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# Persistence Factors for Nontraditional Undergraduate Students at a Northeast Catholic College

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Persistence Factors for Nontraditional Undergraduate

Students at a Northeast Catholic College

By

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**Abstract**

Nontraditional students are an extremely diverse group with very unique backgrounds and needs, and their motivations to enroll, persist, and graduate vary depending on factors internal and external to the college and are often dissimilar to their traditional aged counterparts (Pelletier, 2010). Given this difference and increasing enrollment numbers of nontraditional students, understanding the lived experiences of these students is critical for institutions of higher education. This study examined persistence factors for nontraditional students at a Northeast Catholic college, including academic and social engagement, the role of support systems in their lives, and their sense of belonging. It also sought their suggested improvements to the college environment. 62 students participated in a survey and six students participated in a focus group. Participants described institutional barriers to persistence stemming from a lack of communication and academic advising, unsupportive faculty and services, programming that was not relevant, and a chilly campus climate. In contrast, support and concern from faculty and staff, family, friends, work colleagues, combined with intrinsic, internal motivation was integral to the students' persistence and success. Recommendations for improved practice include building a nontraditional student lounge, faculty training, and strengthening advising and support services on campus. Additional recommendations include improved communication processes, and promoting academic and social opportunities specifically designed for nontraditional students.

*Keywords: nontraditional student, adult learner, persistence, sense of belonging*

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## Introduction

A recent U.S. Department of Labor report indicated that up to 80% of American college and university undergraduate students can be categorized as 'nontraditional.' In other words, students who enter higher education institutions directly after high school no longer make up the majority in American colleges and universities (Kazis, Callahan, Davidson, McLeod, Bosworth, Choitz, & Hoops, 2007). Who are nontraditional students? There is much discussion by scholars on which factors identify this group, and the definition is not precise. The National Center for Education Statistics (2015), defined a nontraditional student as meeting one or more of the following characteristics: Delayed entry into higher education for one or more years, attends college part-time, is employed full time, has dependent(s), is financially independent, is a single parent, or does not have a high school diploma. Students who are age 25 and older, commuters, transfer students, veterans, and military-related service personnel typically fall into the nontraditional category as well. Horn (1996) defined "nontraditional" on a continuum based on the number of these characteristics present. Students are considered to be "minimally nontraditional" if they have only one characteristic, "moderately nontraditional" if they have two or three, and "highly nontraditional" if they have four or more. As a whole, nontraditional undergraduate students are predominantly women who belong to a racial-ethnic minority group and have less educated parents than traditional students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

Due to an aging population and an extreme shortage of technically qualified workers, domestic jobs requiring postsecondary education are expected to grow more rapidly than employment in jobs that do not (Kazis et al., 2007). Additionally, experts project that the rate of students entering higher education institutions directly after high school will flatten or decrease over the next decade, but more nontraditional students will enter or re-enter higher education

over the next decade in order to attain degrees, and employment skills and credentials (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Due to this trend, institutions that are focused on a traditional student model will likely prove less sustainable (Ellis, 2013). The workforce needs nontraditional students to fill job openings, and institutions of higher education need to be ready to enroll and integrate nontraditional students into the campus community, and prepare them for the job market.

Successfully increasing the educational attainment of all students, including nontraditional students, should be a major focus of higher education. Despite an ongoing trend in enrollment, nontraditional undergraduate students are among the highest group to not graduate (Kazis et al., 2007). A 2014 study by National Student Clearinghouse Research Center found that only 32 percent of nontraditional students earn a college degree within six to eight years after enrolling. More troubling is that only 7 percent of low-income and minority community college transfer nontraditional students earn a bachelor's degree in 10 years (Kazis et al., 2007; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2014).

To learn more about the phenomena of nontraditional students, I reviewed the relevant discourses on this subject to glean historical and contextual information. I then conducted a mixed methods research study to comprehensively understand the lived experiences on campus for nontraditional students, including the challenges they face and the support systems that aid in their success. The purpose of my research was to assess persistence factors for nontraditional undergraduate students at a Northeast Catholic college. The survey and focus group included questions relating to their social and academic engagement, what kinds of support systems they utilize, and their perceptions on campus climate. Some of the questions I sought answers for included: Are nontraditional students socially and academically engaged? Is the campus culture welcoming and supporting to them? Do nontraditional students feel like they matter to the

College and feel a sense of belonging? In response to these data, I formulated a list of recommendations for the institution based on student responses and best practices.

My intended outcome of the study was to contribute to the limited knowledge of this population and present findings that will inform future programs and policies concerned with increasing retention rates. First, it is imperative that institutions of higher education address the needs of underrepresented students on campus. Creating uplifting experiences for every campus member plays a positive role in the health of a college. According to University of California President Janet Napolitano (2015), "A healthy climate produces amazing results for a diverse campus. Respect and inclusion form the essential bedrock on which to build a community that cherishes and benefits from robust, constructive discourse and daily interactions among all its members." Because the number of nontraditional students in higher education is steadily increasing, colleges and universities need to be prepared to welcome and integrate these students effectively. In addition, because of their high-risk status, nontraditional students are extremely vulnerable to dropping out of college. Colleges need to be aware of what factors affect persistence and retention for this population, and put the proper support mechanisms in place. Finally, faith-based institutions have a moral responsibility to include the voices and needs of underrepresented groups in the decision-making process.

## Literature Review

### Understanding the Barriers Nontraditional Students Face

Cross (1981) identified three barriers that prevented nontraditional students from fully integrating and persisting in college: situational barriers, institutional barriers, and dispositional barriers.

**Situational barriers**. Situational barriers are caused by work, personal commitments, and family responsibilities. The institution may have little control over these challenges. For

nontraditional students, being a student is only one aspect of their lives. Work and family commitments create unique challenges. For instance, many nontraditional students generally work part time or full time to pay their expenses, others manage households and are parents or caregivers to siblings and relatives, and they may also have other constraints on their time due to personal responsibilities or health problems. Overall, nontraditional students are much more likely to maintain employment responsibilities and/or have family obligations while enrolled (Kazis et al., 2007; Pelletier, 2010; Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Due to situational barriers, nontraditional students are less likely to spend time being involved in co-curricular activities on campus. The majority of nontraditional students tend to maintain residency with their families and commute to the four-year institutions (Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010). Traveling to and from campus places demands on students' time and energy and subsequently, they have little free time to spend on involved in co-curricular activities. Also, parking on campus can be difficult to find and expensive. Research has shown, however, that not being involved in campus activities and events leads to social distancing from their peers and a decreased sense of belonging (Townsend & Delves, 2009). Therefore, one can argue that nontraditional students, such as commuters, spend less time on campus participating in social events and subsequently face challenges to integrating successfully into the campus environment and thriving in college. Building satellite campuses and providing better parking choices on campus is thus a critical issue in student access and persistence (Jacoby, 2015).

Situational barriers can be especially challenging for low-income nontraditional students. These students often receive inadequate K-12 education college preparation; those from immigrant backgrounds may face challenges because English is not their native language. Colleges and universities often require remediation courses for such students to bring their skills up to a college-functional level. However, extra college courses cost money and create an added

burden on students' time, which may discourage nontraditional students to persist with their

education (Kezar, Walpole & Perna, 2015). Technology, now a required tool in academia, is also

unfamiliar to many adult learners. Research has shown that veterans and mature learners

frequently need additional technology training in order to be successful in college (Ellis, 2013).

**Institutional barriers.** Higher education institutions can also create barriers to access by

failing to accommodate the needs of nontraditional students in their practices. Historically, the

policies and practices of higher education were designed to serve traditional students and the

widely held institutional model does not serve nontraditional students well (Hagedorn, 2015;

Kazis et al., 2007; Kezar, Walpole & Perna, 2015; Ross-Gordon, 2011). For example, student

support services such as financial aid, advising, career services, and registration are usually open

during typical business hours of 8am-5pm, a practice which prohibits students who work full

time access to these services. In order to access student support services, working students might

have to leave work early or might have to take a day off from work (Hagedorn, 2015). For some

students such as mature or disabled students, services may be difficult to access because they are

spread out all over the campus.

Another institutional barrier that is often overlooked, and considered inconsequential, is

the lack of appropriate campus-issued marketing information. Researchers have found that

inclusive marketing materials are sparse and that they do not accurately reflect the diversity of

students on campus (Hagedorn, 2015; Jacoby, 2015; Kazis et al., 2007). In reference to print and

online text and photographs, Jacoby (2015) stated, "Students' early impressions…are influenced

by the ways in which the institution chooses to portray itself in its publications and on its

website" and "[this means colleges] should represent all types of students and a variety of

lifestyles" (p. 297). Institutions are not sending out a welcoming message to nontraditional

students when their marketing and promotional materials neglect this student body.

For students with children, finding affordable daycare close to campus is a significant barrier; for low-income students, unaffordable day care might mean they cannot further their education. Regarding a correlation between college graduation rates and on-campus day care, the American Association of University Women (2011) stated, "Adult women students whose children are cared for in campus-based childcare centers display greater persistence, higher GPAs, and graduate in fewer years" (p. 318). Access to affordable, on-campus daycare, would thus allow more students with children to attend college and stay continuously enrolled. Time is of the essence for graduation rates because many students who take time off from their studies never return to school to finish their degree.

Further, institutions create barriers to adult students' involvement in campus programming. Many nontraditional students do not attend events on campus because of the cost involved, the time the event is scheduled conflicts with another priority, or the content of the event is not interesting or relevant to them (Ellis, 2013). For instance, joining a sorority or fraternity, attending a co-curricular trip to learn skiing, or going to a ballgame requires extra time and money - resources in short supply to many low-income nontraditional students (Kezar, Walpole & Perna, 2015). Many events on campus are also scheduled during the day, when many nontraditional students work or are in class.

Faculty and staff are often products of the institutions they serve and, as such, may create barriers to persistence for nontraditional students by not providing equal support to all students. Many nontraditional students encounter unsupportive and unwelcoming staff and faculty, and faculty unfamiliar with adult learning and development and teaching methods best suited to this population (Pelletier, 2010). Townsend and Delves (2009) explained that adult learners "who made connections with faculty and staff...had a richer educational experience and were more positive about their transition back to college" (p. 104.) Nontraditional students who had little

interaction with faculty or did not feel supported by faculty reported less satisfaction and

engagement with their educational experience (Kuh 2003, 2007).

**Dispositional Barriers.** Dispositional barriers are attitudes related to perceptions about

oneself as a learner. These attitudes may include fear about having inadequate learning abilities,

anxiety over fitting in with younger students, low self-esteem, embarrassment, difficulty

adjusting to college, and fear of failure (Cross, 1981). These barriers can be absolutely crippling

and are the most problematic of all the barriers to learning. Cross (1981) suggests that this

category is far more influential in student participation and success than the once thought.

Receiving emotional support and feeling welcomed by the campus community can make the

difference on whether nontraditional students persist and attain their degree, or not.

**Supporting the Emotional Needs of Nontraditional Students**

**Marginality and Mattering**. Schlossberg (1989) applied the concepts of marginality and

mattering to the experiences of college students and asserted that people in transition, like

college students, often feel marginalized or like they do not matter. Marginalized persons feel

invisible or banished to the margins of college environments and campus culture.

Marginalization can lead students to feel depressed, angry, sad, and outcast. Students who

express those symptoms may show lower engagement in their education and not persist in their

educational goals (Jacoby, 2015). Students want to feel like they make a difference to the college

and that others care about them. Veterans and adult learners reported feeling marginalized by

their professors and peers and pressured *not* to share their life experiences in class. Feeling

pressure to hide past experiences invalidates a person's identity (Navarre Cleary & Wozniak,

2013).

On the other hand, the concept of mattering refers to the feeling that one matters to

another person or to the institution. According to Schlossberg (1989), mattering can help

students feel connected and involved, and persist through challenges to fulfill their educational goals. Schlossberg (1989) asserted, "When institutions of higher education devote desk space to the concerns of adult learner and provide relevant… services and activities, adult learners feel they matter" (n.p.) When students feel like they matter to the institution, they are engaged in learning.

Kassworm (2008) applied marginality and mattering to the experiences of adult students as they enter or re-enter higher education. Adult students with a positive sense of belonging to the institution will experience persistence and success. On the other hand, low sense of belonging creates feelings of depression and loneliness. Goodenow (1993), described sense of belonging in educational environments as the following:

> Students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual. (p. 25)

Interactions with others on campus, who value or marginalize them, is a powerful influence on student's sense of belonging. According to Kassworm (2008), college places emotional demands on the "courage and fragility" of adult learners (p. 27) and higher education has not placed a priority on developing policies and programs that support adult students on campus, even though nontraditional students pay the same tuition as residential students. This institutional exclusion leads to these students being marginalized in higher education. However, if the college environment provides a supportive learning environment and provides "class-related learning successes and faculty validating their adult identity" (p. 30), the adult students feel as if they matter to the institution. Kassworm (2008) concluded that although adults may experience anxiety in the transition back to college, validation from other adults and faculty helped them to feel connected to the institution and aided them in their persistence.

Sims and Barnett's (2014) research study also analyzed the marginalization of nontraditional students perpetuated through institutional practices and policies. They conducted a content analysis of 706 sources of literature from I-Share (an Illinois online public catalog for 80 Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries) and WorldCat (the world's largest network of library sources). The purpose of the study was to research how often and in what ways issues that nontraditional students face on campus are published in diversity literature. The researchers sought to raise awareness of the needs of this underrepresented student population.

Their findings revealed a massive omission in scholarly literature regarding adult students and their on-campus experiences. Out of 706 sources identified, only three relevant articles were found, and in those three studies, the research was conducted outside the U.S. (Australia, Africa, and the U.K.). Four books were identified that somewhat related to the purpose of the research, but only one book focused on dimensions of diversity within the nontraditional student population. The researchers stated, "Minority, female, gay, military, and disabled college student experiences are widely discussed in diversity sources, yet those same students are disregarded in the literature based on their age, educational background, family status, or life experiences" (p. 9). The authors argued that the intersectionality of adult students' identities should be discussed together and included in scholarly research in order to fully understand and validate the experiences of nontraditional students as a whole. According to the researchers, the lack of scholarly literature devalues the nontraditional student population and leads to institutions being "ill equipped with the knowledge needed to understand and meet the needs of the population" (p. 9). Since nontraditional student experiences are excluded from diversity literature, they are left out of institutional policy and programming, which leads to their voices being silenced and increased marginalization on campus (Sims & Barnett, 2014).

