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THE UNHEARD VOICES OF NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN HIGHER
EDUCATION: LEARNING TO BECOME A STUDENT

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Children, Family, and Community Sciences
in the College of Education and Human Performance
at the University of Central Florida
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2018

Major Professor: Rosa Cintrón

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of older students who work and have family responsibilities while attending an undergraduate program full-time. Research indicates that this segment of the student population is the only one that is growing today and is projected to grow in the future; this also is the largest the group of students that does not finish their studies in spite of the many services aimed at supporting students' academic success.

This study critically investigated the category of the nontraditional student and reviewed the literature about students' college experiences, including the limitations of its theoretical assumptions to describe and explain the nature of the college journey of older students with substantive life experiences. From the notion that learning is lifelong and holistic (Jarvis, 2006), this study combined a student-centered approach with a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology to respond to the following research questions: What is the lifeworld of undergraduate nontraditional students with significant life experience as they encounter college life? What resources sustain the college experience of undergraduate nontraditional students of and allow navigating the space of college life? What are the changes undergraduate nontraditional students live, the meaning they construct while encountering, and navigating college life?

Themes that resulted from the analysis included the participants' experiences as essentially different from that of traditional students. These nontraditional college students bring skills and knowledge that they deploy on behalf of their specific academic goals. The pace of their lives is fundamentally different from the traditional university

student's sense of time; they are self-sufficient, making decisions and navigate obstacles. Their new identity as students is re-negotiated with the identities they live outside of campus and they establish ad hoc relationships with members of the university community.

To Claudia, Sara y Francisco
Es lindo saber que ustedes existen

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I thank the participants in my pilot and dissertation studies. Students who are single mothers, fathers, who are full time students, work more hours than they should and sleep less hours than they should. You shared the treasure of your time with enthusiasm and entrusted me with your life stories.

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VIGNETTE

From the Outside Looking In

When I first read the term nontraditional students, I had to look up what it meant. When I learned about their journey, I was surprised by a report that described their numbers and declared them the group with higher attrition rates. My first reaction was to think there is something wrong with this situation. I was looking at their condition from my normative perspective, I felt and thought someone should care.

The stories I had the opportunity to listen in the pilot studies and dissertation, echoed as familiar. They were not in essence different from the stories I heard from many of the students in the programs I coordinated at the university back home. After a full day of work, they come to classes late and struggle to balance the time and the checkbook to be able to do everything life demands. I learned that they are not alone and that their studies are part of a collective effort. I learned that the experience in and outside the classroom can be awkward at times and that they rather be ignored when they feel out of place with faculty and peers. I also learned that sometimes the best decision was not to continue. Each one of those conversations left me with an image of empowered and wise people that have learned in informal and non-formal settings to be successful but in an institutional setting, their experience and knowledge did not appear as legitimate.

This is why I connected with nontraditional students in the U.S.A. and empathized with their experience, yet my formal learning of the prevalent academic explanations of who they are and why they do not finish their academic journey did not match the image they had left in my mind.

With these convictions, I approached my study of nontraditional students and the formality of my coursework. My biography gives me a lens to look at their reality and to examine critically the formal literature that address their success in higher education. However, I needed to develop expertise in a novel topic to talk about a group of students I did not know. As such, I am aware that my biography makes a difference. I am outside of mainstream American academia looking in to the condition of American nontraditional students. I hope that the different and critical perspective imprinted in my biography helps me contribute with a fresh perspective to look at an urgent problem, from outside.

*“My notions- of good and evil, of pleasant and unpleasant, of serious and funny, of ugly and beautiful... My taste in books, food and clothes, my sense of honour, my table manners, my turn of phrase, my accent- even the characteristic movements of my body- are all matters of habitus”
Slavoj Zizek*

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION—SO MANY, SO DIFFERENT

Unraveling the Significance of the Demographic Change in Numbers

We are always incorporating into our biographies the outcomes of our new learning and thus creating a changed, but also paradoxically re-creating the same, person (Jarvis, 2006).

It is common for reports of studies about nontraditional students to begin by acknowledging that demographics have changed. The characterization of the change, its magnitude and significance, receive little attention and elaboration. In this introduction, this characterization and description is extensive and broad to clearly explain the relevance of the problem. The first part of this introduction presents evidence that supports the change in demographics and describes the trend of the change over time. I present and integrate different sources of data to argue that the change is a historical trend and to show that the rate of nontraditional students in the total population of students is increasing. I also present the magnitude and constancy of the shift across different age cohorts and illustrate the trend of nontraditional students that access and continue their journeys in higher education.

The number of nontraditional students has been impacting the demographics of the undergraduate population on campuses nationwide, (Hussar & Bailey, 2016). Utilizing actual enrollment data from fall 2012, Hussar and Bailey, projected an increase of 15% in the total enrollment in postsecondary institutions by 2023. This increase is smaller than the increase of 42% that occurred in the student population between 1998 and 2012. When this increase is examined by age group, the change in demographics and

the future trend in the participation of nontraditional students, actual and projected, becomes evident, regardless of the smaller observed increase in the total population of students. Hussar and Bailey reported that the group of students between 18 and 24 years old, representing the traditional age group, increased 45% between 1998 and 2012 and was projected to increase only 12% between 2012 and 2023. The actual increase in the number of students between 25 and 34 years of age for the same periods were 52% and 23% respectively. Students 35 years old or older increased by 24% between 1998 and 2012 and were projected to increase 17% by 2023. The total number of students reported is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Enrollment Variation and Projected Change (in Millions)

Age Group	1998	2012	Projection
			2023
18-24	8.2	11.9	13.3
25-34	3.3	4.9	6.1
≥ 35	2.9	3.6	4.2

Adapted from “Projections of Education Statistics,” W. J. Hussar and T. M Bailey, 2016. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015073.pdf>
Copyright 2014 by the National Center for Education Statistics.

The most recent data available show a smaller increase in the total population of students, but they confirm the tendency reported by Hussar and Bailey (2016) about the change in the proportions of nontraditional students in the total population. Newer data using actual enrollment for 2014 and the projections to 2025 offered by NCES are summarized in Table 2. No specific data were available for 1998; thus, the period 2000-2014 was used to compare to the 14-year period (1998-2012) utilized in the 2016 report.

Similarly, the comparison of the projections is displayed for the 10-year period from 2014 to 2025.

Table 2

Enrollment Change and Projection by Age Group, Gender, and Attendance Status

Group	2000	2014	% Change	2025	% Change
Total 18-24	8,862	11,759	24.6%	13,332	11.8%
Total 25-34	3,377	4,567	26.1%	5,303	13.9%
Total ≥ 35	2,942	3,625	18.8%	4,367	17.0%
Female 18-24	4,765	6,384	25.4%	7,399	13.7%
Female 25-34	1,888	2,571	26.6%	3,021	14.9%
Female ≥ 35	1,865	2,325	19.8%	2,774	16.2%
Male 18-24	4,097	5,374	23.8%	5,934	9.4%
Male 25-34	1,489	1,997	25.4%	2,282	12.5%
Male ≥ 35	1,077	1,300	17.1%	1,593	18.4%
Full time 18-24	6,988	9,078	23.0%	10,182	10.8%
Full time 25-34	1,304	2,143	39.2%	2,567	16.5%
Full time ≥ 35	596	1,024	41.8%	1,324	22.7%
Part-time 18-24	1,874	2,681	30.1%	3,150	14.9%
Part-time 25-34	2,073	2,424	14.5%	2,737	11.4%
Part time ≥ 35	2,345	2,600	9.8%	3,043	14.5%

Note. Calculations of trends by Marcelo Julio Maturana © 2017; 2014 enrollment data from NCES Digest of Education Statistics (2015) in public domain.

Table 2 also shows the summary of the trend in subgroups by gender and attendance status. I analyzed the data and the percentage of variation, actual and projected, to expose more clearly the rate of change of the tendency, in addition to the total number of students. In the disaggregation I observed that for all the subgroups, except part-time students, there has been a persistent larger growth in the number of the students between 25 and 34 years old and 35 years old and older than in the number of students between 18 and 24 years old. Data show that students older than 35 years comprise the group that has a larger percentage of increase across all the subgroups presented in the table and for the projected increase for 2025. This increase in the number of students older than 35 years old is the result of the cumulative effect of students who age while attending college. The overall result, however, is an increase in the number of students who are at least 10 years older than the group that is considered of traditional age. After a careful analysis of these data, I argue that this age difference establishes relevant differences between the lived experiences of the students. I discuss these differences as they may impact in the next chapter. The 2014 enrollment data confirm the observations of Hussar and Bailey (2016) that nontraditional students are the single largest projected group to increase in postsecondary enrollment by 2025.

I have presented age as the demographic characteristic used to support the view that there has been a persistent change in demographics. However, age is only one of the characteristics of seven that the US Department of Education has used to define nontraditional students in postsecondary institutions. These seven characteristics have become standard in the research of the condition of nontraditional students in higher

education, as well as to guide institutional and policy research. In Chapter 2, I discuss alternative definitions, and the origin of the nontraditional branding is presented in the review of the literature. Nevertheless, the landmark study of Choy (2002) has framed the research and discussion using these seven characteristics and I briefly present it here. Choy, in his 2002 report prepared for NCES, used 1999-2000 enrollment data and concluded that 73% of enrolled students had at least one of the seven characteristics, and that only 27% of the students in college met the criteria of traditional college students. The report adopted the criteria proposed by Horn and Carroll (1996) that consider the number of characteristics a nontraditional student has as a measure. Hence, students who have only one characteristic are considered minimally nontraditional; if they have two or three, they are moderately nontraditional; and if they have four to seven characteristics, they are considered highly nontraditional. Participants in this study were selected using the criteria proposed by Horn and Carroll as equivalent to the moderately nontraditional category students. Additional traits complemented this demographic classification in the selection process.

As has been noted, the growth rate of overall population changed after 2000; however, the increase of the proportion of nontraditional students has remained stable. Reeves, Miller, and Rouse (2011) studied Choy's (2002) findings to determine if they were stable over time, using 2008 enrollment data. Table 3 presents a comparison of the results reported by Choy and Reeves et al. by each of the seven characteristics of nontraditional students. Considering the observed change of the overall rate of growth of the student population since 2000, the relative stability of the results, suggests that

analysis of the distribution of the characteristics within the group of nontraditional students could be extended using more recent enrollment data.

Reeves et al. (2011) used a sample that included 132,800 students, more than twice the number that Choy included. Their analysis indicated that the difference found in the percentage was significant ($p < .01$) for each of the seven categories. The analysis corroborates the 2002 findings that a majority of college students are nontraditional irrespective of a small decrease from 73% to 70%. Although statistically significant, the authors admitted the shift had limited practical significance. The largest decrease in the 10-year period since 2000 can be observed in the attendance status. This change is consistent with the data shown in Table 2 where the largest change reported between 2000 and 2014 was the increase of full-time attendance of students older than 25 years old.

Table 3

Percentage Change per Nontraditional Characteristics

Characteristic	Choy, 2002	Reeves et al., 2011	Change
Financially independent	51%	47%	-4%
Work full-time	39%	32%	-7%
Delayed enrollment	46%	31%	-15%
Attend part-time	48%	26%	-22%
Dependents other than spouse	27%	14%	-13%
Single parents	13%	12%	-1%
Do not have high school diploma	7%	11%	+4%

Adapted from “Reality Check: A Vital Update to the Landmark 2002 NCES Study of Nontraditional College Students,” by T. J. Reeves, L. A. Miller, and R. A. Rouse, 2011. Retrieved from https://research.phoenix.edu/sites/default/files/publication-files/reality_check_report_final_0_0.pdf

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In addition to their continued growth in the total numbers and of their percentage of the total population, nontraditional students experience college differently than traditional age students. Researchers have suggested that this difference stems from internal and external conditions of the students in addition to the influence of the seven characteristics proposed by Choy (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Grabowski, Rush, Ragen, Fayard, & Watkins-Lewis, 2016). Researchers have also indicated that one of the outcomes of these differences in college experience is a higher rate of students who do not continue their studies (Benshoff, 1991, 1993; Horn & Carroll, 1996; Laing & Robinson, 2003; Ozga & Sukhnandan. 1998). This perspective has established the idea in the analysis of the seven characteristics as at-risk factors.

The NCES data in the most recent Institute of Education Sciences (IES) Condition of Education report (2017) described persistence information about first-time students in postsecondary education who enrolled in 2011-12, disaggregated by level of institution. For two- and four-year institutions, there has been a higher percentage of persistence for students who attend full time than those who attend part time, at least some of the semesters.

When disaggregated by age groups, students who first entered a postsecondary institution at 19 years old or younger show a much higher persistence rate for both types of institutions. In four-year institutions, the difference between that age group and 24- to 29-year-old age group when they first enrolled was 37 percentage points, from 85% to 48%. Data for the total population and all age groups are presented in Table 4.

Shapiro et al. (2016) also reported the difference in persistence described for the different groups. Their Signature Report 12 used data of the 2010 cohort to look at attainment rates nationally. For the students who were 20 years or younger when they first entered college, 25.9% were not enrolled after six years. For the group that started between ages 20 to 24, 48.5% were not enrolled; and for the group over 24 years old, 49.3% were not enrolled after six years.

Table 4

Percentages of Age Groups and Persistence per Level of Institution

Age group	Total	Population Distribution		Persistence	
		2-Year	4-Year	2-Year	4-Year
≤ 19	76%	66%	85%	62%	85%
20-23	10%	14%	6%	49%	53%
24-29	6%	9%	6%	48%	48%
≥ 30	8%	11%	5%	48%	57%

Adapted from 2017 NCES Condition of Education (2017). Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2017144>
 Copyright 2017 by National Center for Education Statistics.

In addition to the 2010 cohort data, the report offered data about the outcomes of persistence after eight years for the earlier 2008 cohort. The results of that analysis were consistent with the results for the 2010 cohort. For the 2008 cohort, after eight years of having started college, 26.6% of the students who were younger than 20 years old when starting college were not enrolled anymore. This was also the case for 47.5% of those who were between 20 and 24 years old when starting and the case for 47.7% of those

who were over 24 years old when first enrolled. The trend has not changed when considering the longer span of time of eight years in the analysis.

The change in the student population goes beyond a shift in the current and projected numbers of students based on their age at the time they first had access to postsecondary education. I argue that the characterization of nontraditional students proposed by Choy (2002) also supports the notion that given the intersections and cumulative effect of the characteristics, they contribute to a college experience for nontraditional students that is different from that of traditional students, yet the analysis of persistence assumes that they fail because they do not follow the path of the experience of traditional students. Most importantly, the most recent data have confirmed that this difference in their process culminates in a different outcome for a large percentage of nontraditional students who do not continue with their studies.

The situation described in the shift of student population is one element of the problem. The second component is the prism of analysis used to analyze, understand and prescribe the persistence, breaks and ending of the student journey. The analysis assumes simultaneously the presence of a homogenous student population, mostly white, middle class who has just finished high school and lives on campus and it also assumes the capacity of the institutions of higher education to intervene in the student's life to shape and guide the new college experience in order to increase their academic success.

A compounding element of the problem is the deficit perspective espoused by institutions to evaluate the student's origin and prior life experiences. In general, the perspective assumes that the student lacks what is necessary to succeed in college and

whatever the student possess, in terms of knowledge or experience, has limited positive effect in academic success. These ideas illustrate the complexity of the students' experience in the context of institutional cultures and they will be further explained in the review of the literature.

In the review of the literature, I present the discussions that have illuminated the differences between nontraditional and traditional students and of their respective college journeys. I will also discuss the explanations that researchers have provided to understand the college experience of the nontraditional students and the different outcomes.

To this point, I have presented data that illustrate some central ideas about nontraditional students that will serve as a background for the analysis of the literature. First, their numbers have increased and will continue to increase in the future. Second, their rate of participation will also accelerate. As an umbrella term, nontraditional students encompass a wide variety of characteristics of students making them a very heterogeneous group. Finally, the differences in characteristics establish that their college experiences are different from the experience of the students of traditional age. Standing out among the differences is the outcome of the experience with almost half of nontraditional students not finishing the process.

In the following chapter, I consider the question of the differences and specificity of nontraditional students in the literature of higher education. In my discussion, I examine the literature to determine the perspectives used to explain and describe the process of nontraditional students who attend college. I explore if the differences between the lived experiences of traditional and nontraditional students are accounted for and how

they are described and assessed. Questions that guide the analysis will include whose voices and views guide the research and how the differences found are judged.

As a preamble for the analysis, I consider it necessary to underscore that the differences of the experience between traditional and nontraditional students extend throughout the time the college process lasts and that the difference in the nature of this process does not lead to an eventual homogenization of the two groups after a period of adaptation. They remain different. A major point of difference occurs from the starting point of the process. For nontraditional students, the decision to enroll and initiate the process is different. The decision is one that is well informed and well reflected. What moves most nontraditional students to embark on the journey is their goal of gaining skills, earning a degree, and personal enrichment (Choi, 2002). The sources of information that shape their perceptions and expectations throughout their college years are different from the sources that inform the decisions of the traditional students (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998). The result of this different process is higher motivation and commitment to the process (Adams & Corbett, 2010). Increased access has not necessarily translated into academic success, and nontraditional students have remained more than twice as likely as traditional students to drop out during their first year of school (Horn & Carroll, 1996).

The demographic change presented has shown a steady trend between 2000 and 2018 in the increase in the number of students who start their college journey later in life. The data also have shown that the percentage of nontraditional students in the total number of students also has continued to increase. The characterization of those students

indicates that there are differences beyond the age they first attend college when compared to the younger students who enter postsecondary education right after high school. The accumulated data shown in Table 4 also indicate the nontraditional persistence rate is much lower than that of younger students, across cohorts and across type of institution. The evidence suggests that the nontraditional students' lived experience while in college is different from the experience of younger students. More importantly, the outcomes of their experience are different for at least half of nontraditional students. Questions that emerge after considering the trends in data and assuming differences in their lived experiences relate to (a) the reasons for different outcomes for many nontraditional students and (b) the nature of the process that leads to different outcomes than those of traditional students. Conventional answers to these questions indicate that institutions of higher education seem poorly equipped to understand and support the college experience of nontraditional students (Laing & Robinson, 2003). These answers assume the existence of a single organizational and cultural institutional environment and a single type of experience. The accumulated data of persistence rates are evidence of students ill equipped to adjust to that single type of experience. In the review of the literature, explore this interpretation and potential alternative explanation for the differences in the outcomes of traditional and nontraditional students.

The Purpose and Significance of the Research Problem

The participation of nontraditional students has been traditionally understood as a problem of attrition or retention with a variety of impacts for the university reflected in arguments about finances, performance funding, persistence metrics, academic success, diversity and multiple others. The literature is conventional in the analysis of the condition of nontraditional students in the sense that their experience and outcomes have been examined from the perspective of the traditional student and from the perspective of the institution and the effects on it with regard to enrollment and persistence. The instrumental role of the individual and not the promotion of the individual as a goal in itself has been emphasized. An example of the type of idea that promotes concern with the process of nontraditional students and guides the research agenda arising from this concern is the completion agenda promoted by the influential Lumina Foundation (2009):

Lumina's big goal is based on the reality that our country faces social and economic opportunities that can best be addressed by educating many more people beyond high school. As a nation, this means we must continue to focus on approaches that make higher education more accessible and affordable for all. We also must ensure that all students who come to college graduate with meaningful, high-quality degrees and credentials that enable them to contribute to the workforce, improve society and provide for themselves and their families. Current economic conditions have only made this priority clearer and more urgent, both for short-term economic recovery and long-term economic success. (p. 2)

As a means to an end, the concern at the center is not the students and their right to fulfill their potential, their personal growth and their dignity. The Lumina Foundation is no exception, and the introductory paragraph of the report “Making Opportunity Affordable” prepared by Reindl (2007) stated in the first paragraph: “The United States needs to increase its production of postsecondary education degrees *and* reduce gaps in achievement among racial and socioeconomic groups. Otherwise, the country will not be able to meet workforce needs, maintain international economic competitiveness” (p. 1). The author continued, describing the nature of the problem of students not graduating by specifying the cost analysis typical of a utilitarian approach:

The number of students pursuing degrees is at an all-time high. Academic preparation for college-level work is improving. College-going rates are holding steady despite double-digit tuition increases. But these signs of success mask deeper problems. The percentage of our population earning college degrees is stagnating, because a larger proportion of young people are not entering or not progressing through postsecondary education. Low-income and minority students—the segments of the population growing most rapidly—are not succeeding at rates equivalent to their growth. Meanwhile, rising expenditures by students and taxpayers are not resulting in better learning, which points to a dangerous “productivity gap.” (p. 2)

It is very clear in this second example that the author accounted for the demographic change as well as for the number of students who do not complete the programs. It was evident also that at the center of the concern is not the student and the process of

fulfilment of individual potential or his or her particular trajectories of growth and development.

In addition to framing the problem of nontraditional students as a traditional retention issue using the lens of the traditional student and from a utilitarian perspective, I find that the model used to observe the journey of nontraditional students are specific variables to predict retention and attrition based on the individual in isolation.

Psychological factors, demographic characteristics and environmental conditions become variables that are analyzed in relation to, and limited by, their effect on social and academic integration. In general, these elements are used to uncover correlations

that [have] led researchers to focus on the descriptive properties of withdrawal rather than trying to identify the explanatory properties . . . A failure to take into account the personal meaning the teaching and learning environment has for the individual student represents a missed opportunity to develop a more analytical framework of student withdrawal. (Laing & Robinson, 2003, p. 179)

In particular, Tinto's (1975, 1987) pioneering research has been criticized because of the static and deterministic nature of the background characteristics in its model. According to these variables, different levels of commitment of the students with the institution are identified as students encounter the characteristics of the institution (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998).

By contrast, variables such as bounded social networks of support, cultural and linguistic communities, the considerations of different types of capital, as well as cultural and social incongruency often inform the decisions to enroll and support the decision to

stay or exit the process are not included. Regardless, nontraditional students are not considered in these models of attrition and retention (Exposito & Bernheimer, 2012). Additional criticism of Tinto's (1975, 1987) model indicates that it overlooks the dynamic interaction of the student with the institutional environment and the meaning students construct in their encounters. "Tinto's model makes assumptions about how students reach dropout decisions, without ever consulting any students as to whether these assumptions hold true" (Brusden, Davies, Shevlin, & Btracken, 2000, p. 302). McKeown, Macdonell, and Bowman (1993) offer a methodological criticism to the prevailing research based on Tinto's (1975, 1987) work and variables, arguing that the actual use of the model has followed more of an inductive rather than a deductive process. They argue that, by being mainly deductive, Tinto's method "tend[s] to keep researchers from delving deeply into the nature of the university life and using the information so gathered to inform their research design. They were forced, under the circumstances, to make educated guesses" (p. 67).

There is a need to find new descriptions and new explanations of the lived experiences, and the university life of nontraditional students. For Brunson et al. (2000), these explanations must be guided by the student's perspective. They proposed the need to use qualitative methods to be able to reach a level of depth sufficient to inform a student-centered theory.

Regardless of the style and method of approach, the crucial point is that any theory of dropout should emerge from, and take account of, student's experiences and the context in which they make their decisions. Previous consistently reported

findings, such as relationship between age and dropout or sex and dropout, can then, and only then, be incorporated into the theory. (Brunsdan et al., 2000, p. 308)

the lack of a student-centered focus in research that can account for characteristics of the lived experiences of nontraditional students, and given the normative definition of the problem, there is a need to explore and know about the lived experiences of nontraditional students beyond demographics and institutional data. Given the nature of the problem - the exercise of a right to fulfill their potential through education - it is necessary to leave aside utilitarian considerations that place the interest of the institution first. Accordingly, characterization of their experiences (e.g., dropping out, academic success, retention, persistence) constitute a priori labels and terminology used and accepted in mainstream theoretical analysis. These terms carry meanings that need to be avoided until confirmed or refuted by the voices of students.

A student-centered focus is required in research to bring light to the actual experience and meaning nontraditional students make of the process of becoming students. The consideration of students' voices can also reveal the assets they bring with them to their college experience, put in perspective the connotation of those terms accepted in the conventional literature and expose the bias in the analysis framed by the literature of traditional students. Attinasi (1989) was critical of Tinto's (1975) theory because of the inferences about persistence that emerge from institutional data based on questionnaires, data that "effectively strip away the context surrounding the student's decision to persist or not to persist in college and exclude from the consideration the

student's own perceptions of the process" (p. 250). Tierney (1992) espoused a similar critique by considering the anthropological foundation of the first stage of the integration model, namely the process of separation from the original community equated to a tribal rite of passage. The student needs to break with the older community, family, and friends in the community and high school and the types of relationships maintained with them and adopt new codes and values. This notion becomes particularly inadequate if applied to nontraditional students. In Tinto's theory, the process entails leaving behind values and culture and adopting new ones in the socialization process. Commitments to relationships and cultural norms external to the college experience act as a threat to commitment to the institution (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Beyond the question of whether the adoption of a homogenous set of values and culture is achievable or if it constitutes an ethical objective for an ever-increasing diverse population in higher education, nontraditional students probably do not have the need or intention to sever themselves from the values of the life-world they inhabit when they are not on campus. In Tierney's anthropological terms, the act of separating is probably not part of the nontraditional student's culture. Attinasi, like Tierney, called for a different approach to understanding the persistence process, one that included the context in which the decisions to persist or leave take place: "It is precisely those characteristics – the context of the decision and students' perspective on the context - that investigators of student persistence in college must include" (Attinasi, 1989, p. 250).

Another limitation at the core of Tinto's (1975) interactionist theory is that it implicitly installs a deficit perspective in the research assumptions. Predictably,

researchers have concluded that students lack a number of conditions and attributes necessary to succeed in postsecondary education. In this type of analysis, the student bears the blame for an unsuccessful process and the institution is exonerated from responsibility. As Smit (2012) summarizes:

The dominant thinking in higher education thus attempts to understand student difficulty by framing students and their families of origin as lacking the academic, cultural and moral resources necessary to succeed in what is presumed to be a fair and open society. Much of the discussion around these topics concentrates on some aspect of deficiency: those who do not succeed in higher education fail because of some internal shortcoming (e.g. cognitive or motivational) or some external weakness linked to the student (e.g. cultural or familial background). The terminology used contributes to the deficit discourse: students are referred to in terms of what they are not: not traditional, not prepared for higher education, not in a position of privilege or advantage. (p. 370)

Under this deficit approach, the institutional response takes the form of support to alleviate the in-need or at-risk condition. In spite of the inadequacy of designing and implementing student services from a biased assumption about students' strengths and capabilities, it seems that "it is easier to focus and act upon problematic issues at an individual student level, rather than traditions and practices deeply embedded in academic culture" (O'Shea, May, Stone, & Delahunty, 2017, p. 34).

In her comprehensive summary review of the theories of persistence in higher education, Melguizo (2011) found that, after more than 30 years since the original

publication of Tinto's theory, the field has continued to center research on that single theory. She concluded that an effect of this concentration is the restriction of research questions limited to the student experience. She stated that it is necessary to expand the types of research questions to include factors that are external to the student experience but that are associated with it. She concluded by recommending the use of qualitative studies to include the external factors and expand the number of them.

Evidence of the critiques of the dominant perspective and the limitations found in the model to fit the specificity of nontraditional students demands the use of alternative approaches. According to this preliminary analysis, researchers must take into account the lives of nontraditional students off campus, including the spaces and relationships they inhabit. An alternative perspective should account for the life experience and successful achievements and the necessary learning process that demanded its accomplishment. More importantly, a different look at the process should begin by asking the students how they live and interpret their experiences. The focal point for this kind of inquiry is the lived experience of the students. This means events of the world as they immediately experience them rather than conceptualizations, categorizations, or reflections on them (van Manen, 1990). To respond to the mandate, I present a conceptual graphic that exemplifies the criteria I have summarized in this chapter.

Figure 1 visually presents the difference between traditional students and nontraditional students. It denotes the extent to which the life-world away from campus shapes the experience of nontraditional students, the sum of life experience that is more than older age and includes dimensions of life such as work and family that have been

accumulated, and the structural limitations to interact with the institution beyond virtual and face to face classes.

Conceptual Framework

A brief synopsis of the conceptual framework is introduced in this section, and a comprehensive discussion is presented in Chapter 2. The conceptual framework served as a background for the process of inquiry. To inform this inductive study, the conceptual framework adopted concepts from two different sources. These concepts have informed the construction of the research questions and they supported the process of analysis and reflection that led to the formulation of the findings. In the following paragraphs, I briefly describe the concepts and sources. The discussion of their relevance and how they complement one another are presented in Chapter 2 as part of the review and assessment of the literature.

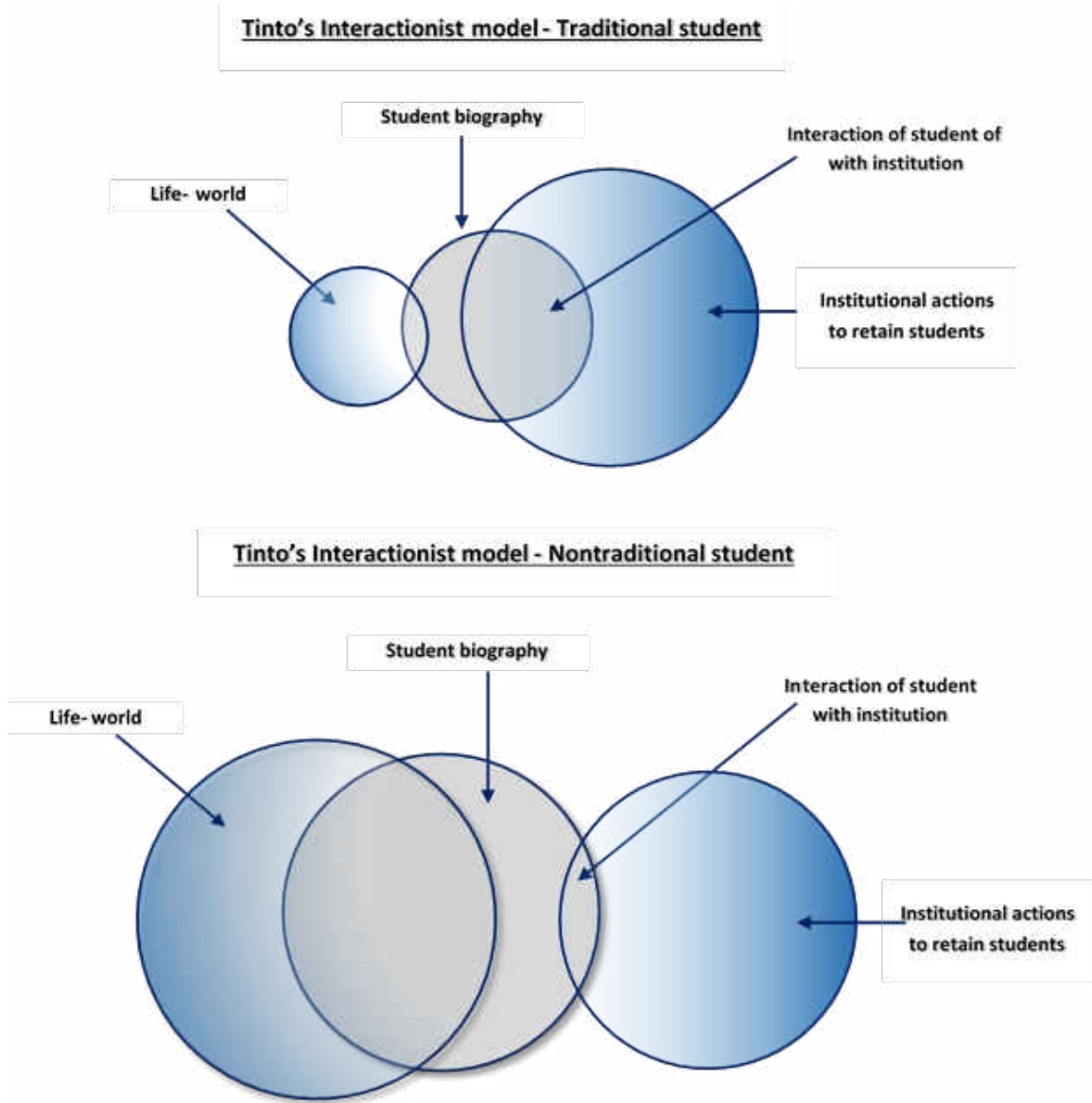


Figure 1. Life world and institution interaction comparison in Tinto's model.
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The conceptual framework borrows from the Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework. She proposed a group of six types of capital that ethnic minority groups can potentially bring to the educational process and constitute strengths and capacities that can help sustain a successful college experience. The focus of the study adopted three of these types of capital, namely familial capital, social capital and navigational capital. In addition, O'Shea (2015, 2016) applied this framework to study the assets that first generation students bring to the college process. Based on O'Shea's findings with older students, she has proposed the addition of experiential capital. I considered it relevant to include experiential capital in studying nontraditional students participating in the present study.

The second source for the conceptual framework is Jarvis' (2006) comprehensive theory of human learning. The most salient feature of Jarvis' model is that it incorporates the idea of learning as a permanent process that occurs in different contexts of space and time and views the person as being in a constant process of becoming and transformation. This holistic theory allowed me to contemplate in my analysis the different life dimensions where learning has happened over time and continues to happen outside the college campus. These present and accumulated experiences, knowledge and skills, contribute to the biography of the student.

The purpose of this research is to explore the phenomenon of the lived experiences of nontraditional students from their perspective and the meaning of the learning process as they encounter college life.

Research Questions

1. What is the lifeworld of undergraduate nontraditional students with significant life experience as they encounter college life?
2. What resources sustain the college experience of undergraduate nontraditional students of and allow navigating the space of college life?
3. What are the changes undergraduate nontraditional students live, the meaning they construct while encountering, and navigating college life?

Definition of Terms

Being and Becoming – The study uses the terms in relation to the learning process as

Jarvis (2006):

“Existence is the process of realizing what we might become – being is always becoming: human becoming is achieved both through our learning and our physical maturing” (p. 5). Learning is about being: human being. Human learning is about being. Being is ever present, but it always contains in its presence the potentiality to learn and is, therefore always becoming (p. 66). “Being is transitory, it is always a manifestation of the ‘now’ in the process of becoming; we are always developing beyond what we already are and this continues for as long as we live” (p. 119).

Biography – It is the seamless experiences of the external world throughout our lifetime and relates to the conscious awareness of it. The biography comprises bodily, emotive and cognitive dimensions of the experience (Jarvis, 2006, p. 73).

Construction-Constructing – Refers to the Constructivist notion that learning is an active, contextualized process of where knowledge is constructed based on personal experiences and hypotheses of the environment. Learners continuously test these hypotheses through social negotiation. Each person has a different interpretation and construction of knowledge process. The learner brings experiences and cultural factors to the learning situation.

Disjuncture – It assumes a state of harmony between the knowledge of the world in which a person is acting as well as the emotions that the person shares. Harmony means that past successful acts can be repeated to interact with the outside world. There are times when harmony does not occur and the person experiences disjuncture. “This can be a situation in which the person is not sure how to act or experience a ‘magic moment’ that just stops us in our tracks. It is something out of the normal – abnormal or supra-normal -- and it gives rise to astonishment, wonder or some other emotion” (Jarvis, 2006, p. 15).

Disjuncture and Learning – “It is the pressures exerted by the disjuncture between life history and experience or the affective element in the experience itself that provide the motivation or the pressure to act upon the experience” (Jarvis, 2006, p. 24).

Lifeworld – English translation of the original German *Lebenswelt*. The world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize or reflect on it. For Husserl, lifeworld is “the world of immediate experience,” the world as “already there, pregiven.” For Heidegger,

Phenomenology becomes the study of ways-of-being-in-the-world. (van Manen, 1990, p. 183)

Lived Experience – English translation of the original German *Erlebnis*. Living through experience. “The reflexive or self-given awareness that inheres in the temporality of consciousness of life as we live it” (Dulthey, 1987, as cited in van Manen, 2014, p. 39). In the words of Merleau-Ponty, “The world is not what I think, but what I live through” (as cited in van Manen, 2014. p. 40).

Navigating–Negotiating–Maneuvering – Refers to the persistent agency of students in resolving problems independently using different planning skills. It involves emotions and the manipulation of the conditions and scheming as a constant reflective process.

Undergraduate – A student in a university or college who has not received a bachelor's degree.

Positionality

In qualitative research, researcher is the instrument that observes, listens, and feels the phenomena they explore. They are, at the same time, spectators of a phenomenon and scribes that transfer what they perceive to be the phenomenon into forms of data for analysis and interpretation. They are the lens through which the light of the lifeworld of others travels to be imprinted, so others can learn about it.

Positionality allowed me to reflect on my research process, the topic, how I collect the data, and how I elaborated the findings and define its implications. As a

disclosure of my potential effect on my own research, I would like to state where I stand regarding the subject, the participant, and the methods. The position I bring to this study is molded by my personal experiences and has played a role in my choice of topic of interest, of methodology, and the analysis of the data I gathered. I acknowledge that besides my will and choices, my orientation towards the phenomenon is also located and shaped socially and historically.

My personal experience as an older student has given me empathy for what nontraditional students experience juggling job and college experience, with family and raising children, and negotiating new and complex environments that are foreign both socially and culturally. For some witnesses of my own academic process, I am one of them. I am first-generation in college student; I have work experience; and I have succeeded at solving the obstacles in my life by putting effort and confronting structural disadvantages. That first impression is misleading. A more accurate observation must include the facts that I am not a citizen of the United States; I am not an undergraduate student, and I come from a different culture. I am close to a nontraditional student, but my experience is different. Being a foreign national in the United States—a nonresident alien—is a condition that defines my access to postsecondary education and my experience as a student. This is an obstacle that nontraditional students do not have to face.

In that sense, I do not consider myself an insider regarding this group of students, and I do not claim any familiarity or expertise in their life experiences. I see myself as an outsider in relation to this group of students. In fact, I did not know about the category

and label - nontraditional student- until I began my doctoral studies. Neither did I know about the circumstances of nontraditional students in higher education in the United States. Being an outsider does not, however, suggest or determine my ontological position or my relationship with the topic and with the participants. I do assume an ontological insider position and an emic perspective respecting my relationship with the participants and the methodological approach. As such, I assume a more relativist perspective that does not assume prior theories that explain and describe the phenomenon. Moreover, my aim is to allow and chase the voice of the participants to give it center stage. I want to capture it to amplify it.

Ontologically, I assume that the truth is subjective and lies in the construction of the meanings and interpretation that the participants make in a specific historical, cultural, and social context. Epistemologically, the research process for capturing their experiences is flexible and assumes a degree of dialogical co-construction of the experience between the researcher and participants that enables me to understand and comprehend their experiences and interpret their meanings. Coherent with this position, the methodology of interpretive phenomenology allows me to admit my closeness and role in the co-construction of the research process. This position admits the influence of my biography and life experience in the analysis and interpretation in the research. Consequently, it does not claim systematic bracketing to take a more objective distance from the phenomenon and the participants.

In terms of the risk that my position has regarding my research, I am aware of the need to manage the influence of my presence in the research and to manage its potential

influence on the research process. The potential sources of influence that emerge from my personal experience have to do with my cultural background and my relationship with education as a field for social action and research. This cultural difference has led me to translate my social and political motivations into new acceptable codes for U.S. academia to start my doctoral program and to embark on this research. This has not meant re-negotiating my identity as a social scientist, but it has meant my distinguishing between the role of social scientist and social intellectual. The tradition from where I come has formed my identity. It is one where there is a social role for the academically trained researcher. From a Gramscian perspective of the role of the intellectual and social change, I see myself closer to an organic intellectual who is closer to the civil society, an intellectual who inevitably gets closer to the concrete events that affect social groups and who assumes a position of alliance with that group. This explains my definition of the problem of the condition of nontraditional students as a problem of social justice and one of rights. I observed this group that was new to me and took a position regarding their condition. I am aware that this tacit alliance as a social intellectual cannot compromise my task as a rigorous researcher.

