggled to add a new role and maintain existing roles. The psychological challenges female re-entry students encountered include feelings of conflict and ambivalence about their proper roles as women. This dissonance appears to have originated internally and was partly the result of interactions with family and other

external agents. Thus, both internal and external pressures combined to form challenges for re-entry women. The division of domestic labor also resulted in limitations on their time, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, and continued enrollment.

The institutional challenges students described suggested they did not receive an adequate level of institutional support. Although they were generally resourceful in finding information, the students still lacked the capacity to access complete and accurate aid information. Were they able to obtain appropriate information regarding funding options, they could have eliminated stressors associated with full-time work. However, what was more striking was that advisors did not inquire about the social integration or well-being of students. Discussions in advising sessions focused strictly on course advising issues. Discussion of students' well-being only occurred when initiated by the student. Because they had been conditioned to be independent and act autonomously, students rarely requested assistance with matters that negatively affected their academic progress. Student support services assumed students would self-identify academic and developmental needs and seek assistance in a timely manner. However, these students had, by necessity, developed autonomous behavioral patterns that prevented them from seeking the assistance. More holistic or intrusive advising methods would have been instrumental in helping these students avoid engagement, financial, and academic pitfalls.

### **Persisting Beyond the First Year**

All of the participants identified broad networks of external support that included family, friends, employers and co-workers. In addition, their own self-reliance and development of coping skills played key roles in their ability to complete their freshmen studies. And while students expressed some disappointment with institutional support

systems, all were able to identify institutional agents who provided necessary support, aided in their development, and strengthened their sense of belonging.

**Family and friends.** Family members were a constant source of unconditional support for most participants. Students' families provided continuous encouragement and emotional support throughout their studies, and particularly during difficult periods in the adjustment process. The value of strong emotional support from the families of nontraditional students in helping them to succeed is documented in the literature (Christie et al., 2001; Christie et al., 2004).

Friends who were fellow students provided guidance in enrollment and aid processes. They were instrumental in encouraging participation and class attendance, and in providing academic support and assistance. Interactions with fellow students typically occurred on campus and often in classroom settings. Such interactions served to enhance academic and social involvement as well as the overall persistence of the study participants (Tinto, 2001). This is consistent with research documenting that students who are more academically and socially involved during the freshmen year are more likely to persist (Tinto, 2005). According to the literature, an added benefit of such interactions was that their involvement in learning activities with other students provided for greater learning and intellectual development (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004).

**Employers and co-workers.** Employers and co-workers were also a significant source of support for these students. Employers provided income, scheduling flexibility, and environments that encouraged and supported student development. Although most of the positions were full-time and off-campus, they allowed students to develop leadership, communications, problem solving, and time management skills, all which positively

impacted their roles as students (Choy & Berker, 2003). While most students entered college with deficiencies in these areas, practice and challenges at work aided in developing their practical skills and coping strategies. The workplace was also where students gained a greater sense of confidence and self-efficacy in their abilities to achieve goals and objectives. This has been confirmed in the literature. Previous research suggests high quality part-time work that develop career skills may contribute to higher levels of career maturity (Furr & Elling, 2000).

Findings in this study also highlighted the paradoxical impacts of paid work. In addition to accruing workplace benefits that allowed greater flexibility in course scheduling, students were also able to develop coping strategies at work. The strategies helped transform them into college students and move them away from their high school approaches to attendance, interacting with faculty, study habits, managing their independence, and goal setting. As students excelled in the work place, the acquisition of leadership roles, promotions, salary increases, and positive validation of their abilities seduced students to engage more in work activities and less in their academic pursuits. And as commuter students, they were even more susceptible and fell prey to academic and social disengagement.

**Institutional support networks.** Institutional support networks reinforced students' sense of fit with the institution, allowed for meaningful interactions with faculty, and provided necessary academic counseling and technology. Being in an environment among students with similar goals and focus provided a level of comfort. It allowed for comfortable interactions in peer and learning groups and allowed for the development of meaningful social connections. And although there was little interaction



with faculty outside of the classroom, students described student-faculty interactions that aided in their understanding of course content and increased their confidence in approaching faculty with questions. In describing interactions with professional university staff, students typically referred to a single office, advising services. These staff were usually a source of quick and reliable information regarding academic programs of study.