**Validation**. Another concept that can be used to promote student's psychological well-being is Rendón's Validation Theory. Rendón (1994) defined validation as "an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in-and-out of class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development" (Rendón, 1994, p. 44). Rendón (1994) examined data from a qualitative research study called the Transition to College Project. The researchers interviewed 132 first-year minority and nontraditional students at four, very different institutions of higher education in the U.S. The researchers explored how students made decisions to attend college, the transition process to college, their expectations of college, and how students felt they were changed by their college experience (Rendón, 1994).

Researchers found that successful nontraditional students received validation both in and out of the classroom. Validation that occurred outside of the classroom was often equally as important to in-class validation. In-class examples of academic validation practices included supportive and friendly faculty, faculty that provided meaningful and timely feedback to students, and faculty who provided students with extra help. Many nontraditional students expressed doubts and fears about their ability to succeed in college. Some students were successful when they got involved in the campus activities, while other students reported that they did not become involved because they did not fit into the campus culture (Rendón, 1993).

According to Rendón (1994), nontraditional students who did not receive validation from their professors or peers turned to out-of-class support persons for validation. Students who received little validation often were not engaged in the institution and left college. Rendón (1993) stated, "The role of the institution in fostering validation...involves faculty, counselors, coaches, and administrators actively reaching out to students or designing activities that promote active learning and interpersonal growth" (p. 16.)

**Engagement, Persistence, and Success of Non-Traditional Students**

In the last several decades, institutions of higher education have become increasingly concerned with the academic and social integration of students to promote students' academic success and degree attainment, especially for traditional-age, residential students. Student engagement focuses on what students do in college and how student behaviors, opportunities, and environments promote persistence and success (Lester, Brown Leonard & Mathias, 2013). Generally, student engagement refers to the student's sense of belonging to the institution or the amount the student is emotionally invested in their education (Kazis et al., 2007). Engagement efforts have included first-year seminars, living-learning communities, and multi-day orientations (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Overall, an extensive body of research supports the idea that student engagement is crucial to student success. Although research related to traditional student persistence is abundant, data measuring nontraditional student outcomes and persistence is minimal, leaving institutions uninformed about best practices to help them succeed (Kazis, et al., 2007). Few research studies have explored the degree to which nontraditional students are engaged within their four-year institution (Sims and Barnett, 2014).

Tinto (1993) theorized that retention could be understood in terms of how well a student integrates into the social and academic experiences of the institution. Academic experiences included face-to-face interactions with faculty in and out of the classroom, whereas social interactions included both campus-sponsored co-curricular activities and informal social interactions on campus. Tinto (1993) posited the more integrated a student is to the social and academic fabric of the college, the more likely the student is to persist in college. However, the researcher recognized the disproportionate challenge to integration and persistence nontraditional students face in comparison to traditional students. Successful integration contributed to a sense

of belonging. Perceived sense of belonging in academic environments has a powerful effect on students' emotions and motivations, and how the student handles anxiety, distress, and other challenges to graduation. (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto (1997) explored how the classroom might play a role in the integration of students academically and socially. He suggested that for commuters and nontraditional students with external commitments, "the classroom is the crossroads where the social and academic meet" (Tinto, 1997, p. 599). Tinto continued by explaining that much of the research, including his own, had neglected the classroom as a critical component influencing student integration and persistence and recommended further inquiry into the idea that social and academic integration may not be two separate integration factors. Rather, he suggested that social and academic integration combines to "appear as two nested spheres, where the academic occurs within the broader social system that pervades the campus" (Tinto, 1997, p. 619).

In 1999, prominent scholars working for the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) crafted a survey instrument called *The College Student Report* to study student engagement in higher education. Since its inception in 2000, the survey has included benchmarks designed to gauge student engagement levels. These benchmarks provide higher education administrators information about distinct aspects of student engagement. The survey has become one of the most widely used instruments to measure student engagement, with more than 1,600 institutions participating since 2000 (National Survey of Student Engagement - About, 2015).

Survey items in *The College Student Report* reflect behaviors by students and institutions that are associated with desired outcomes of college (National Survey of Student Engagement - About, 2015). The theme of Academic Challenge encompasses higher-order learning, reflective learning, learning strategies, and quantitative reasoning. The Learning with Peers theme focuses on diversity and collaborative learning. Experiences with Faculty theme is specific to the quality

and quantity of faculty-student interactions and the use of effective teaching practices. The Campus Environment theme revolves around the quality of students' interactions with students, academic advisors, faculty, student services staff, and other administrative campus staff. Meanwhile, the Campus Environment theme also gauges students' perceptions of how much an institution utilizes services and activities that support their learning and development. These services include academic support, providing social engagement opportunities, health and wellness support, support in managing non-academic responsibilities (i.e., work and family commitments), and campus programming and events. The survey assesses which areas of student engagement the institution is performing well and areas that could be improved (NSSE Survey Instrument, 2015).

George Kuh was one of the members of the original NSSE design team. Kuh (2003) found that full time students who lived on campus were more engaged than nontraditional students, mainly because traditional students did not have work or family responsibilities that prevented them from engaging in co-curricular activities on campus. Nontraditional students were less likely to engage in activities than their peers because they took less classes, wrote and read less, and had less access to faculty than traditional students. According to Kuh (2003), student persistence and success are related to the extent to which students interact with supportive faculty on campus, both inside and outside the classroom. In other words, informal faculty-student interaction activities — working on a research project with a faculty member, talking with instructors outside of class, and serving on committees with faculty—are positively correlated with student learning and development According to Kuh (2007), student engagement for nontraditional students includes academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, and active and collaborative learning, with less emphasis on social engagement on campus. He

asserted that social engagement with peers is embedded into academic collaborative learning. Kuh (2007) posited that those students "who engage in educationally purposeful activities" such as research assistantships, internships, voluntarism, community service, and holding office in student government or other clubs, survive and thrive in colleges and universities (n.p.).

Although widely utilized, the NSSE instrument has a growing body of critics, including Olivas (2011), who contended that the survey does not include the experiences of minorities and nontraditional college students. The survey is flawed, according to Olivas (2011), because it does not take into account their cultural differences and the marginalizing experiences that minority and other nontraditional students encounter on campus. Hence, a more inclusive survey instrument is necessary. The researcher noted that the scholarly literature supporting NSSE lacks adequate representation of diverse authors, which silences the voices of underrepresented students on campus (Olivas, 2011).

The NSSE instrument was also critiqued in Lester, Brown Leonard, and Mathias' (2013) study. The researchers examined the definition and behaviors of academic and social engagement from the transfer student perspective, as opposed to using the standard definition from NSSE. The researchers conducted 31 interviews of transfer students at a large, public university, with a sizeable commuter population. The participants were selected in order to provide a diverse sample in terms of racial identity, gender, part-time versus full-time employment, and residential versus commuter status. The results showed that, overwhelmingly, transfer students viewed engagement as an important factor in their experiences and felt that university support structures contributed to their success. Many of the students, however, viewed academic engagement as their primary function and viewed social engagement as meaningful *only if* it contributed to academics. Students felt a strong sense of engagement when the faculty created educational opportunities for meaningful interactions, such as immersion trips or

experiential learning. Nonetheless, transfer students did not interact much with faculty outside of class, except for attending office hours and asking questions through email. The transfer students related academic engagement to challenge and learning. Significantly high levels of academic challenge led to increased engagement and identification with the campus community (Lester, Brown Leonard & Mathias, 2013).

In contrast to NSSE's standard definitions, transfer students viewed social engagement as social interaction both on campus *and* off campus. Family members and friends provided the most support to transfer students. This support was particularly important because many of the transfer students were older with family and work commitments. When those responsibilities were viewed as support structures, rather than barriers, the transfer students felt successful in their academic pursuits. Additionally, the transfer students saw social, community-based events as social engagement and were often not able to attend campus-sponsored events due to their personal responsibilities. Joining campus-based groups was rarely seen as essential to the transition process. However, an impromptu meeting with peers or a conversation in class was considered a part of social engagement for these students. Sense of belonging was fostered through connections with other older students, in a campus climate that welcomed diversity. For many, engaging in social activities on campus did not promote a sense of belonging. Although students' age and campus climate affected their sense of belonging, the students' perceptions concerning inclusivity related directly to academic challenge (Lester, Brown Leonard & Mathias, 2013).

**Research on Specific Nontraditional Student Populations**

**Community College Transfer Students in Four-Year Institutions**

Berger and Malaney (2003) conducted phone interviews of 372 community college transfer students at the University of Massachusetts. The purpose of the study was examine how

pre-transfer experiences and preparation, along with post-transfer experiences, influence the adjustment of community college transfer students to life on a four-year university campus. The research questions focused on the students' satisfaction with the university experience, their academic progress, social life, sense of community on campus, academic advising, accessibility of faculty, and the ability to make friends.

Findings from this study aligned with Tinto's (1993) research, and indicated that increased immersion in campus life leads to greater satisfaction with the college experience. For example, students were most likely to be satisfied with social aspects of university life when they were actively engaged in social activities at the university. The researchers also found that students needed to decrease the amount of time spent working off campus by over eight hours per week and decrease the amount of time spent with family over four hours per week in order to be successful in college. Overall satisfaction with the university experience was likely to be higher if students lived and worked on campus. Nontraditional students, who often work and have dependents, would not be able to devote more time to social activities on campus and would likely report less satisfaction with their college experiences. Berger and Malaney (2003) concluded that transfer students needed more support to transition effectively into the baccalaureate institution. To that end, the four-year college needs to provide clear communication to transfer students about requirements and expectations to be successful (Berger and Malaney, 2003).

In a more recent study on community college transfer students, Townsend and Wilson (2006) conducted a qualitative research study to understand the factors affecting the academic and social integration of transfer students. The researchers interviewed 19 students; five students in the sample identified as nontraditional (older than mid-20's). The students were asked about the transfer process, efforts of the university to orient and assist them, and their perceptions of

the university versus the community college. The findings indicated that adult transfer students perceived the lack of older undergraduate students on campus negatively impacted their ability to form social connections on campus (Townsend and Wilson, 2006).

According to Townsend and Wilson (2006), community college transfer students found that they did not feel included at the four-year institution because traditional students had little interest in expanding their social groups. The transfer students also expressed difficulty finding traditional students interested in developing study groups with them. Adult students had trouble integrating themselves academically and socially on campus and felt that the university catered to traditional-aged college students who attended full time and lived on campus, or close to campus. The research findings indicated that nontraditional students are more likely to be neglected and ignored in retention efforts by institutions because first-year, traditional age students receive the bulk of attention, while transfer students needed additional support during the first semester on campus. When asked for recommendations, the transfer students suggested that transfer orientations be led by nontraditional students and that the college provide information that is more relevant to the needs of commuter and older students such as parking fees, the credit transfer process, financial aid assistance, and academic support services. Older students also desired information on how to connect socially with similar students.

The research study concluded that "academic and social needs seem to blend together into a desire for socially-oriented academic integration" (p. 419). In other words, the academic and social needs of nontraditional students did tend to blend together; but, rather than socially oriented academic integration, participants in this study described academically oriented social integration (Townsend and Wilson, 2009).

Where Townsend and Wilson's (2006, 2009) studies focused on the institutional role in transfer student success, Wang's (2009) research explored other factors associated with degree

attainment and persistence of community college transfer students, including gender, pre-college preparation, GPA earned in the community college, college involvement, and internal "locus of control" - or the belief that one is responsible for his or her own success. Wang (2009) synthesized quantitative data from the National Education Longitudinal Study and Postsecondary Education Transcript Study that followed 12,144 American 8th grade students over a 12-year timeframe. Wang narrowed down the sample to 786 cases and only included students that began their postsecondary education at a community college and eventually transferred to a four-year institution. Wang (2009) found transfer students' educational outcomes are influenced by various personal, sociological, and psychological factors, such as GPA and mindset, as well as by their experiences in higher education.

In the study, variables that affected persistence included enrollment status (part time vs. full time), academic remediation, college involvement, academic performance, and environmental factors. Full time students had much higher attainment rates than part-time students. Since many older nontraditional students are part-time students, they were less likely to attain their baccalaureate degree. Students with higher socioeconomic status were more like to attain a bachelor's degree than were less wealthy students. Wang (2009) stated that GPA and internal locus of control were the two most significant predictors of persistence. However, college involvement had a significant, positive effect on community college transfers' attainment of a baccalaureate degree at a four-year institution: the odds were almost 2x higher for students who were involved at college versus those who were not involved. Wang (2009) proposed that the positive correlation between college involvement and baccalaureate attainment provides evidence to the notion that colleges and universities should provide programs and initiatives that involve community college transfer students.

Ishitani and McKittrick's (2010) study differed from Wang (2009) in that they investigated the differences in student engagement between community college transfer students and native students- or those who began their college experience at the institution. They utilized NSSE benchmarks to assess the students' collegiate experiences. The researchers conducted a quantitative survey of 535 seniors at a large, four-year institution that accepts 700 transfer students annually. The students were divided into two categories: 417 were native students and 118 were community college transfer students. Similar to the other studies, their findings indicated that community college transfer students were overall less engaged than native students at four-year institutions.

The findings showed that community college transfer students had lower scores in engagement in ACL, SFI, and EEE in the NSSE instrument. Part-time enrollment status negatively impacted both native and transfer students' scores across all benchmarks. However, the level of student engagement for transfer students improved when they enrolled full-time. Timing of matriculation significantly affected engagement; students who transferred as sophomores or juniors were less engaged in the four-year college than native students or students that transferred in their freshman year. The researchers stated, "Some may argue that it is unrealistic to expect transfer students who matriculated to their senior institutions as juniors to have the same levels of student engagement as native students" (p. 589.) This is because the time the student is enrolled is shorter and therefore, they would have less opportunity to become involved on campus. Ishitani and McKittrick (2010) stated another possible reason for this is because social groups are often formed during freshman year, so transfer students that enroll later are excluded from these social circles. Like Wang (2009), the researchers pointed out that these findings support the need for higher education to address the adjustment process of

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community college transfer students and enhance educational and social engagement

opportunities for these students (Ishitani & McKittrick, 2010).