My position of looking at the phenomena is fluid and sensitive to changes in my environment. The formal and deliberate learning process of my college experience has also been incorporated in my biography. It continues to recreate me. As it becomes part of my biography, I become part of a different cultural, social, and academic landscape, where I need to express my ideas in a different language. This constant transition makes replace the long and flourished sentences of my native Spanish and introduces me to a

different personal experience in higher education, I re-learn the role of student after having been faculty and administrator.

My positionality has also been influenced by my experience of designing and implementing programs for the validation of prior informal learning for workers who wanted to access community colleges and progress to university education. From them I learned about the capacity of people to learn and transform their lives without the guidance and limits of formal education. I learned that the best candidates in the assessment programs always became the best students in college if changes in curriculum and teaching methods accommodated their differences. Their stories have influenced me to look at learning as holistic. With them I learned that it is the whole person and his or her biography that is acknowledged and validated in the assessment process, not only the knowledge and skills individuals possess.

Within these broad parameters, my positionality is not rigid and allows for new awareness as the process unfolds. It evolved as I traversed the process of relationship-building with the participants through the interviews and the familiarity with the data during the subsequent analysis of data. Hence, my positionality became part of the research process by a constant reflection of what my role and perspective was originally and what became.

Limitations and Delimitations

The potential limitations of my study come from different sources. One source is the difficulty of being true to the phenomenological analysis of lived experiences I

gathered. The difficulty in writing the analysis was not related to the linguistic limits of a speaker of English as a second language. The challenge was the reflective process of the phenomenological method. As a novice practitioner of the method, there was a risk of not being true to the phenomenon. “Phenomenology is not just the process of writing up or writing down the results of a research project. To write is to reflect; to write is to research. And in writing we may deepen and changes ourselves in ways we cannot predict” (van Manen, 2014, p. 20). The conceivable limitations of the process of reflective writing could have had an effect on the validity of this study. Validity is found “in the appraisal of the originality of insights and the soundness of interpretive processes demonstrated in a study” (van Manen, 2014, p. 348) and in the commitment to the principles for strong phenomenological research.

The second source of limitations originates in the diversity of lived experiences emerging from many alternative college journeys of nontraditional students. The review of the literature in Chapter 2 underscores the diversity of characteristics found in these older students with family responsibilities. The review also highlights the negative impact of reducing nontraditional students to demographic and institutional at-risk-factors. This simplification of traits traditionally defines who nontraditional students are by placing a veil of ignorance over the richness of attributes and intersections found in these students and their lives. The design of this inquiry requires an openness to learn and a willingness to capture the multiple dimensions and wealth of the students’ lives and through their experience glimpse the essential elements of their lifeworld as students. For practical purposes, the design tries to find a balance by the delimitation of participants to increase

homogeneity of the study participants. A purposeful selection of participants can maximize the richness of the data.

The last limitation of the study comes from the impossibility of performing a systematic selection of participants. The site of the study lends itself as an ideal situation to increase the representativeness of the participants because of the large number of students enrolled in undergraduate programs; however, there are no institutional databases that identify students as nontraditional or that collect data on enough characteristics to categorize them. Such databases would have allowed for a systematic selection of a number of participants and I might have anticipated maximum variation in the participants. Instead, a criterion intensity sampling was included in the design of the study.

Summary

The need to understand the college process for nontraditional students becomes apparent when the breath and persistence of the demographic change in college population is compared with the approaches used to analyze the process that traditional students live as they encounter college life. It is evident from the analysis that the lived experience of nontraditional students is essentially different from the experience of traditional students. Therefore, conventional methods that have been developed to learn about traditional students are not suited to capture the rich diversity of the process of nontraditional students as they become college students. The understanding of the process requires a different perspective, one that is student-centered and recognizes that the social

and cultural context of their lives bridges into their college journey. By allowing the voices of the students to be expressed, we may comprehend the meaningfulness of their experience of becoming students.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW—STUDYING WHAT IS NOT

Introduction

The literature I present and discuss in this chapter represents a selection of the diverse approaches and applications found in the research literature on nontraditional students. I only use a sample of the literature to illustrate the main concepts and methodologies and how they reveal the main assumptions about the experience of nontraditional college students. The review emphasizes the historical evolution of the scholarly literature and the evolution of the label, nontraditional.

To define and select the literature that is relevant to this study was arduous because the word, nontraditional, has been used to study different groups with different characteristics and groups at the intersection of those characteristics. There has not been a clear agreement in defining this population. After the standardization process introduced by the characterization proposed by Choy (2002), there has not been a consensus in the literature about who nontraditional students are. The case is even more complex if the literature from outside the U.S. is considered. In a systematic review of the definitions of nontraditional students, Chung, Turnbull, and Chur-Hansen (2014) reviewed 2,155 articles that included the term in the title or abstract from different countries and selected 49 that met their inclusion criteria; 75.5% were from the U.S. Of the 45 definitions they identified, 13 categories emerged to classify nontraditional students, almost twice the number that Choy proposed. In spite of the diversity that emerged via the number of characteristics and their combination, Chung et al. found that a majority of the studies

considered nontraditional students to be a categorical dichotomous variable with students belonging to either the traditional or the nontraditional group. The researchers concluded, “the term ‘nontraditional student’ does not currently represent a functional category in communicating a distinct concept” (p. 1,224). More relevant for this study was their recommendation that, instead of relying in the inconsistency of definitions that are assigned and predefined by researchers, a more promising alternative would be to formulate a definition using “a student-centered approach of definition, which involves eliciting students’ self-beliefs about whether they are ‘non-traditional’ and why” (p. 1,234).

Nontraditional students comprise an area of study that crosses over the interests of many specialists and experts in education in general and of higher education in particular. There are examples of authors in the area of adult education who have emphasized the characteristic of age and have concentrated their writing on older students. Benshoff (1991) concentrated on the reasons for nontraditional adult students to return to school, but Kasworm (2014) considered the conditions that make adult undergraduates a population at-risk. She explored institutional strategies and the need of institutions to consider alternatives to increase nontraditional students’ persistence. Bergman, Gross, Berry, and Shuck (2014) examined factors that affect adult persistence and proposed a model that built on the research of Bean and Metzner (1985). The findings, contrary to Metzner’s model, suggested that students’ characteristics and external factors accounted for less than campus environment in explaining adult attrition. Kenner and Weinerman (2011) made a deliberate effort to bridge theories of adult learning and apply them to

nontraditional students. Their focus has been on understanding adult learners in the college environment and how to teach them. They have used the framework of andragogy to define a series of strategies that can help the process of integration of adult students into the college environment.

Similarly, community college researchers have written about the experience of nontraditional students in two-year and certificate programs and of all the institutional accommodations to serve working and parenting students. Kim (2002) highlighted that in the community college many traditional students have qualities that are typically considered nontraditional. Therefore, students with nontraditional characteristics are in reality the norm and not the outliers in that space. In the area of student services, Brown (2002) established that there is little knowledge about nontraditional students and that institutions need to recognize the unique characteristics of this group. In his review of the research on persistence, Brown concluded that a model of retention based on student integration is not as relevant as academic integration for nontraditional students. He advocated for the need to be creative to establish support systems that “foster nontraditionalism” (p. 74).

Origin of the Term, Nontraditional, and the Unit of Analysis

One of the facts that makes research on nontraditional students so complex is the broad range of students and issues that can be included under this label. In part, the broad number of issues is the result of the change of the meaning of the term over time. A review of the origin and evolution of the term, and what has been included under these

changing labels, shows that the current criteria defining nontraditional students has shifted from its original connotation. Originally, nontraditional referred to types of programs and organizational arrangements of the institutions. These initially included curricular and pedagogical components and have since evolved into a description of students based on demographics. This evolution coincides with the change in the roles and organization of the institutions of higher education, particularly of public institutions. In the analysis of the multiversity model, Marginson (2016) described that the competition for limited financial resources has transformed institutions and it has particularly affected the students:

An increasing number of researchers and scholars point to undue focus on the status value and networking value of higher education rather than vocational skills, let alone intellectual curiosity, mental formation, and human capacity as ends in themselves, and to the drift into lesser cognitive challenge, lighter study, and grade inflation in settings where students-as-consumers rule on faculty, as well as vice versa. (p. 122)

Genesis: From a Social Situation to Institutional Change

The original use of the term, nontraditional, stems from the work of the Commission of Nontraditional Study and the subsequent work of Gould and Cross (Cross & Valley, 1974; Furniss, 1971; Gould, 1973; Gould & Cross 1972). The main idea of the commission was to account for the change in demographics of the college student population. The notion was that education was key for economic progress and that social

change had to reach the institutions of higher education by adapting and creating new programs to serve new types of students. The topics under nontraditional studies that the commission initiated were concerned with the design of alternatives to the traditional structuring of the institutions. The commission proposed the use of external programs, shorter degrees, individualized curriculum, and the use of technology as nontraditional modes of program delivery (Council on Higher Education, 1974). Cross (1973) in particular studied the transformation of institutions in response to change in the society and how the university could respond to a society that was yet to come. Using data from a national survey about learning interests, she concluded that a majority of the potential learners in the country were older adults who do not study because of a series of obstacles the institutions presented to them. She also observed that universities had to respond to the social change of the times (e.g., when the incorporation of underprivileged groups in the society is becoming a priority for social integration and social peace).

This earliest discussion recommended that institutions needed to move away from traditional forms of conceiving education and the learning process. Cross (1973) called on universities to accommodate students using the concepts of lifetime learning in its three components along the life span basic, continuing, and recurrent learning. Central to the propositions emanating from the work of the commission was the change from a degree-granting emphasis to servicing the learner's specific needs. For Gould and Cross (1972), the response to social change was a new philosophy of educational opportunities. Accordingly, they saw a demand for new forms of teaching, of materials and of pedagogy. For those who work and commute, they proposed the incorporation of

technology to accommodate the learning process. Research to support this type of change, to better fit the needs of the learners and adapt to them, suggested the use of cassettes, cable television, radio (UHF-VHF), computers and networks for distance education. All these propositions were included in what was accepted as nontraditional programs of study in nontraditional higher education (Wong, 1974).

Cross and Valley (1974) described the changes in the student population that would attend the new type of university. She proposed that students have the experience of a blended life in opposition to a lineal life. In a blended life, students study, go to work and return periodically for more study instead of the lineal sequence of study, work and retirement. Cross and Valley presented a specific characterization of two types of students that institutions would serve. The first group included the new students who were unprepared to go to college, were educationally dependent and needed support, academically, socially and personally. The new students “are white children of blue collar workers...we now have new kinds of students with new needs on our doorstep and we are not quite sure what to do with them” (Cross & Valley, 1974, p. 256). The other type of student was the nontraditional student, someone who is older, works, is more independent academically and needs flexibility of delivery and curriculum. To accommodate both types of students, Cross and Valley (1974) insisted on organizational change and the need for universities to loosen their traditional rigor and be open to question the value of learning based on residential life, the type of subject matter instructed, and the methods of instruction. In their characterization, they placed special value on the informal learning of nontraditional students and placed the users of

nontraditional programs at the same level or higher than the new students in the academic achievement.

Thus, initially, researchers gave a greater importance to the institutional transformation of universities to serve a new type of students. When writers discussed the characteristics of the new type of student using the label of nontraditional, they did it as a reference to the user of nontraditional programs of study. They did not try to categorize the users based on their characteristics. Anyone who was not new, according to their definition, and who pursued specific nontraditional programs of study, was a nontraditional student. When nontraditional users were specifically discussed, they were described in positive terms as not being affected by the limitations of the new student. The emphasis on institutional change was on the necessary adaptation to serve the potential users of nontraditional programs. However, the emphasis on institutional change and the positive terms of the description of students have been blurred over time. They have been replaced in research and in the implementation of institutional support services. It is important to note that as the commission worked to diagnose the situation and to design proposed organizational changes and new nontraditional programs of study, the voices of nontraditional students, the potential users and beneficiaries of these changes, were not included.

At the time of this budding discussion, the focus was on increasing diversity and access in higher education. Originally, the design was to implement new forms of organizing learning in order to remove the institutional obstacles and adapt to the needs of users of nontraditional program. A different research agenda was carried out to address

the persistence of the new students. These students had gained access, and they were users of the traditional programs of the university.

New Connotations: The Reification of an Infelicitous Term

The work of the Commission and its report was seminal in establishing the term, nontraditional, in reference to alternative programs. These programs were developing to serve the new population of adult part-time students and the users of these programs were a new category of student. In a critical view of the term, Lowe (1978) admitted, “Although the term is infelicitous nobody has found a better one and it has become firmly established in the professional vocabulary” (p. 228). The coined term became part of the scholarly work and by 1983, Hughes was already offering a review of the literature on nontraditional students. He criticized the shortcomings of the accumulated research because it was based on only one institution and by the prevalent use of descriptive studies based on survey and self-reports. In his review of the literature, he attempted to describe nontraditional students. His concise description, in comparison to the diversity and abundance of ad hoc definitions found presently in the literature, was helpful. He defined nontraditional students based on three key differences from traditional students. First, he believed they had multiple commitments and that they were responsible for themselves and others. He saw them playing other roles as workers, taxpayers, and spouses; and their educational activity was only one of several competing priorities. Second, nontraditional students were not campus focused. This reflects that work and family were priorities for the student with the result of limited time to devote to their

education. Third, they had a preference for informal learning. Although they had difficulties with study skills, these nontraditional students often had abundant work and life experience. Because of these differences, it was difficult to assess their academic potential.

The strain of research that emphasized the design of nontraditional programs initiated by the report of the Commission in 1973 remained as a parallel research agenda, and the focus was on required organizational changes to serve the new population of students. Scott (1985) evaluated the new programs that universities had established to satisfy the needs of the nontraditional population. He looked at the integration of these programs into the core activities of the university and concluded that integration was very limited. Institutions reviewed admitted that their nontraditional student programs were not funded on the same basis that on-campus programs were, and they tended to be self-sustaining. Faculty who took part in these programs were paid at lower rates than regular on-campus faculty. Admittedly, integration was difficult and universities faced a dilemma in choosing which population to serve. In this regard, Scott (1985) observed:

Programs pose special problems in this connection, problems which are compounded by their dislocation from the academic mainstream. Maximum satisfaction of one constituency's preferences . . . is likely to result in dissatisfaction of another constituency . . . and can easily lead to program failure or closure. (p. 86)

By 1985, the concern of the research agenda about retention of the new students that Cross and Valley had described in 1974 was well established. Weidman (1985)

attempted to look at the relevance of using the studies for the retention of traditional students to understand the retention among nontraditional students. In particular, he emphasized that explanatory models need to adapt to the peculiarities of nontraditional students. In practical terms, he suggested that universities needed to adapt and facilitate the process for nontraditional students, echoing the focus on institutional reform proposed by Cross (1973). Clearly, some of the needs of nontraditional students and the potential solutions had already emerged 30 years ago. As an example, Weidman suggested the following in 1985: “Such responses as providing day care facilities on campus, resources for personal and career counseling, and allowing some flexibility with respect to institutional demands may certainly be reasonable (p. 3). By 1985, the seminal work of Bean and Metzner was published and formally connected Tinto’s (1975) analysis of traditional students’ drop out problem with nontraditional students.

As summary, during the decade that followed the original use of the term, nontraditional, in reference to alternative programs for a new student population, the term became a label to refer specifically to a type of students. From pertinent and broad characterizations of the differences of nontraditional students compared to their traditional counterparts, the term became associated with a specific type of student and less with alternative programs. I venture to speculate that in this process, institutions made a choice to prioritize one constituency over the other. Nontraditional students often had to acclimate to traditional programs, and institutions struggled to organize and serve a different population. The research agenda followed the concern for the retention and persistence of traditional students the consequence was the initial attempts to understand

the academic process of nontraditional students utilizing a theoretical approach designed to understand the process of traditional students.

Different Characterizations—Who Are Thou, Really?

In the previous chapter, I outlined the idea that nontraditional student studies and research have been framed by Choy's (1992) definitions (characteristics). However, that characterization is not solitary. Choy's characteristics were not neutral or merely descriptive. Rather, the approach focused in the examination of at-risk factors for persistence. As such, they considered only one dimension, the risk, and did not account for other characteristics that could guide the research about the nontraditional student college experience. Alternative descriptions highlighted other conditions that could sustain or compromise the goals of the nontraditional student's college journey and inform institutional policies to support a successful experience. As an example, race, ethnicity or socioeconomic background, marital status, and dependent children are important variables that are part of the social and economic makeup of the students. The interplay of these and other characteristics have different effects in the life of working adults that attend a postsecondary institution. Looking at the intersection of these characteristics in addition to Choy's categories creates different portraits of nontraditional students and the diverse nature and meaning of their college experience.

The Institute for Women's Policy Research (Noll, Reichlin, & Gault, 2017), contained a report of the number of students who work, are older, live independently, commute and are enrolled part-time. They also found that 26% of the total college

student population were parenting students of dependent children. The report assumed that “parenting has significant implications for student’s ability to attain degrees and credentials” (p. 1). Noll et al. also noted that, in the case of parenting students, the effect of successful completing degrees has positive long and short-term benefits for their children and their future education. The report described that nationwide the distribution of parenting students is not homogenous. This suggests that, even when looking at characteristics beyond Choy’s (2002) parameters, there is a need to interpret the local, social and historical conditions of the students and the institution. In terms of the numbers, considering the 2012 total student population, 4.8 million students (26%) were parents. This number represents an increase of 30% compared to the number of parents in 2004.

If one considers characteristics beyond Choy’s (2002) definition, Noll et al. (2017) provided a richer description of nontraditional students in terms of gender and marital status. Of all parents who attend college, 71% were mothers and 29% were fathers. Of all those students with children who were single parents, 59.9% were single mothers and 38.1% were single fathers. Including race and ethnicity in the description, and women students who were mothers, 31.6% were Hispanic, 47% were Black and 29.1% were White. Almost half of all black students were mothers raising dependent children (Noll et al., 2017).

In terms of how the parenting status affects the financial situation of the students, the report indicated that 46.4% of the students who were parents worked more than 30 hours per week, this compared to 20.9% of dependent students and 44.8% independent

nonparents. Although they worked more and could potentially generate more income, parenting students were the group with the highest percentage of \$0 expected family contribution (EFC) as calculated in the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). If one examines these numbers in relation to marital status, single parents had the highest unmet need in dollar amount, approximately 30% more unmet need than married student parents, suggesting that marital status has had a big impact on the financial security of a single parent student who attends college. Paradoxically, although the report indicates that one of the biggest expenses for parents is childcare, institutional response to the increasing numbers of parenting students shows a decrease in the number of campuses that offer childcare. The student parent population increased 29% over the 2004-2012 period, and the percentage of campuses with childcare nationwide decreased 14.2%.

To provide a context to understand some of the variables defined by Choy (2002), and to portray a more complete picture of complexity of nontraditional students, one must include the changes in social roles in gender regarding career development and parenting responsibilities that have occurred. The Boston College Center for Work & Family (BCCWF) has completed a series of studies of the roles of fathers since 2009. In 2015, Harrington, van Deusen, Fraone, and Mazar reported that on average fathers were more involved in parenting activities than previous generations and that parents between 25 and 34 years old opted to spend more time in parenting activities with children under five years old than fathers between 35 and 44 years old. These younger fathers also expressed a higher sense of doing a very good job raising their kids when compared with the older

fathers. The change over time was also described by the Pew Research Center (Parker & Wang 2013) using surveys from 1965, 2007, and 2012. The study, focusing on the roles of mothers and fathers in modern parenthood, indicated that there has been an increase in the amount of time both fathers and mothers spend with children since 1965 and that mothers spend twice the number of hours per week than fathers. On the other hand, the amount of time spent in housework by fathers has doubled since 1965, from four to ten hours per week, and mothers' time has decreased from 32 to 18 hours per week.

Considering single mothers, the demand as a main provider was reflected in the findings of the study, showing a strong increase in the preference of single mothers for having a full-time job, from 26% in 2007 to 49% in 2011. This difference could reflect the income gap between the two groups: 61% of single mothers made less than \$30,000 annually, and 62% of married mothers made \$50,000 or more a year. Another interesting contrast in the Pew study was that 46% of the married fathers consider that they did not spend enough time with their children, compared to only 26% of the mothers.

These reports serve as a general context for the generational change that most nontraditional students are part of and the kind of tensions and dilemmas they face as part of new generations with changing expectations about their parenting roles. Additionally, these reports highlight the many layers of complexity that marital status, gender, and parenting roles add to the decisions to initiate a college journey and persist or exit the process. Similarly, it underscores the limitations of analyses of the nontraditional college experience that have been restricted to institutional and demographic data that cannot capture the nuances of the students' actual lived experience.

Alternative perspectives that have been used to describe nontraditional students use different conceptual approaches. Some look at the ethnic and racial component of nontraditional students as a major factor that defines their college experience. The NCES Condition of Education Report (McFarland et al., 2017) indicated that 40% of the students in four-year public postsecondary institutions correspond to minority ethnic groups. From the data of the IWPR 2017 report, of the total number of students who attained a degree or certificate by 2009 in all institutions, 56.1% were dependent students. Of the remaining 43.9%, 32.6% were student parents and 26.7% were single parents. The report indicated that within the 4.8 million students who are raising children while attending college, nearly half of black women students were raising children and a third of Hispanic women students are raising children. Almost 40% of American Indian and Alaskan Native and Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students are raising children. Given these numbers and the increasing participation of minority students in the total population, it is obvious that a large number of nontraditional students belong to a diverse cultural and social origin. It is also reasonable to assume that the traditional institutional structure designed to serve a traditional white population can become an obstacle to the success of minority students.

Alternative perspectives have emphasized the minority status of students in examining their nontraditional journeys. Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) investigated alternative variables and a different conceptual framework to examine the college experience of minorities that differed from Tinto's influential model. They introduced the idea of dual socialization in opposition to the ideas of separation and departure. They

believed that students are able to transit different cultural spaces without renouncing and breaking with their culture of origin. “Students indicated that that they maneuvered a number of social domains in their native environment while attempting to meet the growing demands associated with college life” (p. 136). The concept of multiculturalism becomes a central idea from a psychological vantage point. This concept allows for a common space of shared culture between two or more cultures, and it becomes an alternative to the idea of abandoning the values of culture of origin and replacing them with the institutional culture. Biculturalism of minority students also is recognition of the potential transformation of institutional culture by the encounter of two cultures. Biculturalism is the acknowledgment that the diversity of the student population and their experiences is actually changing the nature of higher education by the mutual learning experience of different groups that interact.

The question of who nontraditional students are can also be answered by specifying the purpose of the description and its operationalization. In the example of the features described by Choy (2002), the description relates to the notion of risk factors and conditions of the students that become obstacles. This conceptualization leads to the definition of traits that are detrimental to college success and that are operationalized as dichotomous variables. In theory, these variables can help administrators identify specific groups within a population of students, monitor their academic progress and define interventions.

For the purpose of assessment and the prediction of student academic success, the traditional approach is the assessment of cognitive traits using tests such as the SAT or

ACT. This assessment not only affects access and selection in education but also defines for the institutions who the students are in terms of capacities and risks. The argument by Sedlacek (2004) proposes that the diversity of nontraditional students' needs to be defined more broadly. He operationally defined it as "people with cultural experiences different from those White, middle-class, heterosexual, males of European descent, those with less power to control their lives, and those who experience discrimination in the United States" (p. 4). Sedlacek advocated the need to include such a broad operationalization of the nontraditional students based on the results of Situational Attitude Scale (SAS) and Noncognitive Questionnaire (NCQ). Results show that for the purpose of assessment, groups that experience a different cultural context and experience prejudice demonstrate abilities in different ways than those that experience a traditional college experience. The results of these tests demonstrate the need to consider the cultural context and the experience if assessment is to be fair. The consideration of the different experiences of nontraditional students will lead to a better assessment of their potential. Thus, a broad operational definition that could include many types of diverse students is relevant because not all different groups deal and cope with a traditional institutional system with similar strategies.

Other Social and Cultural Contexts: More Characteristics

The change in demographics that has been taking place in the universities in the United States is not unique. Different social and institutional historical developments have led to the use of different concepts to refer to the same population and to describe

their college trajectories of nontraditional students. Following there are examples of the variation in nontraditional students in different contexts found in the research of nontraditional students outside the United States.

Bamber and Tett (2000) addressed the experience of nontraditional students in higher education in a program in Scotland and referred to them with an emphasis on their working-class condition. The participants in the research were “academically unqualified activists from working-class communities, disabled people and minority ethnic groups” (p. 58). They worked part time and attended a BA program. Though they attended a program with traditional students, they had to take more hours in the program. Two full time tutors and an administrator supported the students and helped with the obstacles found in the experience.

Bowl (2001) carried out an action research project to examine the barriers of nontraditional students in higher education with an emphasis on age, referring to participants as “mature first-time entrants” and “mature minority ethnic students” (p. 141). The research went beyond individual factors and incorporated in the analysis the assumption that family lives were integral to the experience of students in higher education. The nontraditional participants in the research were Black British women, Black Caribbean Women, Black African women, Indian Women and women of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin. Brewer (2010), in a case study, explored resilience in online learning of nontraditional students in England. The author adopts Choy’s (2002) definition but continuously referred to the participant as a mature student with limited prior formal education. Choy’s characteristics do not include maturity or prior education

as variables. The emphasis in the analysis was on the skills deficit of mature students who decide to return to education after a prolonged period. Compounding factors for the nontraditional students in this context were the language barrier of immigrant mature students and the vulnerability of elderly students. The researcher found that these types of students were less likely to succeed in online distance learning.

In a quantitative analysis of the comparison of interest, motivation, and positive effect between traditional and nontraditional students in an urban university in Canada, Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007) adopted an age variable to define the categories of traditional and nontraditional. Of the 300 students, they defined two groups in the extremes: students under 21 made up the traditional student category and students ages 28 and older made up the nontraditional category. Interestingly, they added to the definition of traditional and nontraditional students. Traditional students were said to have entered a university program after high school and “for whom attending school is a relatively normative experience.” Nontraditional students included those who “re-entered school after time experiencing nonacademic life events or those for whom the undergraduate experience is nonnormative” (pp.148-149). The emphasis on the additional criteria highlights the different impact of the college experience in molding the person and the relevance of life experience.

The examples I have offered underscore the different characterizations by researchers of nontraditional students within the United States and abroad. The different conceptual approximations to the college experience of students and the emphasis on specific traits depend in part on the social and cultural context of the origin of the

students. These different examples augment the richness of descriptions of nontraditional students and signal the need to have comprehensive approaches that consider the diversity of students. I have already presented Chung et al.'s (2014) description of the problem and the multiplicity of definitions of nontraditional students found in their systematic review of studies, concluding that the label does not represent a functional concept. Beyond the problems and limitations for researchers given the lack of consensus as to a single concept, the diversity of descriptions found in the literature amplifies the existence of a kaleidoscope of students. Although they are many and richly diverse, they most probably exist at the margins of a mainstream culture and differ from the established and accepted norms of the institutional cultures.

Mainstream Analysis of Student Persistence

Mainstream analysis is the conventional mode to understand the academic process and the experiences of students while they attend college. Irrespective of the diversity that can be found in the research about students' retention and persistence within the scholarly debate, common assumptions are shared in research and analysis. Not surprisingly, resulting policy design to attempt solutions follows similar patterns of analysis based on the individual in isolation and relies on a limited number of psychological and demographic variables that explain persistence at the institutional level.

There is a need to understand the journey of nontraditional students because there is a high percentage of students who do not persist to complete their academic programs

successfully. For the purpose of this study, I consider it necessary to review critically the research and the assumptions that support the analyses and learn why it has not been able to generate explanations that can help improve the academic journey of nontraditional students. To accomplish this, I review Tinto's integrationist model, the adaptation of Bean and Metzner to apply it to nontraditional students, and other models that have built upon Tinto's assumptions in an effort to correct it, including Pascarella, Tenezini, and Wolfle's (1986) model of intervention.

An Individualist Integrationist View

Tinto's (1975) socialization theory emerged among the foundational theories of college persistence that were being discussed at the time Cross' (1973) new students began to access higher education. Tinto's main proposition was that, if students integrate academically and socially, they are more likely to succeed and complete their degree. Inspired by Durkheim's theory of suicide, his psychological approach assumed that the individual must adapt and integrate to the new college environment and commit to the institution and to the goal of college completion. Goal commitment and institutional commitment directly affect the dropout decisions in Tinto's model. Both types of commitments are the resulting effect of variables that are essential to the college experience. These are included in an academic system that considers grades and intellectual development, and in a social system that includes peer-group interactions and interaction with faculty. In this linear model, the degree of success in these two systems is mediated by variables that precede the college experience.

Tinto characterized the new college environment as a small society, a social system with its own norms and approved behaviors and social structures. For Tinto, the decision of the student to drop out or persist was the result of the capacity of the student to learn and adapt to the norms of the college (Carter, Locks, & Winkle-Wagner, 2013). Accordingly, the difficulties that some students experience in the transition to college was related to the degree to which the values and behaviors from the pre-college experience were aligned with the new college experience.

Further elaboration of the assumptions proposed by the psychological variables in Tinto's model is found in the work of Pascarella et al. (1986). These researchers posited that an intervention affecting the variables in the model could increase institutional knowledge and make possible a process of anticipatory socialization to the college experience. They determined that central to the integration of students is their informal interaction with faculty outside the classroom. In addition, the results indicated that the effect of the intervention on persistence was largely because of the opportunity it had provided to students to deal with the challenges of a socially unfamiliar environment. This idea of the possibility to intervene in the process gave rise to the expansion of student services in universities.

For a simple analysis of the relevance of Tinto's model to understanding nontraditional students, consider the three main differences between traditional and nontraditional student proposed by Hughes (1983) that included multiple commitments, not being campus focused and oriented to informal learning. Assuming that they are valid and have not been disproved, using that framework of reference, it becomes complicated

to understand how the assumptions of Tinto's model can be useful in understanding nontraditional students. Nontraditional students have multiple commitments and family and work are priorities. According to this, nontraditional students' goals and institutional commitments assumed by Tinto are in conflict with their priorities and accordingly, their likelihood to persist diminishes. Hughes also suggested that the literature is in agreement that nontraditional students are off-campus oriented. Tinto's model assumes that social and academic integration happens as students engage in on-campus activities. Similarly, the idea of informal engagement out of class suggested by Pascarella et al. (1986) is not applicable to nontraditional students. Thirdly, Hughes indicated that nontraditional students have a preference for the type of learning they have successfully acquired in life and work. Most probably, that learning does not find space among the variables defined in Tinto's model that determine the likelihood to persist. GPA and academic formal performance among other variables do not have a particularly good fit with nontraditional students.

Additionally, I can infer that there is no space to be attentive to the different experiences that nontraditional students have in college. In Tinto's original work and in the practical application of Pascarella et al. (1986) subsequent work, the socialization model assumes that there is a single, and mostly homogenous type of experience for students who transition to college life. There is a transition from one environment of family, friends and high school education to another, living in college dormitories in a new social space where new relationships, norms, and behaviors are expected. Furthermore, the expectation of the conceptual framework is that in their new-found

space, students must adopt new values and adapt to a new culture while severing ties with their families to succeed academically.

This explanation about student persistence does little to account for the actual experience of nontraditional students. In addition, it emphasizes a deficit view of students. It presupposes that students lack conditions and resources that can sustain their academic process and the institution can and must provide support. Moreover, it relies on institutional intervention as a main strategy to ameliorate the student deficit. As the institution becomes responsible for the academic, social, and personal development of its students, the students are relegated to passive and reactive roles, objects for intervention. The institution sets up the conditions for their success.

An Individualist Perspective: Acknowledging the Limits of Integration

The effort to think of the specificity of the characteristics of the nontraditional students in higher education became the focus of the research efforts of Bean (1980) and Bean and Metzner (1985). Like Tinto (1975), Bean relied on a psychological approach to explain why nontraditional students drop out. Regardless of the use of the label of nontraditional students introduced by Cross the prior decade, he did not use the label to refer to users of specific nontraditional programs of study provided by the institution to accommodate a different type of student. His attempt was to define a set of psychological variables that, similarly to Tinto's model, added variables to the model and used a different theoretical framework. By doing so, he gave new meaning to nontraditional and

characterized a group of students per se, with a specific psychological make up that was very similar to the young and traditional student.

The causal model proposed by Bean (1980) incorporated the characteristics of nontraditional students and explained how they can be factors that influence their decision to withdraw (Bean & Metzner (1985). Their work built on the analyses of Tinto (1975) and Pascarella et al. (1986). It accounted for one defining structural characteristic of the nontraditional student, the lack of social integration to the campus life. Expanding on the variables proposed in Tinto's drop out model of 1975, Bean and Metzner proposed an approach based not on the theory of suicide but on the model of organizational turnover to account for persistence and attrition.

Bean and Metzner (1985) acknowledged the rise of nontraditional students in the population and claimed that the dominant approaches to study and analyze the problem of retention of traditional students was not pertinent for the study of attrition of nontraditional students. They defined, as the most differentiating characteristics of nontraditional students, age, a factor that is important for the socialization model if someone young lives on campus, but nontraditional students do not. The part-time enrollment of nontraditional students became critical for the outside the classroom integration model of Pascarella et al. (1986). Bean and Metzner posited that most nontraditional students enroll part time and did not have the opportunity to integrate in campus life because they work. On the other hand, Bean and Metzner identified, as a differentiating factor, the type and amount of off campus experience nontraditional

students had that supplemented or replaced the need for integration in other spaces outside campus.

Among their assumptions, Bean and Metzner (1985) believed that nontraditional students experienced less interaction with the environment that the institution offered, including faculty and peers; they described class experiences as similar to those of their peers. Unlike their traditional peers, however, they viewed nontraditional students as having extensive and greater interaction with the world outside the college environment. Their model indicated that dropout decisions would be mediated by GPA (past high school performance), by their intent to leave (based on psychological and academic variables), by family background variables (residence, high school performance and goals), and by environmental variables (finances, employment).

Accordingly, they proposed a model that attempted to account for these differentiating characteristics, and they defined specific variables in their model to measure their effect in the decision to drop out. Most of the variables in the model could be defined as a continuation of the work of Tinto (1975) and Pascarella et al. (1986). In this regard, they accepted and confirmed the importance that psychological variables had in the decision to drop out, and they specified this construct in their model with the name of “intent to leave.” They also acknowledged the value that the other models give to background variables such as high school performance and its effect in academic performance in college.

The result in their analysis was that environmental variables such as employment, family responsibilities, and finances were more important than academic variables in the

decision to drop out. As expected, for nontraditional students, the social interaction variables included in the model had little importance in the decision to drop out.

In 1987, Metzner and Bean tested their model in a university with a population of 22,000. They increased the model to 26 variables that they analyzed using regression and path analysis. In many respects, the results were confirmatory of their proposed model and by association of the models of Tinto and Pascarella. Once again, social integration variables had a weak effect on dropout. The test confirmed their model.

Bean and Metzner's 1985 effort to incorporate the peculiarities of nontraditional students in the variable of the model may have had statistical significance but had little practical significance. The characteristics of nontraditional students are constitutive characteristics of a group of students who have successfully accomplished other goals in life, and most of time those goals have priorities over schoolwork. Yet, they manage competing priorities constantly and succeed.

My understanding of the logic behind the model is that it assumes that environmental variables are detrimental to students' academic success. In other words, the model assumes that if nontraditional students did not have family responsibilities, did not work and could live on campus, their intent to leave would diminish. It seems tautological that if they did not have the characteristics of nontraditional students, they would not have the lived experience of nontraditional students.

In the final account, I believe the model considers the characteristics of the students a problem and places the responsibility for the problem on the student. The model is also inadequate because it excludes from its specification other constitutive

characteristics of nontraditional students. Systems of support outside the university and prior learning that sustains the process to negotiate obstacles of integration are factors that influence the decision to persist or abandon the academic process. The model does not recognize the original characterization of Cross and Valley (1974) that described these students as possessing the assets of autonomy and initiative. Under this prism, the students were considered better prepared to succeed academically than the young and unprepared students who needed support and guidance.

Critiques: Split Between Theory and Empirical Evidence

The review of the literature and the observation of the number and types of student services offered by institutions to support the persistence of students makes clear the dominant position in the research and debate of models discussed. It is important to present some of the critical assessments that these ideas have received and how the idea of a homogenous process around a single college culture as the path for every student's success has been contested.

Researchers have examined the utility of the prevailing explanations of student persistence and attrition to explain nontraditional persistence and drop out. They have found that the variables and assumptions defined do not help to account for the experience of nontraditional students. Some of the critiques of Tinto's (1975) model emerge from the literature on traditional student persistence. In this section, I have reviewed literature that discusses the specific limited fit of the model to explain the progression of nontraditional students in the next section.

The paradigmatic presence of Tinto's interactionist model in the discussion of the college student experience has made it a common point of departure in examining the experiences of different groups of students. In particular, questions have been raised about the model's validity for describing and predicting persistence of minority groups. Some of the limitations observed are conceptual, as in the case of the mandatory departure from the sociocultural space of the student to a new one in college. Tierney (1992) connected this concept of rite of passage that Tinto borrowed to the larger anthropological tradition of analysis of tribal rites. From the perspective of minority students, the requirement of social and academic integration as a rite of passage implies that the university becomes the instrument that makes possible the incorporation of young students into society. In principle, the model in its original and most prevalent interpretation, implies that all students, regardless of gender, race, class, or age have to transit the rite of passage. A central problem that Tierney observed was that although the term is used, it is stripped from the cultural context where the ritual takes place. In the case of minorities, it has not been a transition within a cultural tradition. It has become the transition out of their own culture to a university culture that reflect the values of a society dominated by the majority.

Following the conceptual anthropological reasoning, Tierney (1992) observed that the integration as rite of passage fails to describe an actual traditional rite of passage, because in the original tribal conception, the rite is not a choice to take part or not. Meanwhile, for Tinto (1975), the student can choose to participate, some can take part in it, and some not complete it. In failing to recognize how culturally bound the concept is,

Tierney “assumed that departure is a universal concept rather than a cultural category developed by the society that uses the ritual” (p. 610). For the purpose of my study it is relevant that, by extension, Tierney criticized the cultural context in which Tinto’s model was embedded. Terms such as dropouts, failure and retention are cultural categories that are part of a larger discourse. They are an attempt to describe the reality of academic process from the specific point of view of the college culture but do not necessarily constitute natural actions. In the case of nontraditional students, the decision to exit the process needs to be interpreted from the culture and point of view of the person and his or her sociocultural context, not the institutional culture.

A final conceptual and methodological observation expressed by Tierney (1992) was the reductionism of the integration and departure process as an individual process without a collective dimension. From an anthropological perspective, the notion of rites and culture presumes a collective dimension that serves as a basis for the student process of integration; however, Tinto’s analysis does without them when defining his persistence model. Presumably, one could reduce the idea of rite of passage advanced in the model to a useful simple analogy. Otherwise it would be inconsistent to borrow an anthropological concept and not refer to the conceptual and methodological construct associated with it.

In addition to the conceptual critiques, the theory has also undergone permanent test for empirical evidence that validates it. Braxton, Shaw, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) reviewed the research inspired by Tinto’s (1975) theory by defining 15 clear testable propositions that emerged from the theoretical model. They chose 13 of the propositions that were interrelated to the research findings they had generated during two decades

since the publication of Tinto's model in 1975. Among the relevant results from the published research, for residential universities there was only partial support for the theory with five of the 13 propositions being supported and no proposition supported for commuter institutions. Similarly, in the case of female college students, no proposition was supported by empirical findings. Melguizo's (2011) added to the conclusions of this study, indicating that, "the most troubling finding that they don't necessarily highlight is that they find basically no support for the connection between the two main tenets of Tinto's theory: academic and social integration and persistence" (p. 400).

Braxton and Lee (2005) propose a similar review of the research using the same 13 testable propositions extracted from Tinto's (1975) theory. This time, the review of empirical evidence of studies testing the hypotheses was restricted to studies in four-year institutions so as to exclude commuters from the analysis. The objective of the review was to identify reliable knowledge to use as the basis for informed policy and practice of retention interventions. This appeared necessary, given the influence of Tinto's theory in the design of support services and interventions. The criteria for inclusion of the studies required a single-institution, sample, multivariate statistical procedures, and a threshold for reliable knowledge of at least 70% of 10 or more tests with affirmative results and published in peer-reviewed journals. Braxton and Lee confirmed the results by reviewing studies since 1997. Only three propositions constituted reliable knowledge for residential institutions, and the three were highly interrelated in Tinto's theory. Braxton and Lee's review underlines the need for reliable knowledge to inform policy design and support systems for diverse groups of students.

