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Assessing Adult Learner Experience at Northern Stark University: An Exploratory Study

Kathleen Burke
Merrimack College, burkek@merrimack.edu

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Kathleen Burke

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Abstract

Close to 40% of students currently enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities are adult undergraduate learners, many of whom attend school on a part-time basis (Day et.al., 2011). The rate of college enrollment by adult students, age 25 and older, can be expected to rise even further due to the current economic recession, as adults find themselves in need of new skills and knowledge to pursue continued employment (Day et. al., 2011). This capstone project was conducted through a transformative paradigm with the intention of making a positive change for the adult population at Northern Stark University. I conducted eight interviews with adult learners from Northern Stark University, a public university located in the northeast, asking questions related to their reason for starting or returning to college, their student and work status (part-time or full-time), their experiences as adult students and what changes they would like to see implemented at NSU to benefit all adult learners.

Following data analysis, I created recommendations for NSU adult students which included improved advising, an updated advising web-page, a comprehensive center for adult students, adult student orientation, class improvements, and new student services and a coordinator position to assist the adult students at NSU.

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Introduction

Close to 40% of students currently enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities are adult undergraduate learners, many of whom attend school on a part-time basis. The rate of college enrollment by adult students, age 25 and older, can be expected to rise even further due to the current economic recession, as adults find themselves in need of new skills and knowledge to pursue continued employment (Day et. al, (2011). For this project which focused on adult learners, I researched the adult student population first and then I formulated recommendations for improving their experiences at a 4 year institution such as Northern Stark University. Cannady et. al, (2012) defined an adult learner as a student in higher education who is twenty-five years of age or older, and have taken on what is considered adult roles and responsibilities such as caring for children and other family members, working full-time, or participating heavily in community activities.

Adult students bring non-traditional characteristics to various campuses such as part-time enrollment, full-time employment, financial independence and parental obligations (Gordon et al., 2008).

> One major obstacle that adult learners encounter is situational factors beyond their control including obtaining employment, child care, health crisis, financial troubles, legal dilemma, personal or family hindrances, and transportation. Moreover, adult learners deal with institutional barriers including the level of content that is being taught, location, attendance, and potentially re-entry policies. They also must deal with dispositional barriers such as educational attitudes, self-efficacy, resilience, and attribution of failure (Petty & Thomas, 2014).

Non-traditional characteristics should be considered the norm of the campus climate, classes, expectations, and teaching strategies.

My study explored various aspects of adult learners at Northern Stark University as they navigated their way through an undergraduate program that is mostly occupied by traditional aged students. Specifically, in this qualitative interview research study, I interviewed adult students about their experiences at Northern Stark University. These questions helped examine the positive experiences and the fears and barriers that adult students face. Questions revolved around the student's characteristics, reason for starting school or returning to school, classroom experiences, campus involvement, and services or programs they utilized to succeed. I also asked what programs and services they would like to see in the future that could improve their overall school experience.

The benefit of doing this was to understand the perspectives of adult students, and to understand their experiences, wants and needs at Northern Stark University. All participants were interviewed for 45-60 minutes after reviewing and signing a consent form. The participants were contacted through the Associate Dean of Continuing Education, at Northern Stark University. The Associate Dean of Continuing Education emailed the Evening Student listserve with my consent form, recruitment email and my contact information. By conducting this study, I documented adult learner experiences and constructed a collaborative perspective of adult students at Northern Stark University. With this perspective, I made recommendations for student services and programmatic efforts to transform the experiences, and improve the retention, of this particular population.

Literature Review

This literature review focused on many aspects of adult learners experience in higher education. Non-traditional students, also called adult learners, share common qualities such as their advanced age, employment statuses and frequently having significant family obligations. Barriers that adult learners face in higher education include lack of research skills, fear of technology, and time restrictions on campus. The theory of self-authorship is applicable to adult learners; Marcia Baxter-Magolda (2010), the originator of the theory, stated that most adults reach full self-authorship when they reach their 30's. The review concluded with articles which described various learning strategies that can improve adult learner student success like experiential learning and incorporating real life experience with classroom exercises. Programmatic efforts to improve adult student re-entry into colleges and universities and their retention levels are also discussed, since the adult student population continues to grow as adults want to further their education levels, stay current in their work fields and continue to succeed both in and out of the classroom.