**Mature Students in Four-Year Institutions**

Townsend and Delves (2009) analyzed and synthesized two research projects that took

place from 2005 to 2009 in Australia. The first research study involved interviewing 12 adult

learners, surveying 12, and interviewing 10 university staff. A subsequent email survey was sent

to 80 "mature" (e.g., over 50 years old) students enrolled at a university in Australia, which

yielded a sample of 12 students.

The mature students were asked to make positive and negative comments about being a

mature student on campus. Both the students and staff noted the major challenges for students

included family responsibilities, financial and work commitments, and an overall lack of time to

successfully balance all of their commitments. The students felt confused over professors' use of

academic jargon and felt insecure about approaching faculty and staff for assistance. These

feelings compounded the mature students' fears about their ability to succeed in the academic

setting. Three students identified stress as a major factor impacting their overall campus

experiences. Attempting to juggle family responsibilities, work, and other personal commitments

created emotional stressors, and stress was compounded for single parents. Staff reported that

expecting adult learners to assimilate into a campus culture that was geared to traditional

students, without an inclusive learning environment in place, results in systemic barriers that

prevent the adult learner from realizing his or her full potential (Townsend and Delves (2009).

The students often identified friendships and establishment of a support network as

important factors to persisting with college. Some of the mature students searched for social

connections with other students as a way to create meaning in their lives. The majority of staff

felt that students who had a sense of belonging to their institution persevered and were more

successful at university. Both staff and students identified that those students who felt connected academically and socially had more positive perceptions of their campus experiences (Townsend and Delves (2009).

In a later Australian research study on adult and mature students, Ellis (2013) conducted an online survey with six, open-ended questions. Her sample was 16 mature learners enrolled both full-time and part-time at a university in Australia. The study's purpose was to explore the lived experiences of mature students at their university in order to improve the higher education experience for older students. Mature students reported that they enter or re-enter higher education to learn new skills for their jobs, to develop professionally, or to keep their minds stimulated and active. Despite older adults living productive lives, ageism and discrimination are continuing challenges on campus and in society (Ellis, 2013).

The mature students in Ellis' (2013) study faced several adjustment difficulties in their transition back to campus including negative attitudes from the traditional student population, stress resulting from an emphasis on technology in their studies, stress resulting from work and family pressures, and unsupportive faculty and staff who were out of touch with their learning needs. The mature students also desired a need for an orientation that included pre-entry classes on technology and modern research methods. The students indicated that tutoring, library assistance, and psychological support were crucial to their persistence in college. One student confided, "My self-esteem can be very low at times" (p. 363.) The students showed little interest in co-curricular activities on campus because of a lack of interest in the programming choices or the students had conflicts with other family responsibilities. One student stated that the campus programming "does not fit in with my age and situation" (p. 363.) On the other hand, older students responded that they enjoyed classroom interactions with younger students, were happy

with their sense of achievement, particularly enjoyed sharing their wisdom in classroom

discussions (Ellis, 2013).

### Veterans and Service Members in Four-Year Institutions

Navarre Cleary and Wozniak (2013) conducted two focus groups at a mid-western

university. Their sample was 8 veterans who were enrolled in composition courses at the

university. The researchers wanted to share veterans' voices and insights in order to improve

pedagogical practice at the university. The authors contended that veterans are important in

higher education because they bring diverse life experiences, self-motivation, and a readiness to

learn to the classroom. Like other nontraditional students, veterans generally balanced school

work with career and family responsibilities, and regularly felt like outsiders in the university

setting. Both in the classroom and in social interactions on campus, the veterans felt pressured

not to share their life experiences. However, denying the student's previous life experiences

resulted in them feeling alienated and invalidated in their educational experiences. Veterans

spoke of a need to feel "connected" to other students and "camaraderie" with other veteran

students (n.p). When veterans connected with other students on campus, it reduced their sense of

isolation. A female veteran shared her desire to share her military experiences in an authentic

way with classmates, stating "We're all members of the same community, and the more we

understand each other, the better we function together as a community, as a society (n.p.).

In a larger veterans study, Griffin and Gilbert (2015) conducted a qualitative study using

Schlossberg's Transition Theory to examine how institutions of higher education can facilitate

successful transitions for veterans. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with 28 student

veterans, as well as with 72 faculty, administrators, and student affairs professionals across seven

American higher education institutions, ranging in size, location, and mission. The purpose of

the study was to determine how institutions assist veterans as they transition to the institution,

what challenges veterans face on campus, and to assess if the veterans perceived the campus culture to be welcoming and inclusive.

Three main areas of concern emerged: services, structures, and support. Support services designed specifically for veterans are important to their experience on campus. Students appreciated having a point person on campus or a veterans' office to assist them with resources and serve as their campus advocate. Also, the veterans' office served as a center for academic and social support (VA, 2015). In larger institutions, the veterans' office planned events, provided transition classes for student veterans, offered work study programs, and offered dedicated lounge space where the student veterans could socialize with other veterans and receive academic tutoring (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

According to the data, institutions need to create more streamlined services for veterans. Veterans often felt frustrated when they were directed to offices all over campus for assistance, and in such incidences, felt that campus staff was unknowledgeable about their needs. Veterans also asserted that encounters with unsupportive staff made transitions to university life difficult. Also, veterans wanted social and cultural connections, but often perceived themselves as having little in common with traditional college students. Veterans noted that because they were older and had work and family responsibilities beyond campus, they did not share similar life experiences with traditional college students. The researchers recommended that colleges and universities apply Schlossberg's Transition Theory to frame veterans as students in transition, like other students on campus, in order to promote their success (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015).

### Hispanic/Latino(a) Students in Four-Year Institutions

Many researchers have looked at how ethnicity defines a students' sense of belonging and integration into the college. This body of research is helpful because students of Hispanic/Latino identity are an increasing student population in higher education. Sense of

belonging has been used in higher education research to measure a student's psychological sense

of integration, and importantly calls attention to the meshing of the individual and the institution.

In a longitudinal study, Hurtado and Carter (1997) explored a set of factors associated with sense

of belonging, and developed a new model for sense of belonging that extended beyond Tinto's

framework. They studied how Latino/a students perceived belonging and the factors that

influenced their persistence. Their mixed methods study included an initial survey sent to first

year students who identified as Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Latino. Hurtado and Carter (1997)

followed the cohort through four years in college. A combination of surveys and phone

interviews explored the student's transition to college, their management of time, money, and

family responsibilities, their perceptions about the campus climate, how involved they were on

campus, and faculty interactions. By including a separate measure of sense of belonging, the

researchers were able to examine both the participation in particular activities and what that

participation meant to the student (Hurtado and Carter, 1997).

The researchers found that Latino/a students felt a stronger sense of belonging when they

felt the institution provided support in their transition to college and when they maintained some

link with their pre-college community. Maintaining family relationships was also crucial to a

successful transition to college. Students who perceived a hostile campus climate had a lower

sense of belonging. The researchers contended that engagement does not mean giving up one's

sense of identity in order to integrate into the institution, as Tinto (1993) suggested. Factors that

promoted integration and sense of belonging included developing diverse friendships, positive

interactions across differences, and positive campus climate (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Expanding on Hurtado and Carter's (1997) research, Patton, Harris, Ranero-Ramirez,

Villacampa, & Lui (2014) offered a similar perspective about the experiences of Latino/a

students. According to Patton, et al. (2015), the culture of academia expects students to be purely

dedicated to their academics, however that expectation may not be realistic for students with families, especially for Latinos/as. Family is an integral part of their identities, as their culture stresses obligation and cooperation to their families. Removing the family, then, is culturally insensitive to Latinos/as. Patton, et al. (2015), stated, "A great deal of academic and social programming caters to racially dominant groups...deeply embedded structures of racism and patriarchy that exist on every college campus can be prohibitive in efforts of engagement" (p. 41.) As such, institutions should seek to understand the cultural perspectives and needs of all students so that they are able to feel connected to, and become engaged in, and persist in their education.

In summary, this review of literature helped to define my Capstone project by providing insight as to the factors that influence persistence for nontraditional students on campus and the ways in which institutions can hinder or assist them in their educational goals. Nontraditional students are a complex group of individuals with very diverse and distinct needs. Academic and social engagement has consistently been shown to increase persistence for college students, but scholars disagree what factors best lead to success. In fact, research has shown that persistence and success is attributed to various factors among different student groups – it is not a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. In addition, interactions with other students, faculty, and staff on campus has an impact on whether or not nontraditional students feel included and a sense of belonging to the institution. Interactions can be respectful, welcoming, and validating, or, conversely, negative and invalidating. These interactions across all the groups on campus create a healthy or chilly campus climate. Successfully supporting students - especially those that are vulnerable to dropping out because of situational, institutional, or dispositional barriers - requires institutions to look at new ways to assist them academically and socially. Further, institutions need to create

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a welcoming campus culture that honors the diversity of students, carefully considering their

student body and how well they serve them.

## Research Method

This research study was guided by the pragmatic paradigm because it assumes that there

is a single reality and that all individuals interpret that reality in their own way (Mertens, 2015).

According to Mertens (2015), "Researchers interact with the communities and learn about the

way each person understands the phenomenon and possible consequences of different courses of

action. The values supported by communities should include freedom, equality, and justice" (p.

38). This paradigm most closely aligns with my worldview because I believe each student has a

different lived experience on campus and nontraditional students have historically been

underrepresented in higher education.

Based on my worldview, I felt that a mixed methods study would provide a holistic and

richer understanding of nontraditional needs to better inform practices and policies. Accordingly,

I used mixed methods to triangulate current literature, statistical data, and qualitative data to

legitimize conclusions and to broaden understanding. In that sense, mixed methods allows the

researcher the tools to analyze the experiences of nontraditional students on campus through

statistical data, but also through individual student voices resulting in a richer understanding of

lived experiences (Mertens, 2015).

For this research study, I recruited participants through email from Austin College, a

small, Catholic college located in New England that grants baccalaureate and post-graduate

degrees. To efficiently recruit participants, I utilized the expertise of what Seidman (2006) called

a gatekeeper. A gatekeeper is often an administrator who has access to students and resources. I

created a survey based on one conducted by the University of North Carolina – Charlotte

Campus Climate Survey (1996) and the NSSE (2015) survey instrument. Initially, I emailed the

survey to 244 students enrolled in the Evening Studies Program (ESP) at Austin for the fall 2015

and spring 2016 semester. I chose to sample this population because the ESP serves a

nontraditional undergraduate student population. I also conducted a focus group with six ESP

students who were chosen through purposeful sampling in order to include a diverse group of

students (Seidman, 2006). See Table 1 for focus group participant demographic data.

Table 1:  Focus Group Demographic Data

| Name | 25 or Older | Gender | Race/ Ethnic Identity | Major | Student is a parent | NCES Moderate or High Risk | Works Part Time or Full Time | School Part Time or Full Time |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1  Lindsey | Y | F | Caucasian | Education | Y | Y | Full | Part |
| 2  Jason | N | M | Caucasian | Education | N | Y | Full | Full |
| 3  Isabella | Y | F | Hispanic - Puerto Rican | Business | Y | Y | Full | Full |
| 4  Maria | Y | F | Hispanic - Dominican | Education | Y | Y | Full | Full |
| 5  Susan | Y | F | Caucasian | IT | Y | Y | Full | Part |
| 6  Amelia | Y | F | Caucasian- Italian | Liberal Arts | N | Y | Part | Part |

The ESP offers a number of degree paths for nontraditional undergraduates: a 24-month

Bachelor Completion Program, focusing on Education and Civic Leadership (ECL), as well as

bachelor degree programs for Business, Liberal Arts, and Information Technology. The ECL

students are primarily full time students that transfer into the College with at least two years of college credit. The students in the cohort-style ECL take classes twice per week at night, and on Saturday mornings. The Business, Liberal Arts, and Information Technology programs are not cohort models and courses are offered evenings Monday through Thursday.

Out of the 244 Evening Studies Program students who received the survey, 62 students responded, resulting in a 25% return rate. All of the participants self-identified as having moderate to high risk factors based on NCES' (2015) definitions; 12 students (18%) reported two to three nontraditional student characteristics, while 51 students (82%) reported four or more characteristics. This indicates that the nontraditional undergraduate student body at Austin is at moderate to high risk of not persisting to degree attainment, according to NCES criteria. 77% of participants in the survey were aged 25 and older. See Table 2 for survey participant data.

Given the potential vulnerability of this participant pool, confidentiality and privacy were important factors. A private location was chosen for the focus group session and to ensure ethical practice, signed consent forms were obtained from all participants. To maintain confidentiality, all demographic data, pertinent information, and consent forms were kept in a secure location. Students were informed of their right to discontinue in the study at any time and without any recourse. The survey respondents were not required to provide their identity. All of the participants in the focus groups were given pseudonyms, which were used to identify them on subsequent materials. In order to obtain authentic insight into the students' lived experiences, compensation for participation was minimal: interested survey participants were entered into a $15 gift card drawing and focus group participants were provided dinner. Further, in the case that a student became distressed, I had information on hand relating to the counseling services at the College's health center.