**Technology services.** Finally, students regarded campus technology facilities and services as the most useful resource in their efforts to persist. Students utilized technology services in nearly every aspect of their student lives including conducting research activities, completing assignments, locating campus resources, applying for aid, enrollment, communications, etc. Curricular changes that promoted online courses were also key elements for FNT students as they allowed them to continue enrollment and maintain other adult roles. According to the literature, courses that infuse technology and web-based learning to enhance student engagement improve course completion rates, produce higher achievement rates, lower the occurrence of failed courses, and lower withdrawal rates, (Twigg, 2003). Courses that infuse technology have also positively impacted the performance of nontraditional students (Twigg, 2005). Nontraditional students note the most valuable benefits of these course were the convenience and flexibility they provided (Twigg, 2005).

### **Relationship between a Having Career Goal and FNT Student Motivation and Persistence**

The final aim of the study was to determine the relationship between having a career goal and FNT student motivation and persistence. Theoretically, having a career

goal provides both direction and motivation for students to obtain necessary information and take appropriate steps toward achieving those goals (Hull-Banks et al., 2005; Meier & Albrecht, 2003). It is a primary factor related in school retention. According to Tinto's (1993) model of student attrition, students' goals, initially and over time, have a strong influence on their decisions to persist. While the relationship between career goals and college freshmen motivation to persist has been documented in the literature (Hull-Banks et al, 2005; Ting, 1997), it was not a robust finding in this study. Only two of the participants in this study had firm career goals. These goals were distinguishable when they identified the occupational position they hoped to obtain (e.g., I want to be a teacher, social worker, or nurse, etc.). Several of the study participants lacked motivation upon entry and often implied they attended college simply because it was the next step or expected. They had little clarity or purpose for attending college. This was not uncommon as many beginning students enter college with vague understanding of their purpose (Tinto, 2001). However Tinto (2001) suggests, while career goal uncertainty is normal among freshmen, if it remains unsettled for too long it can seriously undermine the willingness of students to complete their studies.

There were three unexpected findings: two of those findings were related to career goals and motivation. All but two of the participants were majoring in female-dominated disciplines. There appeared to an association between the re-entry students and their career orientation when they returned to school.

While career goal clarity did not emerge as a major theme, all of the students identified firm value related goals (e.g., I want to provide a stable lifestyle for my family, be able to afford or inspire my children, etc.). The findings in this study indicate the

CDSEM is less relevant for FNT students. This finding is inconsistent with other research that has concluded having a career goal is a primary motivation in student's intent to persist (Hull-Blanks et al., 2005; Peterson & Delmas, 2001; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2006). For example, in their study of freshmen students ( $n = 401$ ) and their career goals, more women students reported career-related goals (132) than value related goals (71). The findings in this study differed from study findings in that only two of the eight participants reported career-related goals; the other six reported value related goals. However this was not the only inconsistency noted in the data. Other research has also linked career goals to educational self-efficacy. Hackett and Betz (1981), using career self-efficacy theory, suggested that a women's self-efficacy is linked to career goal choices. This was also not a strong finding in the study as most of the participants indicated low-levels of self-efficacy during the freshmen year.

### **Limitations**

Limitations associated with this study need to be considered when interpreting the findings. First, as a case study that examined a single site, the study did not consider the experiences of FNT students at other types of institutions. FNT students at other types of institutions may have very different experiences. And, due to the small sample size, the results of the study may not accurately reflect the experiences all FNT students in schools and departments across the campus. However, the size of the sample and the use of multiple interviews allowed for greater depth. Also, the distribution of majors represented in this small sample may not represent those of the larger FNT student population. While there was some racial/ethnic diversity in the sample, only two students from traditionally underrepresented populations participated in the study. And finally, because narrative

inquiry is primarily dependent on informant accounts, the data may be vulnerable to selective recall, attention to subsets of experiences, filling memory gaps through inference and reinterpretation of the past (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicated that providing “sufficient descriptive data” or a rich thick description of the setting and findings of a study makes transferability or extrapolations possible (Merriam, 2009, p. 225). This suggests that reasonable assumptions may be made regarding the application of findings to other situations with similar conditions (Patton, 2002).

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings demonstrate that there are a variety of precollege factors facing FNT students as they make the transition to college. Although these students are socialized to the value of higher education and aspire to attend college, they tend to receive little direct support in preparing for, choosing, or understanding how to cover their educational expenses. Consequently, the decisions they make regarding choice of institution, options to pay, employment, and how they seek and gather information do more to hinder than benefit their academic progress. Nevertheless, with a broad range of external support and the development of coping skills including time management and adult problem solving, most were able to access institutional support and persist to the sophomore year. However, while the participants in this study acquired some assistance from university support networks, there was an overall deficit in the types and amount of support they received. The lack of intentional institutional supports left most of these students to their own networks and means of figuring out and navigating a very complicated and challenging transition period. Their stated needs for personal, financial, career, and time

management counseling went generally unfulfilled. Similarly, their need for support that would facilitate and increase their engagement and involvement on campus also went overlooked. Such supports would have included affordable and nearby childcare services and alternatives to off-campus employment (Kappner, 2002; Perna et al., 2006).