Characteristics and learning barriers of adult learners

The authors of *Academic Advising: A Comprehensive Handbook* discussed the traits of returning adult students. Gordon et al (2008) stated that returning veterans, one growing adult demographic, are a new micropopulation on college campuses. Adult learners bring non-traditional characteristics to various campuses such as part-time enrollment, full-time employment, financial independence and parental obligations. The National Digest of Education Statistics (2007) claimed that 18.9 percent of students are twenty-four years or older, and 36.9 percent of undergraduate students are over 24. Most of these students are referred to currently as being part of Generation X, which means they were born between 1965 and 1980. According to

these authors, adult students have different needs than traditional students and are in the midst of

personal transitions such as changing careers, seeking more job security or are faced with life

challenges like divorce and the loss of a loved one. Many adult students view education as a

service they have purchased and therefore expect orientation and advising to be efficient. Most

of these students commute to campus and spend a limited amount of time at college. Because of

their busy schedules, these students may have a difficult time making face-to-face contact with

their advisors. Gordon et. al (2008) suggested that establishing trust and mutual levels of respect

and providing a less formal environment are ways for advisors to establish positive relationships

with adult students. The author noted that advisors must also find creative ways to engage adult

students in their limited time on campus.

While Gordon et al. (2008) concentrated on the non-traditional characteristics adult

learners bring to college campuses, Deggs (2011) , conducted a survey to reveal three barriers

adult learners face in higher education. 21 adult learners enrolled in the *Professional*

Development Strategies course and participated in the qualitative study where two interviews

were conducted, one for the fall and one for the spring semester. The theoretical framework

revolved around Cross' category of adult learning barriers identified as institutional, situational

and dispositional.   Institutional barriers result from practices and procedures that discourage or

exclude working adults from participating in educational activities. Situational barriers arise

from home and job responsibilities, and dispositional barriers relate to self-perceptions about

oneself as a student. Interviews began with questions that focused on the adult learner's overall

experience in higher education, while other questions focused on Cross' three types of barriers

and how they managed those barriers. The adult learners were asked to describe specific

incidents in order to bring meaning to these barriers. The results suggested that intrapersonal

barriers were time management and balance of family responsibilities, career and job-related

barriers which were meeting job expectations and lack of support from the workplace, and

academic-related barriers such as understanding and utilizing technology and balancing course

loads. These three barriers provided an updated paradigm demonstrating greater insight into the

three categories identified by Cross. They concluded that faculty, staff and administrators in

higher education need to consider the complexity of the barriers adult learners face and new

support services should be established which address the needs of adult learners.

To better understand adult student traits, Chen, (2014) focused on understanding their

learning needs by conducting a study which focused on the foundations of adult learning. Chen

(2014) wanted to know how institutions prepare to meet the needs of non-traditional adult

learners given that higher education is mostly focused on younger students. Ten students

participated in 45 minute long semi-structured interviews to discuss their learning experiences

related to the course. The questions in the interviews revolved around prior learning

experiences, learning experiences related to the course and overall impact of learning from the

course (p. 411). The findings stated that five themes emerged comprised as a learning paradigm

shift. The students went through predictable phases, including reflection, emotional conflict,

self-assessment, the learning rubicon and behavior change. The students made the class content

as personal as possible and found that they were transformed by it. They participated in

cognitive and emotional processes present in the learning paradigm which challenged their pre-

existing realities and led them to accept diverse perspectives of themselves, perhaps connected to

self-authorship.

Adult learners and self-authorship

In the article, "Three elements of self-authorship," Baxter-Magolda (2008) expanded upon the theory of self-authorship defined as an internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations (p. 269). She conducted a 21-year longitudinal study of young adults aged 18 to 39. Baxter-Magolda claimed adults must engage in social relations with diverse others, and these relationships need intercultural maturity. Intercultural maturity requires epistemological, intrapersonal and interpersonal complexity. She interviewed 101 traditional-aged students when they began college at a Midwestern public university. This article focused on Dawn, who gave an in-depth narrative offering a clearer view of self-authorship. Dawn's explorations focused on listening to her internal voice, to know herself deeply enough to determine when to make things happen instead of just letting them happen. Dawn was a great example of the three elements of building a self-authored system: trusting the internal voice, building an internal foundation and securing internal commitments. The implications of this article are that developing self-authorship should be a key focus of a college education. This can occur through educators reducing external noise, engaging young adults in complex experiences and guiding them to reflect and make sense of these experiences through curricular, and cocurricular settings to draw out students' internal voices.