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Table 2: Survey Participant Demographic Data

| Demographics | All students n (%) | Students Under 25 Years Old | Students Over 25 Years Old |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Nontraditional Characteristics** | | | |
| I do not live on campus | 62 (100%) | 14 (100%) | 48 (100%) |
| Delayed entry to college 4 years or re-enrolled after a 4+ year break | 26 (42%) | 1 (7%) | 25 (52%) |
| Aged 25 and older | 48 (77%) | 0 (0%) | 48 (100%) |
| I transferred from another institution | 46 (74%) | 12 (86%) | 34 (71%) |
| I am a parent | 29 (47%) | 3 (21%) | 26 (54%) |
| No one can claim me as a dependent | 39 (63%) | 5 (36%) | 34 (71%) |
| I am a veteran | 1 (2%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (2%) |
| I work full time while attending school | 45 (73%) | 12 (86%) | 33 (69%) |
| I work part time while attending school | 9 (15%) | 2 (14%) | 7 (15%) |
| Care for an aging parent or another person | 7 (11%) | 1 (7%) | 6 (13%) |
| Total | 62 (100%) | 14 (100%) | 48 (100%) |
| **Gender** | | | |
| Male | 8 (13%) | 1 (7%) | 7 (15%) |
| Female | 54 (87%) | 13 (93%) | 41 (85%) |
| Total | 62 (100%) | 14 (100%) | 48 (100%) |
| **Degree Program Enrolled In** | | | |
| Education and Civic Leadership | 43 (69%) | 13 (93%) | 30 (63%) |
| Business Administration | 5 (8%) | 0 (0%) | 5 (10%) |
| Liberal Arts | 9 (15%) | 1 (7%) | 8 (17%) |
| Undeclared | 3 (4%) | 0 (0%) | 4 (8%) |
| Information Technology | 2 (3%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (2%) |
| Total | 62 (100%) | 14 (100%) | 48 (100%) |
| **Number of Credits Currently Enrolled In** | | | |
| 12 or more | 35 (56%) | 12 (86%) | 23 (48%) |
| 8 | 14 (23%) | 2 (14%) | 12 (25%) |
| 4 | 8 (13%) | 0 (0%) | 8 (17%) |
| Not taking any credits this semester | 5 (8%) | 14 (100%) | 5 (10%) |
| Total | 62 (100%) | | 48 (100%) |
| **Number of Credits Earned at Austin** | | | |
| 0-27 | 25 (40%) | 4 (29%) | 21 (44%) |
| 28-59 | 18 (29%) | 8 (57%) | 10 (21%) |
| 60-91 | 15 (24%) | 2 (14%) | 13 (27%) |
| 92+ | 4 (6%) | 0 (0%) | 4 (8%) |
| Total | 62 (100%) | 14 (100%) | 48 (100%) |
| **Commute Time to Campus** | | | |
| 5-15 minutes | 11 (18%) | 1 (7%) | 10 (21%) |
| 15-30 minutes | 26 (42%) | 8 (57%) | 18 (38%) |
| 30-45 minutes | 18 (29%) | 4 (29%) | 14 (29%) |
| 45-60 minutes | 6 (10%) | 1 (7%) | 5 (10%) |
| 60+ minutes | 1 (2%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (2%) |
| Total | 62 (100%) | 14 (100%) | 48 (100%) |

To analyze the text responses on the survey as well as the focus group data, I used

standard methods of coding qualitative data (Saldana, 2012). I transcribed the qualitative data

and, for credibility, I conducted what Mertens (2015) calls "member checks" to verify the transcription accurately reflected the participants' intentions (p. 269). I then conducted line by line coding to identify themes and patterns, from which my findings and subsequent recommendations were generated.

The purpose of my research was to better understand the needs of nontraditional students and the factors affecting their persistence. I wanted to understand the factors that influenced their academic and social engagement on campus, their sense of belonging, and persistence in college. I also wanted to raise awareness of this sizable, but potentially marginalized group at Austin. The research questions I set out to answer were: How do the nontraditional students in the Evening Studies Program connect and identify with Austin College? How do nontraditional students define engagement and is it important to them? How do these students engage in the campus culture at Austin and do they feel included? Do nontraditional students have the same access to academic support and co-curricular programming? What supports both on campus and off do nontraditional students have? The instruments used in this study can be found in Appendices A and B.

There is abundant research that nontraditional students are limited in how they integrate in the campus community because of external factors in their lives, such as family and work commitments. However, other research indicates that nontraditional students are engaged through meaningful faculty interaction, academic challenge, and positive peer interactions in class. Therefore, a research study was needed in order to assess if the needs of Austin's nontraditional students are being met. It should be noted that a limitation of my study involves my sample of the nontraditional student population because they are enrolled at night in the College. There could be nontraditional undergraduate students with moderate to high - risk

characteristics enrolled in day classes at the College who may report a different lived experience than students in my research. This limitation warrants future research.

## Findings: Overview

The survey and focus group yielded rich data that can be used to assist Austin College student support initiatives and inform practitioners who work with nontraditional students. Many of the findings support existing literature on nontraditional students, but some of the findings contradicted the existing literature, adding another layer to the complexity of this diverse student population. The participants were very forthcoming in their answers and often expressed their desire to help improve the experience for other nontraditional students at Austin.

## Findings: Survey

**Academic Engagement**. To begin the survey, students were asked questions about their academic engagement on campus. Data indicate that the students report high levels of academic engagement, especially with faculty encouragement of classroom interaction, faculty supporting student well-being and success, and academic challenge. Conversely, in three categories related to one-on-one faculty to student interaction, the data indicate very low student academic engagement. In order to verify the results and look at subgroups within the sample, I cross-tabulated the data to three subgroups based on age, gender, and degree program. Although the percentages varied based on the subgroup filtering, the data consistently indicates low academic engagement in one-on-one faculty - student interaction.

The Education and Civic Leadership (ECL) cohort reported higher levels of academic engagement, as compared to the other majors, indicating that the cohort-style learning community facilitates active and engaged learning, perhaps because the ECL students are primarily full time students. This finding resonates with Kuh's (2003) assertion that nontraditional students have less access to faculty than traditional students do and experience

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reduced academic engagement. The data also support the findings of Lester, Brown Leonard &

Mathias (2013), who found that nontraditional transfer students do not interact frequently one-

on-one with faculty outside of class, except minimally for email or office hours. The data

relating to low academic one-on-one engagement suggests that faculty are primarily engaging

nontraditional students as a group, such as in the classroom setting. See Table 3 for data.

Table 3:  Data Relating to Academic Engagement

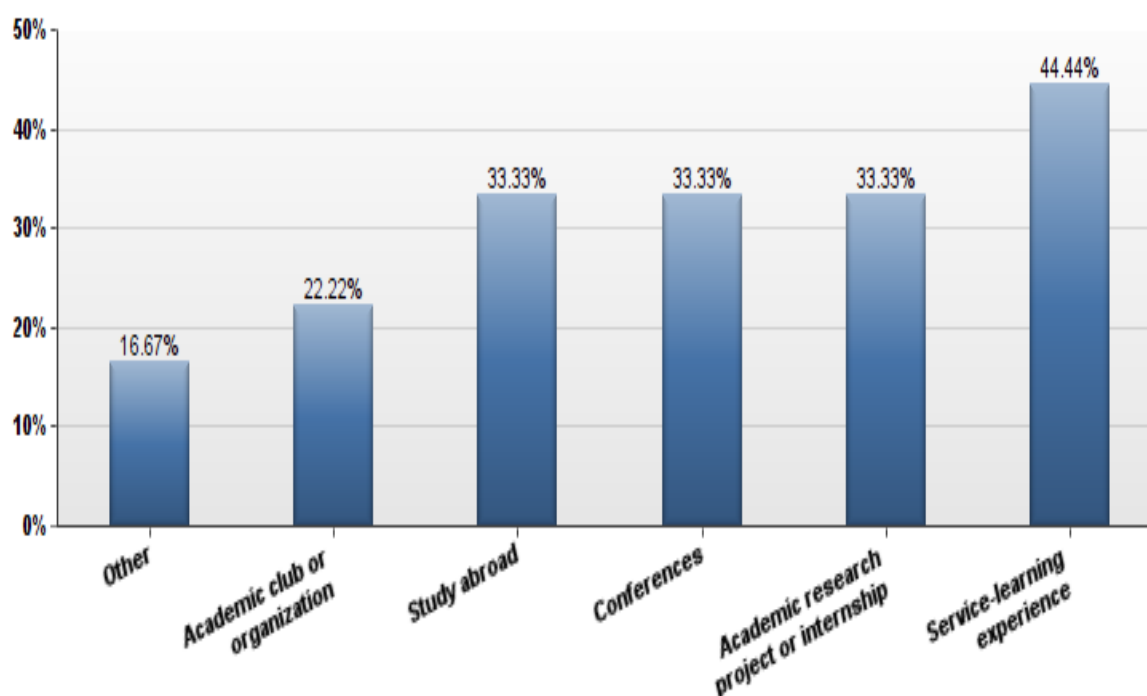| # | Academic Engagement Questions | Frequently | Occasionally | Never |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | I have spoken to faculty members about course-related information | 29.03% | 67.74% | 3.23% |
| 2 | I have discussed personal concerns or problems with a faculty member | 6.45% | 43.55% | 50.00% |
| 3 | I have discussed career plans with a faculty member | 16.13% | 53.23% | 30.65% |
| 4 | I have met informally with a faculty member on a project or paper | 8.06% | 40.32% | 51.61% |
| 5 | My professors are available to answer questions outside of class | 58.06% | 40.32% | 1.61% |
| 6 | My professors encourage me to interact in classroom activities | 70.97% | 29.03% | 0.00% |
| 7 | My professors take an interest in my well-being and academic success | 59.68% | 33.87% | 6.45% |
| 8 | I feel academically challenged by my professors | 61.29% | 38.71% | 0.00% |

Survey data indicate that only 10% of the students are involved in co-curricular activities

on campus and those students spend less than five hours per week involved in their activity.

However, as illustrated in Table 4, 58% of students are interested in additional academic

opportunities through Austin. This finding suggests that there are few academic opportunities for

nontraditional students to participate in, or that those that are offered happen at times that are

inconvenient.

When asked a follow-up question regarding what academic opportunities the students

would be interested in, students reported an interest in academic clubs and organizations (22%),

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research projects or internships (33%), conferences (33%), study abroad (33%), and service-

learning experiences (44%). When filtered by age, 72% of students under the age of 25 indicated

an interest in academic opportunities versus 54% of students over the age of 25, which may be

explained that as students mature, the number of outside commitments increase, preventing them

from participating in on-campus opportunities. Another explanation could be that older students

do not understand the benefits of academic opportunities. Further, male students reported less

interest in additional opportunities (38%) than female students (61%).

Table 4:  Percentage of All Nontraditional Students Interested in Academic Opportunities



When asked about their overall academic experience at Austin, 89% of students indicated

that they are satisfied. This figure was consistent when filtered by gender, program, and age,

except for students under the age of 25 who reported a slightly higher academic satisfaction rate

of 93%. It should be noted that part-time students reported being less academically engaged and

satisfied with their academic experience than full time students. This finding is consistent with

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Wang's (2009) and Ishitani and McKittrick's (2010) studies that found enrollment status

positively or negatively affected engagement and persistence for nontraditional students.

According to the researchers, students enrolled part time are less likely to become integrated into

the campus community, feel engaged, and attain their degrees.

   **Social Engagement.** Data from the survey questions relating to social engagement

indicates that 70% of nontraditional students want to make social connections with other students

on campus, but only 10% of the students are involved in co-curricular activities. As detailed in

Table 5, nontraditional students primarily socially engage in the classroom, occasionally

socialize outside of class, but rarely meet with peers outside of class to work on assignments

together. Less than 50% of the nontraditional students have not made friends with other students

on campus and 25% of students do not have a diverse group of friends on campus. When filtered

by subgroup, 62% of students, age 25 and older, have not made friends with other students on

campus. Similarly, Kuh (2003) found that nontraditional students were less engaged than

traditional students because of the outside responsibilities in their lives, such as family and work.

Table 5:  Data Relating to Social Engagement

| # | Question | Strongly agree | Somewhat agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Somewhat disagree | Strongly disagree | Total Responses |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | I have made friends with students in my classes | 50.00% | 31.67% | 11.67% | 3.33% | 3.33% | 60 |
| 2 | I have made friends with other students on campus | 8.33% | 21.67% | 16.67% | 13.33% | 40.00% | 60 |
| 3 | I have made friends with students on campus whose age, race, interests, or personal values are different than mine | 26.67% | 23.33% | 25.00% | 8.33% | 16.67% | 60 |
| 4 | I have met with my classmates (outside of class) for social interactions | 25.00% | 26.67% | 15.00% | 1.67% | 31.67% | 60 |
| 5 | I have met with my classmates to work on class assignments together (can be in person or online) | 53.33% | 33.33% | 5.00% | 1.67% | 6.67% | 60 |

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When filtered by gender, males reported that they socialize with their peers less both during class and outside of class, and rarely meet with peers to work on assignments together. Interestingly, however, male nontraditional students reported higher rates of making friends with other students on campus and with students that have different identities and values. This finding warrants future gender research.

Nontraditional students in this study are not engaged in co-curricular activities on campus for a variety of reasons, some that the institution can control and some that it cannot control. These findings are consistent with the majority of literature on nontraditional students, with the most likely explanation resulting from the multiple barriers (situational, institutional, and dispositional) they encounter, as described by Cross (1981). More than 50% of the students in this study reported institutional barriers as reasons why they are not socially engaged, including issues with campus parking, programming that is not relevant, a lack of communication about social events, programming that conflicts with class time, and a feeling that nontraditional students are not welcome. The data in Table 6 list the various challenges students reported as barriers to social engagement.

Despite the barriers, 82% of respondents reported they were satisfied with the social aspect of college. Nontraditional students under the age of 25 were less satisfied with their social engagement on campus (77%) than older students. Male nontraditional students reported the highest satisfaction rate of 86%. The ECL cohort students also reported an 86% satisfaction rate, as compared to a satisfaction rate of 72% for students in other majors. The level of social engagement for the nontraditional students is important because as Tinto (1993) posited, social engagement and integration into the campus community aids in persistence and sense of belonging. The more integrated the student is into the fabric of the college, the more likely he or she is to persist to degree attainment.

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Table 6:  Barriers to Social Engagement

| Answer | | Responses | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Other reason (lack of communication/transportation) | | 8 | 14% |
| Lack of parking | | 9 | 16% |
| Lack of interest in the activities that are offered | | 10 | 18% |
| Interferes with academic obligations | | 14 | 25% |
| Interferes with personal commitments | | 24 | 42% |
| Inconvenience or time commuting back to campus | | 26 | 46% |
| Interferes with family obligations | | 32 | 56% |
| Interferes with work | | 39 | 68% |

**Sense of Belonging**. In order to evaluate Austin's campus climate for nontraditional students, students were asked questions relating to their perception of the campus community. Questions included whether students feel like they are included, welcomed, and supported on campus, if they are proud to be an Austin student, and if they feel a sense of belonging to the institution. A healthy campus climate is an indicator of an enriching and supportive college where respect is fostered through attitudes, behaviors, and standards of faculty, staff, administrators, and students (University of California, 2015), whereas belonging connotes membership in a group, such as a student body (Kassworm, 2008). Many scholars, such as Tinto (1993), Hurtado & Carter (1997), and Kassworm (2008) believe that academic and/or social integration is imperative for students to feel like they belong because it is considered a major factor in persistence and success. See Table 7 for student perceptions on campus climate.