A critical feature of student engagement is how the institution deploys its resources organizes the curriculum, learning opportunities, and support services to prompt participation among students to participate in activities that lead to the experiences and desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation (Kuh, 2001). Knowing the policies and practices and other institutional conditions that are related to student success and how to create them are vital to efforts to develop student-friendly campus cultures. If student engagement is a critical determinant of the impact of college, then it is important for institutions to appropriately shape its environment to encourage student engagement (Pascarella & Terenzini 2005).

Because college environments encourage or impede students personal development both in and out of the classroom, institutions must shape their environments in ways that support learning and encourage student involvement in educationally purposeful interactions and activities with peers and faculty. The more students are academically and socially involved, the more likely they are to persist and graduate. This is especially true during the first year of study (Tinto, 2001). Additionally, students are more likely to remain with institutions when they feel the institution acts in their best interest, is committed to providing support, and fulfills its obligations (Berger, 2001; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004). Based on the support needs identified by the students in the study, colleges need to specifically foster engagement of FNT by increasing students'

knowledge of financial aid, expanding grant aid programs, identifying and expanding on-campus student employment opportunities, increasing nurturing and purposeful interactions with students, and creating child friendly spaces and care centers.

Students primarily maintained full-time off-campus employment to cover their educational expenses. Their work obligations limited their participation during their first year. To facilitate increased engagement in EPAs institutions might weigh the value of expanding grant aid, financial coaching, campus work study, advising, and childcare programs.

1. **Increase Students' Knowledge of Financial Aid:** Institutions can increase students' knowledge of affordability options for college by offering workshops during orientation activities or as a part of a first-year experience programs (King, 2002). This kind of aid counseling could be provided as part of a first-year experiences and/or summer orientation program (Richards, 2003; Tuttle et al., 2005).
2. **Expand grant aid programs:** Maximizing the availability of need-based grants for nontraditional students could reduce students' financial need to work. This would provide time for participation and engagement in curricular and co-curricular educational activities (Baum, 2005; Perna & Li, in press; Richards, 2003).
3. **Identify and expand on-campus employment opportunities:** Students become less connected to the institution as they are more preoccupied with off-campus employment opportunities. Research findings demonstrate that the more time students are engaged off campus, the less they are involved in educationally

purposeful activities (Furr & Elling, 2000). Colleges and universities may enhance students' educational experiences by persuading more students to work on campus. It is important to identify ways the campus can expand on-campus employment opportunities and support increases in the Federal Work-Study program (Perna et al., 2006). Institutions should attempt to increase both the availability and attractiveness of on-campus employment (Tuttle et al., 2005).

4. **Mandate advising and purposeful interaction with faculty and staff:** Student retention research suggests that contact with a significant university representative is a crucial factor in a student's decision to remain in college (Heisserer & Parette, 2002). Academic advising allows for regular one-on-one interactions with a concerned university representative. Thus, it is reasonable that advisors are best positioned to make important connections with students. Holistic advising is concerned with the whole student. It assumes students can perform well academically if there is a sense of balance and well-being in their personal, social and academic lives. Students who perceive that they matter and are a part of the academic community are more likely to be academically successful than those who feel no sense from their institution (Heisserer & Parette, 2002). Intrusive advising also involves intentional contact with students and focuses on developing caring and beneficial relationships that increase academic motivation and persistence. Student retention literature suggests meaningful contact with a university representative is an essential factor in a student's decision to persist in college (Heisserer & Parette, 2002). Being intrusive or proactive is often required with students who do not actively seek

counsel and assistance when their circumstances decline (Holmes, 2009). The intrusive advising model is a proactive approach to involve and motivate students to seek help when needed (Ableman & Molina, 2002). This method allows advisors to get at the heart of the cause(s) of students' academic difficulties and recommend appropriate intervention strategies. It involves intentional and proactive interactions with students in order to connect with them before adverse academic situations arise and cannot be successfully managed. These advisor-student interactions should facilitate caring and supportive relationships that increase students' academic motivation and persistence. Intrusive advising differs from the more traditional prescriptive and developmental models of advising because advisors are not only helpful and encouraging of students, but they proactively make the initial contact with students. Students who feel a part of or that they matter to an academic community are more likely to be academically successful than those who do not (Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Ableman & Molina, 2002).