Melguizo (2011) included Tinto's theory (1975, 1987) in a comprehensive review of different theories that look at student persistence. Her review confirmed the tendency verified by Braxton's two previous studies that, in spite of limited empirical evidence, Tinto's theory and his revision maintained a paradigmatic role in the research. She reviewed two decades of studies in three major peer-reviewed journals in the field of higher education and confirmed that most studies relied on a single theoretical approach. In her summary of the limitations of the theory, she condensed the views from different authors and her own opinion in eight categories. She found a narrow view of student departure that neglects the context of the world outside the institution. She observed that the theory assumes a homogenous student body and it has limited utility to study the retention of minority students and their diverse cultural background. It provides opportunities for internal accountability and makes policy relevant for the institutions. However, it lacks external accountability because is a single-institution approach, generating a system with little articulation and minimal opportunities to generate standards. Melguizo also pointed to a central weakness of the model's underspecified and broad definition of the concepts of social and academic integration that limits the construction of valid measurements. Similarly, she criticized the absence of a specific description of how social and academic integration eventually affect college persistence beyond the correlation the theory proposes. In practical terms, the theory has affected how college administrators assess students by neglecting unobserved characteristics that are related to student persistence. It has established a de facto selection problem, "His [Tinto] theory cannot escape the fact that it may be the entering students' characteristics

that determine their level of academic and social integration” (p. 403). A similar inadvertent problem rooted in the application of the theory has been the shift from the original responsibility of the process of integration from the faculty to student affairs professionals. The shift has been deepened by the intensive use of online education that further limits the presence of the faculty and of integration, as defined by the theory. Finally, Melguizo observed that Tinto’s model seems to be at odds with recent changes in postsecondary institutions in general. According to Melguizo, the model accounts for an ideal situation that might have been an aspiration in the 70s but,

the current postsecondary education system is that a small number of privileged students gain access to private elite and public flagship institutions. Most students enter open access institutions with a broad set of goals, most the institutions are constrained financially that have not internal or external accountability, that for the most part do not have the resources to outsource the process of engagement of student affairs professionals. (p. 404)

Looking in from the Fringes

In spite of the paradigmatic presence of a single theoretical framework that dominates research design about the academic process and college experience of students in institutions of higher education, there are alternate arguments and conceptual approaches that have observed the process from the sidelines of the main convention. Researchers look in from the fringes to inform and clarify aspects of the college

experience that remain unexplained or obscured by the main flow of research that Tinto's integrationist approach has produced.

The experience of nontraditional students is altogether a different experience, and the difficulties they face which may affect their persistence cannot be reduced to the variables of the persistence or the attrition models (Kasworm, 2014). Similarly, students' decisions to drop out cannot be explained by adding confounding additional variables to the model. The simplistic notion that nontraditional students drop out because they fail to socially integrate as a result of factors such as age, parenting, and financial responsibilities is not a reflection of their actual experience when compared to the experiences of their traditional peers (Johnson, Taasobshirazi, Clark, Howell, & Breen, 2016). In fact, the socialization model assumption implies an acculturation process that does not describe the actual motivations and expectations of nontraditional students (Cavote & Kopera-Frye, 2007; R. Longwell-Grice & H. Longwell-Grice, 2008). To take a case in point, although some researchers have found that engagement is an important factor, the sense of engagement of nontraditional students is related to academic learning in the classroom, not to activities and experiences outside the classroom, particularly those especially arranged for social integration (Kasworm, Polson, & Fishback, 2002). This finding was confirmed by Price and Baker (2012) using NSSE data. They found that adult student integration, both academically and socially, happens as an experience in the classroom. The students are able to create rich and meaningful relationships with their peers as they experience the classroom curricular activities. When researchers have considered the potential value of interventions to affect the variables related to

persistence through student support services offered, findings indicate that nontraditional students use university services much less than their traditional counterparts even though they declare facing more obstacles (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Arguably, this paradoxical finding seems to imply that nontraditional students can successfully navigate the obstacles they encounter in their unique college experience by deploying personal skills and resources and not institutional services.

Following are some examples that illustrate how researchers have been able to look at the process of nontraditional students in higher education from different perspectives and creative alternative conceptual frameworks and methodologies. These studies are evidence that it is possible to innovate and propose research that considers the integrity of the life world of nontraditional students at the edges of the mainstream paradigm established by Tinto's (1975) original work.

The examination of factors that affect persistence of Hispanic students in Hispanic serving institutions by Arbelo-Marrero and Milacci (2016) placed an emphasis on the ethnicity of nontraditional students in a context hypothetically primed to serve their needs and support their academic success. This unit and level of analysis, the subgroup of Hispanic students, in a Hispanic serving institution offers an opportunity to create alternative to dealing with the problem of the diversity of students under the nontraditional label. Using a qualitative methodology in two institutions, one public and one private non-profit, the researchers were able to give voice to this specific group through a combination of qualitative methods. The theoretical framework of ecological system theory and sociocultural theory allowed the authors to learn about the lived

experience of the students outside the campus and define microsystems of support that students use to sustain their academic process and the social relationships embedded in the academic learning process. They were able to identify interactions at the micro level with family members, faculty, administrators, and peers that affected their persistence. Life challenges, campus environment, family contexts, and English language operated as basic exchanges in microsystems that interconnected as sources of support for students.

A different direction in the analysis of the experience of nontraditional students was taken by Deil-Amen (2011). Deil-Amen argued for a fresh approach to the analysis of the experience of nontraditional students by reconsidering the concepts of minority and diversity. By looking at the total numbers of students, the proposition was that it becomes irrelevant and ineffective to talk about a minority of students as a conceptual starting point for research. Deil-Amen described institutions operating on a prevalent student ideal that does not match the reality of a school population that has a majority of nontraditional students. However, the symbolic effect of such an ideal is that administrators and faculty exclude and marginalize those who do not fit the imagined norm. The author makes a call to scholars “to be self-conscious enough to understand how our own language and framing contributes to the marginalization of the other half and the continued reification of the traditional college student and traditional college-going patterns” (p.7). The consequence of the traditional framework, beyond a research issue, is that nontraditional students measured against parameters of what is considered normal behavior are found wanting. Consequently, the focus lays on remedial actions for the deficiencies of the students rather than on the deficiencies of institutions that fail to

serve an actual collective majority. A similar reasoning is found in the argument of diversity. The author argued that, as with the false minority assumption, diversity is still imagined as a practice of access that enriches the campus environment, and it is considered a practice that targets students based on SES and underrepresented ethnic groups. The author proposed two main ideas that emerge from questioning this ideal. First, there is a need to include more than the minimal characteristics and, more importantly, to map out the interrelationships between the characteristics: “This exercise might effectively make visible the invisible majority” (p. 12). The outcome of revealing the majority will also highlight the need for equity in the institutional design that currently serves as a structure of privilege for a minority. The second idea related to the ideal is the notion that diversity should not be conceived as a set of characteristics that exist outside the agency of the person and exist independently of each other. The proposition is to conceptualize diversity more truly as a system with multiple dimensions that operate interactively to connect the different realities of the students. Among the dimensions included, one finds gender, family dynamics, framework of understanding college behavior besides ethnicity and SES. The importance of these dimensions and their interaction is that they interact in a different pattern for each individual student and they do so shifting fluidly over time. The description of this system, of interaction for those who are conceived now as a majority of students, will provide a truer portrait of the diversity on campus.

Haleman (2004) embraced the ideas of a deeper and more complex connotation of diversity and the interaction of systems as an approach to describe the experiences of

students. The author considered the experience of single mothers in higher education who were simultaneously beneficiaries of social welfare services from the Single Parent Program (SPP). Besides the SES characteristic, of 10 participants, three were White and seven were Black. The author effectively connected the various systems under which single mothers have to live inside and outside the campus walls. Haleman included in the systems the social stereotype of single motherhood that shapes the identity of the students and informs policy decisions inside and outside of educational institutions. The stereotype also emerged in the themes of the interviews. More importantly, however, by giving voice to the students, what emerged was the capacity of students to constantly contest the stereotype. The educational experiences of these women provided an opportunity to gain more awareness of the stereotype. At the same time, their educational experiences provided the opportunity to contest and contradict the belief and expectations toward single mothers through their own personal experience. In this example, Haleman selected an extreme of what traditionally would be a high-risk group of students. They were bearers of a specific stereotype and represented a subgroup within the nontraditional students that potentially face bigger obstacles than others within the nontraditional population. However, a powerful agentic attitude emerged from a method of inquiry that gives space to their stories and their voices. Not only did these women contest the stereotype, they also saw the value of education as instrumental in their challenge to escape from poverty and reach financial security. They went beyond the instrumental gains and described their lives as students as an opportunity for personal growth and transformation. Finally, despite stereotypes and difficulties, they appreciated the value of

education and saw themselves as role models for their children. They expected that their example could offset some of the risks of lacking material conditions needed by students. The author offered an example of the need to challenge stereotypes that influence research agendas and determine methodologies. The author looked at a specific group of nontraditional students that could be categorized as extreme by the interactions of age, gender, marital status, SES, stereotype in and outside the school and augmented by the reliance on welfare services while attending schools. By letting the meanings of those experiences emerge, Haleman was able to speak about the larger context of all nontraditional students their complexities and resources.

A different emphasis in the intersection of the lived experiences of nontraditional student mothers was explored by Lovell (2014). This study shed lights on many of the layers that nontraditional student researchers need to consider. Looking at a similar group of poor mothers attending college that Haleman (2004) had described, Lovell explored the meaning that students make of the experience when mothers have young children (under six) or when the children are older. Mothers with younger children expressed a need to study to provide for their young. Mothers of older children communicated a sense of self-fulfillment in their reasons for entering college. Similarly, mothers with younger children resented depriving their children of their time, and they expressed pain and emotional angst. Mothers of older children only expressed concerns with balancing time between school and their children. The last finding referred to motivation to earn a college degree. Mothers of younger children saw their children as the most important motivator, whereas mothers of older children expressed that their greatest motivation was

rooted in negative childhood experiences. These two studies that look at poor mothers underscore the diversity of experiences and the many evolving stages that some students will transit over time while in college. These studies show the importance of uncovering this heterogeneity of experiences before attempting to systematize the experiences in a theoretical proposition.

When examining the multiple roles that nontraditional students have to perform while attending school, traditional approaches assume the existence of a tension between competing interests that students have to negotiate with themselves and with the support systems that surrounds them. The assumption typically emphasizes the difficulties of a type of zero-sum situation regarding available time and of the substantive different nature of the roles to play. Eller, B.F.V.D. de Araujo, and de Araujo (2016) offered a different perspective to understand the lived experience of the simultaneous multiple roles and the high demands imposed on nontraditional students. The authors focused on the mechanism the students employ to find a personal balance between the different roles. Instead of focusing on the collision of interests, the authors adopted the theoretical framework of boundary theory to examine role transitions that examine “the way people create and sustain their boundaries in order to simplify and organize the environment where they are inserted in” (Asforth et al. as cited in Eller et al., 2016, p. 64). Eller et al. assumed that lines that separate different domains in life are socially constructed and that students develop particular “tactics to experience, interpret and shape the world, enabling the best balance between the domains” (p. 64). According to the theory, the boundary lines between dimensions can be thin and permeable and facilitate integration of domains.

Domains separated by thin boundaries permit modest differentiation of roles which could be the spaces between study and school in situations of online asynchronous course sessions. On the other hand, spaces separated by thin boundary lines generate a clearer distinction of roles, moments, and spaces. As such, students develop tactics to construct socially the boundaries between the different domains. For each student, there could be different preferences to integrate or segment the spaces and define thin or thick boundaries between.

By approaching the lives and roles of students from this perspective, the authors highlight the skills of the students to strike a useful balance and allow for the multitude of experiences implemented to be represented. In the qualitative inquiry, Eller et al. (2016) found eight common tactics to define boundaries. Following are three illustrations which are instructive. The first tactic by students was the use of people, understood as a student's use of the encouragement and collaboration of a person in one domain for easier management of the boundary between work, study and home. The authors also differentiated in defining the permeability among dimensions. They could allow a thin and permeable boundary between home and study, but less so between work and home and even less permeability between work and study. A final example of a tactic offered by the authors was to deny demands. Here, the student refuses activities from the different domains. Given the great demands from all domains, students communicate that they cannot perform either unessential or unscheduled demands due to various roles they have. Innovative approaches to examining typical conditions in the life of nontraditional students, such as the multitude of demanding roles, can offer a lower level of analysis and

concentrate on how students live the process. By choosing a novel conceptual approach, the experience of nontraditional students in other places, as in the context of a university in Brazil for this study, increased the generalizability of the approach.

Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) proposed a different and novel effort to move away from the conventional notion of the student as a problem. The researchers proposed an explanatory model that frames the process of staying or exiting college as a negotiation between the student and the institution. In their model, Ozga and Sukhnandan were able to establish that this process of negotiation was different for traditional and nontraditional students. They defined the main factors that determine the outcome of persistence or departure as student preparedness and compatibility of choice. The novelty of the approach to explore the differences between traditional and nontraditional students was twofold. First, the idea of a social complex negotiation process between the student and the institution defines agency in the student, instead of the deterministic approach of Tinto's model (1975) and makes both actors responsible. Secondly, the negotiation process was provided with a social context where the institution was under pressure to adapt and respond to new parameters of performance and funding and was constantly adjusting its operation to respond to them. This contextualization is frequently missing from analyses of the college experience of nontraditional students. The study highlighted that decisions and the meanings that students made do not occur in a social vacuum. The proposed model also allowed for a description of the institution and its interests in dynamic form, different from the more or less homogenous and static description of conventional approaches to studying college persistence. The model focused on the

formulation of the negotiation process to withdraw based on what the university could offer. The model defined compatibility as institutional compatibility related to the location of the campus and the cultural environment and social facilities. Course compatibility included interest in course content and courses not living up to expectations. It should be noted that the pragmatic and utilitarian approach of nontraditional students weighs heavily on course compatibility more than institutional compatibility. On equal terms, the course availability and the type of mode of delivery is continuously changing in institutions to accommodate demand, but most probably to manage fixed operating teaching costs. Student preparedness was determined using adequate forms and sources of information about higher education and the institution, clear orientation to higher education, and proactive route of entry. Inversely, unpreparedness was associated with unrealistic expectations of college life. Mature students have alternative sources of information about higher education and more realistic notions about what to expect from college life. More importantly, the decision to enter the college process is definitely proactive. The changing policies and procedures of the university affect the nature of the college experience. Massive promotional campaigns and quality indicators generally shape the information and expectations of mature students. Sometimes the information is contradictory and limits the negotiating capacity of the student to select and opt for the optimal institution and the trajectory of courses that will lead them to their goals. It is understood that the decision and negotiation process occurs when the student has options and makes a selection. This is often not the scenario in highly selective institutions.

The different concept of negotiation is found in Mercer's (2007) work. In the previous example, the negotiation was between the nontraditional student and an institution that was in permanent transformation. In this example, the negotiation is between the student and self as the educational process unfolds. The relevance of this example is the emphasis in the fluid process of transformation of the self that happens in the person as the academic process happens.

Conventionally, the process of change in the students is described and studied as a goal, as an outcome, or as an added value to the academic process. There is an acknowledgement that both processes can coexist but are defined as separate parallel processes. This is particularly true given the logic of the traditional student and the process of academic and social integration. Mercer (2007) used grounded theory as a method to establish that progress in personal growth should be observed as a process that is interrelated with academic growth. Mercer also explored the relationship in the process of construction of a changing self and defined it as a dynamic and reflexive system. This process assumes that individual growth and development can occur along the life of the students. The mechanism of the process is founded on the ability of the students to reflect about the personal worlds and daily experience and ability that is facilitated by reflexive awareness. "Such an awareness allows us not to only reflect on who we are, but to envisage possibilities for whom we might become" (p. 22).

The process of becoming aware of change as nontraditional students' progress in their academic journey, according to Mercer (2007), is referred as the renegotiation of the self. There are two categories of transformation. The academic transformation of the self

includes new knowledge, widening the scope of life perspective and gaining a different outlook that together generate a new sense of self. The personal transformation of the self includes two subcategories: increased confidence and self-awareness. It should be noted that these two aspects are not always developed in tandem with academic achievement or result from it, but many times precede it in the descriptions of the participants. The second subcategory of the personal transformation is related to resolving the past. This finding in the description of the experiences of the participants relates to “achieving something which they felt they could have done at an earlier stage of their life, had their situation been different.” (p.26). In one sense, this process is the reclaiming of the self they had configured in the past and that was interrupted. It could be easily understood from the discussion proposed in the study that the sense of a different self, emerging from the academic growth, feeds and is sustained by the increased confidence and self-awareness of the personal growth. The actualization of both allows one to resolve the past. In a constant dynamic and fluid process, the self is in permanent renegotiation. Mercer suggested that focusing in only one variable, age in this case, did not preclude an analysis centered on the student as a student. More importantly, the study is an example of the complexity of processes that happen along and in interaction with the academic process.

Research that looks in the lifeworld of nontraditional students from the fringes of the mainstream theory can shed light onto fundamental dimensions of that experience. As a collection, they represent creative use of conceptual approaches and student-centered methods. As an ensemble, they paint a much richer portrait of who nontraditional

students are and reveal the many layers that researchers need to explore. As the last study presented shows, the task of describing who students are becomes a challenge for researchers, because painting the portrait of their experience is really the description and interpretation of their transformation in motion.

Deficit Perspective on Nontraditional Students

This section of the literature provides a critique of the biased notion of nontraditional students as lacking, limited, or ill-equipped to properly succeed in their college journeys. This brief review attempts to bring attention to obstacles and difficulties that nontraditional students encounter in their lifeworld as college students which belong to the realm of the sociocultural context of the institutions and their agents. I will present different arguments used to understand the culture of institutions of higher education and their regard for nontraditional students as potentially successful students. These different approaches share a biased predisposition towards student that deviate from the norm. They also have in common the idea that students are conceived as responsible for their own limitations rather than institutional structural inequities playing a major part in limiting nontraditional students. They also share that idea that part of the solution to compensate for the limitation of the students is the benevolent tendency of institutions to “help” limited students. This assistance takes the form of intervention and ad-hoc support systems to remediate the condition of the students. Rogers (2006) conceptualized the origin of the inequities under the deficit approach in the following statement: “Some

people lack resources which others possess, a matter which can be remedied by the provision of inputs” (as cited in Black & Yasukawa, 2011, p. 3).

At-Risk

Quinnan (1997) investigated the notion of at-risk and proposed that the condition of at-risk adults in higher education was a cultural construction rather than specific cognitive shortcomings of the students that hindered their possibility of academic success. Traditional notions of at-risk are found in the assumption that students are at risk of not succeeding academically because of cognitive and emotional deficiencies. These assumptions are normally confirmed by entry placement tests and subsequently followed by remedial programs to ameliorate whatever deficit condition the students bring to the academic process. The assumptions connect the difficulty that the student may find in the present academic process with a past condition related to the schools they attended and in the case of adults to gaps in their prior schooling. In the case of nontraditional students, higher education educators received them with lower expectations and the institution with little or no support resources.

Quinnan (1997) admitted that the prejudice and lack of tailored resources for nontraditional students tends to be compensated for by the inner drive and motivation to succeed of the students. They possess a positive self-concept that has been acquired through their life experiences along with support and encouragement that sustain their academic progress and allow them to overcome the at-risk stereotype. Quinnan stressed that the sources of inadequacies that dampen students’ success need to be transferred

from the traditional notion of organic or native student inadequacy to the institutional culture.

According to Smit (2012), the origin of the concept of at-risk is in epidemiology. Medical researchers used statistics to single out groups that were vulnerable and needed to be inoculated against some disease. At its root in statistics is the notion that identifying a set of variables allows one to predict either an epidemic or, in the case of students, student failure. Variables like SES, language proficiency, and prior schooling became variables for such a predictive model.

An example of the ingrained notion of at-risk in institutional cultures are the opinions of faculty about working with nontraditional students. There is an ambivalence in the benevolent instructor who praises the effort of working and studying at the same time. Faculty recognize a higher motivation and enthusiasm, but at the same time they perceive insufficient college academic preparation and identify the source as the structural deficiencies of the public-school system. In their specific relationships with students, they go beyond and establish a clear distinction of what is their responsibility, the institution's and the student's responsibility. The students are responsible for remedial solutions and being sufficiently prepared. The harsh distinction between responsibilities is presented in a distancing language and by blaming students for not being available for additional work (Zerquera, Ziskin, & Torres, 2016).

The deficit framework of the staff is not different regarding the major contributing factors for non-completion by the new types of students who are changing the "normal" student population. For them, it is what the students lack when arriving to the university,

their preparedness, the ability to manage study with other responsibilities, and the mismatch of expectations that become obstacles to their success. Taylor and Bedford (2004) found that perceptions did not differ in their study between staff who worked directly with the students, those in administration, or those who only related to the students in distance learning. This finding suggests that this perception was part of a culture that permeated across the institution.

This attitude towards nontraditional students was explained from a critical discourse perspective in the analysis of Lawrence (2003). Lawrence argued that some of the values and beliefs of new groups of students in the university “may be less in tune with the mainstream university culture” (para. 6), and the lack of familiarity of the institution with these groups resulted in their marginalization. The deficit perspective was reinforced by the expectation that students must adapt to the university culture and value. For Lawrence, how the university reacts to the lack of familiarity is important for the new groups of students to succeed. The reaction reveals power relations and shapes the choices of staff and faculty. In the study, Lawrence reported prior research indicating that 69% of faculty in 15 universities considered that the major cause for increase in staff hours was the demand for academic support. Similarly, “too many students” with “too wide a range of abilities” was considered a problem (Melniss, as cited in Lawrence, 2007, par. 11). From a critical discourse perspective, Lawrence argued that the transformation of institutions of higher education was being driven by a liberal ideology with individualistic undertones. This makes the institutions more conservative and reticent to the organizational change that could help the new groups of students. This argument

makes Quinnan's (1997) call for an approach that places the responsibility on the institutions for the students' at-risk condition more problematic. More importantly, according to Lawrence, is that the liberal ideology that permeates all levels of staff and administration constructs a discourse that blames the students for being underprepared and legitimates a sink or swim approach to face the challenge of the complex type of diversity that older students bring to the student population. An alternative proposed by Smit (2012) has been to go back to the origin of the term in epidemiology and recognize that there are indeed difficulties within all specific groups. He championed the value of predicting variables to identify the differential of difficulties that exist within the groups. This would allow removing the generic label and its racist and classist connotations, and it would identify at-risk individuals across all groups in the total population of students.

How Inadequate? Who Is Inadequate?

The idea that there is a bad fit between students and the expectations of the university and its culture, represented by the community of people that interact with the students, includes a diversity of groups that are at the margins of the traditional institutional norms. The characteristics of the condition and traits of the groups vary according to the approach used to examine it. The students are more or less inadequate to belong to the university depending on the discourses and contexts used to describe them (Smit, 2012). It was important in Smit's study to acknowledge how ubiquitous the different characteristics of these groups are in the literature and the connotations they carry for research and for the design and implementation of support mechanisms. The

discussion in that context provides a fresh perspective in the framing of the discussion and research of nontraditional students in other social and cultural spaces. Nontraditional students in the UK are disadvantaged students in South Africa and the same students in the United States are minority or under-prepared students. Unlike the United States, their characteristics may include diversity of ages, educational level, class, language and cultural backgrounds. Regardless of the specifics of characteristics, what is common to all of them is that the “dominant thinking in higher education attempts to understand students’ difficulty by framing students and their families of origin as lacking academic, cultural and moral resources necessary to succeed in what is presumed to be a fair and open society” (p. 370). As such, the ideology places responsibility on the student. As a theory of inferiority of certain groups, deficit thinking is omnipresent in its different version. Valencia considered it ‘protean’ theory (as cited in Smit, 2012, p. 371). That is, it can morph to different forms to become acceptable by the educational thinking that prevails in each specific social and historical context.

The pervasive presence of the deficit discourse is also found in research as demonstrated by the review of studies of adult undergraduates of Donaldson and Townsend (2007). Their assumption was that the construction of discourse in the language used in research reflects the social construction of language and meanings of a community of practice. As such, language in research mirrors the connotations, norms, and values supported by that community. The construction of knowledge about nontraditional students is per se is an indicator of the importance that institutions give to

the academic process of these students. Common sense indicates that if the problem were urgent, it would be reflected in the research agenda in the field of higher education.

Donaldson and Townsend considered all the publications of seven main higher education journals in the United States between 1990 and 2003. In the content of 41 articles, 1.27% related to adult undergraduates. Age is admittedly a main variable that distinguishes traditional and nontraditional students, and no journal on adult education were included in their sample. Of the 3,219 articles published, four categories emerged that were concerned with how researchers speak about nontraditional students. From the 41 articles that dealt with older students, the categories of meanings that emerged were: Adult students are invisible, that is to say that the experience of traditional students are the norm and apply to all students. Adult students are acknowledged and devalued by researchers. Nontraditional students need to adapt, bring handicaps, and are problematic. Students are different from traditional students but have special needs. A third category of how researchers refer to adult students in higher education revealed that students were accepted. In this case, traditional and nontraditional were seen as equal but separate groups. Both groups were homogenous. Though it was determined that adult students could be studied by themselves, no specific model to study them was found. They were valued because they increase enrollment and institutions chose to design programs, but not because they were perceived as problematic. The last category affirmed that older students were embraced. They were valued for what they are and for what they contribute. Diversity within the groups was acknowledged, and novel theories and practices were developed to account for the lack of fit of nontraditional students in

conventional approaches. Only nine (32%) of the 41 articles were in this category. Noted in the analysis of articles between 1997 and 2006 was that the deficiency approach was dominant in the language that researchers used to look at the academic process as it impacted students.

After seeing the evidence of deficit thinking as a protean theory embodied in attitudes and behaviors of faculty, staff and researchers, the inquiry could be turned around to inquire about institutions readiness to learn to embrace the new diversity of students under the rubric of nontraditional. Smit (2012) suggested that for change to occur, there is a need to acknowledge that institutions of higher education are underprepared to meet the needs of the changing student body. To move forward from the self-awareness of the institutional limitation, the dominant practice and discourse of academic teaching should be challenged to incorporate academic development as its core mission and practice. For Smit (2012), new quality standards should focus on the capacity of institutions to achieve “equity of outcomes for all of the diversity of students taken in” (p. 374).

Assets Perspective: Not At-Risk but At-Promise

The review of the literature has evidenced how the term nontraditional student has evolved together with the institutions along with new social and historical contexts. In spite of the richness of the diversity of students and lived experiences that are found under the term, students as a unit are reduced to a homogenous group to accommodate a dominant theoretical perspective developed for traditional students. The prevalence of the

deficit thinking acts as an ideological framework for the institutional practice of Tinto's theory. The outcome of the process of nontraditional students becomes a self-fulfilled promise for researchers and practitioners in higher education. There are, however, conceptual developments that serve as an ideological framework for potentially new practices in higher education.

Barnett (2007) issued a call to renew the ontology that scaffolds the understanding of the college life. He calls for a new understanding of what it is to be a student in the context of transformation of the university. Changes that define the relationship between the institutions and the student in market terms also define the answers to the questions of what type of person the university wants to nurture and what pedagogies will be needed for that enterprise. An "ontological turn" (p. 9) will allow to define a student-centered analysis and put a limit to the functionality of the student for the institution. Conventional epistemology looks at the student in utilitarian terms of access and pipelines, as a source for revenue, as a gear in the mechanism of economic productivity and as future income for the consumer economy. A new ontology should look at the student holistically and assume a constant process of change.

If then, we are seriously concerned with students, as suitable vocabulary and suitable line of inquiry have to embrace matters of 'being', 'self', 'will' and 'becoming'. How can these matters be avoided? If we are to tackle them, we are bound to embark on a philosophical journey, strictly, on an ontological journey, in which matters of student being are brought into view and engaged with. (Barnett, 2007, p. 9)

Barnett's call finds an equivalent in Jarvis conceptualization of the learning process along the life process:

Human beings are always in the process of becoming – we are always incorporating into our own biographies the outcomes of our new learning and thus creating a changed, but also paradoxically re-creating the same, person. Being is transitory, it is always the manifestation of the 'now' in the process of becoming; we are always developing beyond what we already are and this continues for as long as we live. (Jarvis, 2006, p.119)

For Barnett (2007), the dimension of being on time is not reduced to a metaphysical component of a student's life. The being in the present and being in the future become tangible aspects of their learning process as much of the design of learning in the now is undertaken only as a component of student's future. Particularly important in the design of the student's trajectory today are aspects of employability and future income. The student is called to think himself or herself simultaneously in the present and future. "The student is in time and even lives in multiple horizons of time" (p. 10).

A call for a new student-centered ontology requires "a balance between the agency of the student being and the structure bearing on the student" (Smit, 2012, p. 376). Student agency is an essential assumption of a distinct approach to students as bearers of assets and rich attributes that arise from their being. What the students bring is themselves. In Jarvis' terms, they are present as their own biographies, and they possess a wealth of contributions to their learning process and college experience. The approaches have in common the consideration of the students in their integrity. Holistically, they are

more than GPA scores, SES, gender, race, ethnicities or marital status. As a whole, they are all of those conditions and the sum of them. It is the student as a person, not in isolation but in social relations that the new ontology moves from the margins of the analysis to the center of the process in higher education.

Some examples of research that present an assets approach to understanding the experience on nontraditional students are presented. The objective is to illustrate epistemological and practical examples that have been in the process of development at the margins. An example of empirical research are the straightforward findings of McNeil, Long, and Ohland (2014). The study was framed by the definition of nontraditional students proposed by Choy (2002). The discussion of antecedents acknowledges the notion that nontraditional students do not enroll in a university because they are not prepared academically is a myth, because between 79% to a 100% of nontraditional students transfer credit to engineering. The findings of the longitudinal analysis of more than a million students, revealed that approximately 210,000 students declared engineering as a major at 11 institutions. Results showed that nontraditional students “earn grades that are similar (but consistently higher) than traditional students in science, mathematics and engineer courses and have similar final grade points averages. Nontraditional students also graduate in six years at higher rates than traditional students” (p. 1,083). The recommendation of the researchers was that research universities should make a special effort to recruit nontraditional students. This study is evidence that removing the deficit thinking and challenging beliefs allows exploring more genuinely the skills, capacities and assets of nontraditional students.

McKay and Devlin (2016) confirmed comparable results, challenging the deficit approach, when the inquiry was focused on low SES students. In addition to interviewing students, they interviewed staff to learn about their thinking framework toward these students. They advocated for a “success-focused methodological approach” and the authors echoed the recommendation of Smit (2012) to find a balance between the agency and the structures imposed on the student. They confronted the deficit approach and “deliberately sought to focus on the students from low SES backgrounds who had successfully negotiated and succeeded in their studies... this was premised on the need to provide balance to the concentration of extant research on the barriers facing these students” (p. 350). Through this balanced approach, the researchers were able to uncover what helped the students in spite of the difficulties they faced. The more relevant findings related to the perceptions of staff regarding the low SES students in three different universities. Their experience with these students challenged the deficit discourse and characterized the students as “determined and persistent, actively seeking academic challenges and exhibiting high-level academic skills” (p. 353). The authors urged institutions not to prejudge students based on their SES and call for a more nuanced approach capable of distinguishing the contribution that these students make to the institutions. They did not claim exceptionality for these students, because the traits attributed to them may also exist in other groups of students. This reflection is important because the need to devise new approaches and the need to remove the assumptions of the deficit thinking does not mean that nontraditional students should be portrayed as better, different, or exceptional. The balanced portrait of students implies a just and fair

opportunity to show who they are, and their integrity. This approach would give room to reveal their capabilities under the same light as their difficulties.

Other studies along the same lines have revealed that when traditional and nontraditional students are compared based on their performance on a learning strategies inventory (LASSI) “mature students had significantly higher scores in 7 of 10 LASSI scales... they reported themselves on average to manage time better, be less anxious about study, concentrate better, process information better” (Devlin, 1996, p. 57). They also worked almost twice the number of hours in school related work. The author concluded that given the clear difference, older students should be considered as “learning mentors” of younger students.

The challenge to the deficit thinking premise has emerged from a body of work that has its roots in critical theory. Yosso (2005), with more than 3,000 citations, has been acknowledged as central to the proposition to construct an alternate discourse of assets and capabilities in education. The discussion confronts the basic assumptions of critical race theory with the conceptual framework of social and cultural capital of Bourdieu arguing the rigid and deterministic ideas that seemed to reaffirm that the structural limitations of the social hierarchy could not be removed. Yosso (2005) moved forward by proposing six forms of capital “that comprise community cultural wealth and most often go unacknowledged or unrecognized” (p. 70). The discussion centered in that the locally based rich experience of students of color they carry with them to the school constitutes assets that are underutilized. Yosso argued that the mobilization of these assets of cultural wealth can transform the schooling process. The idea is, in effect, that the deterministic

cycle of social structures identified by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) that perpetuate themselves through the institutions of education, can be broken. The wealth of community capital can be critical to sustain the learning process, but more importantly can potentially subvert the conventional order by placing the person as a whole at the center of the educational process in an agentive role. The discussion of Yosso is located in communities of color and the school system. No references is found to higher education as a power structure in the discussion on critical race theory and education. No reference is made to the type of students or the experiences Yosso was exploring. The study ends with a reference that urges “the generation of theories based on those whose knowledges are traditionally excluded from and silenced by academic research... we need to find practical application for those theories” (Anzaldúa, as cited in Yosso, 2005, p. 82).

The effort to theorize and construct practical applications for Yosso’s theoretical propositions has been the response of O’Shea (2016) and O’Shea et al. (2017). Recognizing the cultural and historical context of Yosso’s discussion and proposition, O’Shea (2016) attempted to look at the experience of nontraditional students in institutions of higher education in Australia. For the Australian context, First in Family (FiF) students shared many characteristics with nontraditional students. Extensive effort is made in her work to challenge the deficit approach in higher education and exchange it for a “strength-based approach” (O’Shea et al., p. 56) to explore the college experience of FiF. Yosso’s approach and a narrative method provided insights to the “diversity of wealth they bring to the campus environment” (p. 69). O’Shea (2016) identified that part

of the value of Yosso's approach. She theorized about the assets of the students in the higher education space in that it is interdisciplinary and draws from migrant studies, critical theory, gender studies, and sociology. She believed this approach was needed to be interdisciplinary and use diverse lenses to account for the diversity of experiences and backgrounds. This flexibility was well suited to account for the diversity of background and intersections found in the population of FiF and nontraditional students in general. The practice of transferring Yosso's approach to higher education found in O'Shea (2016) sought to answer the question, "What if the first-in-family student's perspective and experiences of university were discussed from a strengths perspective?" (p. 60). The question was deliberately constructed as an open question for the students and for the researcher. Probing for unknown results is a form of challenging the conventional assumptions of research on nontraditional students and testing the applicability of the conceptual approach in a new cultural space and with a different population.

A total of 23 interviews took place with FiF students. The conceptual framework considered three of the six types of capital proposed by Yosso (2005) in the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework. Aspirational capital has been understood as a form of resilience. It allows individuals and their children to "dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals" (Yosso, 2005, as cited in O'Shea, 2016, p. 71). Resistant capital was defined as "knowledge and skills that have developed due to resistance to subordination" (O'Shea, 2005, p. 72). Originally, in Yosso's framework this form of capital referred to racism in the United States. The author re-conceptualized it as resistance to the status quo. Familial

capital related to the idea of the importance of the development of a social network within the university. In the case of FiF the actual family and community helped, assisted, and became the de facto network to navigate the transition to college life.

O'Shea's (2015) effort to apply Yosso's CCW to a new space and population led to knowledge construction. The experiences of older participants in the study did not fit in any of the types of capitals defined in Yosso's framework. There was a sense of stigma in older students because of their age. At the same time, however, being older was perceived as a strength which became a source of confidence for older students in that they were able to reflect on their development over the years. O'Shea (2015) proposed a new form of capital to capture the wealth that emerged from age, experiential capital. These different examples indicate that Barnett's call for a new form of thinking, an ontological turn, could be taking place. That researchers have been introducing new perspectives to challenge deficit thinking has been fruitful resulting in empirically driven research and in the application and development of alternate conceptual frameworks. In these examples, the acknowledgment of the assets of students appear clearly and place nontraditional students and their social and cultural context at the center of the analysis.

A Context for the Condition of Nontraditional Students

Describing and interpreting the historical trends of the experience of nontraditional students in higher education require specifying a social and historical context and a perspective to illuminate the problem and its nature. The observed tendencies do not occur in a social vacuum and do not emerge spontaneously. The

understanding of the public policies and the ideologies can help define the characteristics of the demographic change, the participants involved, and the outcomes of the experiences of nontraditional students (Deem & Brehony, 2003).

The change in the college student population should be considered as a demographic shift that takes place in the larger context of the transformations of institutions of higher education that have taken place beginning in the 1990s. Thus, the change from widening access to an emphasis on persistence and the completion agenda are related in part to the changes in public funding. These changes reflect a research and productivity emphasis associated with competitiveness and performance funding. These changes can have effects within an organization in the form of self-interest and competition for status between its members. The same can be observed between larger units between institutions and national systems (Marginson, 2011, 2013). These changes, rooted in ideological principles, have also modified the culture, values, and functions within organizations as well as the relationships among the members of the academic community (Giroux, 2010; Ingleby, 2015; Saunders, 2007). These changes in the objectives, the social role, and principles that structure the university are the background and context where the lived experiences of nontraditional students are taking place.

Similarly, the college experience of nontraditional students, their decision to enter, continue, or depart, needs to be understood by framing the phenomenon of their experience in ideas and ideals about college enrollment and departure that have evolved over time. Meyer (2013) reflected on fairness in access to college and the analysis of the historical transformation of institutions. Institutions moved from an initial oligarchic

model where postsecondary education was the privilege of those who could pay and were destined to become part of the ruling elite, and fairness was not a consideration in the rules or policies. A social-democratic type of access followed this period, one where public education secured the public funds for those who could not otherwise enroll afford to pay. This period incorporated a criterion of fairness where talented students were supported and their exclusion, merely because of social origin, would have been considered unfair. The progression from a social democratic model to a neoliberal model has meant a shift in policies to a model where families and students negotiate their opportunities in the financial markets. Institutional interest in enabling students to access postsecondary education diminished, and fairness dwindled as an organizing criterion for access. This could be perceived as a regression, particularly compared to the previous period.

It is in this specific current historical stage of the process of institutional change that nontraditional students make their decisions of entering, staying, and exiting college. These historical circumstances inform the interaction of the students with the institution and help define the meanings they make of their experience.

A Normative Analysis: Three Views for the Condition of Nontraditional Students

The examination of the observed demographic change in student population and the distinct situation of nontraditional students who enter and exit in larger percentages than the traditional students should also be considered using a normative approach. Such

an approach would inform what is just and fair about access and outcomes in postsecondary education.

Meyer's 2013 analysis of fairness in access placed within the historical development of institutions of higher education aids in understanding the experience of nontraditional students from a normative perspective. Utilizing different ideas of justice and fairness, applied to the context of higher education, it is possible to look at the experience of nontraditional students and define the existence of potential problems from a normative perspective.

The neoliberal changes, informed by the theoretical propositions of Friedman and von Hayek, have not only transformed the economic systems globally but also the educational systems. (Hillman, Tandberg, & Gross 2014; Lorenz, 2013; Marginson & Considine, 2000). From this libertarian perspective of justice, inequality is just a reflection of the natural differences among individuals and does not constitute injustice. Accordingly, the outcomes, whatever those might be, if resulting from a free contract among the parties, are just by definition. In consequence, as expressed by Meyer (2013), for libertarianism there is nothing wrong if the result of "free contracting produced an elite system of higher education, to which the rich have a disproportionate degree of access, and which, in turn, might spawn a social and political elite that consists largely of the graduates of the system" (p. 27). From this perspective, a just system maximizes choice and competition; and if nontraditional students can contract freely for their education, there is not a problem if half of them do not graduate. The exit of such a

number of students from the system is part of the internal mechanism of quality assurance of the system.