Baxter-Magolda (2008) discussed her longitudinal study at Miami University but focused on one student, Dawn, because she proved to be an excellent example of the three elements of building a self-authored system. Evans et al. (2010) wrote about Baxter-Magolda's continuation of her study in 2008 as she continued to interview participants to discuss their post college development. Baxter-Magolda (2001) stated that while they are in their 20's, young adults enter an unfamiliar world outside of education where their concerns revolved around establishing

careers, developing meaningful relationships, being self-sufficient, establishing families and being happy and satisfied. A self-authoring perspective is needed to conquer these concerns (Baxter-Magolda, 2008). In her post-college research she asked informal interview questions over the phone in which her participants opined that learning was not an appropriate framework in which to discuss their post-college development. They wanted to discuss their overall experience instead. Her work in 2008 focused on the developmental process her participants experienced in their thirties, which is the period in life Baxter-Magolda felt self-authorship becomes solidified.

Adult learners and learning strategies for success

Kasworm (2003) explored adult undergraduate beliefs about their construction of knowledge in the classroom, and its relationship to their broader life involvements. The study focused on how students constructed and negotiated their learning by utilizing a constructivist view of knowledge. Using a qualitative inquiry process, six institutions were selected as recruitment sites for participants. A diverse group of participants were interviewed, and the researchers questioned how adult students describe their learning engagement in the classroom and its relationship to their broader life involvements (Kasworm, 2003). Some of the key focal points were beliefs, actions, and relationships associated with the participant's classroom learning. Findings suggested that many of the students most valued learning occurred when a program or academic major was compatible with their adult life roles. They enjoyed instruction with in-depth conceptual explanations and effective course organization. A subset of these students claimed they constructed new knowledge and meanings through experiences that challenged their current beliefs. The study delineated five knowledge voices: the entry voice, outside voice, cynical voice, straddling voice and inclusion voice. The knowledge voices

reflected different beliefs about knowledge and the relationships among knowledge in different settings. Although questions remain about the formation of the knowledge voices, the identification of these voices has significant implications for the design and implementation of instruction, faculty relationships with adult learners, and the creation of programs to attract and support specific types of students.

Kenner and Weinerman (2011) used tacit theory, informal theory and formal theory to identify their participants learning strategies which led to a greater understanding of, and teaching strategies for, adult learners between 25 and 50 who are financially dependent and have little to no college experience. This article focused on the question of how to understand and teach entry-level adult learners between the ages of 25 and 50 who have obtained a high school diploma or GED, are financially independent, and have either one semester or less of college-level coursework. The three main groups of adult learners addressed are workers who lost their jobs due to recession, veterans, and adults who had just completed their GED and are moving on to higher education. The authors stated that Knowles theory of andragogy which recognizes the needs and features of adult learners is entwined with four principles that characterize adult learners: they are self-directed and take responsibility for their actions; they have an extensive depth of experience which ties into their self-identity; they are ready to learn and likely to engage in the learning process; and they are task motivated and attend college for a specific goal. Tacit theory, informal theory and formal theory were the metacognitive frameworks used to identify how students structure their own learning theories with tacit theory and informal theory being useful for identifying how adult learners learn and for creating course material that works for them. The learning strategies that were mentioned focused on allowing adult learners to see the purpose of the class exercises, and presenting new strategies for entry level coursework that

compares academic and non-academic knowledge. They recommended that class lessons should

incorporate repetition, with variety, so the adult learners test new strategies to test its usefulness

(p. 94). Since adult learners have achieved various levels of success in their lives, it is important

that they understand they can replicate this success in their academic endeavors.