5. **Coordinated early warning systems:** Student persistence should be a campus-wide, cooperative effort (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). Educational and personal development goals of advising should be coordinated across multiple institutional partners where faculty, student affairs staff, mentors and advisors comprise a multiple early alert and safety net system for students (Hart, 2003; Kuh, 2001; Kuh et al., 2006). Such team approaches keep students from falling through the cracks and provide information to them when they need it. Early warning systems are important for high risk students. Course assessments,



midterm progress reports, and early alert systems that involve a network across campus are most effective in helping students identify and address early adjustment issues (Hart, 2003; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Tagg 2003).

6. **Provide child friendly spaces/centers:** Providing affordable, high quality childcare services on campus has been shown to positively impact the educational outcomes of students. Kappner (2002) found that student parents who took advantage of on campus, childcare services were more likely to remain in school, earn higher grades, and graduate in fewer years. Childcare is a primary challenge for low-income students. In identifying necessary support resources for adult learners, Cook and King (2005) noted adult students' desire for family-oriented on-campus activities.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Over the last 20 years researchers have produced a significant body of research examining the performance, educational preferences, challenges and outcomes of nontraditional students relative to their traditional counterparts (Bowl, 2001; Eppler, Carsen-Plentl, & Harju, 2000). The expanding diversity in higher education has increased opportunities to broaden our individual and collective understanding of ways education can be shaped and managed to provide the highest level of growth and development for all students. However, to date, much of the inquiry regarding nontraditional students has focused on more mature adult students (Heath-Thornton, 2002; Pusser et al., 2007). Few studies consider the broader diversity of nontraditional students in terms of younger students with adult responsibilities. As the pool of nontraditional students grows in diversity, more research is necessary to determine how differences within groups impact

their outcomes. It will be important for this research to consider how educational policies, resources, and opportunities are developed and distributed differently according to gender, class and other social differences.

A primary objective of future research should be to explore a broader, more diverse population of FNT students. The current study presents rich descriptions of a small sample of female students. While there was some diversity among them, more work is necessary with students from traditionally underrepresented student populations. Also, this study did not include non-persisters. A comparative study with quantitative and qualitative measures could provide a wealth of data, particularly with the collection of baseline data as students prepare to enter college and follows them to the sophomore year. While the findings in this study support previous findings that female nontraditional students have limited tangible support from spouses, have a significant need for childcare services, and experience psychological dissonance in their educational goals and their social conditioning as women (Polakow, Butler, Deprez & Kahn, 2004; Ward & Westbrook, 2000); additional research on the ways in which gender impacts the nontraditional student experience is necessary. This research produced three unexpected findings: 1) an apparent relationship between being a re-entry FNT student and majoring in a female dominated discipline; 2) clear paradoxes in student-work relationships, and 3) value oriented goals as motivations for persistence among FNT students. In addition, because students in this study rarely interacted with faculty or other students in class, there classroom experiences could not be fully examined. This research also focused on a small sample at a particular type of institution. It did not explore a number of issues related to gender.

Future research might use mixed methods to gain a better understanding of how gender may impact nontraditional students' in- and out-of-class experiences, peer relationships, and interactions with faculty and staff. Comparative studies of nontraditional male and female students of different age groups and entry status could shed light on challenges and needs unique to female students according specific age ranges and entry characteristics. Similarly, comparison studies on nontraditional female students who maintain continuous enrollment and those with gaps in enrollment could highlight the differences between the groups and how to structure interventions to reduce stop-outs.

Also, while some research supports the positive impact of paid work on student outcomes (Choy, 2000; King, 2002;), other research has found that work is unrelated to student achievement (Bradley, 2006; Furr & Elling, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The literature also addresses the negative impact of work on schooling (Bradley, 2006; Ziskin, Torres, Hossler, & Gross, 2009). It documents the detrimental impact of work on students' academic success, a negative correlation between the number of hours worked and student GPAs, the harmful impact of working beyond 15+ hours per week, and how the relevance of the work tempers the impact of work on student success (Ziskin et al., 2009). Because findings in this study and others have produced mixed findings, further investigation is needed to resolve inconsistencies in the literature and to provide a better understanding on how work impacts academic success.

And given that the findings were not consistent with other research regarding career goals and motivations to persist, more research is needed to understand career goal orientation and its impact on the motivation of women students to persist. Understanding

the impact of their career orientations on their motivation and persistence will require more comprehensive and integrative approaches and models that accommodate those within group differences. Finally, research examining the relationship between types of institutional support resources and FNT student engagement, persistence, and other educational outcomes is needed. This line of inquiry could help determine how limited resources can be optimized and to have the greatest impact depending on gender, class and other cultural and social origins of students.