From a utilitarian perspective, the organizing principle applied to higher education is maximizing the greatest good for the largest number of people possible. What is implied in this principle is the need to account for the costs and benefits that are involved in a transaction to determine its justice. More commonly today, its application to higher education has been found in the translation of the activities and missions of institutions of higher education to utility arguments. One example is in performance funding that is associated with a concept of quality of the educational process. This quality can be measured by the benefits produced in terms of quick entry in the job market of newly graduated students and by following up on their salaries over time. (Morley, 2001; Umbricht, Fernandez, & Ortagus, 2017). According to the principle, given alternative courses of action, the optimal choice is the one that produces more benefits with the least costs. This axiom has been the basis for affirmative action initiatives in higher education to increase diversity in student population. In the case of these programs, the greatest good and its utility justifies the costs associated with them. For utilitarianism, self-interest and egotism are compatible with the common good only if utility is maximized (Knight & Hebl, 2005).

Utilitarianism, applied to higher education, allows recognizing differences among students and opens access to other groups beyond the elites. However, the ethical question of fairness that is determined by the calculation of utility does not admit qualitative estimates of the alternate courses of action. Hence, many of the established

and accepted benefits of education and of the functions of universities, such as a place that nurtures democratic values through the practice of freedom of expression and diversity are difficult to quantify to calculate their utility and tend to be overlooked. The common good that the education produces, individually or collectively, becomes secondary for the utility argument or is incorporated into the discourse without any practical relevance.

At best, public good ties universities into a larger process of democratisation and human development. At worst, it is joined to empty self-marketing claims about the social benefits of education or research with no attempt to define, identify or measure the alleged benefits. As with public goods (plural), the questions “whose public good?” and “in whose interests?” arise. (Marginson, 2011, p. 418)

From a utilitarian perspective, the specific conditions of nontraditional students and the differences of their lived experiences do not constitute factors that change the calculation of the utility of the institutions. The number of students who exit the educational process does not change the optimal course of action of the institutions to maximize their utility. Thus, from this perspective, the current situation in the number of nontraditional students that exit higher education is just. The status quo of the utility does not outweigh the potential costs that would serve their needs and adapt to them specifically. In fact, it could be that the large percentage of nontraditional students who exit the educational process and the status quo are conditions to maximize the aggregated utility. Consequently, from this perspective, the large number of nontraditional students who enroll and leave postsecondary education does not constitute a fairness or justice

problem. Similarly, the potential social benefit, in terms of both individual and collective goods, that their continuation could potentially provide is not accounted for in the formula of the utility costs, in spite of the increasing numbers of students and the potential exponential social benefit of their education. From the utilitarian perspective, the emphasis has been not on expanding benefits but on managing the costs by means of multiple cost reduction strategies to ensure maximize the utility (Johnstone & Marcucci, 2010).

The increasing participation of nontraditional students in the college population and the high number that exit the academic process without completing it could also be judged in terms of the justice and fairness of their condition by placing the person at the center of the analysis, instead of the utility calculation as the utilitarian perspective did. In the utilitarian tradition, the person is a means to an end, the maximization of the benefit from an egotistical perspective. In contrast, a Kantian perspective of the individual does not consider it as a means to an end. The person has dignity, uniqueness, and autonomy. Equally, persons have the freedom to choose their purpose independently and in a scheme of utility design. From Kant's idea of "individual inviolate dignity" (as cited in Meyer, 2013, p. 29) emerges the notion of personal right and human rights (Jarvis, 1997, Meyer, 2013).

The assessment of the educational situation of nontraditional students from this perspective of right implies to use, as a measurement of fairness and justice, the dignity of the students. This dignity has an inherent and same value for every person without distinction, and it is an inherent characteristic of the human person not granted to them by

anybody or anything (Bayefsky, 2013). A just and fair condition for the student would then be one where the dignity in terms of rights is not only not infringed upon, but the opportunities to advance their potential are promoted on equal terms for any other person. An obvious reference to examine the notion of rights in education is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in its Article 26. Three ideas from the right to education can be useful for the consideration of the situation of nontraditional students and the configuration of a just and fair condition. Section 1 indicates that technical and professional education shall be made generally available. It also refers to higher education as equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. Section 2 indicates that education will be directed to the full development of the human personality. From these ideas, Meyer (2013) concluded:

Access to higher education is that if (a certain amount of) higher education is deemed necessary for an individual to realize his or her dignity and autonomy, that amount of higher education must be available for all on equal terms. (p. 29)

Insofar as education is a condition for dignity and autonomy, access to higher education should be a basic right.

The availability of higher education on equal terms demands that states generate and grant conditions beyond the capacity of the individuals. However, the reference to choose to develop the full potential of the human personality is embedded in the autonomy and dignity inherent in every person, regardless of the social and historical context or will and capacity of states or institutions,

In reference to the freedom to choose autonomously and the fulfilment of the potential through education, Jarvis (2009) explained:

As human beings, we have a degree of, but by no means total. freedom to choose to achieve our potential; this makes us different, so we would believe from other animals... In this sense, achieving our potential becomes an interesting moral question since in many cases we choose to achieve our potential – but it may be that actually miss the opportunity of achieving it when we are presented with it by social position, condition or inclination. (p. 196)

Jarvis (1997) explained that education is better understood not as a series of stages that start with initial education and culminate with higher education. First, he emphasized that not everyone can achieve their full potential with initial education, as guaranteed by Article 26 of the UDHR. By placing the process of learning at the center of a person's growth, learning becomes a lifelong process, a process of being in growth and change as development. This description fits the spirit of the right more closely than the idea of having or acquiring an education as an object external to the person.

From the perspective of rights, dignity and autonomy to choose are notions that help examine the situation of nontraditional students. The demographic change and the rate of persistence can be defined as the opportunity for each person to exercise their right to achieve their potential and to freely choose the path of education to accomplish it. The process they initiate, regardless of the outcome, can be recognized as a process of growth and development - a process that they have started outside the classroom and one that continues in the space of formal education.

By placing the person and his or her rights at the center of the analysis, it becomes critical to explore the lived experience of nontraditional students as a phenomenon of autonomous decision and learn of the conditions they encounter as they attempt to fulfill their potential. The fact that the right to education is infringed upon constitutes a problem for each student. The fact that almost 50% of the students who opt for opportunity to fulfill their potential exit the process would be an unjust and unfair situation for each one of them.

Conceptual Framework

My approach to study the lived experiences of nontraditional students in college used inductive reasoning. Its beginning was the concrete observation of a phenomenon, and it proceeded to the collection of data in the form of semi structured interviews and narratives that informed the phenomenon as primary sources. I explored the patterns of meaning that emerged from the different sources and elaborated eidetic interpretations about their experience.

The approach tried to be open and free of hypotheses that a priori indicated a path for the data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the findings. Although open, the inductive approach in my study was informed by theoretical concepts that emerged from the research focused on the experience of students and the conditions for their academic success. Similarly, the study was informed by the conceptual ideas from the literature of lifelong learning and the process of change that people continuously undergo as they engage in learning processes. The incorporation of these theoretical conceptualizations in

the process of inquiry is reflected in the formulation of the research questions that guided this study.

From the literature on student academic success I have adopted the model of community cultural wealth developed by Yosso (2005) to explore the college experience of nontraditional students. Yosso's model is displayed in Figure 2. This framework proposes six types of capital that form the wealth of knowledge that disenfranchised groups of students can possess. It has been used primarily to explore the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities in education. In addition, I have included the contribution of O'Shea (2015, 2016) to the model that adds one additional dimension—experiential capital—to the framework. This additional dimension emerged in O'Shea's research after exploring the experience of older students whose experience in relation to their awareness of their own strengths differs from that of younger students. O'Shea (2016) found that for older students, skills and knowledge they had acquired in their pre-student lives provided significant capital which they drew upon. This experiential capital was a distinct strength for this group, providing skills in managing competing demands, dealing with difficult people (sometimes staff), and maintaining resilience in often very trying circumstances.

The perspective of these concepts in the discussion of the literature is to contest the deficit approach that prevails in the student retention literature. Nontraditional students have been consistently characterized as lacking the attributes required to succeed. The corollary is that the institution has to respond by attempting to provide support to fill the empty space the students bring with them. Smit (2012), in her analysis of the stereotypes of institutionalized deficit thinking, stated that the stereotype of the

characterization of the students goes beyond a simple label to identify them. The terminology used contributes to the deficit discourse: students are referred to in terms of what they are not: not traditional, not prepared for higher education, not in a position of privilege or advantage. This discourse establishes higher education in a position of privilege and defers responsibility for any critical examination of practices in higher education itself. In this sense, it could be argued that it effectively places the responsibility for the lack of certain desirable characteristics that would promote academic success, on the student. (p. 370).

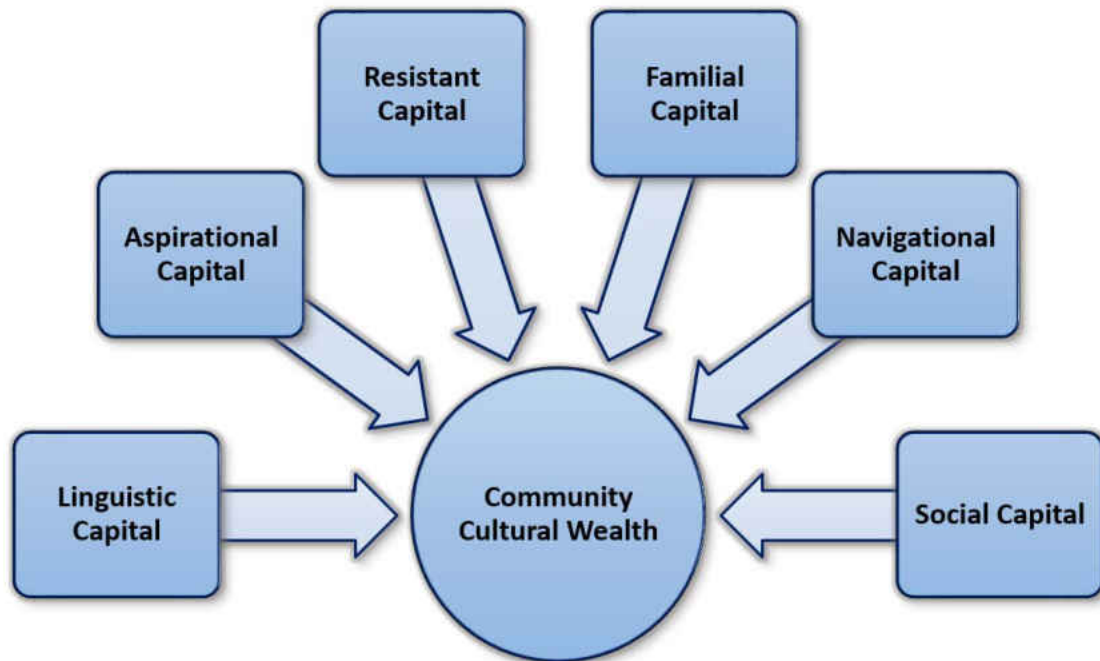


Figure 2. Community cultural wealth framework. Adapted from “Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth,” by T. J. Yosso, 2005, *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 8, 69-91. Copyright 2005 by Center for Research in Race & Education. Used with permission (Appendix B).

The concepts proposed by Yosso (2005) and O'Shea (2015) emerge as an alternative that enables researchers to look at specific groups of students that struggle during their educational journeys. Likewise, these concepts allow for identifying assets and strengths that students bring to the educational process. This framework allowed me to probe data and outline potential sources that support the students' journeys and enable them to continue in spite of difficulties.

The study drew from three types of capital that appeared to be relevant for the experience of nontraditional students based on the findings of two pilot qualitative studies I have previously implemented and the literature reviewed. The study considered familial capital, social capital and navigational capital from Yosso's (2005) model and it included O'Shea's contribution of experiential capital which provided an opportunity to look at the biography of the students in terms of prior learning experiences.

The four types of capital served to explore the experience of the students in different life contexts and to determine if they had reciprocal effects, that is to say that college experience contributed to modify the lifeworld of the students outside the university establishing a cyclical loop that back feeds as long as the student remains in school. A visual representation of the conceptual model of the adopted to inform the analysis and reflection about the lifeworld shared by the students is shown in Figure 3.

A second concept for the framework of the study refers to the process of change students undergo once they initiate their college experience. Older students have jobs, family responsibilities, and relationships--a complete world outside campus life. They do not renounce those dimensions of life when they begin their college life, but they add a

new dimension to them. The act of starting the new process implies a process of learning that goes beyond the formal learning of the class setting and adds new elements to their identity as they continuously become students. The new lived experiences of students percolate towards the other dimensions that influence their lives, the same way that their maturity and life knowledge and skills (e.g., the need to learn a new job or to respond to the tasks of parenting their children), affect the learning process in the context of the university.

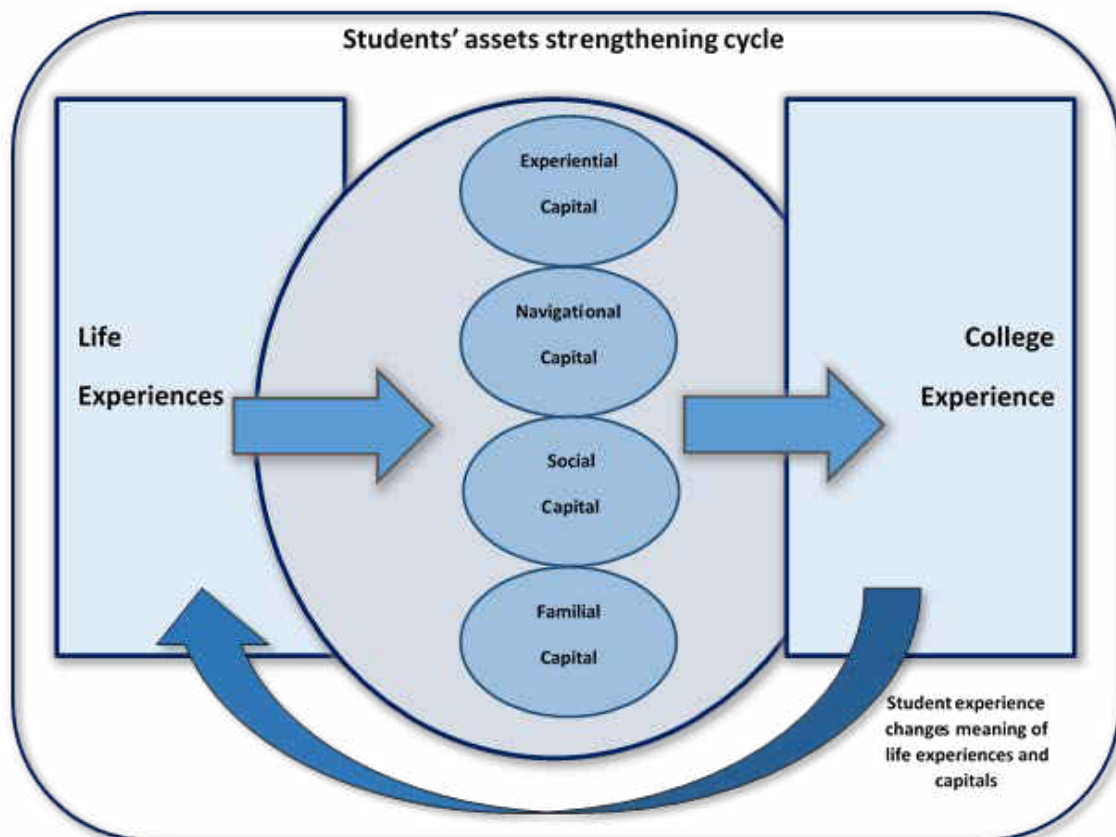


Figure 3. Community cultural wealth: Four types of capital. Copyright 2017 by Marcelo Julio Maturana.

The established literature about persistence describes traditional students who have graduated from high school and moved from their parents' home. The approaches to understanding these students assumes that the student lacks necessary skills that sustain the academic learning process. As such, different forms of socialization and integration to the institutional culture are provided to students to facilitate their persistence, graduation, and the ultimate goal of successful participation in the job market. For the university, life is what happens in and around the university, and the process of change occurs along the design delineated and allowed by the institution.

To understand the complexity of the change that nontraditional students experience, it was necessary to adopt a concept that could capture the type of learning processes that nontraditional students have lived and continue living outside the university. Nontraditional students have learned over time, often many years, from their experiences inside and outside the classroom. Thus, the concept had to allow for the reciprocal effects that all these life dimensions continually have on each other. The comprehensive theory of human learning proposed by Jarvis (2006) states that learning goes beyond knowledge and the cognitive dimension. As such, learning goes beyond the mind, involving the whole person, biology, emotions and biography. "The person is both body and mind, not just personality in the psychological sense. Identity is a matter of both the body and the mind and we know ourselves through both, and other recognize us first by our bodies and then by our actions" (p. 48).

This holistic approach to learning allowed the analysis to incorporate different spaces--physical, social and cultural where learning had occurred before the students

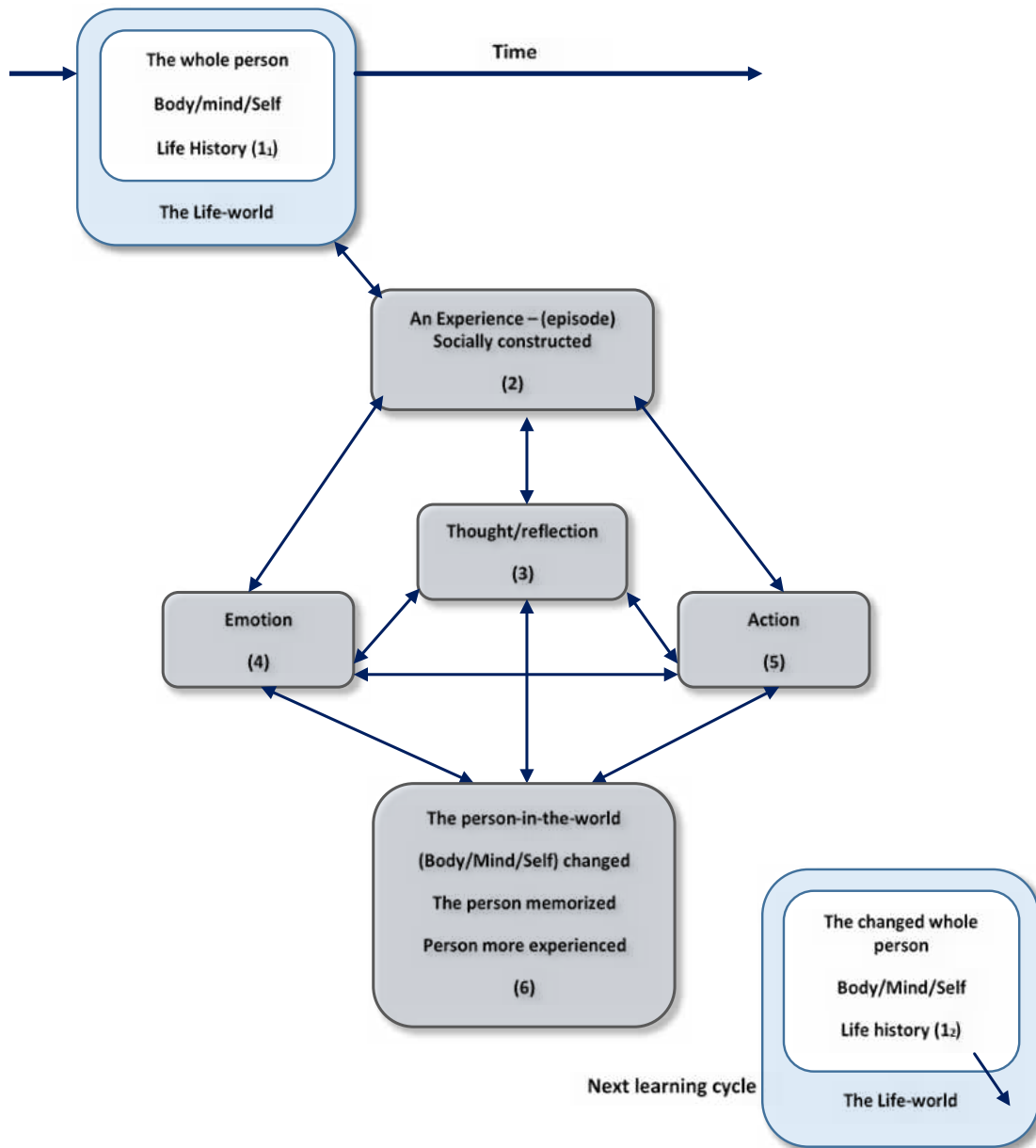
began their college journey. Jarvis (2006) offers the concept of “pre-conscious learning” to account for some of the learning that occurs in life contexts that “is unrecognized incidental, unintended and often discounted” (p. 49) but that can be recognized after it has occurred as biographies.

The concept of holistic learning that Jarvis proposed in his theory assumes that learning occurs in a social context, one in which the person is always in relationships with others and world. The concept helped my process of inquiry by learning how the participants travel, as a whole person, from contexts and relationships through the different dimensions of their daily lives. According to Jarvis, the social context involves the dimension of space and time and constitutes our lifeworld. He explains that “our lifeworld is not only a world of space, it is also one of time, so we can see immediately that it is situated in a world that precedes us and exists beyond our temporality—it transcends us” (p. 52).

In relation to the social context and its temporal dimension, Jarvis (2006) provides a central idea for the analysis of the learning process of the participants in the study. The biography of each person is one way of becoming aware of the time that otherwise may be taken for granted. Jarvis believes that life experience resembles prior experiences that have been incorporated into a person’s biography, that this is a “moment in which we are in harmony with the world” (p. 15). He shows that the flow of time sometimes stops and demands a pause because a new experience is not familiar and cannot be assimilated with any other prior learned experiences. In his model, he defined this as a moment of disjuncture.

But there are times when this harmony does not occur and we then experience disjuncture; this can be as situation in which we are not sure how to act, or even experience a ‘magic moment’ that just stops us in our tracks. It is something out of the normal–abnormal or supra-normal–and it gives rise to astonishment, wonder or some other emotion. It is times like this that we become aware of our world. (Jarvis, 2006, p. 15)

Disjuncture becomes a moment of awareness of the new experience and its context and of the self. Disjuncture, a central component of learning, helped me reflect with the participants about their encounter with the culture and organization of the university and about their awareness of their learning process and of their change. The complete cycle of holistic learning proposed by Jarvis (2006) is presented in Figure 4. The moment of disjuncture is represented by step 2 in the sequence.



The transformation of the person through learning

Figure 4. The transformation of the person through learning. Adapted from “Towards a Comprehensive Theory of Human Learning,” by P. Jarvis, 2006. Copyright 2006 by Peter Jarvis. Used with permission (Appendix C).

Summary

This chapter presented a review of the literature and analyzed the approaches that have been used to learn who nontraditional students are. It also presented a theory used to understand their lifeworld as they encounter the academic, social, and cultural space of higher education. This critical review traced the origin of the term and how its connotation has changed over time having the universities as corporations as a backdrop. The analysis contrasted the multidimensional characteristics of students and the complexity of the multilayered intersections that make up who they are with the monotonic and limited paradigm of a mainstream theory devised to study a different type of student. The assessments of this theory showed that much of the richness of the nontraditional student is not supported in research. Nontraditional student experience has been reduced to an individualistic process far from the collective and social dimensions typical of their experience. This reductionism appears to go in tandem with prevailing deficit thinking in college culture about the students' skills, knowledge and strengths they bring to the college experience. This review also presented alternative efforts to incorporate the diversity of students' experiences and contest mainstream analysis from the fringes. In the final sections, I addressed the forward-looking call of some researchers for a new ontology to illuminate new epistemologies and the construction of new practices. The next following chapter describes the conceptualization of the problem that emerged from the literature and defines the appropriate methodology of inquiry.

CHAPTER 3 LEARNING IN LIFE AND SCHOOL

Introduction

This chapter has as a main reference in the title of this study. The main goal is a brief presentation of the concept and definition of learning that stands as a backdrop to the lived experiences of nontraditional students. In this chapter, I try to connect the ontological idea of being a person as constant process of change to the ubiquitous nature of learning of nontraditional students in the different contexts and moments in their lifeworld.

I considered this review a necessary section for the better comprehension of the fit of the cycle of the comprehensive theory of learning proposed by Jarvis and the biography of nontraditional students. The discussion of learning in higher education and the idea of achievement, understood as accomplished academic learning, traditionally takes place within conventional and dominant connotations. The discussion of achievement happens around metrics related to cognitive skills and formally acquired knowledge. In the case of nontraditional students, a reduction of their college experience could be summarized considering formal assessment and its associated of learning. Formally, many do not complete their college journeys because the metrics of their academic achievement do not meet an institutional standard. The conclusion, from this perspective, is that they went to the university to learn, but they were not successful.

From there, the discussion gravitates around issues of persistence and attrition which, in most theories and approaches relate to the obstacles, difficulties and factors that

intervene in the process of academic success or failure. The factors can be psychological and reside in the person or they could be structural, social, and cultural. At the center, however, is the student's learning as defined by the institution and its established standards.

Considering Barnett's call for an ontological turn (2007) and the need to re-conceptualize what it is to be a student, this section is focused on learning as a process that goes beyond the formality of an intentionally planned program offered by an institution. Although the focus of this study is the complete experience of nontraditional students, this brief review will shed some light on these students as learners. Specifically, in this study I explored how nontraditional students learned to become a college student.

The concept of learning provided a foundation for the conceptualization of my study, and it was present as a guiding concept of my research design. In this chapter, I show the need to widen the concept of learning in higher education and move forward from conventional ways of understanding learning. This change will enable research to account for nontraditional students' achievements and successes in life as the product of a learning process.

A Cathedral of Learning

There is a traditional reference to universities as cathedrals of learning (Ponterotto, 1997). The origin of this description is probably related to the medieval origins of the universities and particularly to the building of the library and its ecclesiastical design (Gyure, 2008). In its origin, the library was a centrally located

building as it was the actual repository of systematized information and knowledge. “The library was regarded as a treasure-house of knowledge to be sampled by scholars, a temple of culture, or a cathedral of learning representing man’s accumulated store of knowledge and understanding” (Vaughan, 1979, p. 280).

Symbolically, the cathedral of learning remains a powerful reference to what a university is and to the central process of learning. In universities in the United States, institutions emulated the gothic lines of buildings with brick facades and ivy. This imagery remains as a symbol of status and quality, of exclusivity and not inclusivity. Symbolically, it also retains the original meaning of a community of shared values among scholars (Teekens, 2015).

The image of a cathedral is proper for many students. It is a cold place with a grandiosity unfamiliar to them. It is a place where one is granted permission to meditate in quiet seclusion and where students are exposed to a rhetoric and language different from the one used outside those walls, in the real world they know. The community spirit implies that faculty and students collaborate in pursuit of an intellectual goal in the medieval tradition of the *peregrinationes academicae*. The spiritual notion of the cathedral could also be interpreted as two groups with different interests. For faculty, the students are passengers in transit. They are only guests to visit the cathedral of learning where faculty, the owners of knowledge, belong and reside permanently. “As guardians at the gate, they oppose the barbarians with whom they have established boundaries of certitude for what constitutes knowledge” (Catt, 2000, p. 3). In this case, the university ceases to

be a space of collaboration between faculty and students and becomes a faculty-centered space where scholarly work is what defines it.

The traditional image of the university as a sacred place separated from the society, and a place where admittance is controlled by those at the top of the hierarchy of erudite scholars, is still valid today. This image is particularly clear to the eyes of poor and first-generation students. For them, in order to access knowledge, they have to learn and become part of a highly organized and formalized process. Courses and teaching are organized following disciplines and a predefined propaedeutic trajectory from basic and general knowledge to specialized instruction.

Epistemologically, in the space of the university, knowledge is constructed logically and scientifically, and it is something that resides outside the person. It can be acquired by having access to repositories of knowledge and to those who can transmit it. From this conceptualization of knowledge, a traditional idea of learning emerges along with teaching, the process of transmitting this erudite type of knowledge.

Before addressing the different dimensions of the concept of learning, it is relevant to clarify that the concept of knowledge previously described is culturally constructed and bounded. In Merriam and Kim's (2008) comparison of western and nonwestern concepts of knowing and learning, it is possible to see knowledge and learning from different perspectives. The prominent knowledge that is academic, formal, intellectual, scholarly and scientifically constructed is but one meaning that has been socially constructed.

The authors describe three differences. First, in nonwestern cultures, learning is communal. The contrast is that in the conventional notion of knowledge and learning, experiences and knowledge belong to the individual. The university becomes a mechanism of passing knowledge from individual experts to individual learners. In communal learning, the learning process is the responsibility of all members of a group and available to all. In this interdependent state, learners and experts are engaged in a selfless relationship. Learners do not learn for personal gain but for collective benefit.

Second, learning is lifelong and informal. In western culture, there is a concept of lifelong learning, but it refers to adult vocational learning and the process of training of skills to work faster and harder and be more productive. In contrast, the idea in nonwestern culture is that learning is a process and an end in itself. The drive for learning is not selfish. Rather, it is embedded in daily life as a permanent process that leads to being fully human. This kind of constant learning process happens in a communal setting. As such, it is informal and happens as life happens. As communal learning is for collective benefit, it happens many times in the process of implementing solutions for communal problems. In western culture, informal learning is recognized, but the awareness and valuation of it is less than formal teacher directed learning.

The third difference proposed by Merriam and Kim (2008) is that learning is holistic. In western culture, knowledge is a cognitive process, and it happens in the brain. The mind is at the center of knowing. Contrary to this idea, nonwestern knowledge learning involves more than just the mind; it includes the body, the emotions and the spirit. The person is an integrated being and mind is not separated from the rest of the

parts. Accordingly, the process of learning is at the service of developing the whole person morally, ethically, and spiritually. A good person benefits the community. From this perspective, there is no preference for abstract and theoretical knowledge. Practical learning from life experiences is important because it involves the whole person and the practical skills developed the person physically and emotionally. It is the engagement in the community which affords individuals holistic learning opportunities.

This description of the differences resituates the sacred knowledge preserved in a cathedral as one socially constructed meaning. If one brings the biographies of nontraditional students to the reflection, differences between academic learning and the forms nontraditional students learn can be identified. The characteristics delineated by Merriam and Kim (2008) can then be used to look at the journeys of nontraditional students from a different perspective (e.g., how they have learned their jobs, how they participate in organizations, or how they learned to build a family and engage with communities where they live and participate). The will to learn that Barnett (2007) describes relates to this permanent illogical desire to learn regardless of age or difficulties. Likewise, many of the decisions nontraditional students make, trying to balance their responsibilities, have an emotional component and involve physical demands of extra hours with classes and homework after having worked a full-time job. Similarly, fathers and mothers go back to school to set an example for others, particularly their children, more than for personal gains.

Levels of Formality and Context

The work of Merriam and Kim (2008) has illustrated differences in how cultures understand knowledge and learning. The discussion of learning within the western cultural tradition has acknowledged in recent decades that there are other types of learning beyond academic learning and that they happen in other places besides a cathedral of learning. There is a consensus around adopted analytical categories. I will describe the relevant aspects for nontraditional students of three categories found in the definitions of the Unesco Institute of Statistics [UIS] (2012). Formal education is institutionalized, planned and intentional. The programs are recognized as well as the qualifications they generate. In institutionalized education, an organization provides structured educational arrangements such as student-teacher interactions designed for learning purposes (p. 11). Non-formal education is intentional and planned and constitutes a complement, addition, or alternative to formal education. The qualifications are not recognized. It is short and of low intensity and takes the form of workshops, short courses or seminars. Informal learning can be intentional and deliberate but not institutionalized. It has little organization and structure. It can include activities in the family, workplace, local community, and daily life. It can be self, family, or socially directed (p. 12).

If noted, there is a differentiation of two types of education and one type of learning that already places an emphasis on the level of institutionalization, planning, and structure. What the three types have in common is that they are deliberate, assuming an agentive role of the student. However, formal and non-formal education by definition are

going to limit the agency of the student by the structure that the institution defines.

Looking at the life experience of nontraditional students, one can hypothesize that many of them have been exposed to and participated in non-formal education and that they have experienced informal learning.

The discussion about these three broad official categories is ample. Schugurensky (2000) added some additional characterizations to the three categories. Formal education is propaedeutic because it prepares students to move to a next level, and each level is prerequisite of the following one. There is only one hierarchy with a minister being at the top and students being at the bottom of the ranks. Non-formal education does not require previous schooling to enter an educational activity, and it is usually directed to adults. Informal learning happens outside a planned curriculum, hence the term learning and not education. There is an important specification in informal learning for the purpose of this study. Although informal learning happens outside a planned curriculum, it does not only happen outside formal educational institutions. On the contrary, it can happen inside non-formal and formal institutions. If informal learning does occur, it does so independently of the objectives of the planned curriculum and at times against it.

Schugurensky (2000) made the point that according to the denomination for each category, non-formal implies everything that does not meet the characteristics of formal education. Describing informal learning, Schugurensky (2000), noted:

If non-formal education is defined as a residual category...then informal learning is a residual category of a residual category (anything that is neither formal nor non-formal). However, it is in this sphere so disregarded and under-researched,

where most of the significant learnings that we apply to our everyday lives are learned. (p. 2)

There are commonalities between informal learning and nontraditional students. Both assume a normalcy that is culturally hegemonic and relegates what is not normal to a lower and marginal category. The visibility of the number of nontraditional students in the institutions finds a counterpart in the pervasiveness of informal learning in their lives.

To build on the concept of informal learning and augment its descriptive capacity, Schugurensky (2000) offered a simple taxonomy to differentiate between different types of informal learning by introducing the concepts of intentionality and awareness. Self-directed informal learning is when a person gets involved in learning without a teacher. Another person can be involved, but the person does not consider that individual to be an educator.

It is intentional and conscious. In incidental informal learning, the person did not have the intention of engaging in learning. After an experience, however, the person becomes aware that learning has taken place. Socialization is also known as tacit learning and refers to the process of internalization of attitudes, behaviors, and values that take place every day.

The taxonomy shown in Table 5 makes visible the components of learning that are prevalent in the daily life of every person. Considering Merriam and Kim's (2008) description of the conceptualization of learning in nonwestern cultures, for those cultures informal learning is not a residual category but a central process.

Table 5

Taxonomy of Informal Learning

Form	Intentionality	Awareness (at the time of learning experience)
Self-directed	Yes	Yes
Incidental	No	Yes
Socialization	No	No

Note. Schugurensky, D. (2000). The forms of informal learning: Towards a conceptualization of the field. <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/2733/2/19formsofinformal.pdf>
 Copyright 2000 by Schugurensky. Used with permission (Appendix D).

Where Is Learning Happening?

The conventional notion of knowledge and learning that prevails in higher education is that it is something that happens in the brain and mind and is eminently a cognitive process. “Adult learning was understood as a cognitive process, one in which the mind took in facts and information, converting it all to knowledge, which then could be observed as subsequent behavior change” (Merriam, 2008, p. 95). In spite of the centrality of this traditional concept in the organization of the didactic and pedagogical design of the educational process, there is a broad acceptance that learning involves more than cognitive processes. A holistic approach to learning includes a multidimensional conceptualization of learning. That conceptualization contains emotional, biological, psychological, and spiritual components (Illeris, 2007; Jarvis, 2006; Merriam, 2008). Freiler (2008) discussed the holistic notion among other forms of embodied learning and described it as

a view of constructing knowledge that engages the body as a site of learning, usually in connection with other domains of knowing (for example, spiritual,

affective, symbolic, cultural, rational). Direct engagement in an experience of guided imagery and visualization that connects mental image, bodily sensations, and reactions can be interrelated with other domains of knowing. (p. 39)

In the discussion of the role of the emotions in learning, Illeris (2007) described emotions as important as thinking for the learning process. Using Goleman's description of emotions, he argued that emotions define the capacity to display mental abilities. He differentiated between emotions and feelings, suggesting that some feelings can occur in different emotional states. Emotions on the other hand, include reflection and distinctive thoughts. For Jarvis (2006), learning is embodied in the whole person that is body and mind. For him, the individualization of each person emerges from a sense of identity. That identity has a physical and corporeal dimension to which actions driven by the personality are added to conform, making the person recognizable as unique for themselves and others.

Like Schugurensky (2000), Jarvis (2006) gave importance to everyday experiences as the fundamental type of learning that defines human learning, noting that their collection forms the biography of each individual. Informal tacit learning in the taxonomy of informal learning has been explained by Jarvis as a daily mechanism where the person experiences the external social world, transform it, and remember it almost without any thinking involved.

Learning: The Being and Becoming of the Whole Person

At the beginning of this brief chapter, the traditional and hegemonic concept of education and learning residing in erudite minds inhabiting cathedrals of learning was described. Regardless of declarations of inclusiveness or diversity, adjectives such as nontraditional, at-risk, underserved, unprepared, and high need describe groups of students that do not conform with an ideal of college student. Increasingly, these students constitute a majority on college campuses, and they do face obstacles in their academic journey because institutions have not yet challenged themselves to embrace them. In their learning, their minds, their bodies and their values and more importantly their diverse and skillful forms of experiencing their lifeworld. For Jarvis (2006):

We are always incorporating into our biographies the outcome of our new learning and thus creating a changed, but also paradoxically re-creating the same, person. Being is transitory; it is always a manifestation of the ‘now’ in the process of becoming. (p. 119)

There are two definitions of learning that represent contemporary efforts to look at the process of learning as something integral to being and becoming a person. These definitions denote a process of learning that differs from the conventional meaning symbolized by academic achievement, grades, and credentials that conventionally define that learning has occurred. They can, however, help describe the accomplishments, achievements, and wealth of knowledge that many nontraditional students have.

Illeris (2006) presented a broad and open definition of learning as “any process that in living organisms leads to permanent capacity change and in which is not solely

due to biological maturation or ageing” (p. 3). Jarvis (2006) presented a very specified and comprehensive definition of human learning:

The combination of processes whereby the whole person–body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses): experiences a social situation, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the person’s individual biography resulting in a changed (or more experience) person. (p. 13)

Jarvis’ (2006) definition accounts for all the elements of the cycle of the transformation of the person described in Figure 4. This figure is part of the conceptual framework of this study. It contributes to the exploration of the process of the lived experiences of nontraditional students as processes of learning in all its layers and dimensions.

CHAPTER 4 METHODOLOGY—LEND ME YOUR VOICES

Introduction

This study utilized a qualitative research method and incorporated an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of nontraditional students as they become college students. Interpretive phenomenology allows for a diversity of sources for the data collection, and this study used two primary sources. It used in-depth semi-structured interviews with the participants to capture their lived experiences and interpretations of their college process (Appendix E). It used surveys with open-ended questions for the members of the support system of the students to capture their voices to construct the narrative and collective synergy of those involved in the process of the student.

The purpose of the study was to explore the experience of nontraditional students from a perspective that places their voice center stage. The role of the researcher in interpretive phenomenology is central in making sense of the personal experience of the participants. Through a constant process of evocation, the researcher attempts to reach the original meaning of the experiences through stories, texts, or any form of narrative that can recall the experience.

The analysis of the interviews and answers to the open-ended questions in the survey followed the thematic reflection procedure proposed by van Manen (1990). This process is recursive, and it strove to isolate the essential themes of the phenomenon. This process was complemented with the practice of the hermeneutic circle as described by

Kafle (2011). In addition, the analysis made use of the six hermeneutic research activities proposed by van Manen (1990) as permanent structuring principles to guide the reflection,

With the focus on meaning-making in a specific context, the adoption of this design allowed for contextual knowledge and situated concept development to occur by leading the research to move beyond their prior knowledge or experience (Schwartz-Shea, & Yanow, 2013). This design acknowledged my prior knowledge, experience, and motivation and provided a legitimate opportunity for me to contribute to the meaning of the lifeworld that participants convey of their own experience. Contrary to the traditional positivistic design and some approaches to phenomenology, this design did not seek to set aside the potential contribution of my life experience to this study. Rather, it accounted for it by explicitly including it in the recursive process of description, reflection and interpretation (Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixsmith 2013).