98% of respondents indicated they are proud to be a student at Austin, and 90% of students reported feeling welcome on campus. When asked about comfortable spaces on campus,

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36% of students feel there are no spaces on campus just for them. Due to the lack of a

nontraditional student lounge on campus, students relax and socialize mainly in the library, the

student center, and in empty classrooms and laboratories. Overall, 24% of students responded

that they do not feel like they are supported and included on campus.

Table 7:  Student Perceptions on Campus Climate

| *Student Perceptions on*<br><br>*Campus Climate* | *All Students n (%)* | *Students Under 25 Years Old* | *Students Over 25 Years Old* |
|---|---|---|---|
| **I Feel a Sense of Pride** | | | |
| Yes | 56 (98%) | 13 (100%) | 45 (98%) |
| No | 1 (2%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (1%) |
| Total | 59 (100%) | 13 (100%) | 47 (100%) |
| | | | |
| **I Feel a Sense of Welcome** | | | |
| Yes | 52 (90%) | 12 (92%) | 40 (89%) |
| No | 6 (10%) | 1 (8%) | 5 (11%) |
| Total | 58 (100%) | 13 (100%) | 45 (100%) |
| | | | |
| **I Feel a Sense of Belonging** | | | |
| Yes | 45 (78%) | 12 (92%) | 33 (73%) |
| No | 13 (22%) | 1 (8%) | 12 (27%) |
| Total | 58 (100%) | 13 (100%) | 45 (100%) |
| **There are Spaces for Nontraditional Students on Campus** | | | |
| Yes | 38 (64%) | 10 (77%) | 29 (61%) |
| No | 21 (36%) | 3 (23%) | 18 (39%) |
| Total | 59 (100%) | 13 (100%) | 46 (100%) |
| | | | |
| **Austin is Supportive and Inclusive** | | | |
| Yes | 44 (76%) | 12 (92%) | 32 (71%) |
| No | 14 (24%) | 1 (8%) | 13 (29%) |
| Total | 58 (100%) | 13 (100%) | 45 (100%) |
| | | | |
| **Places on Campus I go to Relax and Socialize** | | | |
| Library | 25 (59%) | 9 (69%) | 16 (50%) |
| Student Center | 13 (30%) | 4 (31%) | 9 (28%) |
| Empty Classroom or Lab | 7 (16%) | 0 (0%) | 7 (22%) |
| Total | 45 (100%) | 13 (100%) | 32 (100%) |

When students were asked if they felt a sense of belonging, 78% answered affirmatively. This figure aligns closely with the percent of students (75%) who made friends with a diverse group of students on campus, as displayed in Table 5. According to the findings, there is a distinction between feeling welcome on campus and feeling included and a sense of belonging, suggesting that feeling a sense of belonging and inclusion evokes a stronger connection than feeling welcome. This finding supports Tintos' (1993) findings that successful integration contributed to sense of belonging. It also aligns with Hurtado and Carters' (1997) conclusion that a number of factors influence sense of belonging including diverse friendships, positive interactions among different groups, and positive campus climate.

When filtered by age, 40% of students over the age of 25 reported there are not spaces for them on campus, as compared to 23% of students under the age of 25, indicating that younger nontraditional students feel more comfortable co-mingling with traditional students on campus in open spaces. Of significance, 29% of adult learners feel that the Austin community is not supportive and inclusive to them, whereas only 8% of younger nontraditional students feel not included and not supported. Further, 92% of students under the age of 25 feel a sense of belonging, as compared to 73% of students aged 25 and older. Because they are closer in age to traditional students, the younger nontraditional students feel a much greater sense of belonging to Austin. This resonates with Kassworm's (2008) and Lester, Brown Leonard & Mathias' (2013) findings that student's age affected their sense of belonging. Students aged 25 and older on campus, while proud to be an Austin student, do not feel a sense of inclusion and warmth in the larger campus community and report significantly less belonging.

When the data were filtered by gender, 43% of male students reported there are no spaces for them on campus, as compared to 35% of females. Male students find the campus less supportive and inclusive than females, and 71% of males report a sense of belonging, as

compared to 78% of female students. This finding is also supported by Hurtado and Carter's (1997) conclusion that students who feel unsupported report a lower sense of belonging. Interestingly, women (88%) feel less welcome on campus than men (100%), indicating that gender plays a role in campus climate. This finding should be investigated further in future research.

In order to determine if the cohort model of the ECL program affected sense of belonging, I filtered the data by degree program. Findings were very similar among students across degree programs, with the exception of two: dedicated spaces and sense of belonging. 33% of ECL students reported there are not spaces for them on campus, as compared to 41% of students in the other majors, indicating that more ECL students find spaces on campus they are comfortable in. ECL students reported a lower sense of belonging (74%) versus 87% sense of belonging for students in the other majors. Despite higher rates of academic and social engagement, the students in the ECL cohort do not feel a greater sense of belonging. This may be explained because a large percentage (70+%) of the students are also full time working adults who reported difficulties integrating into Austin's campus community, or perhaps ethnicity is a factor, which was not included in this study.

## Findings: Focus Group

From the open-ended survey questions and focus group answers, common themes emerged from the transcription and coding process. Each theme was applied to the research data based on frequency and over-arching themes were found. These themes included: Every Student has a Story, Engagement is Not Consistent, Obstacles Along the Way, Supports, and Fitting In. In addition, the nontraditional participants offered suggestions on ways to improve the academic and social experience of nontraditional students, and improve the campus community at Austin.

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**Finding 1: Every Student has a Story**.

At the beginning of the focus group, students were asked to share something salient about them. Their stories were diverse and unique - indicative of the variety of nontraditional students in the Evening Studies Program. Students varied in age from 22 to 64, six students identified as females and one as male, one student identified as Puerto Rican, one student identified as Dominican, one identified as Italian-American, two identified as Catholic, and four students identified as parents. Most of the students started college at another institution, took classes over a period of many years, started a career or a family, and enrolled at Austin to finish their degree. The youngest participant became disenchanted with the "drinking culture and peer pressure" at another institution and decided to move back home and transfer to Austin.

For the participants, finishing their degree is a deeply personal and often altruistic goal. A student stated, "I want to help poor children. That is my motivation - to get an education so I can help children in third-world countries by God's grace". Several students responded that they want to improve the future for their children and families. One participant responded,

> I don't want to struggle in life. In order to get a good job you need a degree and that's what keeps me going. I want a family someday and I don't want them to have to suffer through what I went through. I want to have money for my kids so they don't have to struggle like I did.

Students repeatedly stated it was the "right time" to finish their degree after being sidetracked from degree attainment many years. One student responded, "This is the exact program I have wanted for years" and "I have wanted it for so long. I need it for my future." Family and partners were essential to enrollment, as Susan, a middle-aged mother of two, shared,

> When I got an Austin College flyer back in 2012, it said 'Did you finish what you started?' And I thought out loud "no". My husband looked at me and asked me "Why not?" So, I thought about it. I'm at a time of my life where my kids don't need me so much, so it's a better time now. I figured it was the perfect time.

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The stories, backgrounds, and goals of the students in this study greatly varied from one another, indicating the diversity and cultural richness of students in the program. This diversity also highlights that there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to nontraditional students success. Despite these differences, the students expressed an urgency to complete their degree.

**Finding 2: Engagement among Nontraditional Students is not Universal.**

Research participants were asked to think about and define what student engagement means to them and if engagement is academic, social, or a combination of both. Focus group responses varied substantially based on their age. Jason, the youngest participant, defined engagement markedly different than the other students, as he viewed student engagement as social integration into the campus community, stating:

> For me, engagement is social. It's not academic. Being engaged is being involved in the college campus, the activities, going to dorms and having a good time, seeing your friends across the hall, and being together. It's really about making friendships at college and in your field of studies.

The older adult focus group participants revealed that while nontraditional students may be aware of events and activities on campus, they viewed engagement mainly from an academic and students support focus. Work, family, and academic coursework took priority when it came to managing their time. They enjoyed the social aspect of college, but felt that it came from the classroom setting. Isabella, a working mother in her 30's, stated that engagement was primarily academic, but included academic support services and, to a lesser degree, social activities. As Ricardo noted:

> Student engagement to me means all the activities and support given to us by the campus staff in order to make our college experience a successful and enjoyable one. Support means everything from counselors, administration, library and tutoring services, food services, technology, and the extra-curricular activities that encourage team building and fun. Engagement means all the little things that happen on campus to make me successful. For me, engagement is just about going to classes and finishing my degree. I do not have a lot of free time and what I do have, I want to be with my family.

Maria, a student in the ECL cohort, defined student engagement as a combination of both academic and social, and felt that social engagement occurred in the classroom setting. As she discussed:

> I think engagement is a little of both- academic and social. I feel like there is a lot of socializing in class, so that is enough socializing for me. Socializing with my cohort is how I am engaged. I have other outside obligations, but I still feel engaged in the way I relate to being here.

Amelia, a mature student had a different definition of student engagement. For her, student engagement was purely academic in nature and was the responsibility of the institution, and she clarified as follows:

> At this stage in my life, engagement is academic. I am not interested in connecting socially or having relationships with other students on campus. Engagement means making a serious attempt at including nontraditional students by addressing the unique needs of this population.

The focus group responses from the adult nontraditional students are consistent with Lester, Brown Leonard, & Mathias' (2013) findings that nontraditional students viewed engagement as important and considered academic engagement their primary function. Social engagement was tied to informal socializing in class. University support structures were considered important to contributing to their success. However, as Jason reported, engagement is not tied to academics and as such, this finding conflicts with Lester, Brown Leonard, & Mathias' (2013) conclusions, and more closely aligns with Tinto's (1993, 1997) research on social integration.

**Finding 3: Supports for the Success of Nontraditional Students are Varied**.

Much like the findings of Rendón (1994), Hurtado and Carter (1997), and Townsend and Delves (2009), the nontraditional students in this study attributed their ability to persist to well-established support systems. These support systems included Austin faculty and staff, family and friends both internal and external to the community college, and work supervisors. As Lee

described, "I could not have reached my goals if the Evening Studies Program staff had not been there every step of the way. I owe it all to them." Conversely, Isabella shared the variety of ways she feels supported in her education, declaring:

> My family is my rock. I want to give my children an easier life than I had, or my parents had, and that is only going to happen with education. I want my kids to be proud of me. And, you know, my parents were poor, really poor, but they were not stupid. They migrated to this country so my sister and I could have a better life. I am making my parents proud, too. Plus, I am doing something for myself that no one can ever take away from me.

Internal motivation and mind-set of students was also viewed as a support mechanism. This mind-set of perseverance was mentioned frequently as a motivating factor for students in their persistence. Amelia, who has been working towards her bachelor's degree for 35 years responded, "For me, it has been a personal goal that I've wanted to accomplish. It's an internal drive". Wang (2009) also found that internal drive or 'locus of control' was one of the most significant predictors of persistence for nontraditional students; The greater a student's locus of control, the greater the persistence.

The research data suggests the Education and Civic Leadership (ECL) cohort model serves as a strong support to students in the program. Students regarded the convenience of having course schedules prearranged, books and meals provided, and Saturday classes as positive factors in their persistence. In her research, Kassworm (2008) found that validation from other adult students and faculty eased anxiety in the transition back to college. Kassworms' (2008) findings are illustrated by Maria's response, when she stated:

> My cohort is the best support system ever and every step of the way, practically from the start, they have all engaged and supported me. Getting back to college was a huge challenge for me, but the cohort took me under their wing and explained, assisted, and always made sure someone was there to support me. Matthew H. has been a tremendous blessing for tutoring! Our program director is a huge sense of inspiration to me. She is always encouraging us and always makes us feel like we matter to her, to the school, and to the world. You kind of feel that you can't fail because you don't want to let the director down.

Maria experienced validation by her cohort peers, a tutor, and a faculty member, which alleviated her self-doubt and anxiety stemming from her transition back to college.

**Finding 4: Obstacles Along the Way**.

**Communication and Messaging.** When asked how to improve the experiences at Austin for nontraditional learners, research participants named a number of different barriers. A large number of students reported a lack of communication from the college. Students need a greater amount of communication in a faster time period from administration, student support offices, advising, and faculty. Some students also reported misinformation relating to program changes, classes, and policies. Maria stated, "I would like better communication from the people running the program. We don't always get our questions answered quickly, so the students talk amongst ourselves, but that's not ideal". Susan described how the lack of communication regarding her degree program is causing her to consider transferring out of Austin, and stated:

> There was absolutely no communication that the IT Program was closed to students. I had to reach out and ask what's going on. I heard through the rumor mill from other students- there was no official Austin communication. There is constant guesswork. I really need to know what is happening in the program…it is the 'unknown' that makes me think I might not be able to continue at Austin.

Amelia also discussed her confusion about program requirements stemming from irregular Evening Studies communication, explaining:

> Night students need complete and clearly stated information from the Evening Studies Department. That means specific and clear communication about current program requirements and which courses are needed to meet those requirements. Nontraditional students should receive regular communication from the program. We should not expect to be kept in the dark about what the degree expectations are for our major.

Several students discussed how the messaging at Austin does not pertain to nontraditional students. A business student voiced his frustration with program communication, noting that "Sixty percent of the emails I get is for day students – parking this, maintenance that, hockey,

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football – none of which apply to me, so I guess I do not belong here". Several students reported

feeling left out of campus messaging and marketing. Lindsey, an older ECL student stated, "If

you look at the photos around campus or on the website, there are no pictures of older students".

Similarly, Amelia felt the College excluded students like her by advertising a younger-aged

campus, and shared:

> The College does nothing to express any pleasure in having nontraditional students in
> attendance. The website makes no attempt to include the nontraditional student in their
> jumbo photos that link to further info. Every picture represents a young, very young,
> student involved in some sort of campus activity. Austin should represent the wide
> variety of students who attend college here.