As the diversity of the college going population expands, more inclusive theory and research will be necessary to shape policy and guide practice. This research adds to the existing body of literature on persistence, provides greater insight into the educational pathways of nontraditional women students, and offers a model for better understanding their course in higher education. I began this inquiry with a desire to provide a voice for women students who often have no voice or visibility in institutions of higher education. By sharing their stories, I hope I have achieved that in some small way.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### E-mail Invitation to Participants

Greetings [student]

I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Education and I am conducting research on nontraditional female students. I am writing to you, in hopes that you will consider participating in the study. The study will highlight the early success of female college students, and as a continuing student, your experiences could shed insight on this important topic.

Participation includes two in-person interviews regarding your freshmen year educational experiences and completing a brief profile form. Interviews will begin in April.

The study focuses on students who meet the eligibility criteria listed below. If you are between the ages of 22 and 29 years old and:

- are financially independent (responsible for your own college and living expenses)
- **or** have a dependent(s) other than a spouse (child, sibling, parent, or other person whom you supported financially)

As thank you for participation, students who take part in the study will receive a \$20 Target gift card. Please read the attached study information to find out more about the study and to determine if you would like to participate. If you are eligible and interested in participating, simply respond to this e-mail message.

If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact me at [jvbanks@indiana.edu](mailto:jvbanks@indiana.edu) or by phone at (317)352-1454 (cell).

Thank you in advance for your consideration,

Julianna Banks  
902 West New York Street, Suite ES2114  
Indianapolis, IN 46202  
E-mail: [jvbanks@indiana.edu](mailto:jvbanks@indiana.edu)  
Ph: (317)278-3100

**APPENDIX B****Follow-up Reminder (E-mail) Invitation to Participants**

Greetings [student]

There is still time to participate! As a sophomore female student, you may be eligible to participate in a research study on nontraditional female students. This study will provide insight on the early success of female college students.

If you are between the ages of 22 and 29 years old **and**:

- are financially independent (responsible for your own college and living expenses)
- **or** have a dependent(s) other than a spouse (child, sibling, parent, or other person whom you support financially)

please review the attached study information sheet to find out more about the study and to determine if you wish to contribute as a participant. If you are interested in participating, simply respond to this email message and I will contact you to arrange your initial interview.

As thank you for participation, students who take part in the study will receive a \$20 Target gift card.

If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact me at [jvbanks@indiana.edu](mailto:jvbanks@indiana.edu) or by phone at (317)352-1454 (cell).

Thank you in advance for your consideration,

Julianna Banks  
902 West New York Street, Suite ES2114  
Indianapolis, IN 46202  
E-mail: [jvbanks@indiana.edu](mailto:jvbanks@indiana.edu)  
Ph: (317)278-3100

## APPENDIX C

### Final Follow-up (Telephone) Script

Hello, I am calling for [Student Name],

My name is Julie Banks and I am calling about a research study I am conducting on female college students. The study will examine the early success of female students and I am inviting students to participate in two in-person interviews.

To be eligible to participate, you must be between the ages of 22 and 29 years old; financially independent, that is, responsible your own college and living expenses **or** have a dependent(s) other than a spouse. A dependent would be a child, sibling, parent, or other person whom you supported financially.

Students who take part in the study will receive a \$20 Target gift card as a thank you for their time and participation.

If you are eligible and interested in participating, I can provide more information and arrange an initial interview.

[When speaking directly with students continue with...] Does this sound like a study you would like to take part in?

If the student responds positively, screen for eligibility and schedule an interview. If student declines to participate, thank them for their time and wish them a good afternoon.

[When leaving a voice mail continue with...] If you have questions about the study, please feel free to contact me at [jvbanks@indiana.edu](mailto:jvbanks@indiana.edu) or by phone at (317)352-1454 (cell).

Thank you!

## APPENDIX D

### Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis Study Information Sheet

#### Academic Experiences and Persistence of Female Nontraditional College Students

You are invited to participate in a research study on female college students. The purpose of this study is to examine the early educational experiences of nontraditional female college students and factors that facilitate their persistence to the sophomore year. Particular emphasis is placed on their motivation and strategies for success.

#### **Information**

If you choose to participate, you will be one of approximately 12 students who will participate in two interviews, each lasting no longer than 90 minutes. The interview sessions will be recorded using an audio recorder. Participants will also complete a brief participant profile form. All materials gathered as a result of this study will be stored in a locked file cabinet and destroyed in August 2010.

#### **Benefits**

Your participation in this study contributes to academe's increasing understanding of the experiences of nontraditional female college students and how to structure first year success, engagement, and development initiatives for these students.