Goddu (2012) also mentioned Knowles' theory of andragogy but stated that higher

education instructors should use theories that incorporate individual's personal history as part of

adult learning since adult learners have a lot of life experience they can bring to the

classroom. In this article, Goddu focused on the questions: How do adults learn and what

theories tie into this? How can an instructor utilize the past experiences of adult learners to make

learning more meaningful? What are the best methods to motivate an adult learner (Goddu,

2012)? Knowles opined that maturity, as an adult, becomes self-directed and motivation for

adult learners is internal. The author, however, pointed out that Knowles's andragogy is a

humanistic psychology, therefore it lacked social history as a part of adult learning

experiences. It does not really consider how one's social identity, cultural identity, gender or

race may impact their learning style. It can also exclude some identities altogether. Goddu

(2012) stated that instructors in higher education should focus on theories that incorporate

personal history as part of adult learning since adult learners bring a lot of practical experience to

the learning table. Self-directed learning, experiential learning, and narrative learning were

listed as effective strategies that higher education instructors can utilize to incorporate adult

learning theory into their course work. Through these strategies, adult learners can engage their

own life experiences as part of their learning process.

Adult learners and programmatic services and efforts to better support them

In a study by Scott and Homant (2008), researchers at the Academic Services Unit at the University of Detroit Mercy (UDM) wanted to promote the academic success of and retention of adult students of color. To accomplish this, they designed and implemented the Professional Mentor Program Plus, combining academic support programming with mentoring. This was designed exclusively for adult students as a proactive academic success and retention model. Two types of mentoring were used: Formal mentoring entails increasing student satisfaction, enrollment and retention and informal mentoring is a spontaneous relationship established by two or more individuals for the purpose of benefitting all involved. A survey conducted in 1997 established that two groups of adult students of color could benefit from utilizing the mentoring program: students at risk of being on academic probation and students who requested to be paired with a mentor for a variety of reasons. The methods used for the program evaluation were a longitudinal study of a program cohort compared to a matched control group, evaluation questionnaires on the workshops using a scale system, focus group feedback and tracking students' GPA's. The results indicated positive evaluations of the workshops, positive feedback in a focus group about the program as a whole, and a small increase in GPA's. A one year study indicated that program participants had an 88% retention rate compared to the control group that had an 81% rate. To improve the academic success and retention of adult students of color at the University of Detroit Mercy, Scott and Hormant (2008) focused on two types of students who could benefit from a newly created mentor program which combined academic support programming with mentoring.

Plageman (2011) listed several suggested programs for academic success for adult learners such as changing admissions policies and academic programming such as hybrid courses

and distance learning to be more user-friendly for adult learners. With the fastest growing jobs in the United States requiring education beyond high school, Plageman (2011) explored, in her essay, how institutions retain their adult learners. A meeting conducted in 2008 by the University of Virginia and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges concluded that state and public universities need to double the number of students receiving higher education over the next two decades. Most of that increase will be comprised of individuals who are underprepared or non-traditional students. Plageman (2011) focused on creative programming, program planning and the need for advocacy to prepare for the influx of these students. To increase the level of adult participation, institutions have made changes to their admissions policies and academic programming to try to be more user-friendly for adult learners. This is done through programs such as accelerated learning, hybrid courses, distance learning, and credit for life experience as working parts of degree granting programs. Program planners and administrators will have to balance fiscal objectives and organizational goals with the institution's mission and vision goals. Recommendations were made for institutions who want to enhance adult learning and success. Some recommendations were to actively market and then assist the adult learners with financial aid, comprehensive advising, access to resources, services and classes at times that are convenient for the adult students. Plageman (2011) concluded the article by stating more advocacy can occur for adult learners through professional literature, professional conferences, educating institutional personnel and community members and utilizing social media outlets.