In addition to interviews, this design included a survey with open-ended questions answered by people identified by the students as an important source of support as they balance their different, and often conflicting, life roles (Appendix F). The experience of the survey respondents contributed to the identification of the nature of the collective effort of nontraditional students' approach to college life and the type of community wealth that is mobilized from life experience to the college experience. Expanding the sources of the experience of the lifeworld of the students provided a richer description and interpretation. Student participants decided who and how many people answered the survey. A flexible criterion was used to determine an optimal number of survey

respondents according to the degree of importance the student has attributed to individuals during the interview. Access to respondents of the survey was mediated by the student participants, and 1-3 survey respondents were received from 5 of the participants. The design of the open descriptive question survey was based on the recommendations of Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2014) and a survey instrument used with relatives of First in Family students by O'Shea et al. (2017). Permission to adapt the instrument was granted by the authors (Appendix G).

In addition, the design chosen allowed me to incorporate, declare, and use my own personal lived experience as the “ego-logical” starting point as described by van Manen (1990). Thus, the design assumes that there are intersubjective social realities in which the participants and the researcher are interpreters of events. (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

Background of the Methodology

The term phenomenology refers to a collection of philosophical movements and approaches to research. Applied to research, phenomenology is the study of the nature and meaning of phenomena (Finlay, 2009). The goal of phenomenological inquiry is to devise rich descriptions of how a phenomenon is experienced pre-reflectively as it presents to consciousness. As such, one can only capture indirectly the consciousness and the experience of a person of the lifeworld, and in this way, describe and interpret the lived meanings. Described as a “second-hand explication,” the process implies access to the actual experience to learn the hidden universal meaning attached to the experiences.

Consequently, a permanent level of translation and an inevitable interpretation is present. One can only experience lifeworld as something that has already been interpreted (Finlay, 2012); all recollections, descriptions or reflections of experiences are already transformations of those experiences (van Manen, 1990). Accordingly, phenomenology is not interested in reporting the subjective experiences of the informants, as seen from their perspectives, nor is it interested in their opinions about the perspectives. The interest is in gathering examples of experiences with the purpose of reflecting on the meanings that exist essentially in them (van Manen, 1990).

Driven by a constant process of evocation of experience, in hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher attempts to reach the original meaning of the experience through stories, texts, or artifacts that can recall the experience. Claiming its place as rigorous approach to research, van Manen (1990) categorized phenomenology as a human science and referred to the text that emerges from phenomenological inquiry as:

A strong and rigorous human science text distinguishes itself by its courage and resolve to stand up for the uniqueness and significance of the notion to which it has dedicated itself.... This means also that a rigorous human science is prepared to be “soft,” “soulful,” “subtle,” and “sensitive” in its effort to bring the range of meanings of life’s phenomena to our reflective awareness. (p. 18)

Interpretive phenomenology demands that the researcher approach the phenomenon with a sense of wonder and, at the same time, practice constant thoughtfulness; the researcher must be open to the lived experience of others, observing and feeling what sometimes can pass as trivial or insignificant. In this process, the

researcher plays a central role in making sense of the personal experience of the participants. In terms of the hermeneutic tradition, Smith (2004) describes the process as engaging in double hermeneutics: “the participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; [while] the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of the personal and social world” (p. 40).

Rationale for Research Design

Current analysis of the experience of nontraditional students in higher education is based on a set of characteristics that defines this group, particularly after the report of Choy (2002) for the National Center for Education Statistics. According to that report, the seven defining features are broad enough that 73% of all undergraduate students nationwide had one or more of these characteristics. Similarly, students can be described as being nontraditional by varying degrees, depending on how many of these characteristics they possess. They can be placed in different categories on a continuum of from minimally nontraditional to highly nontraditional (Horn & Carroll, 1996). If the intersectionality of these seven demographic characteristics with other variables such as SES, race or gender is considered, the number of potential diverse subgroups that emerge is large. Using a single label to refer to the educational process different groups nontraditional students undergo to access higher education institution provides limited analytic value.

The use of aggregated demographic and institutional data has remained the prime tool to analyze nontraditional students’ persistence and attrition processes (Ashar &

Skenes, 1993; Bamber & Tett, 2000; Davison & Holbrook, 2014). Since Tinto's (1975) model attempted to explain persistence through a socialization model, similar efforts have been made to use psychological models to try to describe and explain the educational process for nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985, 1987; Benschhoff, 1993; Bergman et al., 2014; Bye et al., 2007; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). These studies share an emphasis on explanatory variables that relate directly or indirectly to some of the seven characteristics described by Choy (2002). These researchers have also shared an assumption that those characteristics are detrimental in some degree to nontraditional students' academic success and put the students at risk.

According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research design is appropriate when a research question contains variables that are not easily measured or only can be answered by capturing the voices of previously silenced individuals or groups. I propose that, as a group, nontraditional students and their lived experiences in college qualify as a robust subject of qualitative research: they comprise an increasing percentage of the undergraduate student population yet there is limited insight into their college experience. This paucity of research is exacerbated by the use of an umbrella label (nontraditional) and by reliance on aggregated data to analyze and describe their college experience. It is only when we listen to their voices can we learn about their process of navigating the challenges of student life and how it affects their persistence rate.

This research study proposed to reexamine the experience of nontraditional students from a different perspective. Often, nontraditional students decide to pursue higher education after experiencing success in other personal areas of life (e.g., work,

family responsibilities, and community). This success is the result of accumulating a wealth of skills and knowledge outside of formal processes of education. Accordingly, a premise of this study was that this informal learning transfers to the context of college life and is used to navigate the college context and it is transformed as the person changes. Making this assumption of transferability, I looked at the lifeworld of students who possess only some of Choy's (2002) seven characteristics to obtain a rich description and interpretation of the meaning that emerges from their lived experiences. Most importantly, I was able to use their voice to inform the research about the meaning of nontraditional students' experience in a specific biographical, social, and historical context.

Instrumentation and Qualitative Research Protocols

Human Research Procedure

The data collection procedures followed the guidelines from Creswell (2013), Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003), and Seidman (2006). The study will seek proper approval from the university's Institutional Review Board. It is expected to be categorized as a minimal risk study (Appendix H). Each interview will be recorded and transcribed. Each interview will be coded as a separate file with the participant code and date. Files will be kept in a secured password protected location together with the drafts of the transcription, the interviewer's journal with preliminary notations, and materials that each participant have produced provided in the process of the interview. Each participant will have their

own folder containing their personal data, including their consent. An informed consent will be provided to the participant following the model proposed by Seidman (2006; Appendix I).

Sampling Procedure

Before presenting the procedure, it must be noted that the terms, sample and sampling, in this study represent the notion of selecting examples that can provide “experimentally rich description” Also, the goal of this procedure is to identify “individuals that who are capable of putting their own experiences in oral or written words” (van Manen, 2014, p. 353).

Selection of participants followed a non-probabilistic purposive and criterion sample (Gall et al., 2003). Based on the exploratory nature of the study, intensity sampling was used to select cases that strongly match the profile of nontraditional students. Regarding the recruitment site, students who receive support from a university federal program were targeted. This program serves students from disadvantaged backgrounds and can identify older students among the participants in the program. Additional participants that met the criteria were recruited through professors that had knowledge of older students in their courses.

Following the guideline of Marshall and Rossman (2006), the selection criteria are theoretically informed, are related to the central concepts outlined in the review of the literature, and respond to the focus of the research questions. To qualify for participation in this study, potential participants had to be at least 26 years old, have kept full time jobs

more than one year, are primary care givers of another person, and have persisted in higher education for more than two semesters. The assumption in selecting these criteria is that informal learning (e.g. outside the classroom) has occurred and has equipped the participants to make successful decisions in their lifeworld. Similarly, the assumption is that a community cultural wealth of knowledge, skills and support exists to help the participant sustain the college process and balance of the academic life with other dimensions of their life.

The specification of these criteria generated a more homogeneous group of participants. It also allowed for the inherent diversity of their experience to emerge and I had the opportunity to gain a richer, deeper description and interpretation of the meanings these students make of their college experience.

According to Creswell (2013, 2014), saturation in phenomenology can be reached by securing between 3 and 10 participants. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) calculated that most themes emerged after six interviews. Six participants were recruited for the study. A contingency plan for recruitment was to use the snowballing procedure. Having difficulty to recruit a six participant I increased the pool by reducing the required age leaving intact the other criteria. The conditions for participation was to ensure that younger participants had enough experience that could provide thick and rich data, as described by Fusch and Ness (2015). The revision of the age criteria ensured the assumption of successful informal learners in the lifeworld outside and prior to their university experience.

Site of Research

The study took place on a single university campus, thus meeting the criterion that participants have experienced the phenomenon similarly (Creswell, 2014). The institution has a student population between 40,000 and 65,000 student and is located in the Southeast of the United States. The university offers more than 150 programs, including bachelor, master, and doctoral degree-level programs.

The interviews took place on the campus. A conference room in a quiet location was used for the interviews. Based on previously completed pilot interviews, one of the main constrains experienced by nontraditional students was time. Thus, I offered alternative locations and times to ensure meet the scheduling needs of my participants and half the interviews had to be rescheduled

Interview and Survey Process

The interview process in this phenomenological interpretive study is a process of learning about the experience and interpretation of participants who have experiences a specific phenomenon. Through them, the researcher is able to understand the deeper significance of a human experience. The goal of the phenomenological interview is not to acquire information to report the particular subjective view of the participant about the phenomenon, but to ask and learn about the nature of the phenomenon as an essential human experience (van Manen, 1990).

For the purpose of explaining this design, the stages of collecting experiential materials are presented as compartmentalized. Given the nature of the phenomenological

interview, however, they are considered inseparable. During the process of dialogue with the participants during their interviews, there was a constant process of constant reflection with the participant about the experiences. Particularly in this design, the recursive process of reflection and hermeneutic dialogue was used as recurrent stages at different moments in time during and after the collection of material was completed; they constitute two different functions of a unique process.

The study relied on in-depth semi-structured interviews. According to the model, each interview lasted around one hour. The flow of the interviews was kept flexible. The minimum number of participants required for this study and the sufficient amount of information that needs to be collected (saturation) are the principles to structure the final applied design and the emergent components of its implementation (Seidman, 2006; Fusch & Ness, 2015).

The open question descriptive survey was in printed format. There were translated versions into Spanish but all respondents were fluent English speakers. The survey was used to gain perspective of the type and level of support the students had from people they considered important for their process. Additionally, the open questions facilitated the inquiry about the effect that the students' experience had back in their families and friends. The number of surveys and the contribution content of the responses is interpreted in Chapter seven. Insofar the information in the survey did not constitute students' lived experiences, it was not included as part of the hermeneutic analysis.

Interview Questions

The interview questions in this study were developed following the tradition of phenomenology. The conversation was conducted as a hermeneutic dialogue, the interview serves two purposes: (a) to explore narrations of lived experiences that could develop a richer understanding of a phenomenon and (b) develop a conversational relationship with the participants and reflect on experience and meaning.

The interview questions explored lived experiences and lived meanings. The sequence of questions was organized as a way to increase the rapport for the hermeneutic dialogue. Additionally, questions elaborated on emergent lived experiences during the conversation. As the hermeneutic conversation unfolded, the questions followed the path of the recollection and of guided existential reflection in an attempt to involve the four existential themes of lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived human relation (van Manen, 1990). Table 6 contains the interview question matrix that guided me in conducting interviews. The matrix presents the categories of data that will be elicited from participants, the data and question types, and their rationale, the specific questions which will be posed, and follow-up questions.

Table 6

Interview Data Matrix

Data Needed	Data Type	Question Type	Rationale	Interview Question	Follow up
Experience	Narrative of experience	Close ended direct question	To break the ice and obtain some college life background.	How long have you been at UCF?	Had you been in college before?
		Open ended direct question	Inquire biography and life dimensions involved	I believe, you go to school and you also have a job. Would you tell me a bit about your job and family?	How have things changed at work/family after you started to study?
What's new	Narrative of experience of change	Open ended direct question	Inquire about change	How has your life changed since you started classes	Can you compare the routine of a day when you did and how it looks now?
Meaningful supportive relationship	Narrative of relationships and support roles	Open ended direct question	Inquire support – CCW capitals	I'd like to know about your decision to study.	Did you decide it alone?
				Can you tell me about that day and the process?	Are they part of your process as a student?
Integration	Narrative about interactions in campus	Open ended direct question	Inquire support at school	In your courses do you work with someone?	Who do you meet on campus socially?
Change/ becoming	Narrative about self	Open direct question	Inquire awareness of personal change	Do you think the experience of being a student has changed you?	Tell me about where/when you noticed the change Do others notice your change?
Navigating obstacles	Resources mobilized	Open question	Inquire	Can you recall a difficult day at school?	Can you recall a difficult day balancing all the responsibilities? Tell me the worst event and how you solved it.

Research Questions

The following three research questions guided the study. Table 7 contains the research questions, the type of data that will be collected to respond to each question, the instrumentation, the sample, and the methods of analysis used to respond to each of the research questions.

1. What is the lifeworld of undergraduate nontraditional students with significant life experience as they encounter college life?
2. What resources sustain the college experience of undergraduate nontraditional students of and allow navigating the space of college life?
3. What are the changes undergraduate nontraditional students live, the meaning they construct while encountering, and navigating college life?

Data Analysis Procedures

Prior to the transcription of the audio recordings of the interviews, all participant identifiers were removed from digital sound files and replaced with participant codes (numbers and letters) to be able to follow the sequence of conversations with each of them.

The text of the interviews was complemented with journal notes and reflections of the researcher collected after each interview. The contents of the journal notes included contextual elements and non-verbal language of the interviews that cannot be captured with digital audio but that was helpful to reflect and clarify the meaning from the material

gathered from the interviews. Particularly important to the role of the researcher, the journaling process allowed me to “brindle” (Vagle, 2016) my own experience and perspective for the analysis of the material and for the elaboration of the subsequent interview questions.

Analysis of Participants Interviews and Survey

In interpretive phenomenology, the procedures for the analysis of the experiential material obtained in the hermeneutical dialogue and the survey answers in interpretive phenomenology is less structured than other phenomenological approaches. Despite its flexibility, central concepts guide this analytical process that it is creative and demanding.

As Laverly (2003) explained:

There cannot be a finite set of procedures to structure the interpretive process, because interpretation arises from pre-understandings and a dialectical movement between the parts and the whole of the texts of those involved. What was called for is an obligation to understand the context under which the text or dialogue was being produced and to bring forth interpretations of meaning. These interpretations arose through a fusion of the text and its context, as well, as the participants, the researcher, and their contexts. (p. 30)

Table 7

Research Question Matrix

Research Question	Data Type	Instrument	Sample	Data Analysis
RQ 1: What is the lifeworld of undergraduate nontraditional students with significant life experience as they encounter college life?	Narrative of the participant's experience of the world. Descriptive, narrative & context	Semi structured in depth phenomenological interview.	Description of meanings of being in the world and choices made	Isolate essential themes by recursive thematic reflection. Macro-thematic + Micro-thematic. Hermeneutic Cycle
RQ2: What resources that sustain the college experience and allow navigating the space of college life?	Narrative of the participant's experience of the world. Descriptive, narrative & context Narrative of how the community of support, how they experienced the world	Semi structured in depth phenomenological interview. Open question descriptive survey	Description of meanings of being in the world and choices made	Isolate essential themes by recursive thematic reflection. Macro-thematic + Micro-thematic. Hermeneutic Cycle
RQ3: What are the changes undergraduate nontraditional students live and the meaning they construct?	Narrative of the participant's experience of the world. Descriptive, narrative & context	Semi structured in depth phenomenological interview	Description of meanings of being in the world and choices made	Isolate essential themes by recursive thematic reflection. Macro-thematic + Micro-thematic. Hermeneutic Cycle

The text generated by the interviews was analyzed and stories were crafted from topics identified in the text (Appendix J). These stories were reflected on using thematic analysis based on the four existentials proposed by van Manen (1990) that follows the hermeneutic process of writing “linguistic transformation” of the original texts into themes. First, macro-thematic reflection will look at the text as whole. This thematic reflection was followed by micro-thematic reflection.

The process of reflection and analysis in phenomenology is a recursive one that is presented in this proposal as separate stages. Both processes considered the possibility that not all themes that emerge from the texts are essential to the lived experience. The analysis tried to isolate and elaborate in the writing process only the essential themes of the phenomenon (Appendix K).

Besides the thematic elaboration for the analysis, the procedure had as a foundation the six hermeneutic phenomenological research activities proposed by van Manen (1990):

- (1) Turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world,
- (2) Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it,
- (3) Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon,
- (4) Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting,
- (5) Maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon,
- (6) Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (p. 30)

Central to the analysis was the reflection structured by the practice of hermeneutic circle of reading, reflecting writing, and interpretation (Kafle, 2011). A complete detailed account of the sequence of phases included in the method used is found in Chapter 6.

Trustworthiness of Research Findings

Phenomenological interpretive research is not assessed using the traditional criteria of validity. Within the approach, validity is understood as a measure of strength or quality. The criteria within qualitative works vary according to the organizing principles and concepts of each approach. I used the criteria proposed by van Manen (1990, 2014) to appraise the strength of a phenomenological interpretive study. Van Manen's criteria and the respective indicators of strength are presented in Table 8. The criteria include heuristic focus, rich description, interpretive insight, distinctness, addressiveness, and practice.

Originality Score

The advisor informed the committee during the session of the dissertation defense of the results obtained after submitting the manuscript to the Ithenticate website for originality, 9%.

Table 8

Strength Appraisal: Phenomenological Interpretive Studies

Principle	Indicator of Strength
Heuristic focus	<i>Heuristic attentiveness</i> : does the text induce a sense of wonder and questioning?
Rich description	<i>Descriptive richness</i> : does the text contain concrete experiential (narrative) lifeworld material?
Interpretive insight	<i>Interpretive depth</i> : does the text show reflective allusions and surprising insights?
Distinctness	<i>Rigorous focus</i> : is the text constantly guided by a self-critical question of distinct meaning of the phenomenon that is being described?
Addressiveness	<i>Strongly embedded meaning</i> : does the text “speak” to and address our sense of embodied, sensual, situated, temporal, or communal self?
Practice--meaning	<i>Oriented epiphany</i> : does the study offer us the possibility of an ethical or inspired grasp of life-meaning, human action, or professional practice?

Adapted from *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, by M. van Manen, 1990. Copyright 1990 by State University of New York Press. Also adapted from *Phenomenology of Practice: Meaning-giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*, 2014. Copyright 2014 by Routledge.

Summary

The methodology presented in this chapter permitted the exploration of the lived experience of nontraditional students and allowed their silenced voices to be heard. It reexamined the experience of nontraditional students without preconceptions of deficits and expanded the analysis to include broader contexts of the lifeworld of the students such as work and family. Finally, it also explored the meanings they make of the

relationships of support they have and the role that their past experiences play in their academic journey.

CHAPTER 5 THE SHADOW OF THE INVISIBLES

Introduction

The purpose of the chapter is to introduce the people who participated in this research study. As I have presented in the critique of the literature, the lived experiences of students who work, have family responsibilities, and go to school are conspicuously missing from the discussion. I argued that it is not possible to know comprehensively who these students are and how they experience college by simply analyzing their associated demographic variables and risk factors related to attrition. This study was an attempt to bring these students' stories to light and learn about their experiences through their own voices. The current available data only indicates that they exist in large numbers. However, these students remain invisible to their institutions' systems of student support services insofar as services are based on the needs of traditional students and the institutional priorities to retain them.

The goal of introducing the participants of this study was challenging; any effort to represent faithfully in writing who they are, by its very nature, it will be incomplete and inadequate to account for their full presence. I had the privilege to engage in dialogue with them, listen to them, and learn about and with them. I cannot fully share the nuances of their gestures, their silences as they struggle to find the words, the emotions that emerge as they recall their lives, their wry chuckles when describing their struggles, and the tears that drop from their eyes when they describe who they are and who they are becoming.

I hope to bring participants' experiences to light and to appreciate the diversity and richness of their experiences. The process of bringing their experiences to light allows us to acknowledge their presence and see beyond demographics and labels.

It is unthinkable that any woman in Shakespeare's day should have had Shakespeare's genius. For genius like Shakespeare's is not born among the laboring, uneducated servile people. It was not born in England among the Saxons and Britons. It is not born to-day among working classes. How, then, could it have been born among women whose work began...almost before they were out of the nursery, who were forced to it by their parents and held to it by all the power of law and custom? Yet genius must have existed among women as it must have existed among working classes. (Woolf, 1929, p. 41)

As I went through the process of the conducting the individual interviews and analyzing their transcriptions, I remembered Woolf's (1929) assumption that genius is equally distributed among all of us, regardless of the historical and cultural context. In her work, Woolf conjured Shakespeare's sister, naming her Judith; she described Judith's life and concluded that it would have been impossible for Judith, a woman, to write plays in Shakespeare's times. Woolf then extended the inference to men and women who belonged to marginal groups who did not have the privileges that Shakespeare had. The social expectations that emerge from a social structure (e.g., Shakespearean London) determine if that genius can develop and shine. Before meeting the participants, I only guessed at the lives these students led. I knew little about the difficulties they faced, their

lack of social privileges, and their tenacity but I also assumed some brilliance was at play.

The students who I met confirm that genius exists and its recognition depends largely on the tenacity and endurance of each student to defy expectations and overcome structural obstacles that determine the opportunities to succeed in life. As a group, these students represent those who have achieved success in their lifeworld, outside of the university. The participants in this study have become aware of their capabilities and have found creative ways to solve life's problems. They have tried and failed many times and have developed stamina and abilities in the process; participants have brought these experiences and skills to the college experience, together with fears, hesitations, and uncertainties.

Six students participated in this study. As they are invisible to their institution, finding participants was a challenge. Participants were recruited from two student support programs oriented to traditional students but that had included older students. In addition to these two programs, I reached out to professors who teach undergraduate courses and who indicated that they knew of older students taking classes. I received information regarding 20 students who were interested in participating in this study. Of the 20 students invited to participate, 10 responded positively to the invitation and six ultimately participated in the interview process. A structural limitation to recruitment was the limited times available for these students to meet with me; constraints on potential participants' time included family responsibilities (e.g., child care) and employment.

Time is a luxury for these students and constitutes a limited resource in their lives and I was asking them to share what little free time they had with me.

The six students who participated in this study were women' three women were African American, two were White, and one was Afro Caribbean. Five of the interviews were conducted in a conference room on campus that had been especially reserved for this purpose with no limitation of time. For the remaining interview, I went to the student's workspace and we had the conversation in her office. Three of the participants had to reschedule twice and one participant rescheduled three times. One participant brought her daughter to the interview and another participant cancelled her daughter's dentist appointment meet me for the interview. I am most appreciative of their generosity.

The methodology of interpretive phenomenological research assume that the researcher is part of the research process and the analysis is infused with the researcher's own experiences and judgments. It is in the process of writing and reflection that the researcher becomes aware of his or her presence. The acknowledgement of this presence allows the researcher to connect with and evoke the experiences of the participants; this closeness facilitates the emergence of essential themes that define the experiences of all the student-participants.

Accordingly, I present here what I learned about these participants and what they decided to reveal and conceal in the context of their interviews. Pseudonyms have been assigned to each participant to protect their anonymity. I acknowledge that I only captured a glimpse of who they are. Epistemologically, I have tried to augment the limitations of the single image we have of them by situating each personal account within

a specific historical and social context. As Woolf (1929) observed, we cannot deny, assert, or comprehend the existence of the potential capacities of others, their actions, and mindsets if not placed in their cultural and social contexts.

These Are the People Who Contributed Their Experiences

Andrea

At the time of this study, Andrea, a White 37-year-old mother of four, had her two youngest children, a girl (16) and a boy (13), still at home; the two oldest kids were out of state attending college and working. Andrea grew up on the East coast but, when she was in the 11th grade, she moved with her family to Texas where she lived for the next eight years. She is bilingual (Spanish and English). While in Texas, Andrea met her husband and started a family when she was 15. After the family moved back to the East coast, she worked for 15 years as a certified pharmacist and was her family's principle breadwinner. Considering the low pay she was making at the time, Andrea decided that a job in education would provide a better future for her and the family. She attended a local community college for two years and, after that, transferred to a local university. When she decided to go back to school, Andrea had just bought a house and her youngest child was still in elementary school (fourth grade). She had attended full-time college for two years at the time she participated in this study. To make ends meet, Andrea had found a part-time job as substitute teacher for the county, and she works, on average, 16-20 hours

per week. Her husband found a full-time position as a server at a local restaurant. He is supportive of her studies and would do anything to help her.

When she transferred to university, Andrea began her studies as a math and science education major but soon realized that math was going to be a challenge, particularly because of the large class sizes, which was a big change from the community college she attended. Andrea quickly realized that math was not a good option for her and changed to language arts, where she found her niche. She loves reading and can talk about books for hours. Her goal is to teach, get an MA in education, and become a principal at a local school.

For Andrea, it was very important to be present for her children. She shared her academic struggles and successes with them; she shared her student journey with her children when the three of them did homework together at the kitchen table. And they helped each other. For example, Andrea's daughter had helped her by reviewing written assignments for punctuation. Andrea was aware that, besides getting the help she needed, her daughter was also learning by reading and commenting on mom's written assignments. Andrea's job was flexible, and she preferred this type of schedule because it helped her to manage her school schedule and allowed her to attend her son's wrestling meets and her daughter's softball matches, including organizing food concessions.

The role of mother is central to Andrea's identity, and she knew that her attending school creates a model that benefits her children. Once, Andrea asked her professors for permission to bring her daughter to class; her daughter was allowed to attend a full day of class with her mom. Andrea's daughter sat next to her, realized how huge the campus

was, and saw that mom was not the only older person in her class. Andrea's daughter also decided that she would rather attend a smaller institution when it comes time for her to go to college.

Andrea also had a very good friend who she encouraged to go back to school and get her GED. This friend was attending a community college and they helped each other with their assignments. This friend knew everything about Andrea's life and she understood what Andrea was going through as a student. They helped each other with homework, especially when they had to complete activities online and the technology got tricky.

During the interview, my first impression of Andrea was that of a simple, middle-aged woman who looked a bit tired. She did not look like a student but more like a mother who stopped by for the interview on her way to run household errands. During our conversation, I realized that Andrea had clear opinions about her process, her peers, and her kids. At times, Andrea was reluctant to go beyond her general opinions and share her actual life experiences. I understood that some recollections are painful to remember and share. I could see that Andrea struggled as she looked for words. Sometimes, her choice was not to delve into specific past experiences which I recognized was a legitimate option in any conversation. Andrea, like any other participant in this study, chose what to reveal and what to conceal as she saw fit. She was calm and perhaps, justifiably, a little tired. But my final impression of Andrea was serenity and acceptance. There was something in her that suggested that, although difficulties along the way are inevitable, she embraces these difficulties without hesitation. I am not sure if her

accepting attitude and positive energy when dealing with obstacles is a virtue, but after meeting her and listening to her story, I believe that it represents a talent of sorts, a survival skill that carries her toward her goals. Andre made a big decision to go back to school, and she has persevered. More importantly, Andrea has maintained her goal of improving her life and her family's future:

I don't let anything stress me out anymore because if I did that, I was stressed out all the time. I got way too many things going on. So, I kind of just let everything go with the flow like it happens or it doesn't happen, and if it doesn't happen, then you should try again later. That's all I can. I mean that's all I can do because I can't give up. That's the biggest thing I can't give up. I've put too much effort and time and money into this I can't give up. There's not an option. (Transcript 60, pp. 30-36)

Teresa

Teresa was a second-year student who was majoring in health and sciences in addition to pursuing a minor in mathematics. At the time of our interview, Teresa was 37 years old and held a full-time job as an administrative assistant at a large university. She is African American and was, at the time, a single mom with a seven-year-old daughter. She attended a local community college before transferring to the university to complete her major. She completed her AA in five years and, two years later, she enrolled at the university. Teresa did not begin her studies immediately after high school and, when she did enroll in community college, she was already married and working full-time. Then, Teresa had to take a break because her spouse did not support her education. When she eventually went through her divorce, she already had her daughter. Then, Teresa was free to go back to school, but she initially struggled to find the right balance between the

demands of motherhood, work, and her studies. Teresa eventually interrupted her studies two more times while she found more stable jobs and a place of her own. She managed to finish her AA and achieve some stability. Eventually, she was ready to move on to the next step. When she entered the university in 2014, Teresa was commuting one hour to campus from her place of work. She maintained this grueling schedule for a year; she picked the earliest morning classes, got up at 5:30 a.m. to get her 3-year-old daughter ready, and drove an hour to campus for her 7:30 a.m. class. She always took her daughter to class and the first semester the preschooler sat through Calculus III and Logic and Proof. Mother and daughter went for breakfast between the first and second class period and they sat together in the first row of the classroom. After class, Teresa and her little girl rushed to the state-sponsored free child care program; this program offered four hours of child care (noon to 4:00 p.m.). During that time, Teresa completed her homework and then went to work at Home Depot. Teresa maintained this schedule for the first year of her university studies. In her second year, Teresa found a one-bedroom apartment closer to campus and a job with more hours. Teresa still brought her daughter to every class, except when she had to pay for childcare when she needed to attend labs. Although she always managed to get permission from each professor to bring her daughter to class, Teresa couldn't circumvent the liability risk of a minor in a lab. These days Teresa's daughter is in elementary school and Teresa found a full-time job with higher pay. She can afford a service that picks up her daughter from school and takes her to after-school activities. After work, Teresa picks her up at 6 p.m.

At the time of this study, Teresa was approaching the end of her program and reported that she has faced problems with the requirements of her program. The university required Teresa to take her final courses on campus and that conflicted with her work schedule. She found transient classes at a local college that fulfilled some of her requirements but she wasn't allowed to do that on weekends. Unfortunately, her remaining course requirements were not offered online, which would have been ideal. Teresa was advised to change her major to one that could accommodate her life circumstances. And that is what Teresa did—her current major was not her first choice as she was initially pre-med.

Teresa arrived at our interview accompanied by her daughter; after all, they go everywhere together, even sharing the same birthday. I could see mother and daughter were very close and they were very engaged with each other. Teresa explained to her daughter what was going to happen during the interview. From that moment, the little girl was quiet and entertained herself. At the beginning, I found something odd in the attitude of the child; I thought maybe she was an introvert as she did not appear to be shy. At that time, I didn't pay much attention to how familiar the girl was to the classroom environment. By the end of the conversation, I could understand the little girl more clearly; she is just a normal seven-year-old who has spent many hours in college classrooms.

Teresa looked much younger than her years; she has bright eyes that speak to the energy that drives her. She appeared very confident and articulated her answers with a combination of detailed recollections followed by a reflection on what she had revealed;

Teresa demonstrated an acute awareness of what she has experienced and continues to experience. Teresa and I settled quickly into our discussion and the interview flowed very easily, with many of her recollections surprising me. Her experience as a young mother and student shifted how I thought about the struggles of balancing academic life and personal responsibilities. Teresa described her personal story with true emotional intensity. Her voice was strong and clear when explaining hardships while her voice became lower and softer when describing painful moments. Teresa shared her emotions with honesty and transparency; still, she remained composed at all times. In her responses, Teresa chose her words carefully and with precision, careful to be truthful in her recollections. The account of her lived experiences is infused with a sense of duty to herself, her daughter, and her life goals. Displaying a never-surrender attitude, Teresa did not present herself as a hero or a martyr; she is very much a matter-of-fact type of woman. Paradoxically, despite having endured many hardships, I saw a very balanced person with a clear head who strives to be honest and authentic. A student and mother? Well, Teresa decided that she could take her daughter with her to class. For her, it was the logical thing to do and there was nothing for which to apologize. For some, her solution might have seemed impossible, but she made the decision after much reflection and no small amount of courage.

I don't think I learn just like they do (peers). I definitely absorb the information a little differently. And part of it is because of what motivates me. I'm at that point you know, at my age and in my life where I don't see failure as an option and if I were younger or if I didn't have a child and I lived on campus, you know, I would be making so many mistakes right now. I wouldn't be passing my classes, you know, the way I passed my classes or I wouldn't maybe, I wouldn't be on top of school work the way I'm on top of my school work now. And it's mainly, that I

take that approach because I can't afford it financially, I can't afford it chronologically. Like, I can't afford the time or the money to make mistakes. And a lot of people who are not in my situation, who may be taking the same class, they, they don't have that same outlook because they don't have the same experiences. (Transcript 54, p. 14, lines 9-18)

Emilia

Emilia is an Afro-Caribbean woman who came to the US 20 years ago from a small English-speaking island. At the time of our interview she was 40 years old and a single mother who worked and attended school full time. She was about to finish her BA in legal studies that summer and she was set to start law school in the fall. Emilia expressed a desire to get into politics after becoming a lawyer as she is moved by social justice issues. Before starting her BA, Emilia attended a local community college for three years. It took her three years to finish her AA because, at the time, she was working for the state full-time from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. At the time, her daughter was in kindergarten so she could only take classes part-time. Immediately after she finished her AA, she transferred to a university to complete her BA. No pauses or breaks.

Emilia was married for two years and then she and her husband divorced. Divorced and in charge of her daughter, Emilia decided to go back to school. For a while, her ex-husband lived in their house while it was being sold. During that time, Emilia dropped the girl at school in the Early Learning Program at 7:00 a.m. to make it to work by 8:00 a.m. She worked until 5:00 p.m., picked up her daughter before 6 p.m., dropped her off at their home to stay with her father. Then, Emilia rushed to the community college for her classes. She could only take classes at night. Emilia maintained this

schedule for her first two years at the community college. The only time she had to study and do homework was from 4:30 to 5:30 in the morning, a schedule that she was keeping at the time of this study. The previous semester, because she had taken five courses, Emilia had to add an additional half an hour of study time in the mornings.

In 2016, Emilia started her B, at the same time she was terminated from her job working for the state. She had never thought of her job as a career and her supervisors had never been accommodating in terms of her work schedule; she only needed the job to make ends meet. Emilia felt relieved when her former marital home sold and she was able to move into an apartment. Her ex-husband had already moved to another city and, at the time of this interview, did not own a car. Emilia did not have any relatives in town or friends to help her in managing her day-to-day logistics. She recognized that her priorities were to be a full-time mom and a full-time student. After struggling to find a new job that would fit her schedule and provide enough income, Emilia discovered Uber, a peer-to-peer ridesharing and transportation service, and she has been working with the company for two years. She works while her daughter is at school and when she is not at the university. She makes more money driving for Uber than at her previous state job. To maximize her time, Emilia arose early each morning and worked on her homework. After that, she had breakfast with her daughter around 7:30 a.m. and then dropped her off at school. On most days, she headed to a morning class at one of the regional campuses of the university and later picked her daughter from school at 3 p.m. Then, they headed back to the house to change clothes before driving to the main campus for an afternoon. They had to leave the house around 4 p.m. to make it on time for class at 6 p.m. On her way to

class, Emilia and her daughter would stop at a fast food restaurant to get something to eat while they sit in traffic. Emilia's evening classes lasted until 9:30 p.m. Emilia made sure that her daughter completed her homework while sitting with her in class.

Although she reported not having time to socialize or enjoy any of the extra-curricular activity that the university offers to students, she did find the time to join organizations; she was inducted into the Greek society for National Leadership Success, and she received an award for academic performance from the TRIO scholars program.

Emilia had a striking personality and, regardless of the hardships she was recalling and sharing, she maintained what I saw as a genuine positive attitude during the whole conversation that lasted almost one hour. Emilia appeared to be very happy and actively enjoying her life. She declared a few times that she was passionate, opinionated, and had a strong personality that became clear as the conversation unfolded. I enjoyed the listening to the distinct rhythm and cadence of her speech; she repeated many times particular expressions to emphasize what she had said and she was very effective at adding color to her recollections. I observed that there was a theatricality to her voice, how she used a loud voice as easily as she whispered to indicate that something was private. Emilia is an extrovert who brought passion to everything she shared in our conversation. With her lively spirit, it was easy for her to develop an idea and then quickly branch out into other topics. I could see how her mind was churning with ideas. As our conversation unfolded, I could see how cultural differences can influence problem solving in creative and unique ways. I saw how, as an immigrant, Emilia remained aware of the differences between herself and the locals, affirming her identity in the process.

Emilia was present in the moment, meeting the demands of her busy, complex life with intensity. She was looking at US culture from the position of an outsider, adapting to the new world of the university using the same skills she used to adapt to her new country. She was aware that she does not belong at the university, and I do not think she wants to.

Failure is not in my DNA. So, I always thrived for greatness. I'm very determined. And I think because of all the challenges that I was able to overcome. I think that was an ingredient that you know somewhat helped me, that kept me going. Keep going, don't give up, just keep going, don't give up, keep going, don't give up. So yeah because of my experiences, those you know, I'm going to try to just continue thriving and thriving and thriving. Yeah. (Transcript 55, p. 16, lines 6-11)

Susan

At the time of our interview, Susan was a student in the bachelor of social work program at a large university. She was 36 years old, Black, and the mother of two children—a 14-year-old boy and a 16-year-old girl. She was in her last semester and attended school full time. She also worked part-time. Susan's internship that she currently held required approximately 20 hours of work per week, but she was working close to 45 hours per week to help with a federal review. She was married for six years; her husband was a veteran who recently had finished his BA at a local private university.

After graduating from high school, Susan enrolled at a local community college. She, a first-generation college student, received no guidance from her family. She enrolled in six classes the first semester, failed, and dropped. Then, she had the first child; the father never got involved. Susan started working, got married, and had her second child. Her marriage was very abusive and, as a result, there was no opportunity for her to pursue an education. But Susan stayed busy, taking care of the children and

supporting the family financially. Her husband passed away in 2008. While she worked at a social charity for children, Susan observed interns in social work working with clients; she felt that was her call to work towards getting a better job. Susan went back to college, ultimately navigating through three colleges to get her AA. She tried online classes but she realized that she needed face-to-face classes for some specific subjects in she needed to improve. Trying to find the right fit, Susan tried a private college, then she tried a private Christian college. She collected credits along the way and eventually completed her AA and graduated from a state college in 2015.

By the time she earned her AA, Susan had already decided that a BA in social work was her goal. She also had started dating. For her next step—going to a university—she had made some big decisions and had a game plan: quit her job, convinced her employers to write a letter that supported her application for state unemployment benefits, and cashed in her 401K to buy a mobile home close to the campus. Susan wanted to be a full-time student and started working part-time (26 hours per week) at a local Home Depot. She also got married, but she stills considers herself a single mother as every expense for the kids and most of the family's expenses (e.g., rent and utilities) are paid by her. At the same time, Susan had continued to volunteer at a local charity that supports the homeless; she began volunteering while she was pursuing her AA (five years ago). Susan said that she fell in love with social work in that environment and she stated strongly that helping others has helped her be herself. She had to stop volunteering recently because she had to complete her internship. To find the

extra hours to devote to the internship, Susan had to pay for childcare and has had to reduce her hours at Home Depot.

The transition to a large university was not easy for Susan, particularly working with classmates in groups along with speaking in class. Susan learned to adapt and she was very aware of her limitations as well as her strengths regarding her academic work. She found a strategy to face and deal with these new academic challenges and she had no intention of quitting. Also, Susan convinced two her sisters to go back to school and they helped each other; her sisters also have children of their own.

Susan decided that, after graduating, she wanted to secure a job that allows her to spend as much time as possible with her children. She was aware she had been absent from her children and she feared that she might have hurt them already. Her husband suggested that she should continue on to her MA immediately after graduation, that she could make more money with an advanced degree. Unsurprisingly, Susan had already meditated on the question of going to right on to graduate school after her BA and she had already made up her mind: she will be staying with the children while they need her.

My conversation with Susan lasted one hour and a half. She was eager to share her life story with me. When she arrived, Susan looked very tired but she had dressed up for our meeting and had applied fresh make up before her arrival. She looked like an older, respectful woman, and I did not think people on campus would have identified her as a student. As we travelled through her life in our conversation, I got the feeling that she was trying very hard to persevere in her lifelong goals, but the long process she shared with me revealed she had become brittle as a result. As I listened to her, I

confirmed my first impression: Susan is a relentless fighter. I wondered if she was trying too hard to be present in the moment and collaborate with me, beyond her comfort zone. As I listened to her, that constant effort to help others and a genuine attitude of service emerged as a core element of Susan's being, including helping me with my study.