#### **Confidentiality**

The identities of participants will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published. Only the researcher will have access to the collected data. Interview sessions will be audio recorded and transcribed. Audio tapes and transcriptions, gathered as a result of this study, will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study in August 2010.

Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the investigator and his/her research associates, Office of Human Research Participants (OHRP), and the IUPUI/Clarian Institutional Review Board or its designees.

#### **Compensation**

To thank you for your time and participation, you will receive a \$20 Target gift card for participating in this study. Additionally, there are no costs associated with participation. Participants who choose to withdraw from the study do not forfeit any legal rights or benefits to which they are otherwise entitled.

#### **Contact**

For questions about the study or a research-related injury, please contact the researcher: Julianna Banks, IUPUI School of Education, 902 West New York Street, Suite ES2114, Indianapolis, IN 46202; (317) 278-3100, or by e-mail at [jvbanks@indiana.edu](mailto:jvbanks@indiana.edu).

For questions about your rights as a research participant or complaints about a research study, contact the IUPUI/Clarian Research Compliance Administration office at 317/278-3458 or 800/696-2949.



**Participation**

You must be at least 18 years old to participate in the study. Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled.

## APPENDIX E

## Study Flyer



# *Are You a Sophomore Female Student?*

**You may be eligible to participate  
in a research study on college persistence!**

Participants will complete two interviews about their  
freshmen year educational experiences.

As a thank you, participants will receive a \$20 Target gift  
card for their time.

**To participate, you must be:**

- between 22 and 29 years old and;
- financially independent (responsible for your college and  
living expenses)
- or have a dependent other than a spouse (e.g., child, sibling,  
parent, or other person who you support financially).

For more information, contact Julie at

**[jvbanks@indiana.edu](mailto:jvbanks@indiana.edu) or (317) 352-1454.**

## APPENDIX F

### Participant Profile Form

This information will only be used for research purposes. All responses will be kept confidential. Thank you in advance for your participation.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail Address \_\_\_\_\_

Student Classification: SO Other Enrollment Status: Full-time Part-time

Residency Status: In-state Out-of-state Marital Status: Single Married Divorced

Major \_\_\_\_\_ Anticipated Graduation Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Family Structure: Two Parent Household Caregiver/Guardian (not a parent)  
Single Parent Household Other

How would you characterize your family's economic background?

Low-Income Working Class Middle Class Wealthy

Mother's highest level of education? Completed High School Completed College  
Some High School Some College  
Other \_\_\_\_\_  
(Please explain)

Father's highest level of education? Completed High School Completed College  
Some High School Some College  
Other \_\_\_\_\_  
(Please explain)

In reference to your freshmen year:

Please list the number of dependents "you" had (other than your spouse) \_\_\_\_\_

Please estimate the number of hours you typically spent each week doing the following activities:

Attending class \_\_\_\_\_

Working for pay \_\_\_\_\_

Attending to family/household commitments \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX G

### Interview - I Protocol

Review the Study Information sheet with the participant. Advise that the interview will take only 60 to 90 minutes and that they will receive a \$20 Target gift card for their participation after completing the second interview.

Interview Focus:      Pre-entry motivations, support networks, knowledge, expectations, and self-efficacy

Interview Guide:

1. Tell me who \_\_\_\_\_ (participant's name) was before she came to \_\_\_\_\_ university.
2. Tell me what motivated you to attend college?
  - a. What important factors in your life brought you to college? [Probe for family, relationships, previous experiences that might apply to this question]
  - b. What or who guided your decision to attend college?
  - c. Why is it important for you to earn a degree?
  - d. What do/did you aspire to do or be?
3. Tell me about your family in relation to your education. Describe the role they played in your decision to attend college.
  - a. Who were important individuals in your life who influenced your college choices?
  - b. Who, if anyone, aided you in understanding the college going process (applying, financing, enrolling, choosing courses, etc.) and choosing a college? Who discouraged you, if anyone?
  - c. Describe your relationship with them and how they assisted in the process.
4. Describe what your strengths were when you first came to college.
  - a. What were you most confident of?
  - b. Were there areas you felt needed improvement, if so, explain why.
5. Describe what your expectations were for the first year.
6. After you arrived on campus, what were your initial impressions about the campus, faculty, students, being here?
  - a. How were your experiences different from your expectations?
  - b. Can you discuss how faculty, university staff, your peer students, or student resource centers influenced how you adjusted to student life (socially or academically)?
  - c. How would describe your interactions with faculty and students in and outside the classroom?