The findings relating to Austin's marketing and messaging is consistent with Hagedorn (2015),

Jacoby (2015), and Kazis et al., (2007) who found that underrepresented groups on campus are

not celebrated or promoted when campus-issued marketing materials exclude their stories and

likenesses.

**Advising**. When asked how Austin could better assist them academically, a large

percentage of study participants discussed advising deficiencies. Students reported never meeting

with an advisor, not knowing the name of his or her advisor, advisors who do not "understand

transcripts," a general lack of advising communication, and feeling that advisors are not

supportive of nontraditional students' needs and personal situations. The lack of advising creates

stress and discouragement for students. Because of a lack of advising, some of the students

began to self-advise or engage in informal advising with other students. Susan felt that without

an advisor she was missing out on crucial educational opportunities, and mentioned:

> I feel like advisors should suggest what to take or not to take, or other opportunities that
> exist for me in college. Without the help of an advisor, I don't know if I'm missing
> opportunities for my future.

Isabella, a working parent and graduating senior, discussed how she has never had any

communication from her advisor, noting:

> I think we should receive quarterly emails or meetings from our academic advisors to ensure we are on track. I have to agree, I don't know who my advisor is. I'm a senior – taking my last class this semester – and in all my years here, I have never heard from an advisor!

These data resonates with the research of Hagedorn (2015) who concluded that institutions create barriers to access and success when crucial student support services, such as advising, fail to accommodate nontraditional students in their practices.

**Faculty**. Research participants also faced obstacles with some faculty, not only with slow communication and feedback, but also with a lack of organization and clear expectations regarding assignments. Amelia said, "One professor responded to my email about an exam in October, when I had sent the original email in February." Amelia's experience was counter to Rendón's research (1994), who found that timely feedback from faculty provided validation to students. Feeling unsupported by faculty caused some students to feel unwelcome on campus and led to negative thoughts about their educational experience. Kuh (2003) and Townsend and Delves (2009) also found that supportive faculty members create a more rewarding and engaging educational experience. Isabella, who has taken both online and regular courses at Austin, discussed how the lack of faculty communication and faculty support set her up for failure, stating:

> It makes me feel like I do not belong on campus because unless I reach out to faculty, no one reaches out to me. Even in the online classes, which should be catered towards people that work full time and not able to attend the classroom, many of the rules are changing. When we first joined, we were told that online classes are "work at your own pace". That is not happening! Assignments are posted many times over the weekend, so that we do not have time to spend with our families. This format is very difficult for someone like me. *How am I expected to succeed, if I am set up to fail from the beginning?*

Students reported an inconsistency in the quality of Evening Studies faculty and were critical of professors not familiar with adult teaching and development methods. This finding aligns with Pelletier's (2010) conclusion that professors who are unaware or unwilling to adapt

to the needs of adult learners create barriers to persistence and success for this student

population. Jason discussed a lack of consistency in the quality of professors added to challenges

he faced in his educational experience, adding:

> I have some simply amazing professors in the Evening Studies Program, but there have
> been several professors that I could never reach outside of class time, never responded to
> emails, didn't release grades in a timely manner, or even once during the entire semester,
> and didn't seem at all interested in any of the adult student's well-being.

Some students felt like they did not matter to faculty, which made them question their

ability to persist and succeed at Austin. This finding resonates specifically with Schlossberg's

(1989), Kassworm's (2008), and Navarre Cleary & Wozniak's (2013) conclusions that students

want to feel like they matter to the institution and supportive environments aid students in their

persistence. Amelia shared an experience when she felt excluded and marginalized in class,

stating:

> The class was geared toward younger students and who leaned heavily on the professor's
> lectures and had no questions for him. Whenever I asked questions to better understand
> the information that was presented, I was met with resistance. I find that older students
> are more likely to come to class with prior understanding, education, and experience
> around a topic. I felt excluded from the classroom and the experience made me question
> if I really belonged at the College.

Feeling "resistance" from her professor caused Amelia to question her place at Austin. This

aligns with Kassworm (2008) who described adult learners as having an "emotional fragility"

and needing validation from the institution in order to thrive.

**Credit Transfer**. In addition to the aforementioned barriers, research participants also

shared challenges with credit transfer. Because some of the students have taken courses at

multiple institutions and sometimes over the span of decades, they cannot graduate on time if

Austin does not accept their credits. A complicating factor is Austin's four-credit hour course

policy that is not in line with three-credit hour course policies at nearby community colleges.

Lindsey, an Education and Civic Leadership cohort student, discussed challenges with the credit

transfer process and how it created confusion and stress for her and other students, sharing:

> Another thing that could help is understanding credits needed for graduation, perhaps this
> should be discussed more. There are classes Austin does not offer, and you can't graduate
> until you obtain those credits. If you take those credits at another college, then you miss
> credits at Austin. How do you accomplish both? I have noticed a lot of confusion around
> credits: what you need, what you don't, what happens if you are missing a session. It's
> mostly logistics that tend to get confusing and stressful.

Susan also felt confused over the credit transfer process and was concerned that her credits were

not assigned correctly towards degree requirements, offering:

> I would like an advisor to look at my transfer credits. That person could suggest a minor
> or another degree that maybe I already qualify for. I transferred in a lot of math and
> science courses. How were my transfer credits applied? Maybe I am not on the right path
> in my education?

> **Parking**. A majority of students cited the lack of campus parking as a reason why they

do not participate in college events. Parking on campus can be difficult to find at night and on

weekends, and the parking fee creates additional stress on students. This finding resonates with

Jacoby's (2015) research that providing better campus parking is a critical issue in student access

and persistence for nontraditional students. Amelia feels "forgotten" by the college because she

does not think the College considers the needs of nontraditional students,

> We are asked to pay money for parking and yet it takes me nearly 20 minutes to find a
> place to park. If there is an event on campus on a Saturday, it is completely forgotten that
> we go to school on Saturdays and all the parking lots are closed completely.
> I hear a lot of students are having problems finding parking. Even on weekends it is
> difficult. The college closes parking lots for games, alumni events, and road races.

Closing parking lots on nights and weekends limits access for the Evening Studies students.

Several students also voiced their frustration regarding parking spaces in student lots that were

occupied by hockey parents waiting for their children during practice. Susan felt "taken

advantage of" by the College because of parking challenges, and responded:

> The hockey parents take up all the spots in the lot next to where the science and engineering students are supposed to park. I am especially frustrated that I have to pay $100 for parking. We come here during off-hours. I do not feel it is justified to charge us a parking fee. It feels like we are being taken advantage of and a lot of night students really cannot afford the extra money.

The majority of students in this study considered the lack of parking and the institution of parking fees a significant source of stress and concern.

**Facilities and Technology.** When asked how the College could better assist them academically, students also discussed issues with outdated facilities, unreliable technology, and poor internet connection on campus that disrupts their academics. Isabella stated, "The Wi-Fi connection is so slow and needs to be upgraded. It breaks down during exams". Susan added, "the Austin server is so slow that I cannot access Blackboard to complete my assignments which is really frustrating!" Amelia shared how aging facilities, broken and aging technology made her feel marginalized on campus, adding:

> Nontraditional students like myself feel isolated. Almost every one of my classes has had to switch physical classrooms because of broken technology, inadequate space, cooling/heating issues, and broken windows and doors. In that sense, I feel like we are given the worst classrooms because we are nontraditional.

**Office Hours**. Research participants also discussed challenges with the office times of campus support departments, such as financial aid and the Registrar's office, that are only open during traditional office hours of 8am to 5pm. Since most of the Evening Studies students work full time during the day, they find it difficult to meet with college departments crucial to their success and felt ignored by the College. This data resonates with the research of Hagedorn (2015) who found that institutions often block access to student support services on campus when they are not open hours when nontraditional students can visit. Maria voiced her difficulties with campus office hours, especially during the summer, and noted:

> I have to rush here, but I have to really push it. Forget if there is traffic. At 4:00 everyone leaves campus. Forget about meeting with Financial Aid after 4:00pm. The College does

not differentiate their hours to include the needs of night students. It's worse during the summer when we sign up for summer sessions because even the labs are closed and tutoring centers are not available after 5! The administration does not take the extra steps to make sure that they provide support to night students. When you email departments on campus, they don't return email or calls and then you have to hunt them down.

**Student Programming.** When asked what prevents them from attending campus events, older students in this study discussed how programming caters to traditional students and events were not inclusive of their interests. One survey respondent answered, "I am 32 years old. I do not have an interest in campus activities that are mainly centered on younger students." Isabella noted that campus programming at night often involves alcohol, which limits participation of night students who have to commute home and work in the morning.

As outlined by Ellis (2013) and Kezar, Walpole & Perna (2015), a lack of student programming for nontraditional students is a barrier to integration into the campus community. Further, as Townsend & Wilson (2006) concluded, nontraditional students find it difficult integrating themselves academically and socially on campus when their needs and interests are ignored. Jason shared his difficulty trying to integrate into the campus. He felt that residential students at Austin were not interested in expanding their social groups, and discussed:

> I would not get to meet other students unless it's someone from my hometown that I bump into on campus. I am not invited to hang out with any of the students close to my age on campus, like the resident students. *It's like there are two worlds on campus and neither one intersects with the other.* I want to meet up with other guys on campus, but I don't know anyone. Not being able to socialize with anyone else, who is like me, is difficult. Our classes make us isolated from the rest of the school. Night classes are great for students who work, but you lose the social aspect of college.

Older students in this study also discussed feelings of social isolation. Maria shared, "The College needs to involve evening students more. I feel so isolated and don't know anyone. I think it's important for us to know each other and make friends." This finding is consistent with Townsend and Wilson (2006) who concluded that the lack of older undergraduate students on campus negatively impacted the social integration of nontraditional students. The researchers

also found that traditional-aged, day students had little interest in forming social connections on

campus with nontraditional students. Many older students expressed how their personal

responsibilities and commitments created challenges to attending campus events. Feeling

conflicted between her outside responsibilities and her desire to engage socially with her peers,

Lindsey, a middle-aged, ECL cohort student shared,

> You know, when an event like a talk or something happens on campus, as a night student
> you do not want to come all the way back to campus. But if it happened during class
> time, and it was a requirement, you would have to go. Maybe once a semester, the
> professor would require us to get involved in a social event on campus as part of our
> class. And then you would have a group to go with, too, so you would not be alone. I
> would enjoy that.

When asked a follow-up question on how to improve the social aspect of college for

them, focus group participants discussed that they were more apt to attend events on campus if

they were required to attend for class. They recommended the professors include co-curricular

attendance into the course requirements. This finding is supported by Lester, Brown Leonard &

Mathias' (2013) conclusions that students felt a strong sense of engagement when faculty created

opportunities for academic and social interactions.

**Finding 5: Adult Learners Face Challenges to Fitting In.**

Research participants in this study faced adjustment challenges in their transition back to

college. These challenges resulted from dispositional barriers such as anxiety over fitting in, fear

of failure, and embarrassment about being the "old one" in class, as several students reported. In

regards to her transition back to college, Maria commented, "If you haven't been in a college

environment in awhile, everything can be intimidating because it is new. You feel inadequate

and the technology requirements can be disorienting and overwhelming". This finding is

consistent with the research of Cross (1981) who found dispositional barriers to be difficult to

overcome and highly influential factors in student success. Likewise, Ellis (2013) concluded that

adults often experienced severe adjustment issues in their transition back to campus.

Some students in this study perceived negative attitudes from traditional students, faculty,

and staff, which created a chilly campus climate for them. The chilly climate led to a decrease in

their sense of belonging. According to the University of California (2014), campus climate is

defined as:

> The current attitudes, behaviors and standards of faculty, staff, administrators, and
> students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potential.
> Respect is the critical word, as it must occur in all interactions among individuals and
> groups on campus.

When faculty, staff, and students do not embrace and promote nontraditional students on

campus, they do not feel included in the campus community (Townsend and Wilson, 2006).

Maria shared her experiences with ageism on campus perpetuated by campus staff and personnel,

"It would be nice if the bookstore staff and library staff didn't look at me like I'm so obviously

out of place when I go in". Isabella also found challenges to fitting into a campus that caters to

residential students, and shared:

> There are two worlds/groups here: day students and nontraditional students. There is a
> huge age gap - day students in their early 20's and Evening Studies students are late 20's
> up to 50's. We don't live the 'campus life' and never will. So, it's hard for me to relate to
> that lifestyle. I come from a community college and I fit in there much better because
> there were many different types of students, many of which had personal situations
> similar to mine.

Students in this study discussed feeling a "camaraderie" with other nontraditional

students in class and tended to congregate in areas around campus where other nontraditional

students frequented, such as the library. Susan shared the reason she avoids places on campus

frequented by the residential students, "The student center is Grand Central Station. It is just a

very busy, hectic space with lots of young people. I feel more comfortable in the quieter, calmer

library café where I can unwind a little before class". Lindsey also discussed how she is more at ease in spaces on campus that were frequented by other older students,

> I go to meet a lot of my cohort members in the library. And it's not just us. It seems like a lot of people our age, maybe other night students congregate in the library too. That is the most comfortable spot for us.

This finding resonates with Townsend and Delves (2009) who found that social engagement and sense of belonging increased in adult students who formed social connections with other adult students. Making connections to like-minded students in a comfortable and welcoming environment is an important factor, therefore, to persistence and success, and should be made a priority by the College.

The nontraditional students in this study come from diverse backgrounds and have various life situations and career goals. The findings of this study point to the complexity of providing programs and services to a diverse student body. While the majority of these students are over the age of 25, one-fourth of the students align closer to age with the residential students on campus. The younger students indicated they want more opportunities to connect with their younger peers, while the older students want opportunities to connect with older students on campus. Strong family and friend relationships were noted frequently as student supports. Faculty who took a personal interest in student growth and development were also recognized as critical supports. Timing and internal motivation, sometimes referred to as grit, were critical to success.

Conversely, a number of obstacles, both internal and external to the College, were repeatedly noted during the study. The research participants expressed the need for additional supports from the College including stronger advising, more communication, timely feedback on grades and performance, improved parking, expanded office hours, and student programming that more closely aligned with the needs and interests of adult students.