During our conversation, I became mesmerized with her capacity to recall, to remember, and bring back particulars of situations long past. The number of situations and events she could recall was enormous, and she never bothered sharing her stories in a lineal, chronological fashion. I could discern that she was sharing events as they flowed in her recollection. At times, the lack of a clear chronology made it hard for me to follow her stories or link them together in a meaningful way. For example, she introduced one sister, much later she talked about another one, and then, in the middle of a story, she referred to a third one; when she said "my sister" at one point, I didn't know which one she was referring to but most of time I didn't interrupt. Eventually, I got into the rhythm of her narrative and was confident that the stories were going to make sense in the end. It was just Susan, with her eloquent way of talking about her life. Sometimes the events and situations she described were difficult; the conversation became emotional, and she cried. I saw that she did not try to hold in her emotions and was willing to display her feelings openly.

Susan's life represents a timeline of learning and survival. I think that her perseverance developed early in her life and became the foundation of her drive to move forward and keep trying. At the same time, the learning experiences of her younger years shaped her ability to relate to people. Her lived experiences as a student were displayed in

the tapestry formed by those events and serve as the context in which to understand who she is and who she is becoming.

I grew up in... so, I came to the university and the biggest biggest, biggest, biggest thing that I grew up on... at the university had to be... (she struggles, pauses, mutters) That... people are not as bad as you think they're. When I was a single mom, running around in an abusive relationship... I always thought people perceived me a certain way. And so, I combated it. And I started perceiving other people the way I thought they were. But then when you sit in a room with a whole bunch of kids, of all nationalities, and you listen to them talk about how they went to Africa to feed kids. With their church or with some, you know, group...and you're like... You did that? You know what I'm saying, and then you're sitting in a room with a whole bunch of people and everyone in that room for that specific program is passionate about that one thing and you all have that commonality. That's amazing. Like, I'm like, I can't believe it. You want to help homeless people too? You know, for what reason? ... and you just see the kindness of everyone's heart. Like I now see people different. I now see people. As willing and wanting to help. All you have to do is ask.

...I'm working on not caring how people see me (chuckles). I'll try to get to that point where I'm like I am who I am, you know. I would always try to be better. You know, I'm always wanting to just become a better individual. But I'm working on not caring so much, you know. Like... and then like it's fun!, it's fun like knowing I got a degree, what we were talking about, like, like back in the day when I was younger, and with my kids, I hated, I hated being on food stamps. I was grateful, But I didn't want that, and now it feels so good. (Transcript 57, pp. 21-22, lines 46-20)

Carla

At the time of our interview, Carla, a White woman, was 46 years old. She had been married for 16 years, and she and her husband had been together for a total of 20 years. They have three boys, at the time their ages ranged from 11 to 21 years old. The oldest was attending the same university as Mom; they started together in the same year but she was to graduate a semester before her son. Her oldest son was born during her

first marriage. Carla was pursuing a double major: in the health and legal fields. She also was on track to earn a minor in anthropology and a certificate in advocacy. Carla had already been accepted into an MA program that she was set to start the semester after she graduates.

Carla, at the time of our interview, worked full-time at a large university. The nature of her job required that she be on call 24/7 two weeks of each month. She had been at that job for the past 10 years. Carla first went to a community college in 1988 and she had her first son with her. She took four breaks in her education but she always returned to her studies; she went back in 2000, 2007, and 2011. By that time, she had three kids and was taking one class each semester until she completed her AA while working full-time. During that time, other events happened. Carla went through a very difficult divorce and it was hard to take care of a baby, work, and study. At that time, she only had a few credits left to finish her associate degree when she decided she wanted to continue on to her BA. She had to switch to the AA program and the majority of the credits did not transfer, so she stopped. She went back but changed jobs and had a new family and a new baby. And lots of extra hours at her job didn't leave much time for education, so she stopped. An additional two job changes and health problems hindered her return to her studies. At her last job, her boss encouraged her to go back so she could be promoted. So, she took one course at a time and she graduated with her AA in the summer of 2015. In Spring 2016, Carla started working on her BA. Then, she began pursuing her studies full-time, excelling in every class. She was participating in an honors programs, in leadership programs, and she had been serving as a teaching assistant. Busy

as she had been, her kids and her husband remained the anchor for her life. The family was organized around the support she needed to perform academically. When she decided to go for her BA, the family discussed how everybody was going to assume new responsibilities and her husband guaranteed that everybody did their part. For example, her husband did the grocery shopping, one the boys cleaned the bathroom, another one filled and emptied the dishwasher, and everybody was in charge of their own laundry and folding.

Lacking a home office, Carla did her homework at a desk in her bedroom or sometimes she shared the space with the boys and their homework. They knew that when Mom was locked in her room with the computer, they were not allowed to interrupt her. She got up at 4:30 every day to study and do homework. After that, she made breakfast for everybody and sat with them while they ate it. For her, that was the time she could have with her family all together. Carla worked until 4:30 p.m. but she stayed in her office on campus until 5:30 p.m. to study. Then, she would go home, make everybody a snack, and continue with homework until it was time for dinner. After dinner, she usually worked until 8:30 p.m.

She did miss time with the family, especially now that her middle son was about to start high school the coming year and she felt she had not been there for him and they have grown apart. Recently, when she had to manage a crisis at work and she was on call and had exams, she felt that she could not continue. She took a day off and went to the beach with her middle son. She felt she needed to do something to find her balance and feel better about her role as a mother.

Carla expressed her deep satisfaction with her work atmosphere and culture. She knew she would not be there for long. Her long-time aspiration had been to move to a better position, and she said the BA and her academic performance would unlock that possibility.

My interview with Carla was easy. She was very proud of her accomplishments and was eager to share the details. Still, there was a constant tension in our conversation because I wanted to know about her lived experiences, past and present, but her responses frequently focused on the future and her plans. When Carla did talk about the past, she added how things are going to change in the future. Carla was constantly living in hope and looked forward to what was to come. I understood that the length of her journey and the perseverance she had demonstrated focused her vision squarely on the future, especially as she was just a few weeks away from receiving her diploma. She talked about job opportunities and job offers with genuine excitement.

During our conversation, I noticed almost instantly Carla's repeated references to her husband and the boys; she focused on her role as a mother and wife in many of the recollections life as a student. It became obvious that, although her student journey had been riddled by turmoil, her persistence and tenacity was propelled by the stability and certainty of the family and their explicit support. In her case, I could see that her academic journey had been a collective one. Everybody's lives had been affected and transformed by her commitment to her studies and she was determined to make sure that I saw the shared nature of her accomplishment. Carla recalled moments when she felt overwhelmed and had decided to quit. Her family changed her mind and helped her

sustain her process. After learning about her, I had no doubt about the momentum she had generated during her two years at the university, a please that was quite different from those many years at the community college. Carla said that her only concern was that she was getting old and needed to sleep more than she had been. She admitted that gets tired more easily than she did when she was younger. I could certainly empathize with that. I was also certain that her enthusiasm for what lies ahead would keep her going and she would succeed.

I usually get up about four 4:30 a.m. doing homework if I have it until about 6:30 when I wake up the first one that's my youngest son that needs to get ready for school. We breakfast together, gather our things and we have to be out of the door by 7:30. Do other stuff. Sometimes I stay, I usually work 8:00 to 4:30, sometimes I'll stay until 5:00 or 530 if I have some homework or more homework I need to get done or do get a jump on the evening stuff and then I'll go pick him up from school. My middle son gets home on the bus my older son he goes wherever he wants to now. And then, I come home, everybody gets a snack, I'll sit down and do homework until we decide what are we getting for dinner. You know, my husband, my husband cooks it...Then, I'll do work until, until about 8:00 o'clock that's when I'm done I want to be in the shower and in my bed by 8:15 because to get up so early. And that gives me time to spend with especially the little one because he's very, he's 11, but he's very, he's a momma's boy, mini me for sure. (Transcript 61, pp. 6-7, lines 39-5)

Anna

Anna, at the time of our interview, was a 20-year-old White student in the language arts program at a university. She was in the process of completing her second year. Anna completed her AA at a local community college; she had graduated in the spring and she did not want to wait until fall to start. She started immediately after graduation, in the summer semester. Anna paid out of pocket for those credits during that

summer semester. Anna was living with her grandmother and her father; she was also the primary caregiver for her grandfather and grandmother. Her grandfather was connected to an oxygen machine and he passed away last fall.

She attended school full-time. Anna had taken five classes per semester on average and she worked two jobs. She had received mostly “A”s in her classes. At the time, Anna was working for the YMCA as a counselor in their after-school program (24 hours per week) and she was a substitute teacher for a local county for about 21 hours per week. She tried to substitute teach two or three days a week. The substitute teaching system allowed her to pick time slots so she had the flexibility to make her days fit with her school schedule.

Nobody in her family had attended college and her father and grandmother understood that she was busier now. However, her priority was to be able to spend enough time with her grandmother so she worked her schedule around her grandmother’s needs. The previous fall, when her grandfather had a small accident while connected to the respirator, she rushed home, providing CPR until the ambulance arrived. She knew that too much time had passed and probably not enough oxygen had reached his brain. While he was in the hospital, other members of the family arrived from other cities to see him. Despite Anna’s help, he did not recover. Anna’s family made the decision to disconnect his life support. Her father called Anna to inform her of the decision while she was in class. She picked up the phone and decided to stay in class. There was nothing she could do for him, she had already taken care of him, and she tried to keep him alive. Despite wanting to be with her family, Anna decided to stay in class because the prospect

of having to catch up with what she would miss would be more stressful than not going home.

She didn't tell anybody in her class about her grandfather's death because she didn't want anybody to treat her differently or make exceptions for her. Because of her class schedule, the hardest days for her were Mondays; She worked and also had classes on that day. Anna left the house at 7 a.m. and her last class ended at 9:20 p.m. Not only she was concerned about her family, but her family was also waiting for her at home, worried about how she was coping with their loss. She was definitely the pillar that supported her family.

At the time of our interview, Anna had a fiancé who was also a student, worked, and was a caregiver for her family. In the mornings, she picked up her fiancé and, after class, dropped him off before heading to her own job. She has made new friends among her classmates; Anna and her fiancé tried to participate in the tailgating activities before the football games at the campus stadium, but she and her friends did not have the money nor the time. Some of her friends also work two or three jobs. When they had the time, Anna and her friends would hang out on a Saturday at someone's house but they never got together on campus.

On Wednesdays, Anna would get up at 6 a.m. and prepare breakfast for Grandma and then she gets ready for school. She would pick up her fiancé and arrive at campus for her 7:30 a.m. class. She was in class until 1:20 p.m. Ann and her fiancé would then leave campus, and she would drop her fiancé at his home she could start work at 2 p.m. She changed into her YMCA uniform in the office at the school after she arrived. She

admitted that she did not like to wear her uniform to school and that her classmates noticed it. She would work until 6 p.m. Then, she would go home, cook dinner for her father, take care of Grandma, and clean the house. Her father would go to bed around 8:30 p.m. but she would keep her grandma company until around 10 p.m., making sure she was OK. After that, she would tackle her homework. She did not enjoy Wednesdays because the fast pace of the day and the demands of everyone and everything—school, family, work—stressed her greatly. She particularly did not like to appear stressed out in front of the kids she was teaching.

The interview with Anna contradicted some of the ideas I had developed that based on my own experience as a student and my research on this topic of study. Anna was quite young in age, but she reported life experiences that one would expect from someone much older. Listening to her share the events that make up her short life made me wonder if the complexity of life events can really make someone mature rapidly and become older in wisdom and mindset. The first impression I had of Anna was that of a young girl. She was soft spoken and, like many people in her age cohort, her sentences often ended with a raised tone, as if asking a question. I know it is just a way of talking, but, in her case, it created an impression that she was doubting everything she was telling me and she asking for confirmation. That impression contrasted with her lived experiences and how she handled the responsibilities of a family, job, and schoolwork. She was assertive about herself and she is driven as a student, as a worker and as the head of a household. She never complained and I never interpreted any of her comments as

frustration. Anna appeared and happy and was performing academically. I think that the only thing that she was missing was the opportunity to be a 20-year-old student:

How do I pull this off? I want to say it's will. Honestly, I have anxiety and a lot of my anxiety is a force for me to do something whereas it could be a factor in procrastination it's not for me. It's like hey you have something to do. You should do it before you get it. It's like a constant, like I can't forget about it. And so knowing that, it's like I have three calendars, I have one of my planner, I have one in my room, I'm like you still have this to do, you should do it for the end of the week. You should do it tonight. And I pressure myself to do it which isn't really good but I get it done and that plays a big role. But also, remembering everything else I have to do, I'm like make sure you do it at this time. At the time when you know you have time...I would say that thing, most like a big factor they put pressure on me, is that I wasn't sure what to expect. And the anxiety that I got was from knowing like I didn't know where to go. But after knowing where things would be it was OK. (Transcript 56, p. 3, lines 22-36).

Summary

There were six participants in this study. The descriptions of the participants provide the contexts in which their respective lived experiences have taken place and attach meaning to the choices they have made. Each participant was distinct, as were the plot points of her story; their different roles, however, intersected and sometimes overlapped. Their life stories played out within a shared space—the world of the university—and these stories then impacted the other worlds they occupied (e.g., family, work). These women brought the totality of their previous live experiences to the educational space; transformed by their experiences as students, the participants in this study were able to take what they learned to improve their lives in other realms, including work, relationships, and their plans for the future. Their voices will be heard in greater detail in the following chapter. The goal of this chapter was to have a glimpse into their

lives and who they are. The descriptions included here bring to light to the richness and diversity of their lives inside and outside the university and present their lives as a process in motion.

CHAPTER 6 LISTENING TO VOICES: A METHOD

Introduction

In Chapter 4, I presented the methodology for this study. The background of the methodology situated the inquiry within a phenomenological interpretive approach. As such, I presented the main assumptions about the relationship of the researcher to the phenomenon along with the criteria for trustworthiness. Central components for the implementation were the use of a hermeneutic sequence of reading, reflecting, and interpreting (Kafle, 2011) and the micro and macro sequence of thematic reflection (van Manen, 1990) to relate parts of the texts to the whole in a recursive manner (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). These general parameters established and organized the data analysis of this study. Consistent with the hermeneutic approach, the practical implementation of the analysis had no *a priori* set of steps to follow. As van Manen (2006), commenting on Heidegger's notion of techniques for analysis, stated, "Genuine phenomenological method consists in creating one's path, not in following a path" (p. 720).

In this chapter, I present the practical steps and conventions I followed to meet the guidelines and requirements of the interpretive phenomenological analysis.

The Nature of the Task

Writing is not just externalizing internal knowledge, rather it is the very act of making contact with the things of our world. In this sense to do research is to write, and the insights achieved depend on the right words and phrases, on styles and traditions, on metaphor and figure of speech, on argument and poetic image. (van Manen, 2002, p. 237)

The analysis involved writing as the primary task. The operational question to answer was this: how, from listening to the interview audio recordings and reading the interview transcriptions, could I develop a writing practice that would facilitate the appropriate depth of reflection, reading, and additional writing. I was certain the textual material I had collected “possessed hermeneutic and interpretive significance” (van Manen, 2006, p. 715). Also, I understood that the constant dialectical movement of looking at details in units of statements and looking at the whole was necessary to gain insight about themes in the lived experiences of my participants. Finally, the task had to involve my reflections as a researcher to allow me become aware of how I was interpreting the meaning of their lived experiences.

I understood that, in the process of devising my own path of analysis, I would have to confront and resolve the challenge involved in trying to represent in words a phenomenon that escapes representation. As van Manen (2006) describes, “Language substitutes itself for the phenomenon that it tries to describe” (p. 718). As such, the task was an elusive one for a novice writer such as myself. The goal was to develop an analysis that sees through the crevices of the lived experiences and captures in words the meaning and phenomenon to share it with readers.

I understood that my pre-understandings could guide my writing and reflections and condition my analysis. While devising my own process, I became aware that this analysis required an attitude throughout the procedure. I concluded that the attitude I needed to face the task was one of progressively letting go of what I knew and understood and engage with the phenomenon. My attitude had to allow me to merge my

own history and culture “with the history and culture of an unfamiliar other” (McManus, 2007, p. 5). I understood I had “to live the method” (Smythe, 2011, p. 46).

Crafting the Analysis

First, I present the organization of the analysis in the form of the outline I followed to guide the methodical implementation of each step. The narrative of the implementation of the series of steps follows the outline.

The sequence of instructions followed for the interpretive phenomenological process appears in Table 9. For practical purposes, the hermeneutic circle has been defined as continuous, non-linear, and in dialectical relationship with the data.

Table 9

Steps in the Interpretive Phenomenological Process

Step	Activity
1	Transcribe interviews.
2	Group text in clusters of text according to topics in the conversation.
3	Reflect and write 1-3 short phrases that capture the lived experience of the interview as a whole.
4	Read each topic and reflect on how each topic relates to the short phrases you wrote.
5	Revise and re write (if necessary) the short phrases that represent the interview as a whole. Use the dialectics between the detail and the whole in the text. How do they resonate with your own personal experience?
6	Extract from the text under each topic the lived experience and highlight it. Leave aside comments, opinions, and speculations that are not actual lived situations.

Step	Activity
7	Reflect and write on how those lived experiences connect with the hermeneutic dialogue during the interview. In terms of the conversation as a whole, which one appears as transcendental and which ones are incidental.
8	Craft stories with the highlighted lived experience. Think of the audience. Be faithful to the lived experiences as you compose them.
9	Reflect and write what the stories are revealing using the four reflective themes proposed by van Manen (1990): (a) spatiality (lived space), (b) corporeality (lived body), (c) relationality (lived other/relation), and (d) temporality (lived time). What do they evoke and what resonates with you?
10	Reflect & identify essential and incidental themes in the stories. Use free imagination variation step.
11	Reflect & write what personal experience is at play in the analysis.

Narratives

Transcribe Interviews

The starting point of the analysis was the transcription process that captured, in writing, the hermeneutic conversations with each participant. The transcriptions, as a verbatim record, included the peculiarities of the question-and-answers sequence of the interview format and included the fillers and hesitations that define the dynamic of oral communication. The transcriptions also reflected the non-linear nature of a natural conversation. The recollection of one event led to another and, as rapport and trust developed, events and descriptions of lived experiences were explored repeatedly with new depth and nuances. The unstructured nature of the interview process allowed for each conversation to flow at a different pace; participants created their own unique

winding path as they branched out to other topics associated experiences. Those associations provided a rich context for their lived experiences. The resulting product was a transcription document for each participant, with time tags for the exchanges, page numbers, and line numbers.

Group Text

The first task was to identify topics that emerged in each conversation and categorize the text with the voice of the participants under the different topics identified. The process demanded a thorough reading of the text of the transcript and the clustering of segments of the text under topics that emerged along the conversation. As an unstructured interview, the questions and follow-ups from the protocol allowed the topic of conversation to expand and, as a result, the participants pursued topics that otherwise might have gone unexplored. These unplanned topics resonated with the participants and enriched the recollection of their lived experiences.

This step involved the detailed scrutiny of each paragraph of the transcription, deciding if it belonged to a topic already identified or if a new topic should be created. After this up-close review of these text fragments, the next step involved the dialectical process of seeing the collection of topics and clusters that represent the collection of shared experiences as a whole.

Read and Write

This step involved two phases: (1) the summary of what the participant was revealing during the hermeneutic dialogue in three or four short phrases or concepts and (2) a reflection on my choice of phrases or concepts to describe the interview as a whole and how these terms related to the topics.

Read Each Topic

After the whole text was characterized using short phrases, I re-read each topic with those words in mind. As those phrases accounted for the whole set of topics in the conversation, I wanted to have a deeper, more accurate impression of how these phrases connected with each individual topic.

Revise and Re-Write

Most of the time, after completing the micro contrasting reflection of each topic with the short phrases, I saw aspects of the conversation and of the participant that I had not seen in the broad view of the whole interviews. I proceeded to revise the short phrases and re-wrote many of them.

Extract

The following action involved looking at each cluster and the text under each topic and highlighting the description and evocation of actual lived experiences only. This step contained an eidetic reduction (van Manen, 2017) that was aimed at keeping only what appears as essential. I excluded everything that was a free opinion, a

conjecture, or a hope. I kept the opinions that represented synthesis of, or elaborations on, a lived experience. Following the guidelines for crafting stories of Crowther, Ironside, Spence, and Smythe (2017), I continued by removing the details that did not add to the story. In the recursive sequence of the hermeneutic circle, in the next step I progressed from the detailed scrutiny of the text to the identification of the lived experiences. The next step emphasized the researcher's reflection.

Read and Write

At this stage, I re-read all of the highlighted text—the lived experiences—and reflected on these experiences and wrote about how they were present in the conversation of the interview. I also reflected on the relevance they could have for me when I first listened to them and how they shaped my first impression of the participant.

Craft Stories

The following step involves the crafting of stories. To introduce this phase in the analysis, I will first describe the sources that informed the construction of the stories in my research. This methodological step was inspired by van Manen's (2017) essay on meaning attribution in phenomenology. In this discussion, he presents examples of Heidegger's analysis of boredom. This analysis utilizes short stories with concrete examples of experiencing boredom aimed at evoking in the reader the lived experience. From his stories, van Manen identifies the existence of three kinds of boredom. Van Manen demonstrates the emotional impact the various kinds of boredom would have on

the reader. In the case of Heidegger's accounts, the stories or anecdotes could be fictitious events or stories that have been embellished to reveal more accurately the experience of boredom. In his stories, Heidegger had the choice to describe any generic situation as a means to sustain his reflection and evoke in the reader the essential feeling of boredom. In the case of the lived experiences of the students in my study, the stories were crafted using only the text that constituted the lived experiences in each clustered topic. Faithfulness to their stories and authenticity of the text was paramount. In my study, the crafting of stories did not allow the inclusion of fictional elements or stylistic embellishments.

The crafting of the stories also borrowed from the examples of Crowther et al. (2017). Like them, I re-ordered the sentences containing lived experiences to make sure the composition of the story flowed. I also corrected grammar and verb tenses to ensure time consistency. Similarly, connectors or prepositions were included to transition from one section to the next one in the story. I also utilized the exercise suggested by the authors of reading each story aloud. This helped me identify where further reordering or polishing was needed. The examples that Crowther et al. (2017) provide are different from the stories created by Heidegger to analyze the essence of boredom. In their examples, the stories are crafted from genuine personal lived experiences. In Crowther's et al. process (2017), there is attention to extracting the actual lived experiences and crafting stories without adding fictional elements.

The two examples that served as the inspiration for my adaptation differed in two ways. First, in his reflective analysis, Heidegger utilizes the story as a way to illustrate

the phenomenon he has previously discussed and to clarify his argument for his readers. The stories are clearly well crafted to serve the purpose of representing a lived experience. The analysis that follows is ad hoc in the sense that the reflection process, and my own reflection process, has preceded the crafting of the story. The stories created by Crowther et al. (2017) account for experiences that the authors actually lived; they crafted stories about their lived experiences as phenomenological researchers. This process implies that the analysis is accurate insofar as they reflect on their stories and as they gain new awareness about their own lived experience. Thus, unlike Heidegger's analysis, the phenomenon did emerge from actual data. In the process, they reflected and recalled their own lived experiences. They concluded by sharing with the reader what they learned about the phenomenon based on their own experiences through the crafting of their own stories.

In my study, the stories were not a fictional device that served as a means to represent my own pre-elaborated reflection, nor were they stories about my own lived experiences. The stories I crafted were as genuine as possible, representing the lived experiences of students and not my experience. I relied on my notes and recollections of the interview and went back to the audio recordings many times to capture paralinguistic elements that provided context and meaning to the statements in the text. I tried to be truthful to the truth of participants' statements and organized the flow of the stories accordingly. Similarly, the reflective writing was not about my own lived experience. My reflections included my own reflections as a researcher, on the outside of those lived experiences but trying to merge and connect with them. My reflective writing about their

experience tried to move beyond the concrete experience and anecdote and move myself close to the meaning of the phenomenon. My reflection included the participants' own reflection in what Smith (2004) described as double hermeneutics that consisted of my trying to make sense of the participant's own reflection. I tried to be open to the perspective from which the text and the person formed the views that they revealed during our conversation (McManus, 2007).

The result of my use of stories was that, for each topic and its associated clustered text, a story was crafted. This process of looking at statements and reorganizing them in a sequence that reflects each participant's lived experience required an up-close review of the text and a deep reflection on the meaning of the text clustered under each topic.

Reflect and Write

Once I redacted the stories the reflection and analysis was guided by the four existentials used by van Manen (1990), Sloan and Bowe (2014) and Crowther et al. (2017): (1) spatiality (lived space), (2) corporeality (lived body), (3) relationality (lived other/relation), and (4) temporality (lived time). All humans experience the world through these four dimensions in their life. In phenomenology, these four categories are part of the basic configuration of the lifeworld (van Manen, 1990). Although an experience can be lived through all of these dimensions at the same time, they are not all present in the same modality; one or two of them are more prominent while we experience an event.

The next practical step was the writing of a reflection for each story guided by the existentials. With the lenses they provide, I explored and reflected on the essential elements of each story. I included contextual elements of the interview process and of their life histories that could inform and enrich the reflection. For each reflection, I determined and wrote which existentials were the most prominent. I wanted to advance the reflection by stating which existential(s) had served the student in living the experience of the story.

Once a reflective writing for each story was completed, I became more aware of essential elements of the participants' lived experiences and how they complemented each other to confirm the lived experiences of each student.

Reflect and Identify

After the up-close individual analysis, the next step was to determine if each particular story—now in the form of the reflective writing—was essential or incidental to the lived experience. I followed examples of incidental and essential themes by van Manen (1990). Analyzing each story entailed reading, reflecting, and eventually making a decision regarding each story. “In determining the universal or essential quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make the phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is” (van Manen, 1990, p.107). For this task, I used the process of “free imaginative variation” (van Manen, 1990, p. 107; Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). With fresh eyes, I looked again at each story and, using my imagination, I asked myself the following question: if I remove this story and the theme it

represents, does the phenomenon, the total lived experience represented by all the stories, does it remain the same? In practical terms, this step consisted of reading, reflecting, and labeling each of the reflective writing pieces as essential or incidental.

Reflect and Write

The final step of the analysis involved removing myself from the lived experiences of participants, where I had been immersed in the two previous stages of the analysis, to allow myself the opportunity to reflect on the phenomenon. The product of the stage was a written personal reflection. I looked back on the whole process of analysis and the lived experiences I on which I had reflected. I wrote about how my own previous experiences were at play in the process of immersing myself in other's person's life experiences. I also described in my reflection how my perceptions about each student evolved as the analytical process advanced. I wrote this reflection for each participant. I was aware that, from the moment of the interviews, to the repeated listening of the audio recordings, and to the constant process of the reading, reflecting and writing, each case was different for me. I lived each one as a different experience and my whole self-related to each person, their narratives, and text in a unique way.

CHAPTER 7 ANALYSIS: UNHEARD VOICES SPEAK

Introduction

The analysis presented in this chapter is the result of the recursive implementation of the hermeneutic circle and of the crafting of stories of the lived experiences of six students. The implementation of this methodological sequence of analysis allowed me to immerse myself in their lifeworld and gain insight into the meaning of the human experience of being a student. This chapter describes the process of reflection, the data used, and the common themes that emerged from the process of reflective writing. Next, there is a brief summary of the findings in the survey responded by people the students identified as important in their process. The final section addresses the research questions that have guided this study and presents an appraisal of the validity of the research.

The Process

The Evidence

Interpretive phenomenology, unlike other phenomenological approaches, does not focus on the verbatim text of the transcribed interviews. The aim is to go beyond the semantics of statements and their limitations to elucidate the lived meaning of a phenomenon. Likewise, the phenomenological hermeneutic method does not aspire to provide a definite description or final interpretation of a lived experience. It seeks to reveal the possibilities of meanings that surface from the experiences. “The purpose is to reveal that which lies in, between, and beyond the words while staying close to the

phenomenon of interest” (Crowther et al. 2017, p. 829). Accordingly, this hermeneutical analysis accepts the intrinsic ambiguity of the interpretive task. As Kinsella (2006) describes, “A hermeneutic view resists the idea that there can be one single authoritative reading of a text and recognizes the complexity of the interpretive endeavor” (para. 32).

Accordingly, the transcriptions became the raw material for the analysis. The density, richness, and amplex of the conversations varied in each interview. Consequently, the quality of the phenomenological evidence that they provided created different opportunities for insight into the phenomenon of being a student. In the hermeneutic dialogue, when the participants in the conversation engage in sharing and reflecting, the interviewee decides what to reveal and what to conceal. The participants decide what and how to construe their stories. They engage in a meaning-making sequence where they select details of their experience, and they reflect on them to produce a line from beginning to end in each of their stories (Seidman, 2006). This process of deliberately symbolizing their experiences in words produces variations in the type of the evidence available for the phenomenological analysis.

The words spoken by the students and the stories crafted for each participant were the evidence for me, the researcher, to grasp what stood out as self-evident. This self-evidential grasping of a concrete phenomenon is the aim of the phenomenological method (van Manen, 2013). Sometimes, the anecdotes and shared experiences were more or less complete, albeit not self-evident. However, on occasion, the text did not present the phenomenon in full. Just as one can never see all sides of a building at one time, but only the external walls of two of its sides, we can nevertheless intuitively “see” its

internal features. This partial view, or “inadequate evidence” according to Husserl’s classification (as cited in van Manen, 2013, p. 36), is by definition perspectival and also served as the basis for the reflection.

The collection of crafted stories represents, on the surface, varied situations and conditions of the student experience; the objective of the analysis was to come to see the universality of the phenomenon that they represent. “The phenomenologist would aim to go beyond particular varying anecdotal experiences (*doxa*), striving to reveal meaning of the human phenomenon” (van Manen, 2013, p. 38).

The stories became the focus of the analysis. As Crowther et al. (2017) suggested, I organized each text striving to bring the shared events together in a way that illustrates what I noticed and what interested me while working with the transcripts. I proceeded to reflect on the essence of each story beyond the semantics and the anecdotal events. After defining which of the resulting reflections were essential or incidental, I contrasted the hermeneutic reflections of the different participants, looking for what Heidegger refers as “the essential moments” of those experiences (as cited by van Manen, 2017, p. 10). Through them, I tried to distinguish the path to the fundamental meaning of their lived experiences.

The reflective review of the evidence in the stories provided a glimpse into the common life experiences of the six participants. The value of reflecting directly on the stories was confirmed as I contrasted the text across participants. The richness of the individual stories facilitated identifying similar essential meanings in the other stories. Particularly important was to verify the importance of the stories as the sources for the

hermeneutic reflection. Van Manen (2014) proposed that “stories or anecdotes are so powerful, so effective, and so consequential in that they can explain things that resist straightforward explanation or conceptualization” (p. 251). The stories, through their vivid recollections, allowed me access their common experiences. The stories became more than an emotionally rich accounts product of my potential bias. Their role was to “gift insights into human experience from which we can all learn” (Crowther et al. 2017, p.833).

The analysis and presentation of common and universal themes do not attempt to provide an unambiguous description of the experience of becoming a student for people who are older and have family responsibilities. This analysis hopes to point to the possibilities of meanings that emerge from those stories. As a novice researcher attempting to learn about the essence of the lived experience, I found myself learning about many unexpected aspects of the students’ lived experiences. In this process, I came to terms with the need for humility and an awareness what was unique and essential to the meaning of the shared experiences. Van Manen (1990) describes the inherent limitation of our attempt to explore the life of others:

To *do* hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal. (p.18)

Participants and the Evidence

Six students participated in the unstructured interviews. The six of them were women in junior or senior-level classes at the time of this study. All of them were transfer students from a local community college. The time it took them to obtain their AA in the community college varied from 2 to 27 years. The number of colleges attended to get their AA ranged from 1-5 colleges. Five of the students were mothers with children ages ranging from 22 to 7 years old. Out of the five mothers, one had four children, one had three children, one had two children and two had only one child. All of the participants were attending school full-time and three of them were taking up to five courses per semester. Three of the students kept a full-time job (worked 40 or more hours a week), two of them worked at a local university in administrative positions, and one kept two part-time jobs working more than 40 hours per week. Three of them kept part-time jobs; two worked at a local hardware store and one was an on-demand private driver. The student who had no children was the primary caregiver of elderly people at her home. Of the other five student who were mothers, three were married and two were single. Three of the participants were White, two of them were African-American and one was Afro-Caribbean. Two of the participants had already been accepted to graduate school at the time of our interview and two others had planned to apply to graduate school the following year.

The interviews took place over the period of two weeks during the spring semester. The conversations lasted between 52 minutes to 88 minutes. The total recorded time for all interviews was 412 minutes, with an average of 69 minutes per conversation.

From the transcribed texts, different topics of conversations emerged. After the identification of these topics and subsequent crafting of stories, a total of 57 stories that accounted for their experiences were redacted. Each of the stories produced an individual reflective hermeneutic analysis. I proceeded to analyze holistically the group of stories for each participant following the “free imaginative variation” process (van Manen, 1990, p. 107; Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). From my reflection on these 57 stories, I determined that 38 qualified as essential experiences of the students and 19 were incidental; that is to say, if those stories were altered or removed, they did not substantially change the essential structural aspects of the experience.

The common essential themes of the experience of being a student were extracted from the essential stories and the reflections elaborated for each one of them. The themes are presented in accordance with the methodological framework of interpretive phenomenology. That is to say, they are presented in a context of a space and from a perspective of time of the lives of the students.

Themes

Theme 1: Self-Sufficiency—The Ability and Skills to Overcome Obstacles

The stories represent some experiences involving life events that demanded unambiguous solutions in real time. The resources the students had at hand to make decisions varied but, in most cases, were scarce. The imminence of the situations they lived led them eventually to accept the consequences of the decisions they made. They

learned to come to terms with the outcomes of their decisions and to make the best of them. As they moved forward, they honed the skills and abilities they had learned and then to define optimal solutions throughout their lives, including the decision of start, attend, and leave college. The stories revealed an essential component of the experience that is the result of this recurrent process of facing obstacles and resolving them. The conversations showed that the students do face different obstacles as they transitioned into the life of a university student. When asked about how they knew how to face these challenges, the answers revealed different levels of awareness of the mechanisms or reasons that influenced their decisions. Almost instinctually these students all looked inward as they guided themselves through the processes of decision-making.

The self-sufficiency that the stories expressed did not necessarily result from a position or feeling of isolation. The fact that few of the participants were in fact alone and without anybody around them to help make decisions did not make a difference to the process of decision-making from other students who had a support group. The stories reveal the experiences of students as autonomous and independent women who bring to the physical and symbolic space of the university an internal assertiveness that guides them, as they become students in a new place and culture. This sense of owning their decisions is present and active regardless of the presence of others around them.

The definition of experience as the deployment of skills and abilities in the university setting resonates with the description of non-Western notions of learning (Merriam & Kim, 2008) in Chapter 3. Learning is a constant and is embedded in daily life, albeit most learning is informal, ubiquitous, and happens as life happens.

During the conversation about obstacles in their lives as students, the main attitude that emerged was that of a stoic, not that of harshness or resignation but with a sense certainty, tolerance, and patience; the attitude of someone who has traveled in similar circumstances before. Someone who knows that it will not be easy but is confident they have the personal resources to deal with problems as they arise. I realized that, for these students, the “student self” is a product of the assertiveness and awareness they have gained while becoming adult human beings.

The lived experiences of these students as expressions of self-sufficiency contrasts with the at-risk label that traditionally has been attributed to students who have had especially challenging life experiences (e.g., failed attempts at earning a degree, motherhood out wedlock, and precarious work experience) such as those reported by the participants this study.

What I came to see in their stories reminded me of the image that the poet Walt Whitman used in his “Song of Myself” to represent this internal solid structure that needs no external support:

Sure as the most certain sure, plumb in the uprights, well entretied,

braced in the beams,

Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical,

I and this mystery here we stand.

Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not

my soul. (Whitman, 1891-92, p.31)

A high degree of a sense of self-sufficiency, a sense of “I am enough for myself” is required to make decisions about going to school while fulfilling demanding family responsibilities, such as breadwinner, homemaker, and mother. Some of the examples are telling of how they lived their experience of becoming a student while not suspending their additional roles. When Susan decided to go school to study social work, she was 29 years old, had just emerged from a long-term abusive relationship and, had two children with two different uninvolved fathers. Both children were diagnosed as having special needs and she was paying for tuition at a private school that provides the service. She was renting an apartment and she was struggling to make ends meet. At this congested intersection of her life, Susan made the decision of going back to school. As a single mother of two, she left the full-time job she had had for a number of years, withdrew her 401k funds, and went on unemployment. She bought a mobile home on a lot close to the university where she wanted to attend after finish up at the local community college.

Her decision turned out to be a wise one. She did not discuss this decision with anybody.

In our conversation, she recalled that she had gone to community college right after high school, but because she had no guidance and no one in her family had gone to college before her, she took too many courses (six including labs), struggled, and then quit entirely. When I asked her why she decided to go back to school and who helped her make the decision, she replied:

Why did I decide to go to school? It was because I, I was in a dead end job. You know, I'm only making ten dollars an hour, ten ninety eight to be exact, and right across the room. I sat where other individuals were actually doing the job I

wanted to do. I wanted to be a social worker. And I sat not too far away from social workers. I saw how I would handle things like had it been me in that position. I would handle things differently. With some, certain cases and I'm like, wow, you know right, I, kind of felt like they didn't know what they had. They didn't appreciate. What they had, their degree or they appreciate as much of the power that they had. You know, to help. To make a change to encourage to live. So, watching that. It just it would eat me up. Eat me up. And then, who, I wanted to go back to school. I wanted to make a difference. (Transcript 57, p. 3, lines 11-23)

In the neighborhood center for families. I'm sitting across social workers. But I'm also sitting across interns...social work interns. I'm seeing. Interns. They're coming out of university working on their social work degree. I didn't know how they got it. I don't know how, you know, and these are people that are younger than me, younger than me and I'm like how how did they figure this out? Like how did they get it. Like how. You know. But. I had to like, Pray. Because I believe in God. I had to pray had to take the time to like really. Figure it out. I had to seek... that was the only way because. There was no one around me that was in school. No one in my house. No one that I had. A close relationship with or anything. (Transcript 57, pp. 5-6, lines 45-48).

Oh, no, I decided. I knew. Oh, no, I went slow. I figured it out, I figured out it out, I, because even then I didn't have guidance after that. I did not. It wasn't like somebody was telling me hey Susan you're better than just this job, you can do more. I didn't have that. But I knew I wanted more and I was scared. I was so scared when I started it. (Transcript 57, p. 5, lines 39-42)

Other students also related stories about making decisions to go back to school at critical moments in their lives. They highlighted the essential aspects of self-confidence and self-worth that led them to take risks independently. Teresa was a single mother of a small baby, working as a server, living temporarily at her aunt's house. After her divorce, she decided it was the right time to return to school. She had to take a break from taking classes, but eventually she got her AA. She was living in a one-bedroom apartment with her daughter when she decided to continue on to earn her BA. When I asked her about

this decision, whether she had talked to anybody about going back to school, she answered, “Talk to about going to school? No, it was just me. It was just me. I know, I'm, not very, I don't really share (laughs) my emotion. I'm not very emotional in that in that way” (Transcript 54, p. 4, lines 1-3).