Like Plageman (2011), Day also advocated for institutional transformation in order to better support adult learners, but instead, is focusing on the faculty. Using a qualitative study within a constructivist paradigm, Day et al. (2011), studied faculty perceptions of adult learners

to better understand adult student's classroom needs and improve upon their teaching methods by urging students to integrate their work/life experience into their learning experience. In the Day et al. (2011) article, faculty members question how to become more aware of the issues adult learners face in the classroom. This article focused on faculty perceptions of adult learners in two-year colleges and one four-year public university. The faculty in the study had experience teaching traditional-age and adult college students. Faculty who met the study criteria were interviewed using open-ended, semi-structured questions. Three major themes emerged in the findings: conceptions of adult learners, preparedness for working with adult learners and teaching skills (p.79). Adult learners were perceived as tenacious, dedicated, more focused, able to multi-task their many life roles, and harder working in their classes. However, the students lacked confidence in the classroom and in their study skills.

Because adult students were usually juggling multiple responsibilities, they felt guilty because they viewed returning to school as selfish. To adapt teaching methods for adult learners, the faculty mentioned how important it is to build on the student's life experiences. Some faculty utilized an active strategy by asking the adult students to integrate their work experiences in lessons and use effective communication. The faculty felt students wanted them to be organized using clear content and expected teacher-directed instruction through lectures. Some faculty admitted they had limited preparation for teaching adults but the students taught them to be more patient and more creative on presenting information. The implications were that college instructors should respect adult learners' multitasking abilities but may initially need to use a structured, traditional approach to learning. Adult students need guidance in more interactive classroom settings and faculty need more formalized training in effective teaching strategies for adult students.

As Day (2011) advocated for in-classroom transformation, so do faculty and librarians need to partner to ensure that adult learner needs are met in those spaces, as well. Cannady et al. (2012) utilized Knowles six motivation assumptions for the adult learner as the theoretical lens to first understand the participant's frustrations with using a university library and its resources, and then improve upon them. Cannady et al. (2012) wanted to know how to help adult learners with their frustration on using a University library and its resources. The authors of this article cited Knowles' six motivation assumptions for the adult learner as their theoretical framework to best address this group's needs in higher education. Knowles stated adult students seek to learn material they need to use immediately instead of at some other point in the future. The material needs to be relevant to what the adults are experiencing in their lives at that moment, then they arrange the material to be problem-centered rather than subject-centered. With a solid commitment to learning when they return to school, adult learners struggle with research and using the library resources. This struggle could be related to their location away from campus, being unfamiliar with technology, lack of confidence, lack of basic research skills, limited time, and lack of knowledge about the resources available in the library. A reference librarian at the Mississippi State University consulted with faculty to explore the benefits of increased collaboration with a goal of increasing student success while reducing anxiety. The new services developed were library orientations, flexible scheduling for research consultations with the librarian, including nights and weekends, faculty providing librarian contact information to students in class, development of subject and course specific Libguides, and the Ask-A-Librarian button on all library Web pages. The reference librarians also invested in chat and email services as a form of outreach to undergraduate and graduate students. The proactive outreach strategies

and the variety of options for communication and instruction allowed the adult students to improve their research and library skills.

In order for programs and services to be responsive to adult learners, whether libraries or other programs, context must be taken into account, as noted by both Cannady et al. and Bohonos (2014). While professional development can play a pivotal role in motivating adult learners, Bohonos (2014) focused on how to understand adult learner's career contexts and how it could provide more effective program development and improved student services. Bohonos (2014) presented five broad categories of career context which were:

· Students with work histories in occupations generally labeled *nonprofessional*.

· Professionals who want to change career fields.

· Displaced professionals.

· Employees who are concerned about being displaced, and

· Professionals who need a degree to make the next vertical step within their organizations (p. 29).

Students who fit in these categories are drawn to complete their educations for various reasons. This article explained the circumstances that can encompass students in each of the five categories. The goal of the article was to assist practitioners in asking the right types of questions of their adult learners. The author made suggestions on types of courses, amount of school time needed, and degrees or certifications which could work best for students in each of the categories, while also maintaining a healthy work-life balance. It was noted that in this article that the reflections and observations that were made stemmed from work in adult career advising in a major metropolitan university.