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**Recommendations**

From this study, I learned that nontraditional students at Austin face many challenges on campus including a lack of one-on-one faculty engagement, decreased sense of belonging, and difficulty integrating into the campus community. Many older students experience ageism and marginalization, and often feel disconnected from the College. These factors present challenges to persistence and success. In contrast, students reported strong support systems, inside and outside of the College, and internal motivation and resilience aid in their persistence. The literature suggests that increased academic and social engagement promotes integration, persistence, and success, and should promoted by the institution (Tinto, 1993; Kuh, 2003, 2007; Kassworm, 2008; Wang, 2009; NSSE, 2015). In the following recommendations, I outline practices designed to improve the nontraditional student experience at Austin, toward the goal of creating a more inclusive campus and higher student satisfaction.

*Recommendation 1: In order to increase sense of belonging, persistence, and success for adult students, Austin should construct and actively publicize a nontraditional student lounge.*

The 62 participants in the study described various challenges and supportive factors that influenced their lived experiences. 70% of students responded that making connections with other students is important to them and the literature supports the notion that academic and social integration is critical to integration, persistence, and success. However, in this study, students reported difficulty connecting with their peers and other students on campus, and the older students, in particular, felt uncomfortable around the younger, traditional students on campus. As one survey participant responded, "I feel so isolated and I don't know anyone. I think it is important to bring nontraditional students together to get to know each other and make friends". Without a dedicated lounge space on campus - a 'home away from home' per se,

students are spreading out all over campus and not able to form those critical support structures necessary for success.

According to Strange and Banning (2001), "campus environments set conditions that affect student learning and, in turn, students influence the shape of campus environments" (p. 200). In a broad sense, the campus environment includes both a physical structure and a social component for students. The physical structure, depending upon its location and design, can promote or diminish certain activities. For instance, a well-designed lounge in close proximity to academic buildings can increase academic engagement through facilitating student – faculty interaction and peer interaction, which, according to Kuh (2003, 2007), are critical components in persistence and success. Moreover, students' integration, persistence, and sense of belonging can be strengthened by intentionally creating a strong "sense of place" that provides a space for meaningful interactions and where students can bond to one another (Kuh & Manning, 2005).

With this knowledge, I recommend that Austin build an adult student lounge either in the library or in the new building for student support services, set to begin construction this summer. Austin could model the lounge after Weber State University's nontraditional student lounge that is housed in a new building on their campus (Weber State Nontraditional Lounge, 2016). Weber's lounge is a large, well-lit, open space decorated in the school colors. There are comfortable couches and chairs arranged in pods to facilitate interaction and conversation, tables for studying, a communication board, a separate, glass-enclosed computer room with printing and scanning equipment, a small kitchen, a playroom for children and a fenced playground for children. Staff and advisors have offices adjoining the lounge. Office hours are extended three times a week to 7pm to accommodate night students.

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I recommend the Evening Studies office staff relocate to the lounge, once built, so that students can easily access advising and administrative services. The nontraditional lounge should be open until 7pm to meet the needs of the students. A large, wall-mounted television that streams important student and program information during office hours should be mounted in a visible location in the lounge. I envision the space would become a hub for hosting nontraditional student orientation, career events, faculty – student interaction, and social events to build friendships among the students. Further, student supports such as health and wellness counseling, tutoring, technology training, and financial aid information sessions could be conducted in the lounge, providing a centralized, easy-to-access space for students.

***Recommendation 2: In order to better integrate nontraditional students into the campus community, Austin should offer an expanded orientation with optional technology training.***

In the study, students reported a number of challenges with their transition back to college, as well as barriers once they enrolled that threatened their success. Some students discussed feeling anxiety, stress, and confusion during college because they did not have clear information about program requirements, student benefits, and campus supports. Older students expressed challenges with the level of computer-savvy needed to complete academic assignments. When asked if they were aware they receive free or reduced prices to on-campus musicals, plays, sporting events, and the fitness center, the majority of students did not know about these student benefits. Berger and Malaney (2003) and Townsend and Wilson (2006) found that transfer students needed additional support and encouragement during their first semester of college to successfully integrate and persist in college. Townsend and Wilson (2006) suggested an expanded orientation that includes relevant information to adults is a necessary factor to success for nontraditional students.

To facilitate integration and student success, the Evening Studies Program should require an orientation for nontraditional students to be completed within the first semester of enrollment in a degree program. The orientation would be co-facilitated by the Evening Studies Program and the Office of Student Engagement, who also run the orientations for residential students, commuters, and transfer students who attend classes during the day. This orientation should be held for three hours on a weekend, and include relevant information for nontraditional students such as parking information, the credit transfer process and degree auditing, financial aid assistance, and academic support services. In addition, to increase engagement, integration, and sense of belonging, the Office of Student Engagement should inform the students about the co-curricular programming on campus. Orientation should include a full campus tour, led by a nontraditional student knowledgeable about the typical concerns nontraditional students have. For students unable to make an in-person orientation, such as disabled students or distance learners, the College could offer an online version that requires student feedback and participation. For example, the student would have to pass an embedded quiz to ensure compliance of the orientation requirement.

Bristol Community College (2016) has found that requiring an orientation to nontraditional students is very beneficial to their persistence. Bristol requires a three and one-half hour orientation called "Quest for Success" to be completed by the student's 12th credit. In order to assess the student's needs, the College sends out an orientation survey one month in advance to the student and then tailors the orientation to include the information on the survey. Spouses and dependents are also invited to participate in the orientation, which validates the student's identity and also acknowledges the importance of family support in the transition to college process.

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte (2016) also requires an integrated, full-day orientation program called SOAR, an acronym for Student Orientation, Advising and Registration, specifically for nontraditional transfer students. The SOAR Program includes breakfast, a welcome session, "Meet the College" session, and lunch. After lunch, the students meet with their advisor, discuss their pathways, and register for classes. Spouses and dependents are encouraged to attend SOAR, and the university has specially designed sessions just for them.

In order to decrease the stress and anxiety older students feel relating to using technology, a recommendation is to offer an optional technology training on software students typically encounter at Austin, such as Blackboard, Google products, Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. Students could sign up for the training during orientation, or at a later date through their advisor. Technology training could rotate based on student needs throughout the semester. As illustrated in recommendation #1, the new student lounge space would facilitate both the expanded orientation and technology training for nontraditional students.

***Recommendation 3: The Evening Studies Program should reevaluate their advising structure to ensure students have regular communication and support from their advisors.***

Advising plays an integral part of student success. According to DeSousa (2005) who wrote an advising paper for NSSE, the quality of advising is the single most powerful predictor of satisfaction with the campus environment for students at four-year institutions Students who rate their advising as good or excellent are more likely to interact with faculty in various ways, perceive the institution's environment to be more supportive overall, are more satisfied with their overall college experience, and gain more from college in most areas (DeSousa, 2005). A new advising structure for the Evening Studies Program would help to alleviate stress and anxiety within students and improve communication.

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 The students in this study continuously reported a need for increased advising in order to better assist them academically. Some students discussed never meeting with an advisor, not understanding how their credits were applied, and not knowing if they are on the correct path to graduation. Students often self – advise or engage in informal peer advising, but, according to the study, self - advising creates confusion and a "rumor mill" as several students responded. Traditionally at Austin, faculty members advise residential students. For the Evening Studies students, however, the Evening Studies program managers handle advising. The program managers do not use advising software and instead, rely on a paper-based system to document academic plans, which can be time-consuming to create and manage, can become quickly obsolete as a student's circumstances change, and can be misplaced or lost. The advisors mainly follow the path that the department heads have outlined and defer to faculty if they have any academic questions (E. Rinaldi, personal communication, March 14, 2016).

 The Evening Studies program managers/advisors are the front line for student support and need better tools and information to do their jobs effectively, efficiently, and personally. The nontraditional learners, meanwhile, are in need of clear information that creates a pathway to success that leads to an enriching educational experience. In order to increase student support, the Evening Studies Program should increase the amount of advising offered to students and invest in technology to support the needs of the students and assist the advisors with meeting those needs. Advisors need to reach out to students more regularly and expand their advising hours to accommodate the hours students are on campus. Since NSSE (2015) and Kuh (2003), and other scholars, assert one-on-one faculty-student interaction increases student persistence and success, Evening Studies students should also receive faculty advising, particularly during their junior and senior year. Also, considering that some of the evening students take only one

class per semester and some students are distance learners, clear directions for self – advising

should be provided to the students at orientation and also posted online.

In this study, students reported stress resulting from unclear graduation plans. According

to the Evening Studies program managers/advisors, Austin's in-house online student portal is

supposed to allow students to track their credits and graduation plan. However, the information is

not always accurate, which increases student stress and confusion (E. Rinaldi, personal

communication, March 14, 2016). To assist the advisors in supporting the needs of students, I

recommend that Austin invests in a digital tool called Starfish (2016), a platform that gives

advisors one-click access to a holistic picture of a student – including past advising activity,

flags, courses, grades, demographic data, notes, and referrals. Starfish also allows the faculty and

advisors to share notes about students and sends an early alert notification to advisors when

students are struggling. According to Starfish (2016), students who were contacted by their

advisor when struggling academically are 1.67 times more like to persist in their studies. Starfish

would allow advisors to more efficiently communicate with students, and partner with faculty to

increase academic success for these moderate and high - risk students.

A new module, called Starfish ADVISING, would eliminate tracking graduation plans on

paper because the software has templates to proactively plan a student's academic path. The

software automatically monitors the plan, notifying advisors and students when the plan is not

followed. According to Starfish (2016), the ADVISING module has been beneficial for

institutions with high nontraditional populations. Starfish ADVISING allows advisors to capture

student data that is not available in existing student information systems, including the student's

life circumstances (e.g., transportation logistics, work requirements, childcare issues) that may

impact his or her persistence. Utilizing the software, the Evening Studies advisors would be able

to more easily support the students and streamline systems (Starfish, 2016).

I recommend the College consider Widener University's (2016) advising model to meet the needs of students. Widener offers nontraditional student advising on weekdays until 7pm, and during Saturday studies, which would be particularly helpful to Austin's ECL cohort students enrolled in Saturday courses. The Widener advisors generally schedule 30 minute advising appointments, but they can also schedule one-hour "Personalized Information Sessions" depending on the level of advising need. To quickly and efficiently communicate important information, Widener's advising department also emails a weekly newsletter to their nontraditional students, which includes crucial dates, events, and other beneficial advising information. Past newsletters are archived online. Similar to Widener's advising, the Evening Studies Program should offer advising hours until 7pm twice a week and distribute a weekly newsletter to students. Both of these practices would increase student support and communication, and decrease stress and confusion.

***Recommendation 4: To increase campus communication, student success, and sense of belonging, Austin should make improvements to the campus network, web site, and marketing strategy.***

As mentioned, the students in this study crave accurate and timely information related to their academic and social experiences at Austin. Communicating information and updates in an easily accessible and convenient manner is crucial to success. Students are interested in clear information on program requirements, academic advising, credit transfer, grades, academic opportunities, social programming, financial aid and registrar information, MTELs, graduate school testing, parking closures, and career advice. Students shared stories of the campus network crashing while they were taking online tests and completing assignments, preventing them from completing academic assignments. In addition, students felt excluded because Austin's website photos and campus-issued marketing did not reflect the diversity of

nontraditional students on campus. In particular, older students felt particularly excluded and

banished to the margins. Therefore, the network should be upgraded at the College's earliest

convenience and, simultaneously, the Evening Studies web pages should be redesigned in order

to provide more thorough and inclusive information to students.

Austin should look at Weber State University's (2016) comprehensive web site dedicated

to nontraditional students. A banner across the top of the home page boldly states, "Know you

are nontrad; Connect with your peers; Realize your dreams" in bright colors. From the home

page, students can schedule advising appointments, make a tutoring appointment, get a quick

reply to a question, pay fees, watch student support videos, see office hours, link to other campus

departments, and view a running list of current events and important information. Other pages

include the Center's mission statement, employment opportunities, an activities schedule,

childcare availability, a student-run journal, student success stories, scholarship opportunities,

and the nontraditional student newsletter.

I would suggest that the Evening Studies web pages also include pictures of Austin's

nontraditional students, contain faculty contact information, information relating to academic

clubs and organizations, MTEL information, and graduate school information. Additionally, I

would suggest that the leadership team in the Evening Studies Program post a welcome message

on the site with a "Contact me with any questions or concerns" link to their personal emails.

Doing so would more closely connect them with the students they serve.

***Recommendation 5: To foster student learning and development and increase academic***

***engagement, Evening Studies faculty should adopt teaching methods and delivery systems that***

***incorporate adult learning styles and promote academic clubs and co-curricular opportunities.***

Without stimulating, committed, and motivational faculty, a college will not be successful

and students will not have an enriching academic experience. Students in this study reported

inconsistency in the quality of Evening Studies faculty. Some professors were characterized by students in this study as "amazing" and "inspiring", while other faculty invalidated their identities and made the students question their ability to succeed in college. As Kuh (2003) found, nontraditional students who did not feel supported by faculty reported less satisfaction with their education experience. Townsend and Delves (2009) also found that mature learners often felt confused over academic jargon, felt insecure about approaching faculty, and were prevented from realizing their full potential due to unsupportive faculty. In order for Evening Studies students to realize their full potential, I recommend that faculty incorporate nontraditional student – friendly teaching styles.

There are many adult learning and development theories faculty could incorporate into their classroom including Malcolm Knowles' model of Andragogy, Self-Directed Learning, Experiential Learning, and Transformational Learning. Knowles (1980) stated that adults bring to the classroom a reservoir of knowledge, and are ready and motivated to learn. He suggested four principles that should be applied to instruction:

1) Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction;

2) Experience provides the basis for learning activities;

3) Adults are most interested in subjects that have relevance to them; and

4) Adult learning is problem – centered rather than content –oriented.

Adult learning theory also suggests that learners are more successful when they receive timely grades and communication from professors, and when assignments are clear and defined (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

Faculty must set the tone for an inclusive and nurturing classroom in order for nontraditional learners to thrive. Knowles (1980) stated that the classroom climate should cause "adults to feel accepted, respected, and supported"; further there should exist a "spirit of mutuality between

teachers and students as joint inquirers" (p. 47). For Schlossberg (1989), this type of learning environment would be one in which students felt like they mattered to the institution. Rendón (1994) stated that validating academic practices include supportive and friendly faculty, faculty who provided timely feedback to students, and faculty who provided extra help to students.