I also asked Emilia about making the decision to resume her studies following a lengthy and painful divorce while holding a full-time job. Considering she is an immigrant and had no relatives in town, I wanted to know about her network of support when she returned to school:

No, there wasn't any friends, I'm not a friend person. I'm like me and my daughter. I'm really focused on me I'm a daughter. I don't do too well with friends, and this is honest. I don't do too well with friends. Because I know, I know that I have a very strong personality and not everyone, you know, come in as an immigrant. It's just it's very hard to fit in. You know I mean it's like. You know people, you tend to find people like, oh well, “I don't like how you said that”. They are very sensitive the way you say things or how you react to certain things or you may be too passionate about this. No, I want to be authentic. You know I'm original, I'm all about authenticity. Don't try to change who I am. You understand me. And so I don't do well with friends. I'm like yeah I'm alone. (Transcript 55, p. 4, lines 13-21)

Self-sufficiency is a common theme associated with the phenomenon of becoming a college student and can be examined using the conceptual framework proposed for this study. The accumulation of skills and abilities across the lifespan brings together the ideas of lifelong learning proposed by Jarvis (2006) and O'Shea (2015). Jarvis, in his model of holistic learning, recognizes that learning goes beyond cognitive learning and involves the biology, emotions, and the biography of the person. For the participants in this study, the ability to cope with novel situations and resolve them effectively emerges

from a variety of life experiences at critical junctures that demand timely decisions without input from other people.

In Jarvis' (2006) diagram of the transformation of the person regarding their self-sufficiency, students do not experience a socially constructed episode that generates a moment of disjuncture in the timelines of their lives. Whatever difficulties or dilemmas they encountered when deciding to go back to school or during their studies, students possess resources enhanced by their prior informal learning to resolve these dilemmas effectively. From this perspective, no new learning happens while attending college. Students brought vital skills and knowledge with them to their university experience. From the viewpoint of the Student's Assets Strengthening Cycle and the capitals, the students mobilize resources and assets from their present and past lifeworlds to the university. The flow of capital signals use of experiential capital; O'Shea (2016) describes how older students draw on skills and knowledge (capital) they had acquired before becoming a student. Just as the assertiveness when making decisions outside the university enabled the participants to make wise and informed decisions as students, application of these skills in the university environment strengthens their same skills, expands their knowledge, and promotes confidence in their own ability to succeed in life. As described by Smit (2012), self-sufficiency challenges students' dominant thinking that their life trajectories mount up to obstacles and lacking of resources,

Theme 2: Strategic Relations—Ad Hoc Associations

The conversations I had with the participants focused on the crafting of their stories about their lives while at the university. The relationships they established within the different spheres of the university as students was an important topic of conversation. How they related to members of the institution—staff, faculty and other students—was relevant to the interview questions. The reasoning behind this topic was the assumption found in the integrationist literature that students should socialize and integrate in the institution and that this engagement is key to their academic success and persistence. Participants' stories and anecdotes uncovered a different yet essential type of relationship with the institution; these stories implied a utilitarian nature to the connections or associations with members of the university community. Participants choose to connect with them on the basis of their practical and often specific needs. Does this mean participants were taking advantage of the university and its members? I came to see them as well-intentioned and not abusive. Insofar as relationships require more than one participant, when it came to faculty and staff, the default optimal mode was one of minimal engagement for both parties involved. As in an arranged marriage, the decision to relate to one another was not one that had at its center the development of a relationship over time. As a matter of mutual convenience, the students extracted from the institution what they needed and did not aspire, in practical terms, to anything else and university personnel did not offer additional services or support.

When asked about their peers, the participants did need to interact with them for course work activities, sometimes in person, but most of the time they communicated

from a distance. They did not develop friendships and the efforts they made to establish connections to their peers were never reciprocated. Participants were aware of the difference between themselves and traditional-age students. Their classmates did not appear to judge them, there was no antagonism, and classmates did to appear to intentionally isolate them. However, participants reported feeling very much outside of their traditional-age classmates' world, highlighting the differences between them and accounting for their different experiences and viewpoints. The stories participants shared with me verifies that the differences between participants and their classmates stem from different life trajectories rather than cultural or social referents.

Regarding faculty, there were times when the participants requested special consideration or accommodations. The participants noted their ever-present concern that their responsibilities as mothers, caregivers, or employees would change the type of relationships they had with faculty and administrators. If possible, participants would never reveal their private lives to them because their goal was to be treated like their classmates. The idea that they could appear like any other student, hiding who they are and what constitutes their identity, suggests that the university environment did not permit them to show who they really are.

The ideology of "at-risk" and the limitations that their life circumstances imposes on them are part of the culture of the university. Participants did not recognize themselves in any space or discourse at the university. They see no classmates like them—working, taking care of children or parents—in the symbolic and concrete spaces of higher education. They see that they are not the ones for whom the rules, regulations,

services, informational channels, departments, or professors have been created. To be acknowledged implies risk and implies a positive action on the part of the students to help themselves. If that is the scenario for student-mothers who work or are caregivers, their best hope for engagement is one where risk is minimized and gain is maximized. Establishing a relationship is a means to a bigger goal; it is not the objective of becoming a student, but an accessory in the lived experience of these students.

When Teresa needed to explain to every professor in every course each semester that she was a single mother and that, during afternoon classes, she had to bring her seven-year-old daughter to class, she carefully explained that it was the only way she could stay in the program. At the end of one semester, the final grade for a class was a poster presentation; immediately before the presentation her daughter suffered a serious accident on campus. Because of her daughter's accident, Teresa arrived late to the presentation but she did not notify her instructor for the reason she was late and accepted a lower grade for her presentation. She calculated the cost and the professor had already accepted her daughter in class. She made the decision and established the limit. Something similar happened to Anna. She was the primary breadwinner in her family and was the caregiver of her elderly grandparents. One day, her grandfather, who was connected to an oxygen machine and used a walker, had an accident. Anna had to leave school to perform CPR on him while the ambulance was in route. A few days later, Anna's family decided to disconnect him from life support and she wanted to be with him as he passed. She briefly described her situation to her professor and left the class. The next day she was in class the entire day. Anna explained that she didn't want anybody to

know or make exceptions for her because of her loss. Anna only wanted to have normal conversations in class. When I asked Emilia about socializing on campus and participating in the many activities for students, she only identified two scholarly organizations she joined because they strengthen her applications when applying for graduate school.

When I followed up asking if she wished she could socialize she replied: I have not socialized per se at the university. I'm going to tell you I was in the scholars, the TRIO scholars... and I got selected in to.. I recently got selected into the National Society of Leadership and Success. I'm Sigma Alpha,Phi... whatever it is, greek (laughs) but you have to...of course have certain GPA and say I got selected and that's something. I'm going I should be inducted in next month. So when I'm graduating I'll began to do different stuff and ... in TRIO and I also got awarded. I was...I received the award of excellence for my academic performance. But like social? No, I don't have a social life. No. I love my life. Honestly, I do love my life. Yeah it works. It's working for me. Yeah, because you see, I have goals. I'm on a mission. I'm on a mission. I don't want any distractions. (Transcript 55, pp. 13-14, lines 41-6).

When I asked Teresa about socializing on campus, the need to bring her daughter to class, and her peers and professors' reactions, she told me:

No. Absolutely not. I do not have time to socialize with anybody. I don't. I did not meet any friends in class and didn't mean boyfriend, I didn't have time to entertain any boyfriends or any guys who wanted to talk to me. I didn't have time to entertain any friends. I go in there I do my work. I get out. Have to get to the next thing. But I'm an introvert so it wasn't really. It's not it's not I don't really feel like I'm missing out on anything by not talking to people after class.

And are you aware that there are activities for students?

Yes, and there are clubs and things like that that I mean. Athletic clubs I would have liked, I would like to join or but I don't have time for them and the opportunities just don't present themselves for parents who attend the university. They really aren't. There really isn't a lot of support for parents who attend the university. (Transcription 54, p.12, lines 1-12)

Even that kind of had, I mean it had its obstacle like it did hold me back. In that I couldn't attend all of the events. There was another event that actually just happened February 3rd and I had to cancel because my sitter canceled. But I do, I mean I still don't. I don't regret it. I wouldn't resent her (her daughter) for it. Either I can do it or I can't...I didn't feel too bad about it because I was more of an introvert anyway... I didn't prefer to have studied groups. I study or process information better on my own. I had one group in like the medical research. That she would be in the class with me and I had to work with these people and they all knew my daughter as well, mainly I mean, everyone was fine about it. The only part that I felt a little hesitant about at first was when... every semester you're meeting a new teacher and you have to talk to them about your situation or you have to say is it okay if my daughter comes? and you have to deal with yourself and like, Oh man I hope they say yes because I can't go to the class if they say no, there is no other way. I, I gosh... I would say hi...Is it OK if I bring my daughter to the class with me? I mean, I have no, I would say I have no other option I'd say I have no other option. I really do need to bring my daughter to class with me in order to attend the classes. And they were like, oh yeah that's that's fine. So, I would go there if I had any questions, and I met with them in their office hours. They they knew her or if I didn't bring her they would ask about her. Thankfully and some of the professors were so intimidating but they were they were actually very receptive to her. The toughest one would give her candy. So, so, it was a good one. (Transcript 54, pp. 10-11, lines 44-37).

I asked Andrea about her relationship with her peers and faculty. She indicated that she was content with the fact that everybody had interest in her own field. She was mother of four, ranging from 11 to 21 years old. Andrea had her first child when she was 16 years old. I wondered how she felt about her newfound independence from child rearing and the experience of learning alongside younger people. This is what she shared:

There's a drastic difference between me and my peers and a lot of times I know my OK, my experiences are a lot different from somebody else's because, I mean, a lot of the kids in the classrooms are 26 and under like 26 to 18 they are babies. They just came out of high school their parents are helping them pay through college like they don't have any other responsibility except for maybe going working part time and running a cash register or something compared to me who

has four kids plus my husband plus I've been through the education system. It doesn't mean, it doesn't have like a negative effect but it's got a positive effect because I can bring stuff to them that they've never seen or wouldn't even think of. Because I mean, I can think of things that happened in high school when I was younger that wouldn't dare happen now but they can think of things they did in high school that I would have never come in contact with. So, it's good and it's bad like the young adult literature is what I'm struggling with now because I have never seen. Like young old young adult literature didn't exist when I was in middle school, like that was not a thing. So, a lot of these kids have read those books and helps me out if they tell me something. About me, I can do classical literature with them because that's what I was raised on. So it's like it's a helping situation. We both have something to give it's just different. I think we both benefit from each other's experiences. Just because they are younger...
(Transcript 60, pp. 7-8, lines 40-22)

When I asked her if faculty knew about her life and if she had needed or requested special accommodations:

Some of them do. I mean I like. I don't share a lot. And they asked me. I think if they don't ask me then I'm just somebody else in their class.
Accommodations? Not really, my kids are older now so even if they get sick they stay home by themselves. So, I kind of like, I don't baby my kids at all either.
(Transcript 60, pp. 18-19, lines 40-12)

Strategic relations in required and selective cases constitute a mode of feeling and thinking about their role and identity as a student. The awareness of being different because of a different lifestyle defines the expectations and the limits of engagement with the members of the university. From their perspective, participants needed what the university offers; Teresa expressed it clearly: go in, get what you need, and get out. The relationships and ad hoc associations they defined and created was a way of meeting specific needs. They existed as long as they were necessary and contributed to a larger personal goal. From the perspective of the institution, ironically, these students are low

maintenance. In large universities, such as the one these students attend, no resources are invested in satisfying their specific needs. This institutional attitude generates an environment in which these students define the terms of their relationship if one is needed at all. This prerogative is appropriated by the students, to decide and define the terms of the engagement.

This essential component of the lived experiences of older students with family responsibilities can be examined using the lens of the conceptual framework proposed for this study. If the cycle of students' assets from Figure 3 is considered, navigational capital refers to skills to maneuver within institutions that have not considered the characteristics of these students in its original design. The students demonstrated a high-level of skill and abilities to establish the best terms to guide their relationship with the institution.

For example, when they requested permission to bring a child to class every day, participants were fully aware that there was no specific regulation that allows or prohibits this specific accommodation. The institution has not accounted children accompanying parents to class as a potential circumstance that students confront. The students, in turn, take advantage of this vacuum in university policy and use it for their own benefit. What is an informally learned skill—to make space for themselves in contexts that are not designed for the underprivileged—constitutes experiential capital. Single mothers, immigrants, and poor people move around the fringes of the perimeter established by the institutions and take advantage of gaps left in the design. They occupy these gaps without putting creating tension within the system that can satisfy their needs. This strategic mode

of thinking and navigating is what they display with courage and legitimacy within and outside the institution.

Using Jarvis' (2006) approach to the experience of learning, students understand their experience as finding a moment of disjuncture and resolving it, then learning and changing as a person. The moment of disjuncture is characterized by a socially constructed episode that is original, that is to say there are no prior events like this one encountered in the lifeworld of the person. The students have not previously lived the university experience, with its specific, explicit, and implicit rules for interaction. They live the discourse of inclusion, the menus of activities, the golden rule, and they adapt to the new space. They accommodate the new socially constructed experience and mobilize their mind and emotions to use the space to their advantage. They learned that is costly to be disruptive and to not contest the conditions and terms of the interaction that the institution has to offer to them; they learn that they go in, get what they need, and go out.

Theme 3: Timelessness—The Ephemeral Nature of College

Time defines the lived experience of these students. First, in their stories and experiences, time is present in the chronological passage of time. For the students, time translates into the urgencies of daily life and its limited supply. More importantly, time contributes to the meaning of these students' lived experience by providing a larger context than their daily, feverish routines. Time provides a perspective to their journey, to who they are, and who they will become. The stories and lived experiences express the notion that there is a trajectory, a constant flow, a movement and direction to their life.

The college experience is, in a sense, a stage that serves as the background for their becoming a person and a student. As Jarvis (2006) reminds us:

There is a sense that when disjuncture occurs we not only become aware of our situation in time and space but we also become aware of ourselves as actors in temporal situations – even aware of our temporality. We experience ourselves in time. (p. 67)

Their stories and reflections recount their long journeys toward becoming a student and, in the process, always changing and transforming, continuously becoming.

The university defines time in relation to students from a different perspective. For the institution, time has evolved to mean student progress (i.e., metrics). As such, the university understands the need to push students to finish “on time” and not amuse themselves with more credit “hours” than are necessary to complete their degrees; time acquires meaning as a measure of efficiency and quality. Time is a resource that should be used with upmost efficiency: less time means lower cost for the university. Less time also means quality; if students take less time than defined by the institution, the university’s goal has been accomplished and the metrics met. The university also defines time as moments that need to be maximized to ensure the students engage and socialize when not in class. Time is an opportunity for integration and social growth along the lines that the institution has prescribed. For traditional-age students who do not work or have family responsibilities, college life is their life; if they get involved in activities offered by the university, this involvement becomes a transformative experience. Traditional-age students identify and engage with the institution; the time at the university is a milestone

in their lives, a marker that shapes their identities by adopting the university's culture and goals.

For the participants in this study, time sometimes passes too slowly and anxiety to move forward more quickly creeps in. Sometimes, time seems long, as several decades of their lives have already gone and there seems too little time left to waste; ultimately, however, they know that there is no sense in rushing. The long-term perspective constitutes a mirror where they see themselves making progress, moving from one point to the next, each day closer to where they want to be in the future.

The time, in perspective, gives meaning to the detours, pauses, and sprints. Time is not a lineal trajectory to meet metrics; it contains imponderables and paradoxes. From this perspective, the period of time these students spend at the university does not become their central experience. They dwell in other spaces and other times as workers, wives, mothers, or granddaughters. These spaces have their own rhythms of time and students do not dance to the beat that the university plays.

In the university, these students live in permanent state of transience. The years they spend becoming students has only a transitory meaning. While at the university, these students do not become consumed or defined by the student experience that the university has prepared for the average student. The experience for them becomes a lookout post where they can observe their past and plan their future. The experience of time while at the university expresses the hopes for what is beyond the college experience. When Carla shared that she would be graduating that semester with her BA, and that she started attending college in 1988, she commented that she had to take four

breaks. There was no stopping, no permanent break on her journey as a college student. She did not quit. Her becoming a student over an extended period of time has enriched her lifeworld as a mother, wife, and employee. A timeline that is so rich featured a different timeline than a four-year college career right after high school. Carla never renounced her goals. Granted, at times she feels like quitting, but she did not. Her life during the last 30 years can be read as a permanent moving towards the same goal. Time becomes secondary to the process of moving to that goal. Just as her lifeworld has enriched the timeline of her life, the two years at the university has allowed her to define a hopeful future. Carla learned from the present time to shaper her future time. The projected future time of graduate school and the joy of teaching could not be foreseen before starting the university. When Carla started, there was a different present that traced different possible future times.

When Susan decided to go to community college for the second time, she was the mother of two children, on unemployment, and a single mother. In the process of finding the right college to get her AA, she tried four different institutions. In three of them, she received credit for her courses. As her life conditions changed, new options appeared on her horizon. She did not know how much time was going to be required. She knew she can use online classes in one institution, but she was aware that she would need face-to-face classes for specific skills she knew she need and for that a different institution is better. She also knew that she needed to graduate from an accredited institution to be able to continue on to her BA and MA. To earn her credits, she moved to a fourth institution.

There are choices to be made and options to ponder; there are obstacles but she stayed on course. Time is secondary because she could only control some factors in her life and time is not one them. She did not rebel or feel defeated because she could not make progress toward her goal as quickly as she would have liked. She got married along the way, she found a part-time job literally “at the same time” as she was earning course credit after course credit. It is “at the same time” because there is no other space and time she can live in to become a student. She could not suspend in time all the other dimensions of her life to only be a student.

In the big scheme of things, the time spent in college is ephemeral because it is a time of preparation for something else. Students live their present time learning to become a new self. That experience transcends the number of days in college. The knowledge, the essays, the books, the online quizzes, all of these will fade in memory and will not stay with them. Students come from a journey in time that sometimes is thick and rich in experience. The substance of the past time’s lived experience is what allows present awareness and what propels them to the future.

An example of the sense of time in perspective comes from Teresa when she shared how she coordinated schedules and what worried her while at school. Both dimensions of time were present: the concrete, limited time that characterizes the daily routine and coordinated time in life and school time:

A lot of times I play it by ear. You don't know what. You don't really know what's going to happen. I've been I've committed to schedules and they've been canceled all the time. And so, I just I just make things up as I go at this point. I am taking six hours this semester and they are both online... So I've even tried the option of registering online for some transient courses so that maybe I could just take them on the weekends or go to the classes when they're required and then get declined

because when you're about to graduate you all of your courses had to be taken at the university. But the class that I needed they actually offered online at a state college, but they don't offer it online here. So it's another you know, conundrum or you know it's a catch 22 to face with and you know, I'm trying to take the classes and graduate and I can do more you know, with my degree or you know, pursue other avenues with my education and it's sometimes it just feels like your hands are tied. You know, as much as you tried many adjustments you try to make to make things happen you know something always comes up or there's an obstacle but I remain vigilant. I mean it, it, things tend to work out when they're supposed to work out and I have resolved to my myself to the fact that it's just going to take longer but it's going to happen and that tends to keep me sane. (laughs)

... The thing that worries. It's that angst, it's that impatience like I have been going to school for so long and I want it to be over. Like I wanna be established in my career. I wanna you know, move on with my life. And you know, right now we're actually we're house shopping right now and even that takes time and our schedules conflict sometimes because of his work schedule and mine ... I just feel like a lot of things would be easier if I took at least one of the things I do full time out of my life. So I take care of my daughter full time, I go to work full time and I go to school full time like something, something's gotta give. (Transcript 54, pp. 6-8, lines 49-4).

The conceptual framework illuminates the meaning of the phenomenon by putting the transformation of the person in historical perspective. Jarvis (2006) proposes that the learning process is embedded in time and space and to resolve the moment of disjuncture involves reflection, emotion and action. He observes that we live in the flow of time and as long as there is harmony between the experiences of the lifeworld and the biography, one continues to live in the flow of time. When disjuncture appears, the interpretation of the lifeworld is not in harmony with the biography and with the accumulated memories and stock knowledge; the person becomes aware of the moment and strives to re-establish harmony by making sense of the new moment, by learning and in the process, becoming.

When Jarvis (2006) discusses time in the context of the process of learning, he establishes a difference between the external history and internal history of the person. In external history, “time stands between us and our goal and the moment of satisfaction is when we achieve the goals – the quicker we can do it, the better” this kind of external history resonates with the conceptualization of time of the university and its metrics. Internal history refers to the recognition that with the passing of time “we can never repeat precisely the same actions” (p. 67). Internal history is what makes the person aware of novel situations followed by disjuncture and learning. It is only when a person cannot make sense of a new situation that the person steps outside the flow of time and engages in learning. The person becomes aware of the trajectory, direction, and purpose of the flow of time. As the person reconstructs harmony between biography (the past) and the current conditions (disjuncture), they can direct the flow of time to future goals.

This type of internal memory and the process of being in the flow of time represents the timelessness of the lived experience of the students. In effect, their lives as students at the university involves learning. Their recollections and hopes for the future are evidence of the constant process of encountering events that pause the flow of time. Internal memory is not interested in the efficiency of achieving an outcome in a short time. Internal history, the one that drives learning, is interested in the process: not in the duration but in the becoming aware of the past and making sense of the present to project the new person in the future and continue flowing. Timelessness represents that constant reconciliation of the present with the past to continue moving forward. This sense of timeless episodes while looking at their own biographies to make sense of the present

time is what makes the students wise, patient, and persistent and enduring in their efforts. They are constantly reengaging the learning process and the flow of time.

O'Shea's (2015, 2016) experiential capital is key to understand the learning process described by Jarvis (2006). The experiences of the participants were a central component of their biographies. What they bring to the learning process was not always a facilitator of reconciling the novel moments that triggers a sense of disjuncture. Experiential capital can be a contributor to re-establishing harmony and resuming the flow of time if the experience has a holistic component to it. Experiential can be a contribution to learning if it has involved body, mind and self. Hence, it is not practical experience only what conforms the biography, experience is a central component of the learning process if there is awareness, openness and flexibility to adopt changes. In other words, experience helps maintain the momentum of the learning process.

Theme 4: Becoming—The Realization of Achievement

During the conversations with the participants in this study, there was a sensation that grew as I reflected, listened to their voices, and crafted their stories. Their stories of their lived experiences as students provided an intimate portrait of their lives as women, mothers, workers, wives, and caregivers. Listening to their voices, I registered something like enthusiasm and joy. Reading the text of the transcriptions and writing and re-writing their stories, I came to see the phenomenon of the lived experience as a student lined with satisfaction and something like a sense of pride and fulfillment.

I admit that I was a bit disconcerted and I felt that something was out of place in what they shared; something did not fit. During my reflection, I realized that I had a advanced knowledge and understanding of their lived experiences and what listened to and read was not what I had expected. I had conducted two pilot studies with similar participants but I had not engaged in a hermeneutical reflection in the analysis of their interviews. I knew that their lives were demanding. I knew the context of the many roles they play and they are required to handle much more responsibility than a traditional-age student does. My foreknowledge made me associate their lives with harshness, struggle, and emotions that indicate suffering. What I registered was something different and I had to open myself to listening to their actual lived experiences.

Students who have overcome difficulties outside of the university space have experienced success. Their self-perceptions are shaped by the recurrent exercise of facing challenges and conquering them. Their sharpened abilities and skills to find solutions to difficult problems have created in them a confidence and a distinct perspective on what constitutes difficulties and obstacles.

Participants' conversations were infused with a positive tone of achievement. They pointed to concrete outcomes and realizations of what they had accomplished as students. I knew that they probably had faced difficulties in their new university environment; however, the insight I gained through listening to their stories let me see that there was a sense of proportionality. The sense of proportionality of what constitutes a difficulty had to do with the resources they had at hand and a sense of empowerment that gave them control over a lived situation. At times, academic demands and adaptation

to the new culture were stressful. Clashing schedules were exasperating and dealing with multiple chat groups for online classes were a true challenge for the less technologically savvy.

Proportionally, what those difficulties demanded from the students was different from what they had learned to deal with in life. In adapting to university life, there was definitely a learning curve; participants shared anecdotes about the initial experiences, including learning to navigate a large physical campus and how to get in touch with professors who are never available. More importantly, they brought their fears of not being able to meet impossible academic demands and unachievable expectations of performance. In retrospective, participants admitted that those ideas were parts of a cluster of myths and unknowns that haunted them before starting at the university.

The sense of success and achievement in participants' lives came to dominate their stories as students. Their emotional stance became a lens through which to see an essential aspect of the phenomenon of becoming a student. Although they are successful in life and possess skills, knowledge and abilities, there was no certainty that those resources would adequate and lead to success in a university setting. In the lifeworld of the university, achievement and success have very concrete indicators: grades and passing courses. Progress and performance are marked by stages of time clearly demarcated by the semesters. The culture of the university enhances the idea of success based primarily on academic results. Also, other activities such as honor academies only increase the value of academic performance by especially recognizing performance and rewarding high academic achievers with grants, scholarships, fellowships, and stipends.

When the participants in this study traverse the spaces of their lives outside the university, the academic demands and expectations may seem easy to meet compared with the more complex, permanent, and nuanced demands of their other roles. In their academic lives, they have control and, in most occasions, depend on their own abilities to complete school work, get good grades, and pass to the next level. The academic space gives them concrete feedback about their performance, skills, and progress. That feedback is invigorating and helps them to develop a positive attitude about themselves and their identities as students. Initially, receiving grades and feedback might have not been different from their experiences in community college where they received their associate degrees. What changed their expectations of their own performance was the initial fear of a university-level course (e.g., more complex content, more demanding professors). Having learned about the expectations and the course work and what are the expectations regarding performance, participants rejoiced at their achievement.

When I speak of joy and pride, I do not mean an effervescent, bouncy, and vibrant attitude. The participants did not display a high-level of emotional energy, instead displaying a quiet attitude of pride and self-confidence. They did not boast about it. What I write is the measure of my experience as a witness. It is me who wonders: can't they see everything they are capable of, given their demands on their time and attention and in spite of an oblivious institution?

Reflecting on this question, participants' satisfaction and joy showed me that the phenomenon of the lived experience as a student had an impact on their concept of self. Transferring their skills and abilities to the university space and becoming aware of their

own successes changed their self-perceptions and the definition of who they were. The lived experience of being academically successful in a previously unfamiliar space (the university) created two distinct effects: on the one hand, it confirmed their abilities to face challenges but, on the other hand, it reconfigured who they are.

In the process of receiving feedback about their academic performance and assessing their progress as they passed courses and moved through semesters, the participants in this study were becoming students. More importantly, they started seeing themselves as students and successful ones at that. The mothers, wives, granddaughters, and workers became something more; they became students. The process of becoming a student implies a transformation. Given the gradual nature of academic progress, the realization that they were changing was also gradual. The fact that there was no renunciation of the other roles that define who they were means that there must have been a point in the process where they re-negotiated with themselves who they are. Because most of participants were well advanced in their respective programs, the emotions they shared communicated the gratifying and satisfying integration of the new role and, in the process, accepted their new selves.

Carla was a part-time student, taking one course at a time while raising three boys and working full time, when she enrolled full-time in the university at the age of 45. At the time of this study, she was graduating soon and had all As and only one B+. The previous semester she volunteered as a TA for a professor and she was president of a leadership organization for students. She was in the honors program and described how she was going to look like as she walked in her university's commencement ceremony:

This is something exciting. There's a new interdisciplinary honors society, I'm now the president of a student organization, just regular a president of just the regular student club which is really funny because all the kids I can be their mom, (laughs), I'm in the criminal justice honors society. Leads scholars academy, of course but my academics is outstanding. I'm so excited, I'm a three point eight seven five GPA so though I'm going to have a swag calculator when I graduate in a few weeks, and I'm gonna look like Mr. T cause I have four medallions four stoles and a whole bunch of court stuff so I am aware all 'cause I'm excited (Transcript 61, p. 1, lines 27-34)

Initial adaptation to university life meant adding a new set of demands to the already existing ones. The learning curve demanded that students identify the challenges, make sense of them, and mobilize resources to meet them. When Emilia decided to continue on to a university after finishing her AA, she noted the new standards and adapted accordingly to meet the demands of taking five courses per semester:

Yeah the demand, o my god, it's a lot.(sigh) Compared to the community college because there, it more like a (thinks). What's the word... It was more like a trial. Like it was more like a trial for me...When I got to the university the ballgame was different. Because Here I am going to school full time. I'm a single mother and I had to put in way more hours into my studies than compared to when I was at the college, way more hours, and I'm still juggling being a single mother, working and going to school full time. You know, just being a student. It's like sometimes I'm going to light it out, because it had been, I had been you know some semesters in the past, has been, very overwhelming for me. Overall, it was like a lot. God what have I done. How am I going to do with this all these classes, why did I signed up all these classes? Because I have to set my schedule in such a way around my daughter... So I had to build even though I have to build my school, but at the same time the main thing for me was to build my schedule around her schedule. Because her Dad doesn't live in the same city. He doesn't have a car. So the honors falls on me. So that's when I said to you, Mr Marcelo I'm happy to do this interview, but my god (cries) you know because. it's all on me... it was really overwhelming. It was, yeah. But here I am yes, ready to graduate. (Transcript 55, pp. 6-7, lines 42-15).

That semester when I took five courses, in the beginning I thought it was very difficult. Because I have never... It was my first time taking on so many courses at one time because I'm used to taking on three classes or four, right? So, when I took on those five classes. I was like oh my god what have I done. I don't know and I was like back on the two campuses...The Research Part I was taking legal research that semester. That was a bit challenging. I think I'm getting an A in that class? I ended up getting an A? no, I got a B...It was a lot of it as it was just. That semester from me was the difficulty for me was a time constrain that I had to work with you know being there from 8 to 9 ... it was just, it was a lot... I think over a period of time for me it became easier. Once I found I grasped the ideas behind it. It became easier and so what I did I adjusted my time...If I studied one hour in the morning I probably add an extra half an hour, you know what I mean, to it became me. Yeah. So that sort of kind of like help resolve the I'm... the overwhelmingness that I had for that Semester and for me it went from difficult to easy. I think I'm getting like what for A and 1 B+?. Yeah, that. (Transcript 55, p. 15, lines 16-41).

Sometimes, participants noted the sense of joy that came after facing difficult challenges and finding creative, high-impact solutions. For example, Andrea had enrolled in a university science education program. She did not know what to expect from this new academic environment but her associate-level math and science classes had been manageable. However, her university courses in science education brought new challenges but she learned to adapt:

Oh my gosh! When I left the college and I came to the university the biggest difference was I was sitting in a physical science classroom of over 500 people and in in the college that would have never happened like we would have had 20 kids in our class. So I think when I walked into the first lecture hall I was like. Oh my God how can I survive this. But I managed to figure it out. It just it took a lot of getting used to. That that many people in your class...I really didn't have a choice. I had to do it. Like you just have to kind of grin and bear it. There's no other choice. I don't let anything stress me out anymore because if I did that, I was stressed out all the time. I got way too many things going on. So I kind of just let everything go with the flow like it happens or it doesn't happen, and if it doesn't happen then you should try again later. That's all I can. I mean that's all I can do

because I can't give up. That's the biggest thing I can't give up. I've put too much effort and time and money into this I can't give up. There's not an option. .
(Transcript 60, p. 7, lines 30-36)

Yes, I struggled with calculus I actually withdrew from calculus and decided instead of being a science secondary teacher I just chose language arts because calculus was not happening for me. I always knew that I had issues with math but like I thought okay I got through trigonometry. I got through calculus. I mean precalculus fine. Like I have all As in math except for that and I go into this calculus class and of course it was my first year at the university. 500 some students in my calculus class. We meet twice and twice a week and the third time we meet with the student with a student assistant and he goes over stuff that nobody even asked him to go over and he's like well if you don't know how to do that I can't help you. So it was kind of like all right if you can help me maybe I'll take this course some other time because this is not it's about working for me. I didn't have time to look for help because I had physical science when I had the calculus class and the calculus class was three days a week. So I was coming up here three days a week taking physical science calculus and then taking education classes...that's too much I can't, I can't, can't do this anymore I need to change majors is not happening. I made the decision on my own...I can talk about books for hours. Science might be a little iffy I mean I can talk about for an hour or so but after that, we are going somewhere else. But yeah, literature sure I could talk about forever.

There was no way. It was so far off from the math I learned. Like there was no way I could have even. Started to figure that out in my head. I quit the first time. It took me 17 years to go back to school so, you can't quit the second time and I'm on a roll now...in education. That's my thing. Now I'm going to teach and go to school at the same time and then hopefully sooner or later I'll get. A job as a principal or something else. (Transcript 60, p. 19, lines 25-39)

Jarvis (2006) discusses self-identity in the process of learning and underscores the social context where learning takes place. The students in this study lived the experience of changing context of learning. It became clear that they not only were fully aware of the change, but also the stress and anxiety of the expectations and demands of the new space.

The sense of self and the process of permanent becoming results from the constant reflection of the students about how they think other perceive them through their actions. For Jarvis, this is a dialectical relationship insofar “learning enhances both our own singularity and individuality” (p. 122). The students constantly become as they recognize themselves in the actions that they live as students and others – the university and its standards of success – recognizes them through their actions as students. The phenomenon of the lived experience of these students provides meaning to who they are and of what they are capable. As Jarvis (2006) in his sequence of learning describes (Figure 4), this transformation of the person through learning, or what I have described as the reconfiguration of the self, is socially constructed.

In this sense, experiential capital and navigational capital clarify the resources the students bring with them to the new environment of student life. Experiential capital provides them with a perspective on the type and magnitude of difficulties they have lived and overcome. It helps them compare the new challenges to the old ones and gauge the demands and resources they need to mobilize and invest to meet them. As Teresa, single mom and full-time employee, noted about the two years she spent at the university:

If I had to look at myself in the mirror right now, I'd definitely say I'm quite happy. Yeah. It's where it's worth it. Nothing worth having is ever easy. You know, and I tend to not stress about a lot of things because I know how much worse they could be. I really do. And and a lot of people look at me like I'm weird ... you know, she's always just so laid back and I was like yeah, I am. Because honestly, it could be a lot worse. It really could be a lot worse. But we have our health and we have the ability to do these things and these opportunities to us and it's a little harder but we're going to. I'm going to. I mean I'm going to make it work. There's no other choice. (Transcript 54, p. 8, lines 28-36).

Analysis of Survey

Eight members of the support circle of five students that participated in interviews responded the survey. In the case of three students one person responding the survey. The purpose of the survey was to include the perspective of the people around the students regarding the process of becoming a student and the changes they perceived. The opinions in the survey are not equivalent to lived experiences and, by definition, do not try to complement what the students have lived and shared.

The first finding that survey provides is that in most cases, the students are self-sufficient. It is noticeable that one student, Emilia, said that they had nobody to support her and her daughter. Similarly, in the case of Anna, her grandmother, whom she cares for, completed the survey, in the case of Teresa, her partner who only met her after she was at the university completed the survey. In the case of Susan, two relatives completed the survey and they confirm that she is the one supports everyone else in the family. Only in the case of Carla, three people that are actually helping her in practical terms completed the survey.

The idea that five out the six participants declared someone who was important for sustaining their process suggests support is not only practical and logistical. In the content of the survey, the respondents appear to know the life of the students intimately and can place it in time perspective. They know that they have had the goal of attending college for a long time and what they want to accomplish in the future. They also know about the limitations of time and the emotional cost of balancing multiple roles, but they also express the confidence in their capacity. They also report change and growth in their

daily life, confirming the effect of academic success in the renegotiation of the self. In all cases, the respondents describe how the students are a source of inspiration and change for the family, extending the effect of their student life to others around them.

Research Questions

The research questions have guided the data collection and the analysis of the interviews and questionnaires. The questions, taken together, aim at learning the meaning of the experience of becoming a student later in life. Through the process of hermeneutic reflection, the experiences of the students became a window to observe the essential and universal component of their lifeworlds. The texts of the stories were used in retrospection to go back to the world as originally experienced by the students “before we conceptualized it, before we (*they*) even put words or names to it” (van Manen, 2017, p. 9).

As such, the answers to the research questions do not represent a positivistic assertion of truth or result from a process resembling an empirical proposition to be tested. The answers to the research questions within the epistemology of hermeneutic phenomenology represent a partial insight and understanding gained through the interview process, the interaction with audio recordings and transcriptions, and the recursive process of the hermeneutic cycle. The answers, as a whole, represent an incomplete phenomenological insight that reveal “eidetic meaning” (van Manen, 2013, p. 38).

The four themes that emerged from the analysis of the interview data inform the responses to the research questions but also the process of interaction with the participants and the process of crafting stories and reflecting on them. The process of elaboration is what generated insight and allowed it to be shared with the reader in the form of text. Yet, “the meaning of our experiences cannot be unequivocally represented by a word or a concept” (van Manen, 2017, p. 9).

Research Question 1

What is the lifeworld of undergraduate nontraditional students with significant life experience as they encounter college life?

The meaning of the experiences of older students who work and have family responsibilities, as they originally experienced it, is revealed by the analysis found in Themes 1: Self-Sufficiency and Theme 3: Timelessness.

The process of becoming a student, as originally experienced, can be visualized as a space filled with autonomy, independence, and assertiveness. In that sense, the experience is a solitary one, regardless of the presence of supportive relationships inside or outside of the university. The experience is a lonely one because it is framed by a permanent self-reference that isolates others from the process of becoming. The experience requires the individual to look inwards, reach inside for previously sharpened skills and abilities, assess the novel spaces and challenges they face, and then decide what of their prior learning is most useful to deploy. The process is confirmatory of the self.

Each assertive decision to face a challenge corroborates to each one of them “I am enough for myself.”

In this process of transferring capabilities from their biography to the lifeworld of the university, this new space becomes an extension of the other roles they fill and other realms of life in which they dwell. In the lifeworld of the university, students do not cancel the other facts of their lives. On the contrary, the self-sufficiency they display while experiencing the university is sustained by the convictions about their capacity to succeed in life. Those other roles and demands act as the columns where they stand solidly and the axles that propel their confidence to move forward.

A consequence of the extension of their personal life into the lifeworld that represents the university is the inception of a virtuous cycle. Success in life, in all the roles and spaces they live, provides the means to succeed at the university. In turn, their sense of achievement and successful academic performance creates hope for future selves in their lives outside of the university. Fundamentally, their lifeworld is a constant learning processes that resolves disjunctures (Jarvis, 2006), confirms who they are: sufficient for themselves and accountable to themselves. By itself, the learning process gives them the opportunity to continually become.

The lifeworld of the participants at the university was defined by transience. In the micro-scenario of everyday activities, the students visited the university, there was not permanence in it, in the symbolic and material sense. Their experience of the university campus was brief; then, they returned to their elemental spaces, the family, the home, the workplace. In their life trajectories, symbolically the university was a stage, a

pause, a passage they had to cross to realize their future hopes. These trajectories are projected from a past where they existed as wives, mothers, partners, and granddaughters, roles that they embraced and that defined them before becoming students. In this trajectory, the condition of student was temporary and secondary to the others. They existed in their time, not in the time of the university marked by efficiency, results, and outcomes. Their lifeworld encompasses more versions of time than simply the institutional one. The time of no rushing, the time of the processes, the time of waiting without exasperation. Those times were not measured in watches and calendars. Their times welcomed uncertainties, delays, detours as well as shortcuts. Their times showed them a natural pace for each life event, just as divorces tend to last a long time and the growth spurts of a son happen in a flash.

Research Question 2

What resources sustain the college experience of undergraduate nontraditional students of and allow navigating the space of college life?

Students who have extensive life experience, including the management of family responsibilities and work experience, have assets that make them successful in those spaces and their cultures. Regardless of the level of complexity of their lives outside of the university, they only to go back to school only when they have their other roles firmly established and under control. Only when a feeling of relative accomplishment in those roles is reached do they decide to add the additional demands of the lifeworld of the student.

This type of decision protocol allows the establishment of priorities with some flexibility. For example, sometimes participants took a break from studying, sometimes they decided to increase the course load. This practical approach to engaging with the institution defined the relationships they established and the resources they mobilized. The lifeworld they faced in the classroom space with peers and faculty was a space of transaction. The participants decided to connect with them on the basis of a utilitarian benefit. The students were aware of what role the university and its community play in the larger scheme of their priorities and future aspirations at that time. They were aware of their specific needs and the utilitarian impulse is to maximize the gains for all the actors involved.

From this perspective, a minimal reciprocal engagement is what ensures the maximization of benefits for all. It is clear that the university was oblivious to the specific needs of the participants. The meaning of the lifeworld of the participants in this respect was one of minimal expectations of what the environment they live can provide. From the university, they expected education in the form of a sequence of courses and a certification. The specificity of the students' needs was not acknowledged; in response, the participants opted to be as inconspicuous as they could. Asking for exceptions and accommodations made them reveal the conditions of their lives outside of the university.