While Bohonos focused on career context as a way to best serve adult students, Petty and Thomas (2014) made several student service and program suggestions to keep adult learners engaged and successful in higher education. With the shifts in the labor market, many adults have to focus on obtaining the proper skills to stay relevant in the job market and therefore the adult learner population in higher education continues to grow. Petty and Thomas (2014) questioned how to define persistence for adult education programming while they examined barriers that adult learners face, and they reviewed components of a successful program for adult education. When the authors described the components of successful adult education programs and motivation, they attributed them to a lot of Tinto's (1999) assertions. Tinto argued that students are more likely to persist and graduate in higher education settings that hold high and clear expectations for them. Petty and Thomas wrote about the barriers adult learners face such as their own diversity and long-term obligations that involve many goals that can change over time. To reduce these barriers, improve persistence, and address the components of successful adult education programs, the authors focused on the importance of instructors, career development programs, literacy programs, orientation and goal setting to keep adult learners engaged and completing higher education. Suggestions such as using a consistent definition for persistence and retention for all stakeholders, having an array of resources that lead to high levels of retention, a tracking system for students who utilize the resources to share with instructors, and providing additional professional development for instructors is vital to the retention of adult learners. The authors indicated that additional in-depth studies are needed in connection to adult learner retention in higher educational programs.

By exploring literature on adult learners that covered the strengths and weaknesses they bring to the classroom, different theorists who centered their research on adult students, and

services and programs that were developed for their success and retention, this literature review provided insights into the many components that come with being in this non-traditional population. The literature served as a foundation for interview questions for this project, as well as ideas on what kind of services or programs could benefit undergraduate adult learners in four year institutions.

Methodology

For my methods section, I used a transformative paradigm in my study of undergraduate adult learner experiences in a four-year institution. I chose this paradigm because this is a demographic that I am a part of and I wanted to see programs and services put in place to assist this growing, non-traditional, demographic. Mertens (2015) stated that "transformative researchers consciously and explicitly position themselves side by side with the less powerful in a joint effort to being about social transformation" (p. 21). I wanted to advocate for positive change through the implementation of student services and programmatic efforts so going to college or returning to college is an easier and smoother transition for adult students. By hearing their stories, experiences, successes and barriers, I gained more insight on adult students and formed solutions on how to make their experiences inside and outside of the classroom more beneficial.

Mertens (2015) stated that there is no unified body of literature that is representative of the transformative paradigm, but there are four characteristics which are common to the diverse perspectives within this paradigm. These four characteristics distinguish it from the postpositivist and the constructivist paradigms. The characteristic I focused on is the following:

> It places central importance on the lives and experiences of the diverse groups that, traditionally, have been marginalized. Researchers should not limit study to the lives and experiences of only marginalized groups; they should also study the way oppression is structured and reproduced (Mertens, 2015, p. 21).

As the researcher and an adult learner, I have been concerned with the lack of literature, services, faculty preparation and programs that support adult learners. Although this population continues to grow, it also continues to face situational barriers of home and job responsibilities and dispositional barriers of their self-perceptions as a student, understanding and utilizing

technology and balancing course loads (Deggs, 2011). I chose qualitative research because I

wanted to conduct face to face interviews so the data collection can be more personalized. I

wanted to hear the participants' stories and that they could hear some of mine. We built

relationships with the collective goal of making a change. If I wanted to transform their

experience, I felt I should get to know them and act as an ally.

 I conducted the qualitative research through semi-structured interviews with

participants. The interview sessions lasted 45 – 60 minutes and were recorded. Consent forms

were distributed to the participants prior to the interviews taking place. The population for this

study is undergraduate adult students at Northern Stark University. My sample was limited to

adult students who chose to be interviewed. I worked with the Associate Dean of Continuing

Education, at Northern Stark University, who agreed to assist me on my capstone research and

gather the student information. She contacted students to see who was willing to be recruited

with the intention of obtaining 8 – 12 participants.

 Because adult learners tend to be enrolled part-time, work full-time and have parental

and/ or family obligations, I used convenience sampling (Gordon et. al, 2008). According to

Mertens (2015) convenience sampling occurs when the participants in the study were chosen

because they were readily available. As the researcher, I acknowledged the limitations of my

sample and attempted not to generalize my findings beyond the given population pool (Mertens,

2015). The Associate Dean and I were in agreement that I may not have access to a large sample

due to the students' busy schedules, but we were both confident I would likely have eight

participants. I interviewed the participants at a location of their choosing and compensated them

with coffee or a snack.