Further, in order to increase student's academic engagement, I recommend the Evening Studies faculty and staff promote academic clubs and co-curricular activities such as internships, research assistantships, short term immersion experiences, and other academic opportunities. As Kuh (2007) articulated, students "who engage in educationally purposeful activities" survive and thrive in colleges and universities (n.p.). According to the survey data in this study, 58% of students crave additional academic opportunities.

There are a number of different leadership organizations designed for nontraditional students including the Association for Nontraditional Students in Higher Education (ANTSHE) (n.d.). ANTSHE is a national organization that supports non-traditional students seeking to advance in their professional careers through furthering their college education and provides a support network, resources, and scholarship opportunities. ANTSHE also provides support to academic professionals and institutions that support nontraditional students by providing professional development, publishing, and networking opportunities with an elite community of other academic professionals (ANTSHE, n.d.).

The University of Maine (n.d.) sponsors a Nontraditional Students Association (NSA) that is led by students on campus. The NSA assists nontraditional students in adapting to college life, identifies issues specific to nontraditional students, and acts as an advocate for them. The NSA also develops programs and services for students, provides networking opportunities, and fosters connections between faculty and students. Notably, the university connects students to an adult national honorary society (Alpha Sigma Lambda). In order to nurture not only academic

engagement and facilitate leadership development in students, Austin should promote student

organizations such as AMSHE, NSA, and Alpha Sigma Lambda).

***Recommendation 6: To increase social engagement and inclusion and foster a healthy***

***campus climate, Austin should create and promote programs and events that would appeal to***

***nontraditional students.***

For nontraditional students, being a student is only one aspect of their lives.

A key characteristic distinguishing nontraditional students from other college students is the high

likelihood that they are juggling other life roles while attending school, including those of

worker, spouse or partner, parent, caregiver, and community member. These roles may be

considered support systems, or may present challenges in students' allocation of time for

participation in campus-based organizations and activities (Hagedorn, 2015). NSSE (2015) and

many scholars support the theory that creating strong relationships and bonds between students

and the institution is critical to supporting their integration, persistence, and success in college.

One of the dilemmas colleges face, however, is determining the best way to offer programming

to a student body that often does not have any additional free time to spend on campus. Using

my assessment, the College can identify barriers to involvement and more intentionally target

nontraditional students with activities and initiatives.

In terms of barriers, all of the students in this study reported facing multiple barriers to

involvement. The most commonly cited barriers to involvement were: interferes with work or

family obligations, inconvenience or time commuting back to campus, interferes with personal

commitments, interferes with academic obligations, lack of interest in the activities offered, lack

of parking, not feeling welcomed at campus events or not fitting in with younger students, and

lack of information about events. Despite these challenges, the majority of students still want to

make social connections on campus.

When asked about how to improve involvement and make the campus more inclusive of their needs, the participants offered a number of ideas. The younger students shared that they desire social interaction, but they want a friend or group to attend events with. A younger nontraditional student expressed her difficulty with integrating into the campus community that is geared to resident students, stating "I go to school at night, work 40 hours per week, and am not your typical student, but I'm still young and I want friends at school." Several students expressed the feeling of "two different worlds" existing at Austin – one for the residential, younger students and one for the older, commuter night students - and felt that it was necessary to integrate both student populations. In an effort to integrate nontraditional students into the campus more effectively, the Office of Student Engagement and Involvement should invite a nontraditional student representative to fill a leadership position in both the Austin Student Council and the Austin Programming Board. These two student groups offer students leadership opportunities and develop campus programming. Further, the Office of Student Engagement should proactively invite students to on-campus activities and events tailored to adult students, and increase communication about social engagement opportunities. This would be an effective first step at integrating nontraditional students, in particular younger students.

Older students in the study expressed hesitation with becoming involved in campus activities, often noting that they had outside priorities that took precedence of their time. Low-cost or free events that involved the family were appealing to students with younger children. All of the focus group participants agreed that one strategy for increasing student involvement is requiring it for class. For example, one student shared that her business professor invited the career center advisor into class to discuss utilizing social media for job searches. The business students were then required to make follow up appointments with the career advisor to review their resumes. Another older student discussed a time when she was required to attend a play on

campus and write a paper about the play for the class. She said that since all the students in class had to attend the same play, she felt happy because she was not attending the event alone. That involvement sparked an interest in her and she has since seen additional productions on campus with friends and family. With the cooperation of administrators and faculty members, threading co-curricular events into the curriculum would increase the participation of students who otherwise may not become involved in campus activities.

The University of Arkansas at Little Rock (n.d.) sponsors nontraditional student programming aimed at helping nontraditional students make a successful academic and social transition to the University. Some of the different social events throughout the year include Scholarship Workshops, Family Dinner & Movie Night, Alpha Sigma Lamda Honor Society Induction and meetings, and a First Generation Workshop. These programs are in line with the types of events the nontraditional students at Austin indicated an interest in. This programming strategy corresponds with Wang (2009) and Ishitani and McKittrick's (2010) research findings that increasing nontraditional student involvement and campus support increases their persistence, success, and degree attainment.

In order to promote a healthy campus climate where nontraditional students are warmly accepted and respected as vital campus members, Austin should sponsor a diversity campaign that celebrates the nontraditional students on campus. Some of the research participants in this study shared their experiences with being mistaken for faculty members by younger students on campus. These experiences led to the nontraditional students feeling "isolated" and "embarrassed". A campus diversity campaign would have two outcomes: 1) Increase sense of belonging for nontraditional students, especially older students; and 2) Educate the traditional, residential about the different types of students on campus. All diversity campaigns on campus

should always include older students and commuter students. Otherwise, nontraditional students will continue to be marginalized.

ANTSHE (2016) and many colleges and universities host a Nontraditional Student Week the first week of November each year. During Nontraditional Student Week, Becker College's Center for Accelerated & Evening Studies (2013) hosts a programs from 5pm to 6:30pm Monday through Thursday in their Evening Studies Lounge. Each day there are a number of activities in the Lounge such as Meet the Dean, Cookies and Course Planning, Resume Review, and Let's Give Thanks. St. Joseph's University (2015) also celebrates Nontraditional Student Week. The Philadelphia Catholic university serves their nontraditional students free breakfast on Monday, gives out tee shirts and gifts throughout the week, hosts a family movie night, provides a professional networking night, and sponsors other events to celebrate their students. The Evening Studies Program should celebrate the nontraditional students at Austin by participating in Nontraditional Student Week. The diversity campaign for nontraditional students could be rolled into the programming for Nontraditional Student Week.

## Conclusion

In summary, colleges and universities face rapid changes in enrollment trends, demographics, and an increasing demand for accountability from the public and government. In American higher education, upwards of 80% of students can be classified as nontraditional (Kazis, et. al., 2007). Despite ever increasing numbers of nontraditional students enrolling in higher education, most are not attaining degrees. In fact, only about one-third of nontraditional students earn a college degree within six to eight years after enrolling (NSCRC, 2014). As more and more students seek alternative ways to achieve their baccalaureate education and finance costly tuition, institutional leaders are required to confront the challenge of how best to serve nontraditional students on campus. There is not a simple solution, but nonetheless, nontraditional

students should be intentionally immersed into the entire campus population through institutional

policies and practices. Integration and inclusion of nontraditional students will require putting

students first and changing current institutional paradigms to reflect one that considers the needs

of all college students. Institutions of higher education need to examine what factors influence

nontraditional students' persistence in college and how they can foster success for this large

student body.

In assessing factors for persistence of nontraditional students at Austin, I hoped to bring

awareness to the needs of this growing student population. According to my literature review,

nontraditional students face situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers in their academic

pursuits. Scholars disagree whether nontraditional student engagement can be defined by the

same parameters as the ones used for traditional students. Adults students are expected to

integrate into an, in many ways, outmoded youth-centered campus culture, and because of a lack

of support on campus or a hostile campus climate, many nontraditional students do not feel like

they belong or are welcome in the campus community. These feelings lead to a decrease in

persistence and success.

Based on my research findings, I proposed recommendations that can be used to increase

nontraditional student persistence and success through enhancing existing policies, programs,

and services at Austin. These recommendations included strategies to improve communication,

increase academic and social engagement, and strategies to foster sense of belonging and create a

warmer campus climate for nontraditional students on campus. Nontraditional students do not

have the same lived experience as traditional students on campus, so it is imperative that Austin

examines the one-size-fits-all approach to student success, and better align their mission and

strategy to engage, encourage, and enlighten *all* students on campus. Austin's patron Saint

Augustine, as cited by Villanova University Professional Studies (2016), envisioned learning as a

shared compassion, "for this feeling of compassion is so strong that, when our listeners are

touched by us as we speak and we are touched by them as they learn, each of us comes to dwell

in the other…" And so it should be in the classrooms and on campus.

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**Appendix A**

Email Survey

*required questions

**DESCRIPTORS**

1. Please check all that apply to you *

☐ I am over the age of 24

☐ I am a parent

☐ I care for an aging parent(s) or another person

☐ No one can claim me as a dependent

☐ I do not live on campus

☐ I am a veteran or service member

☐ I transferred from another institution

☐ I delayed entry to college for 4 or more years, or I re-enrolled after a 4+ year break

☐ I work part time to support my education

☐ I work full time to support my education

2. What is your gender?*
Male
Female
Write in answer

3. What program are you enrolled in*
Education and Civic Leadership
Business Administration
Liberal Arts
I am not enrolled in a program at this time
Write in other choice

4. This semester I am taking*
12 or more credits
8 credits
4 credits
I am not currently taking any credits this semester

5. As a student at this institution, I have earned*
0-27 credits
28-59 credits
60-91 credits

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92+ credits

6. On average, how many minutes, on average, does your commute to campus take, each way? Check one. *
5-15 minutes
15-30 minutes
30-45 minutes
45-60 minutes
More than 60 minutes

**ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT**: This set of questions concerns your academics at the College. Please respond to each question as best as you can.

7. Please respond to the following using the scale of "frequently", "occasionally", or "never."*
I have spoken to faculty members about course-related information
I have discussed personal concerns or problems with a faculty member
I have discussed career plans with a faculty member
I have met informally with a faculty member on a project or paper
My professors are available to answer questions outside of class
My professors encourage me to interact in classroom activities
My professors take an interest in my well-being and academic success
I feel academically challenged by my professors

8. Are you interested in any of these academic opportunities through the College? Check all that apply *
Academic club or organization
Academic research project or internship
Conferences
Service-learning experience
Study abroad
Write-in response

9. Are you satisfied with your academic experience at this institution? *
Yes
No

10. How can (institution name) better assist you in your academically?
Open text box

**SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT:** This next set of questions asks you about how you interact socially on campus.

11. Please respond to the following using a scale of "frequently", "occasionally", or "never."*
I have made friends with students in my classes
I have made friends with other students on campus
I have made friends with students whose age, race, interests, or personal values are different than mine

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I have met with my classmates for social interactions
I have met with my classmates to work on class assignments together

12. It is important to me to make social connections with other students on campus*
Yes
No

13. I spend time on campus (outside of class) involved in co-curricular or co-curricular activities*
Yes
No

14. (Skip logic) How much time do you spend on campus involved in co-curricular activities or attending campus events?*
More than 8 hours per week
5-8 hours per week
2-5 hours per week
1-2 hours per week
Less than one hour per week

15. (Skip logic) What are the reasons that you do not spend time on campus involved in co-curricular activities? Check all that apply.*
Inconvenience of commuting back to campus
Lack of parking
Interferes with academic obligations
Interferes with work
Interferes with personal commitments
Interferes with family obligations
Lack of interest in the activities
Write-in other reason

16. What kinds of social activities or programs would you like to become involved with at the College?
Open text box

17. Are you aware that students receive free or low-cost tickets to Rogers Center events and athletic events?
Yes
No

18. Are you satisfied with the social aspects of your educational experience? *
Yes
No

19. (Skip logic) What can (institution name) do to improve the social aspects of college for you?*
Open text box

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**CAMPUS COMMUNITY**: These questions relate specifically to your sense of the campus community and your sense of belonging and inclusion.

20. There are places I can go on campus to study that are specifically dedicated to nontraditional students*
Yes
No

21. Where do you go on campus to relax, or meet with other students or friends?*
Open text box

22. I am proud to be a student at this college*
Yes
No

23. (Skip logic) Please share the reason you do not feel proud to be a student at (institution name)
Open text box

24. Do you feel (institution name) does a good job at supporting and including nontraditional students? *
Yes
No

25. What suggestions do you recommend to help the college be more supportive, welcoming, and inclusive to nontraditional students?*
Open text box

26. I feel welcome on campus*
Yes
No

27. (Skip logic) How can (institution name) help you feel welcome on campus?*
Open text box

28. I feel a sense of belonging at (institution name)*
Yes
No

29. (Skip logic) Why do you feel like you do not belong?*
Open text box

**MOTIVATIONS AND BARRIERS:**  You're almost done! The next two questions help me to understand what factors either help or hinder your student success.

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30. What or who motivates you to stay in school? What or who motivates or supports (either on or off campus) you in staying enrolled? Please clearly explain how you are motivated.*
Open text box

31. What challenges or barriers (either on campus or off campus) threaten your ability to stay enrolled in classes at the College? Please explain clearly.*
Open text box

32. Is there anything you would like to add about your experience as a nontraditional student at (institution name), or any recommendations for the College?*
Open text box

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**Appendix B**

Protocol for Focus Group

1)  Would you introduce yourself, share with us how you identify, and a little about yourself

2) How do you define student engagement?

3) Do you feel that engagement is academic, social, or both?

4) If you could change or improve the College to increase engagement or to make the campus more inclusive of nontraditional learners, how would you do that?

5) Does (institution name) have a welcoming campus culture?

6) What places on campus do you feel are inclusive to nontraditional students? Are there spaces dedicated to nontraditional students?

8) What or who motivates you to stay enrolled in college? What drives you to keep you going?

9) In closing, how would you recommend that the College improve the experiences of nontraditional students on campus?