- d. How would you describe your interactions with university administrative and student services offices and staff?
7. How were you able to manage school the first year?
    - a. How did you figure things out?  
What or who was most helpful to you during your first year and how did that person or entity provide aid to you?
    - b. How did they eliminate or create obstacles for you?
    - c. Did you attend full-time the entire academic year?
    - d. How did you cover the cost of attending college?
    - e. Describe the options that were available to you to pay for your first year of college. How did you learn about the options for covering college expenses?
  8. Tell me about your recent work experience.
    - a. Were you employed during your first year?
    - b. If so, how many hours per week did you work and what kind of work did you do? Was it an on-campus position?
    - c. How did you balance school and work?
    - d. What did you gain from that work experience or how did it benefit you?
    - e. How was this work related to the kind of work you want to do after graduation?
    - f. Had you chosen a career field or did you have solid career plans?
    - g. Had you determined a plan of how you would go about achieving your career goals? If so, explain how you were able to develop that plan.
  9. Describe any additional roles you fulfilled during your freshmen year.
    - a. How did these roles impact your role as a student?
    - b. How were you able to manage your school responsibilities with responsibilities outside of school?

## APPENDIX H

### Interview - II Protocol

Review the summary of the previous interview. Clarify any points that may have been unclear and discuss any item(s) that may need to be changed or adjusted.

Interview Focus: Transition experiences cont'd, external influences, challenges, strategies for success

Interview Guide:

1. Tell me more about your relationship with your family.
  - a. How did attending college impact your relationship(s) at home?
  - b. What role did your family play after you began attending college?
  - c. Were they able to aid in the process or did they add challenges to attending?
  
2. What was the adjustment period like for you?
  - a. Was there a time when you considered leaving school? If so, what made you decide to stay or what were your primary motivation(s) to overcome these challenges?
  - b. How did you feel about your abilities and skills to be successful and meet your goals?
  - c. What made you confident that you could meet your goals?
  - d. What strategies did you use to persist to the second year?
  
3. Do you think there are important differences in the way traditional and nontraditional students experience their first year? [Provide definition of a traditional and nontraditional student.]
  - a. Do you think there are important differences in the way male and female nontraditional students experience their first year?
  - b. How has your being female influenced your experiences as a student and your commitments outside of school?
  - c. How do you think the university has served you?
  
4. What recommendations would you share with new freshmen students to help them be successful?
  
5. Do you intend to enroll for the Fall 2010 session?
  
6. Are there any other important things for me to know about your first year in college?

**APPENDIX I****Study Incentive Acknowledgment**

Dear Volunteer,

Thank you for participating in this research on female nontraditional students. I appreciate your participation and hope you have enjoyed the experience. For your time and service to this study, I hope you will accept this small token of thanks—a \$20 gift card.

For study records, please sign and date below to indicate you have accepted the gift card mentioned above.

---

Participant Signature

Printed Name

Date Signed

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Investigator Signature

Printed Name

Date Signed

Thanks again for your time and support!

Kind regards,

## **JULIANNA V. BANKS**

### **Education**

*Doctor of Philosophy, 2010*

Indiana University - Bloomington, IN

Educational Leadership and Policy Studies: Higher Education and Student Affairs

*Master of Arts in English Literature, 1993*

University of Louisiana, Monroe, LA

*Bachelor of Arts in English Literature, 1991*

University of Louisiana, Monroe, LA

### **Current Position**

*Research Assistant*

*Center for Urban & Multicultural Education, School of Education*

*Indiana University Purdue University, Indianapolis, IN, January 2008 – present*

Co-investigator in research on faculty and students of color in higher education and K-12 systems. Compile and analyze data for program evaluation and presentation. Coordinate data collection process and manage database development. Co-author final reports and literature reviews

### **Teaching Experience**

*Associate Instructor*

*School of Education*

*Indiana University Purdue University, Indianapolis, IN, Fall 2009*

EDUC S555 Diversity and Community of All Learners:

*Associate Instructor*

*Educational Leadership and Policy Studies*

*Higher Education and Student Affairs*

*Indiana University, School of Education, Bloomington, IN*

EDUC C690 Doctoral Seminar

EDUC C565 Introduction to College and University Administration

EDUC U547 Master's Seminar

*Associate Instructor*

*Department of English*

*University of Louisiana, Monroe, LA, December 1991-1993*

Introduction to English



## Research Experience

### *Project Associate*

*National Survey of Student Engagement, Center for Postsecondary Research, Indiana University, School of Education, Bloomington, IN, Spring 2007 – Summer 2008*

Guide campus project managers through data collection process for institutional/national survey research. Provide project support for national surveys and map survey items to regional accreditation standards. Conduct conference presentations and review literature for research reports. Compose articles for center's bi-monthly online news publication

### *Research Assistant*

Survey Research Center

*Indiana University Purdue University, IU School of Liberal Arts, Indianapolis, IN, Summer 2008*

Provided survey research services to a variety of private, not-for-profit, and governmental organizations. Conducted research for faculty members, university departments, and students. The majority of the research was applied work in the fields of public opinion, epidemiology, health care, and marketing.