The open-ended interview questions I asked the participants focused on: the students'

characteristics such as students' status, employment and family obligations; positive experiences

they have had and barriers they face; if there are support services or programs in place for them;

and what services or programs they would like to see. I asked these questions with the intention

of changing the experience of adult students at Northern Stark University, so they feel more

welcome. I wanted them to feel secure in their knowledge of the campus, classes and

expectations from faculty and staff. Although none of my questions directly involve the theory

of self-authorship, I felt the questions do allude to it and the participants' answers shed more

light on where they are in their self-authorship.

Baxter-Magolda (2008) stated that students in their 20's are at a crossroads where

external influences and initial internal voices conflict with one another, but students' in their 30's

come to trust their internal voices to effectively coordinate their beliefs, identities, and social

relations. When adult students choose to attend college or return to college, there can be many

reasons behind that decision. I felt that making that decision is part of self-authorship because it

can be life changing and an exploration into one's own internal beliefs, values and identity while

presenting a challenge to adapt to collegiate norms and expectations. I wanted to know how the

Northern Stark adult students cope with the life balance of school, family and work while being a

college student. I wanted to know what services and programs SSU has in place for them and if

the students utilize these services. What services or programs should be added? What can I do

to help? How can we make a positive change so that the future adult students have a good

experience at Northern Stark University?

I did not anticipate any human subject issues other than the participants having time

constraints due to their busy schedules. I did not feel any harm or risk would come to the

participants. I felt my questions were formed with the intent to explore the adult student

experience and transform it through services and programmatic efforts to make for a better

college experience. I hoped the participants were ready to share their stories with me and would

not feel that they needed to hold back on how they really felt if they were biased in some

way. They could have been biased if they work at NSU or were there under a scholarship, and I

needed to be aware of that. I hoped to have a variety of participants, but I knew that with

convenience sampling I did not have a lot of control over who will be in my study.   To analyze

my data, I used standard methods of coding qualitative data (Saldana, 2015). I transcribed each

interview, then conducted line by line coding to identify themes and patterns, from which my

findings and subsequent recommendations are generated.

My data collection focused on what adult students at Northern Stark University want and

need to be successful students. I wanted to know what services were in place to support them

and what services and programs should be put in place. I wanted to know what keeps these

students motivated and how them complete their studies. My ultimate goal is to find the best

way to assist adult learners in higher education.

With the Associate Dean's help, I obtained 8 undergraduate participants for my interview

process. I initially had over fifteen adult students respond to my email recruitment form which

was sent out by the School of Continuing Education to an undisclosed amount of adult students

defined as age 25 and older, bringing non-traditional characteristics to college campuses such as

part-time enrollment, financial independence and parental obligations (Gordon et al., 2008). Of

the eight participants, five were male and three were female. Ages ranged from 26 to 65 and all

of the participants identified as white Caucasian. All but one participant was employed and all

participants were financially independent. One participant had graduated from Northern Stark

University in the spring of 2015 and another student was currently enrolled in an online class at

Local four year institution while taking a break from NSU. All participants will be referred to by

their pseudonyms, which were chosen by some, and in other cases by me.

Participants were asked 20 open-ended questions, some questions had additional, smaller

questions attached to them. The questions revolved around students' characteristics; positive

experiences and barriers they have experienced; if they feel there are adequate support programs

in place for them; and what programmatic or service changes they would like to see at Northern

Stark University.

Findings

In the course of the interviews, several themes emerged which revolved around the

factors influencing their decision to start and or return to college, the adult learner experience,

classroom experiences of adult learners, advising and types of support inside and outside of the

institution leading to student persistence, balancing the adult student role with other life roles and

recommendations for improved programs or services. The participants were very eager to share

their stories. They all possessed a sense of pride about being a college student and took their

student status very seriously despite their busy lives and multiple roles outside of school.