Strategic thinking and engagement are skills that the participants in this study have mastered outside of the university as they constantly negotiated with themselves and others their life priorities. They demonstrated the skill of minimizing personal costs while maximizing the gain of everyone involved to the lifeworld of the university

In terms of the capitals included in the conceptual framework of this study and defined by Yosso (2005) and O'Shea (2015, 2016), the first affirmation is that these students displayed resources and assets and none of their characteristics or conditions define them as at-risk. They did have familial capital that they mobilized while experiencing the university. This capital defines a sense of commitment to community and family group. They did not mobilize this capital to engage with others in the university community. They activated this capital each time they needed to make decisions and set priorities. The familial capital acted as a referent and reminded them where the priorities and the unconditional loyalties were. Participants did bring their navigational capital to the university as they attested that the institutional arrangements were not design with their needs (the needs of nontraditional students who work full-time and have family responsibilities) in mind. They adapted and walked the fringes of the university community without disturbing the established order and culture. They did not disrupt the community, hoping that each time they asked for an accommodation, it did not cost them too much. They learned to stay in the shadows and hope not to stand out too much given their obvious differences. The most important resource they used to succeed in the space of the university was their experiential capital. They were skilled at life. They knew when to look for a job and when to quit and fight for their 401K. They knew that best job to pay bills and raise a daughter as a single mother while taking five courses on two campuses was driving for Uber. They knew that taking one course at a time when the opportunity arose was the route to the AA, the BA and the MA. It does not matter that the road was 30 years long. They knew that they just need to stick to it. I

describe these experiences from the participants' perspective to represent the variety, the density, and the diversity of experience the students brought to the lifeworld of the university space. In terms of the learning process flow that Jarvis (2006) proposes, their biography was thick with experiences and few situations in the lifeworld of the university would be completely new and be a cause of disjuncture. Most of the situations they needed to address "to make it" in college resembled and evoked some experience they had already lived and solved.

Research Question 3

What are the changes undergraduate nontraditional students live, the meaning they construct while encountering, and navigating college life?

The central changes participants experienced are reflected in the discussion about the reconfiguration of the self (Theme 4) that is intrinsic to the process of becoming. The process of change as a product of learning is not restricted to academic learning. In the case of these students, their stories indicate a limited impact of academic learning on their personal change and transformation. As Jarvis (2006) describes, "Human beings are always in the process of becoming—we are always incorporating into our own biographies the outcomes of our new learning and thus creating a changed, but also paradoxically re-creating the same, person" (p.119). From this perspective, the changes participants experienced as they navigated college life did not originate and were not intrinsic to their stepping into the college space. Learning is inherent to being in the now but being is transitory as is the now. Learning in the now becomes a permanent

becoming. Participants' lived experiences of now sometimes occurred in the space of the university; change and the becoming was lived in that space.

In this study, becoming a student was the central change that took place. This becoming was a constant movement and the change was progressive and permanent. The students' identities were defined by their biographical trajectories and the different roles they adopted in their lives. Progress, accomplishments, and what they have become in those roles is less evident to them. Signals and markers to indicate change in those spaces is, most of the time, ambiguous and infrequent. On the contrary, change in who they are as students in the university space is marked by the academic success represented by grades and by their progress from one semester to the next. In the newly adopted academic life of these students, the markers of accomplishments and the feedback of success are concrete, explicit, and recurrent.

What the process of becoming entails is this: to enact change, a student has to become aware of, accept, and embrace change. The process of becoming a student is progressive; the acceptance of the new role and its integration into the established ones takes some time. The renegotiation of who they are goes through a stage of disbelief that starts before they physically step into the space of the university. The university exists in their lives before they become part of it. The image and meaning they manufacture is fed by the unknown expectations and the myths of a place of science and abstraction that is only accessible to the few privileged. The image they have built is full of desire but, at the same time, has been filled by ideas of exclusion and elites. They have heard from the university itself the discourse of complexity, struggle, and privilege. They know who

they are outside of the university but they know that their kind is destined to fail in the space of the university.

The progressive and cumulative effect of the feedback about their academic performance eventually allowed participants to re-signify their capacities and their sense of self-worth as students. They came to terms with the idea and the evidence that they too could become a university student. In the case of some of the participants in this study who were close to graduation, the sense achievement, joy, and pride had to do more with what they had become than what they had achieved along the way. Just as their skills and abilities had allowed them to see themselves as successful mothers, wives, daughters, and workers, those skills deployed over time in the lived space of the university allowed them to extend their success to the realm of academic life. They became students in their own eyes and, in the process, became a new person in their own eyes.

Trustworthiness of Research Findings

As noted in Chapter 4, the appraisal of phenomenological interpretive research does not follow the traditional criteria of validity. Accepted procedures in qualitative research, such as triangulation, disconfirming evidence, and member checking are not part of the assessment criteria for establishing the strength of hermeneutic phenomenological research (Crowther et al., 2017). The reference to establish the validity of the process and findings of this study was the notion of validity as strength of the process assessed by the six principles proposed by van Manen, (1990, 2014) and defined in Table 8.

The description of the method crafted and the products presented in chapter 6 the analysis presented in this chapter and the discussion and recommendations in the following chapter verify the fulfilment of the criteria for strong phenomenological writing described by van Manen (1990, 2014).

Summary

The three research questions that guided this study established the paths to inquiry about the lifeworlds of older students as they became college students. The stories of participants' lived experiences served as crevices to access the essence of this human experience and get at the eidos of this phenomenon. The themes that emerged from the analysis as well as and from the perspective provided by the conceptual framework informed the answers to the questions. The answers proposed do not attempt to be an absolute generalization in a positivistic sense. More modestly, the answers are insights to the possible patterns of meaning that belong to one single phenomenon. The patterns of meaning presented in the themes and answers to the research questions have increased the understanding of the experience of nontraditional students. By learning through and with their voices, the themes and answers offered provide a new insight that "infuses us, permeates us, infect us, touches us, stirs us, exercises a formative affect" (van Manen, 2007, p.11).

CHAPTER 8 MAJOR FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The main goal of this study was to learn about the experiences of older university students who also work, have family responsibilities, and study full-time; I wanted to learn about their lived experiences through listening to these students' own voices and learning about their lifeworlds. The need to understand their experiences became apparent by observing the persistent growth in the college demographics and the limitations of explaining their journeys using conventional approaches to study college students' experiences. Those approaches fail to account for the diversity, richness, and complexity of the nontraditional students' lives.

This study is an answer to the call to move away from demographic and institutional data and develop student-centered approaches (Chung et al., 2014). Similarly, this study responds to call for an "ontological turn" to change the functionality of the student for the institution in the analysis. This new way of thinking has to place the student's process at the center and "the vocabulary and line of inquiry have to embrace matters of 'being,' 'self,' 'will,' and 'becoming' (Barnett, 2007).

In this chapter, I present and discuss the major findings of this exploratory study. I delineate limitations and provide recommendations for various audiences and for future research.

Major Findings

Although researchers have looked at nontraditional students and their college experience, they have done so by embracing a deficit, at-risk perspective, using psychological models defined for traditional students and with the main purpose of helping institutions increase their persistence. The study was exploratory given that antecedents of phenomenological studies that looked at essential, meaningful elements of students' lived experiences (e.g., social, historical, and personal context) were not available.

The implementation of the hermeneutical approach yielded promising initial findings about what does it mean to be an older student who works and has family responsibilities and is also becoming a student at a university. What this study has produced is a complement to studies by adding new data that describe who these students are and how they live their college experience. In the process, the findings of this study add new depth and clarity to the image of older students that highlights the differences between them and their traditional-age counterparts and the theoretical work that explains their process.

The meaning of their lived experiences portrays the students as autonomous and independent; they experience the challenges transitioning to a university but, at the same time, are skillful and wise enough to resolve them. Older students have a biography that has equipped them to find optimal solutions to problems at critical moments. As they have extensive experience as mothers, workers, and caregivers, the types of problems they encounter at the university are well within the range of their skills and previous

experience. The holistic theoretical approach indicates that they have acquired learning outside of the university that transfers well to the university content and helps them overcome obstacles and flourish. Contrary to some of my own assumptions, the degree of others' practical involvement in these students' decision-making process is non-existent and, if there are others who are part of their daily life outside the university, their support is mostly symbolic and in the context of a consultation.

These stories also revealed that older students' interactions with others—however utilitarian in nature—are essential to their experience and their success. This applies to individuals in the university community as well as the institution as a whole. Academically, these students are fully aware of their needs and what the university can provide. The transactions between them constitute the least costly engagement that occurs in courses and outside courses. Time is a valuable resource that they constantly try to maximize. The university, on the other hand, does not provide support services to accommodate their unique needs, such as flexibility in schedules or childcare. Given their resourcefulness, older students require limited maintenance from the institution and it would be costly to address their unique needs. Institutions take a utilitarian approach to student support services: they offer services that offer the greatest benefits for largest number of students and, in this way, maximize the impact of these services. Students develop strategic and ad hoc relationships with the university and members of the community only when necessary. In their words, they would rather be unnoticed, obtaining what they need as they need it and get out. Although these strategic relationships benefit these students, the question remains: how well has this arrangement

of mutual convenience, of passing unnoticed amidst institutional oblivion to the needs of older students, worked out for those students who did not persist?

The experiences shared by the participants of this study also reveal the place that the education they are receiving plays in their lifeworld, in the present and the future. The sense of time in which students live places them as transient in the university and in the process of education. The context of their lives puts in perspective the moment they live as students in relation to the other more or less permanent roles they fulfill. The vector of time gives them the opportunity to place the education process within a continuum of their lives. In this timeline, the goal has always been in the future, post-graduation. For most of them, education has been a process that started and re-started in some distant past. The time they are living in the present, as students, becomes just a transitional moment, a moment that reveals itself as a means to an end. The value of the present is in the opportunity move forward, in the opportunity to override it. Sometimes the goal has been postponed for a period of time, or it's been temporarily suspended. The sense of process (i.e., the rhythm of the academic calendar) situates students' achievements as markers of progress. In their perspective of time, what is central is moving forward and maintaining a balance with their other responsibilities.

This idea of time that is represented in the lived experience of the students contrasts with the institutional idea of goal achievement and efficiency of duration. The shorter the time, the better. Under this view, students have only one main task and meeting metrics of duration is the marker of that task. It is probable that the sense of time the students incorporate to their lifeworld of the university emerged from priorities set

before they started college. Connected to the idea of how students perceive and live the time process is the joy and satisfaction they had as they shared their lived experiences as students. This enthusiasm and positive attitude seems at odds in the context of their previous life experiences and the many demands they have on their time and energy. The student experiences they share are plentiful in terms of frustration, fear of the unknown, and stress from many sources, yet they are joyful about it. The attitudes and emotions that exude as they share their lifeworld is a reflection of the change in their identity that they are undergoing. The fact they see themselves as successful jugglers of life outside the university does not transfer to the academic space. In that space, older students are fearful and insecure. As they progress in their academic programs, the positive feedback represented by passing grades and remaining in good standing each semester becomes a powerful, explicit acknowledgment of their skills and a validation of their identity as students.

Traditional students are different from older students in that younger students are still in the process of shaping their personalities and defining their identities while going; they do so under the influence of the university environment. Older students, who have multiple responsibilities, are aware of their roles and identities as mothers, wives, partners, workers. The validation of their success as students results in the adoption of a new identity and the integration of it into the person they already are. In this process there is a renegotiation of who they are. Embracing themselves as successful students is a matter of positive feelings and the confirmation that they are genuinely being and becoming.

Conceptual Findings

The hermeneutical methodology of the study assumed that concepts emerge from the field. These concepts are found in the use by the participants and their lived experiences and are identified by the researcher. As noted in the positionality section of the manuscript, the epistemological approach assumed that the researcher always brings prior knowledge (academic and personal) to their research. As such, based on prior pilot studies, this study presented a conceptual framework with the purpose of helping the analysis and the reflection about the lived experiences of the students as they balance their different life roles daily. This section of the findings refers to the utility of those concepts to guide the analysis.

The critical elaboration of social capital carried out by Yosso (2005) was the first concept that I proposed for this study. The assumption was the success of participants in resolving life issues outside of the university could be the result of collective cultural community wealth; this wealth informed the options, strategies, and decisions that helped participants find optimal solutions to problems. The inclusion of O'Shea's (2016) concept of experiential capital, based on Yosso's framework of capitals to study the experiences of older first-generation college students, followed the same logic. The lived experiences of the participants in this study show that the process is mostly an individual one and not a collective one. If there is a universal meaning to be derived from their individual experiences, it is not one that reflects the community cultural wealth of a specific minority group. What emerges as a common interpretation is the experience of poor women with little resources that have a clear goal regarding their education. The

strategies used to resolve life situations transfer to the problems and situations lived on campus, but they are not typical and cannot be associated with a specific minority group. These strategies cannot be deconstructed using variables such as gender, race, age, or marital status within a culturally specific setting.

The contribution of the conceptual model of the transformation of the person through learning was a powerful guide to reflect on the lived experiences of the students. The idea of the weight of a personal biography that is present in the learning moment reflected the multidimensional lives of the participants who were simultaneously mothers on campus, students at home with their husbands and children, and students in their own workspaces. The model also helped identify the moments of disjuncture that the participants experienced as they became students. The model eloquently framed the stories of the students regarding personal change. The continual process of becoming a person proposed by Jarvis (2009) clarified the constant process of transformation that involves adding new dimensions to the mature student who already fulfills multiple roles and assumes multiple identities. There is no renunciation of prior lives or cultures, as Tinto's (1975) integrationist model proposes, and it is not limited to the experiences on campus; the new person and the new experiences travel to the different spaces they inhabit.

Jarvis's (2009) model emerges as an important analytical tool for understanding the holistic process of learning and transformation of older students with family responsibilities as they experience college. This model provides a lens through which to

see the learning process as personal change where academic and formal learning is but only one of the components.

Limitations

There were a number of limitations to this study. First, the study was limited to the lived experiences of six participants and all participants were women. All but one of the participants were mothers, and the one who had no children had substantial caregiving responsibilities at home. There are students who are married fathers and single fathers, as well as students with older children for whom they no longer have caregiving responsibilities. The experiences of these students, if included in the study, would have enriched the essential themes that emerged from the lifeworld. Given the social expectations and self-identity of males and older parents, new perspectives on how they negotiate within their life context and with themselves the different roles they have to play in addition to the role of students may have emerged. It is also possible that the skills and knowledge acquired in life outside the university is of a different nature and value when transferred to the college space. Their presence could have enriched the unheard voices.

A second restriction was the limitation in the number of interviews that were conducted. The main reason for having only one interview per participant was the limited availability of the students; some participants dropped out of the study completely and many participants had to re-schedule their interviews. As Seidman (2006) noted, a second interview is valuable. The trust that was formed in the interview opened spaces of

recollection and evocations that were hard at times. A second interview would have capitalized on that trust and moved the hermeneutic conversation to another level, creating more opportunities to listen to the students' voices. I felt this limitation keenly after listening to the audio recording and was confirmed again after the interviews concluded—participants kept sharing stories and reflection in emails, some of them sending more than one. Richer conversations could have occurred if more time was available. Time constraints that limited the duration of the interviews as well as the number of interviews per participant are normally discussed in the same section as data saturation. In this case, the limitation of one interview per participant also limited the students in their ability to express themselves more fully. In this sense, when engaging in research activities that give space to silenced and marginalized groups to express their voice, particularly in a hermeneutic dialogue, there is an ethical responsibility to give participants the opportunity to express themselves fully. This ethical consideration becomes part of the engagement and conversation. Given the nature of the reflective process, the sense of engagement cannot be concluded at will. It goes beyond the establishment of an interview protocol, framework, or data saturation.

Implications and Recommendations

This study offers insight into a specific population of students. It brings to light their learning process, skills, and abilities and explains how they become resources in their college life. The implication from these outcomes is twofold:

- A student-centered approach to learning about the student's experience can be a productive enterprise to reconfigure the image of who the students are, moving away from at-risk and disadvantaged profiling that is endemic in the literature and the practice of institutions.
- The act of listening to the students' experience showed that they already have low expectations about what the institution can provide to them and those who succeed do so at a very low actual cost for the university.

The implication here is that the questions traditionally posed in the literature about how to engage them with the institution and how to provide opportunities for socialization are unfounded. Students do not have time to spend on those activities and, if they had time to spare, they do not intend to spend it on additional activities on campus. Their priorities are elsewhere, in places and spaces where they already belong.

General Suggestions and Recommendations

Practitioners

The implication for practitioners of student services that support the academic success of students is to be open to new ways to engage with this student population. These stories and findings support the notion that their college experience is essentially different than that of their traditional-age peers. As the participants describe, although different groups share the same space and interest in their specific discipline area, they actually travel along parallel trajectories. The same college experiences carry different meanings for different students. The origin of their different learning processes is based

on their different biographies. For practitioners, the biography should not be seen as baggage that slows down progress, but it should be seen as assets. The good news is that in that biography are many of the goals that the practitioners try to help achieve in younger students. If practitioners take, for example, Chickering's (1969) seven vectors of identity development, students in higher education ought to develop skills that are considered critical by practitioners: (a) developing competence, (b) managing emotions, (c) moving through autonomy to independence, (d) develop mature interpersonal relationships, (e) establishing identity, (f) developing purpose, and (g) developing integrity. Well, the students who participated in this study had learned and developed all seven vectors before they started college. The only one they are still learning in college is one of the three competences defined by Chickering (intellectual competence) that is in process but did not started in college. The remaining competencies they learned and perfect on their own and are resources for practitioners to use in support these students (e.g., older students peer-mentoring younger students.)

Institutions

The first recommendation is to shed light. First, track and make public the numbers of students, who they are and where they are, and what their main characteristics are, beyond Choy's (2002) seven characteristics. This study provides multiple other characteristics and intersection could be helpful to understand their journeys. The second recommendation for institutions is related to the marriage of convenience that nontraditional students define as their relationship to their institutions. In this type of relationship, the institution is blind and does not perceive the students and the reality of

their experiences. In this type of situation, the student negotiates with him or herself the conditions to maximize their gain. Institutions could benefit themselves and their students by engaging dynamically in a relationship with students. If institutions engaged creatively with students by acknowledging their needs as well as their assets, students can contribute to maximizing the gains for students and the institution. For example, if some degree of flexibility is introduced in the scheduling of classes, students would not need to delay progress or change majors and would graduate sooner. The degree of flexibility and the critical courses for different majors, that's a matter for engaged dialogue.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are three recommendations for future research. The label “nontraditional student” lacks value as a unit of analysis (Chung, 2014); it only carries some value in research that explores the experience of students and takes a critical stance at the connotations related to “at-risk” and “deficit,” as this study does. To abandon the deficit approach will be the result of more extensive characterizations of who this new demographic is in all its diversity. The spectrum that this study covered illuminated some essential characteristics but remains narrow.

Secondly, research that tries to learn about the college experience of nontraditional students has to include their voices by using different means. Although qualitative approaches lend themselves well to generate thick and rich descriptions about the student experience, large universities can also engage in data analytics from many sources already available at institutions to learn about patterns in student academic

performance and engagement. In many cases, data bases will have to be created to be able to include cross data that may or may not exist but that can show intersections of characteristics and the identification of subgroups.

Accept Barnett's (2007) challenge of making an ontological turn to think about the phenomenon of the student experience. More than a methodological choice, it represents the inevitability of a change stemming from the transformation of the university, of its role and mission. The question to answer regarding the students emerges from that shift. What does it mean to become a student in this new type of university?

Researcher's Reflection

I embarked in this research study because I wanted to learn about a group of university students that is increasing in numbers and that, regardless of their progressively increasing numbers, remains the group with the largest number of students that exit their academic process.

From the beginning, I felt uncomfortable with the category of "non-something." As I carried out this study, I learned that the label used to name them was no coincidence. I learned that, in the researching of the experiences of this group—older students who work, have families, and drop in and out of universities—"non-traditional student" is a residual category of what is normal and official. From this perspective, the connotation of the name makes it appropriate and correct. These students do not represent the tradition. What I learned is that they break with tradition and use the opportunities available to improve their lives. Their presence is not the result of access policy; they decide to

traverse the landscape of campuses to take advantage of a service that is available. They contest the tradition of the privilege of access with their mere presence and succeed in spite of their institutions.

I learned all this by listening to the participants in this study, talking to them about their sons and their daughters, about their husbands, boyfriends, and about the grandfather who is dying. Sadly, she couldn't save him. I listened to participants chuckle while recollecting their lives for me because the conversation was a moment of retrospection that let them see all the obstacles they had overcome, that it was funny to even remember everything they've gone through. I listened to them cry when they remembered difficult moments in life and at school. It was revealing to me when one of them told me that she had never told anybody about her most difficult moment as student, that I was the first person she had told about it. I learned that I was learning about them and with them.

I realized that, as a researcher, I had been able to connect with students I had never met and that they trusted me. More important for me was that connection occurred despite differences in accents, skin colors, national origins, age, and gender. I learned that being listened to has power and enhances self-awareness, identity, and convictions. The students' voices were already there, eloquent, loud, wise, and honest. They flowed effortlessly, revealingly, and generously. Their voices were already there; my job was to notice them and listen to them.

In Jarvis' (2006) terms, I was being with them and I was becoming. It was not a teaching moment, it was a learning moment. They made me aware of my biography and,

in the process of bringing it to consciousness, they changed me. If I started this study declaring that I was looking at the situation of the students from outside looking in, I feel that through them I gained access to see the inside from their perspective. I can see better now.

Closing Vignette

I started the study with the goal of getting to know nontraditional students and their college journeys. I approached this study with convictions nurtured by my previous knowledge and experiences. Consequently, I looked at them from outside of mainstream academia. The goal was to learn by listening to them and reflect about their lives. In the process, I hoped to amplify their voices and that others can see them and hear them as they become students.

Emilia:

By the time I started at the university, I had move to the Sanford area and had started to work with Uber. The routine had changed because my advisor told me to take five courses in fall and I could graduate when I wanted. I thought it was impossible and I told him I was a single mother. He told me he knew that but with my GPA of 3.5, I could do it. I thought about it for one night and because I'm stubborn, I did it. For me it was trial and challenging moment. This meant that I was on campus four times a week, Monday through Thursday. Sometimes I thought, oh, my God what I've done. I still got up at 4:30 to do my homework and sometimes I had to add half an hour more to that. I did Uber in the morning and rushed to Clermont to pick my daughter. I had to be there by 3 or 3:15. At that time, I was taking two classes on campus one hour away from the main campus I had to come to main campus twice a week. From Sanford it took me an hour to get to campus. Traffic was overwhelming so much time is consumed to get from one point one to the next one just driving. It drove me crazy. The professors understood that sometimes I got fifteen minutes late to the 6:00 class. I don't I ever missed a class. Fall was just time consuming for me. I had never take so many courses I always took three or four. A research class was a bit challenging for me. I ended up getting a B in it. I didn't ask for help. Once I grasped the ideas behind it, it became easier and that's when I adjusted my study time in the morning and I added and extra half an hour. At one point, it became me. I resolved the overwhelming feeling I had for that semester and it went from difficult to easy.

APPENDIX A
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Re: Copyright permission request

Tamara Reeves <keysforhopepllc@gmail.com>

Thu 10/26/2017 10:17 PM

To: Marcelo Julio Maturana <Marcelo.JulioMaturana@

Hi Marcelo, thank you for considering our article in your dissertation research. You are welcome to reference it. Thanks for checking, and good luck with your study!

Tamara J. Reeves, Ph.D., Licensed Psychologist

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LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/tamara-reeves-41315918

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On Thu, Oct 26, 2017 at 8:25 PM, Marcelo Julio Maturana <Marcelo.JulioMaturana@uct.edu> wrote:

Dear Dr. Reeves,

My name is Marcelo Julio and I am a third year doctoral student in the Ph.D. program of Higher Education and Policy Studies at the University  I am preparing my dissertation proposal and my topic is related to the lived experiences of nontraditional students in higher education and the strengths and assets they bring to their college journey.

I searched for you as a first author of the 2011 report **Reality Check: A Vital Update to the Landmark 2002 NCES Study of Nontraditional College Students**. I am preparing my dissertation proposal and I want to request your permission to use Table 3 of the report *Percentage of Students Demonstrating Each of the Seven Nontraditional Characteristics: 10 Years Ago and Today*. I have a section in my dissertation where I discuss the persistence of the shift of student population over time and your analysis that compares the different nontraditional characteristics is very eloquent.

APPENDIX B
PERMISSION TO USE FIGURE

RE: Permission to use journal material

David Gillborn <D.Gillborn@bham.ac.uk>

Wed 11/22/2017 5:20 AM

To: Marcelo Julio Maturana <Marcelo.JulioMaturana@██████████>

Hi,

thank you for your email. I'm happy for you to reprint the figure assuming that the article and its publication in REE is cited as the original source.

Best wishes

David

Professor David Gillborn
Director of Research, School of Education
Director, Centre for Research in Race & Education (CRRE)
Editor, '*Race Ethnicity and Education*'
University of Birmingham
Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, UK.

Latest articles:

Gillborn, Warmington & Demack (2017) QuantCrit: education, policy, 'Big Data' and principles for a critical race theory of statistics, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, DOI: 10.1080/13613324.2017.1377417

Gillborn, D., Demack, S., Rollock, N. & Warmington, P. (2017) Moving the goalposts: education policy and 25 years of the Black/White achievement gap, *British Educational Research Journal*, 43(5): 848-874. DOI: 10.1002/berj.3297

Gillborn (2017) Dis/ability as White Property, in Julie Allan & Alfredo J. Artiles (Eds) *World Yearbook of Education 2017* (London: Routledge), pp. 104-19.

Latest book: Rollock et al. (2015) *The Colour of Class: the educational strategies of the Black middle classes* - <http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415809818>

Latest Collection: Taylor et al. (2016) *Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education* (2nd edn) - <http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9781138819450/>

The contents of this e-mail may be privileged and are confidential. It may not be disclosed, used, or copied in any way by anyone other than the addressee. If received in error please notify the sender then delete it from your system. Should you communicate with the sender by e-mail, you consent to The University of Birmingham monitoring and reading any such correspondence.

From: Marcelo Julio Maturana [Marcelo.JulioMaturana@██████████]

Sent: 21 November 2017 22:45

To: David Gillborn

APPENDIX C
PERMISSION TO USE FIGURE

Re: Greetings and permission request to use figure

p.jarvis@surrey.ac.uk

Thu 11/23/2017 1:33 AM

To: Marcelo Julio Maturana <Marcelo.JulioMaturana@██████████>

Dear Marcelo Julio,

Unfortunately Peter is now too ill to reply in person to your lovely email. However, we were both charmed by your comments. Peter is glad and honoured that you have found his work so helpful in the past and is very happy for you to use his chart.

It is always interesting and warming for him to hear details of the life of individual folk who value his ideas.

Thank you so much the photo of your 'Collection!' You may be interested to hear that the vast majority of Peter's books which he owned personally have been donated to the University of Gulu, Uganda, - where they will no doubt continue to be useful. However, we keep a small selection of his books here too. We could not bear to part with them all, so we retain a shelf of them, just as you do!

With warmest good wishes to you in your own studies,

Maureen Jarvis (Peter's wife).

From: Marcelo Julio Maturana <Marcelo.JulioMaturana@██████████>

Sent: 21 November 2017 11:44

To: Jarvis P Prof (Sociology)

Subject: Greetings and permission request to use figure

Dear Dr. Jarvis,

My name is Marcelo Julio and I am a third year doctoral student in the Ph.D. program of Higher Education and Policy Studies at ██████████. I am preparing my dissertation proposal and my topic is related to the lived experiences of nontraditional students in higher education from a perspective of strengths and assets.

My conceptual framework includes the concept holistic learning. I am using your definition of learning together with the work of Dr. Schugurensky on informal learning. My assumption is that the person learns and that the different learning processes of nontraditional students in their diverse realms of life daily come with them, as their biography, to the encounter of the formal learning process in higher

APPENDIX D
PERMISSION TO USE TABLE

Re: Permission request

Daniel Schugurensky <dschugur@asu.edu>

Fri 11/10/2017 1:52 AM

To: Marcelo Julio Maturana <Marcelo.JulioMaturana@ [REDACTED]>

Hola Marcelo,

Of course you can use the table and any other part of the any of my writings.

There is no need to ask for permission if you give proper credit to your sources.

Best wishes on the defense of your dissertation proposal. Interesting topic.

Un saludo cordial desde Arizona,

Daniel

On Thu, Nov 9, 2017 at 11:43 PM, Marcelo Julio Maturana <Marcelo.JulioMaturana@ [REDACTED]> wrote:

Dear Dr. Schugurensky,

My name is Marcelo Julio and I am a third year doctoral student in the Ph.D. program of Higher Education and Policy Studies at the University [REDACTED]. I am preparing my dissertation proposal and my topic is related to the lived experiences of nontraditional students in higher education from a perspective of strenghts and assests. The concept of informal learning is central to describe how they have become successful and skill-ful learners in their lifeworld. I also intend to use the concept to think about how those learning skills travel to the formal space of the college experience and to the learning inside and outside the classrooms.

I requested your 2015 Chapter 2 publication via researchgate yesterday. Thank you again for your quick response and your generous support.

This time, I write to you to request permission to use the table of your taxonomy of informal learning. It is part of your 2000 working paper: The forms of informal learning: Towards a conceptualization of the field. The table is Table 1: Three forms of informal learning, on page 3 of the document.

Proper credit will be given with the table.

Thank you for the time to consider my request and for your contribution to look at learning from a more comprehensive perspective.

Sincerely,

APPENDIX E
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction:

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study about nontraditional students, those who are older, work and have family responsibilities. We will be talking about your experience for a round 45 minutes and I will record the audio of our conversation.

The different question will focus in your life as a student and also the other dimensions of work and family life, your life in general. I would appreciate it if you can give me as much detail about your daily life of you feel you can share.

Your identity will not be shared with anybody during my study or at the end when I report the results. The details about the study you can read them here, in the explanation of the research. We can read it together so you can ask me any questions (*provide explanation of research and proceed to read*). Do you have any doubts or questions? I also want to remind you that you can stop this interview and any moment.

So, I'm going to turn on the recorder to start. (*Begin interview*)

1. How long have you been at [REDACTED]
 - 1.1 Had you been in college before?
2. I believe, you go to school and you also have a job. Would you tell me a bit about your job and family?
 - 2.1 How have things changes at work/family after you started to study?
3. How has your life changed since you started classes
 - 3.1 Can you compare the routine of a day when you did () and how you do it now?
4. I'd like to know about your decision to study,
 - 4.1 Did you decide it alone?
 - 4.2 Are they part of your process as a student?
5. Can you tell me about that day and the process

- 5.1 With whom do you socially on campus?
- 6. Do you think the experience of being a students has changed you?
 - 6.1 Tell me about where/when you notice the change? Do others notice your change?
- 7. Can you recall a difficult day at school?
 - 7.1 Can you recall a difficult day balancing all the responsibilities?
- 8. Can you think of the worst event and how you solved it.

APPENDIX F
SURVEY PROTOCOL

SURVEY SUPPORT CIRCLE

Research Description and Consent

Title of Project: Learning to become a student: the unheard voices of nontraditional students in higher education

Principal Investigator: Marcelo E. Julio

This survey is part of a study being conducted to investigate the experience of older students that work and have family responsibilities and learn how they balance all their demands.

1. In completing this survey, I understand that (please tick ALL of the boxes below):

My contribution will be voluntary and confidential in that I will not be identified in publications

I am free to withdraw from the research at any time

Refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not impact upon my relationship with the University [REDACTED]

The data collected from my participation will be used for publication / presentation purposes (journal publication, conference presentations, reports), and I consent for it to be used in that manner.

Study contact for questions about the study or to report a problem: If you have questions, concerns, or complaints Marcelo E. Julio [REDACTED]

IRB contact about your rights in the study or to report a complaint: Research at the University [REDACTED] involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (UCF IRB). This research has been reviewed and approved by the IRB. For information about the rights of people who take part in research, please contact: Institutional Review Board, University of [REDACTED] Office of Research & Commercialization, [REDACTED]

FAMILY REACTIONS AND PERCEPTIONS

1. When (name student) talked about starting university studies, how did you react or feel about that? What kinds of things did you think about?

2. Before (name student) started doing university studies, what did you think about

university?

3. Have these thoughts / feelings changed for you over time?

Yes

No

I am not sure

If yes, can you describe these changes?

4. Have you ever thought that you would do university studies? Why / Why not?

5. What kinds of things have others in your family, or friends, said about (name of student) undertaking university studies?

6. Why do you think they have said these things?

7. Have you ever visited a university campus, attended a lecture, looked at any formal online study resources, etc? If yes, what did you think about this experience?

8. Since (name of student) started studying, can you describe some of the changes that have occurred for you or your family?

9. What do you think have been the 'high points' for your family member (i.e. the achievements that they are proud of in their university work)

10. What do you think are some of the difficulties that your family member has encountered since starting to study?

11. Have you noticed any changes in your family member since they started doing university study?

- Yes
- No
- Too early to tell
- Not sure

If yes, can you describe the changes below

12. How have these changes and/or the decision to continue studying made a difference to you or your family?

13. What is your gender?

Female

Male

Other

14. What age are you?

15 .

Which member of your family or friend is currently undertaking university studies? (Please nominate the family member who suggested you complete the survey)

partner

mother

father

sister

brother

daughter

son

niece/nephew

grandchild

cousin

friend

coworker

neighbor

Further details or other (not listed above)

16. Your educational level - please indicate all the levels you have completed or are currently * completing

- Primary School
- Middle School:
- High School: Year 10 Certificate (or equivalent)
- High School: Year 11 - 12
- High School Certificate
- 2 year Certificate
- College degree (Other not listed above insert box)

APPENDIX G
PERMISSION TO USE AND ADAPT SURVEY

Re: Greetings Dr. O'Shea

Sarah O'Shea <saraho@uow.edu.au>

Wed 10/18/2017 3:32 AM

To: Marcelo Julio Maturana <Marcelo.JulioMaturana@██████████>

1 attachments (79 KB)

FIF Survey for family members O'Shea, May, Stone & Delahunty.pdf;

Dear Marcelo

Thank you for the email and for sharing the details of your very interesting study and also, your own narrative. I hope to visit the US next year where I want to explore how the US (and also Canada) are engaging with FiF students and the assistance provided so your email was of great interest to me.

I emailed my research colleagues and everyone is happy for you to have copy of the survey (attached) if you decide to use it then some acknowledgement of the team would be appreciated.

Best of luck with your studies – this is important work that sounds like it will make a real contribution to knowledge

Warm regards

Sarah

A/Professor Sarah O' Shea (PhD)

Principal Fellow, HEA; Australian Learning and Teaching Fellow

2017 Visiting Research Fellow, NCSEHE (Curtin Uni)

Chair, Wollongong Academy of Tertiary Teaching and Learning Excellence (WATTLE)

School of Education | Social Sciences | 67:308

University of Wollongong NSW 2522 Australia

T +61 2 4221 5838 |

Twitter: @Uni_FiF or @UOW_WATTLE

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University of Wollongong CRICOS: 00102E

Your feedback is appreciated and can be submitted at: feedback@uow.edu.au

NOTICE: This email is intended for the addressee name and may contain confidential information. If you are not the intended recipient, please delete it and notify the sender. Please consider the environment before printing this email.

From: Marcelo Julio Maturana <Marcelo.JulioMaturana@██████████>

Date: Wednesday, 18 October 2017 at 6:36 AM

APPENDIX H
IRB APPROVAL

[REDACTED]

Determination of Exempt Human Research

From: [REDACTED] Institutional Review Board #1
FWA00000351, IRB00001138
To: Marcelo Julio Maturana
Date: January 26, 2018

Dear Researcher:

On 01/26/2018, the IRB reviewed the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination – Category 2 – Adult Participants
Project Title: Learning to become a student: the unheard voices of nontraditional students in higher education.
Investigator: Marcelo Julio Maturana
IRB Number: SBE-17-13694
Funding Agency:
Grant Title:
Research ID: N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the [Investigator Manual](#).

This letter is signed by:

Signature applied by [REDACTED] on 01/26/2018 04:51:16 PM EST

Designated Reviewer

APPENDIX I
CONSENT FORM

SURVEY SUPPORT NETWORK

Research Description and Consent

**Title of Project: Learning to become a student: the unheard voices of nontraditional students
in higher education**

Principal Investigator: Marcelo E. Julio

This survey is part of a study being conducted to investigate the experience of older students that work and have family responsibilities and learn how they balance all their demands.

1. In completing this survey, I understand that (please tick ALL of the boxes below):

My contribution will be voluntary and confidential in that I will not be identified in publications

I am free to withdraw from the research at any time

Refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not impact upon my relationship with the University of Central Florida

The data collected from my participation will be used for publication / presentation purposes (journal publication, conference presentations, reports), and I consent for it to be used in that manner.

Study contact for questions about the study or to report a problem: If you have questions, concerns, or complaints Marcelo E. Julio, Graduate Student, Higher Education and Policy Studies, College of Education and Human Performance

IRB contact about your rights in the study or to report a complaint: Research at the University of
involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (UCF IRB). This research has been reviewed and approved by the IRB. For information about the rights of people who take part in research, please contact: Institutional Review Board,

APPENDIX J
SAMPLE OF ANALYSIS CRAFTING STORIES

Teresa – Story #2

I was still living at my aunts' when I started in December, 2014 at this university. It was a one hour commute to get to campus. At the time, I was a server at a restaurant and it was just my daughter and me. I found a job with more hours in the Sanford area. We lived in one bedroom apartment close to the 417 and close to where I worked so I could go straight to school. She came to school with me every day. I was taking her to school with me just to get through classes. I was taking six credits at the time and she was there in Calc 3 and Logic and Proof, she was there in research methods, she was like a little staple. Through her, everyone knew who I was.

I took all my classes in the morning; I took them as early as I could. I had heard about the difficulties finding parking and I wanted to beat the crowds. I would get up around five thirty, I got her dress and ready and left around six forty five. Because we didn't have time for breakfast in the morning, we went straight to Calc 3 class first. We had one hour break between Calc 3 when Logic and Proof started. So we went to Starbucks at the Barnes and Noble library, she ordered her regular (her daughter) and we went back to the Math building and sat in front of the class, we always sat in front of the class. She eat her breakfast and I took notes, answered questions, did everything. Sometimes professors also asked her questions.

After class, we left right away. I couldn't afford a daycare but I had access to a VPK program that was free for four hours, five days a week. I went back to Deltona from the university and she would be in the program from noon to four. Then, I would go home, do homework, and go to work.

APPENDIX K
SAMPLE OF ANALYSIS REFLECTIVE WRITING

Reflective writing for Teresa – Story #2

A central theme is introduced in this story. The presence of her daughter is constant in her academic life and her student experience. *Relationality (lived other/relation)* is the theme when she describes they both lived in one bedroom apartment and she attended calculus class with her. The symbiosis of these two human beings goes beyond a normal mother-daughter relationship. Although in many cases of mothers and single mothers that attend a university the presence of the children is a constant and the hybridism of mother student role is present in their constant overlapping of demands, in Teresa's case you can't imagine her presence on campus or in the classroom without the other person. You cannot separate the presence of both as two celestial bodies permanently attached by a strong gravitational force. It's the intensity of this relationship that Teresa develops the one that leaves everybody else outside. It's a close relationship in more than one way. Close in distance and close as exclusive and sufficient. The whole interview is plagued of comments that are directed to the daughter and telling stories with events where the child caps with the ending. Her mother's lived experiences are hers at some intimate level. I can see that this relationship also speaks of the theme of *Corporeality (Lived body)*. It hard to separate the experience of both. However, they do not play equal roles. Teresa is the caregiver, constantly. The experience of a 3 or four year old child being in constant presence means above all a corporeal presence and the care of a small fragile dependent body. She talks about carrying her and feeding her and dressing her. The child wellbeing and presence has to do with being closer to her to care for a developing, friable, delicate organism in its most essential condition. -- **ESSENTIAL**

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