### *Research Consultant*

*Information Technology*

*Covance (Clinical Research Org.), Indianapolis, IN • Fall 2005 – Spring 2007*

Planned, managed, and reported progress of global IT projects (in Sydney, Geneva, and Indianapolis). Compiled and analyzed data on business processes for presentation and Evaluation. Coordinated testing and documentation for audits and provided quality assurance audit assistance. Collaborated w/Global managers, vendors, and finance to improve services and internal accounting

### *Research Assistant*

*Office of Professional Development*

*Indiana University Purdue University, Indianapolis, IN, Fall 2004 – Summer 2005*

Co-investigator in research on African American and Latino students in Higher Education. Compiled and analyzed data for analysis, presentation, and program Evaluation. Devised data analysis plan and developed assessment tools to measure impact on diverse populations. Developed web-based surveys, designed database, and managed data collection process

## Research Reports

Banks, J. V., Stuckey, J., Macey, E., & Smith, J. S. (2010). *Gopen scientific writing program evaluation*. Indianapolis, IN: Center for Urban and Multicultural Education.

Banks, J. V., Houser, J. , Stuckey, J., Brattain, K., Guillot, G., Smith, J. S. (2010). *Leadership in Academic Medicine Program (LAMP) evaluation*. Indianapolis, IN: Center for Urban and Multicultural Education.

Banks, J. V., Huddleston, G., Macey, E., Rhoades, A. (2010). *Indiana Poison Control Center evaluation*. Indianapolis, IN: Center for Urban and Multicultural Education.

Houser, J., Banks, J. V., Guillot, G., Jauch, B., Maffini, K., Brattain, K., Smith, J. S., (2010). *Appreciative inquiry in academic medicine*. Indianapolis, IN: Center for Urban and Multicultural Education.

Medina, M., Banks, J., Brant, K., & Champion-Shaw, C. (2008). *Understanding student perceptions of campus climate at IUPUI*. Indianapolis, IN: Center for Urban and Multicultural Education.

Nelson Laird, T. F., Garver, A. K., Niskodé-Dossett, A. S., & Banks, J. V. (April, 2008). *The predictive validity of a measure of deep approaches to learning*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education. Reno, NV.

Smith, J. S., Macey, E., Banks, J. V., Jauch, B., & Brattain, K. (2010). *Next Generation @ IUPUI program evaluation*. Indianapolis, IN: Center for Urban and Multicultural Education.

### **Peer-Reviewed Research Presentations**

Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE)  
Contributor, Jacksonville, FL, 2008

Professional & Organizational Development (POD)  
Presenter, Reno, NV, 2008

American College Personnel Association (ACPA)  
Presenter, Indianapolis, IN, 2008

National Student Affairs Professionals & Administrators (NASPA)  
Program Reviewer, Boston, MA, 2007

American College Personnel Association (ACPA)  
Program Reviewer, Atlanta, GA 2007

IUPUI Summer Research Enrichment Program  
Presenter, Indianapolis, IN, 2005

### **Student Leadership Symposium**

IUPUI Symposium on Research of Faculty, Staff & Students of Color  
Presenter, Indianapolis, IN, 2005

### **Service Related Activities**

IUPUI Office for Women Advisory Council  
Indiana Univ.-Purdue University at Indianapolis, 2008 - Present

Third Millennium Philanthropy & Leadership Initiative

Indiana Univ.-Purdue University at Indianapolis, 2006

Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program  
Indiana Univ.-Purdue University at Indianapolis, 2005

Indiana Project on Academic Success  
Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, 2005 - 2006

Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate  
Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, 2005 – 2006

Education Policy Studies Organization  
Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, 2005 -2006

### **Awards & Honors**

Dolores Donchin Memorial Service Award  
Donald H. Wulff Fellow – Professional & Organizational Development (POD)  
Educational Opportunity Fellowship  
Outstanding College Students of America  
Pi Lambda Theta (International Honor Society & Prof. Ed. Assoc.)  
Phi Tau Gamma (Foreign Language Assoc.)  
Dean's List

### **Professional Associations**

American College Personnel Association (ACPA)  
American Educational Research Association (AERA)  
Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE)  
National Association of Student Affairs Professionals & Administrators (NASPA)  
Professional & Organizational Development (POD)

### **Civic & Community Service**

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America  
American Cancer Society  
Martin Luther King Community Service  
Operation Outreach