Decision to return to college or start a college education at Northern Stark University

Returning to college after time away, or starting college for the first time as an adult can

be an important, but also stressful experience. All of the students I interviewed were balancing

many roles outside of school such as full-time employee, parent, home owner, and care-

giver. When asked why they decided to attend NSU, many of the decisions revolved around

either advancing in or changing their career and by doing so obtaining a certification or

degree. Carl initially worked in finance for many years when he discovered he really liked

computer programming. He quit his career and started on a new journey as a computer science

major at NSU. While we discussed how many adults return to higher education to change

careers, Carl described:

> I don't know if you watched the last state of the union but the president almost somewhat addressed that, he was talking about being able to provide for people who are in the middle of their careers who need to go back to school or change what they're doing and I thought that was interesting when he said that because it really reflects what I'm doing right now and there must be a lot of people doing that.

> Carl is an example of a student starting over in higher education to change careers. Jon

has been attending NSU part-time since 2010 to obtain a degree to feel more secure in his IT

job. Both Carl and Jon are in higher education with a career-driven focus. Jon is currently

taking an online class at a local four year institution because of travel distance and a newborn

baby. He stated:

> Well, I did want to get a degree, you know, for the future. So I mean, I don't need it for my job. I already got one. But in ten years from now, I don't want to be surpassed by some kid with their Master's Degree, just because he's got a degree and I don't, and he doesn't have experience and I do. So, and Bachelor's degree is kind of like a baseline anyway, a minimum. So, that's why I'm doing it.

Jon's story reflects the career-motivated decision to attend NSU: He wants a degree for future

job security and is afraid that co-workers who have four year degrees will be more likely to

advance into higher positions and receive promotions within his company, though he claimed to

have more work experience. A few other students wanted to complete the degrees they had

begun years ago at other institutions. Stevie stated, "I'm 54 years old, so for me it's more about

finishing what I started, ok, achieving what I set out to do." Both Carl and Jon's experience at

Northern Stark University reflects what has been previously noted in the literature by Bohonos

(2014) and Day et al (2011) which is adult learners return to colleges and universities for career-

related reasons such as expanding their knowledge in their fields and gaining new skills and insight while obtaining a degree. Bohonos (2014) placed adult students in categories based on career context including career changers, displaced workers, and those who are upwardly mobile within an organization. Day et al (2011) opined that the rate of college enrollment by adult learners is expected to rise even further as adults find themselves in need of new skills and knowledge to pursue continued employment.

Several of the adult students have mentioned the difference in treatment between the day students and the evening students throughout the interviews. Most of the participants were only able to attend evening courses because of their jobs or they would leave work early to attend a 4:30 pm class. Bearing this in mind, the participants were asked if they felt like non-traditional students and why they felt that way. All of the participants said they very much felt like they were non-traditional students. The most common reason was their age. The second most common reason pertained to work, with one participant mentioning their previous career in IT, while other participants mentioned being in the working world, working full-time, and one adult student working while also being a volunteer EMT. Previous education was also cited with a few participants having already obtained degrees before attending Northern Stark University. Other answers were taking time off before starting school, being married, having real world experience, and always being mistaken for faculty instead of being recognized as an actual student. Stevie was the only adult learner who answered both yes and no to the question when she explained:

> Well yea I do but only because well no, no I don't, I think I'm the same student, you know my definition of traditional and yours might be different, what I'm thinking of, I mean I'm traditional as far as I expect the same things other students are expecting I assume, and I go to school the same way I do, what I think is very different is my outlook so I might consider myself a non-traditional in that aspect.

This reflects the study by Kasworm (2003), who wrote that even though adults have a significant

presence in undergraduate higher education, when compared to younger collegiate learners, they

bring more complex and varied backgrounds of life experiences, prior knowledge, and skills.

When participants were asked about their fears of returning to higher education, they

gave a variety of answers, including some having no fear about returning to higher education

while others expressed anxiety about the social aspect of college, money issues, the enrollment

process, and getting used to the size of the campus. A couple of the adult students described the

experience as intimidating, socially strange, and confusing in terms of the matriculation process.

Tyrion had a difficult time enrolling into Northern Stark and was intimidated by the process. He

claimed there were no clear directions and the enrollment process was vague, thereby

questioning his ability as a student. Tyrion illustrated this by saying:

> I think everyone is intimidated about going back to school. I was when I initially came
> back just because I mean comparatively to the school in Vermont, it's tiny, it was a single
> building, you know, it's easy to navigate so I think touring the campus for the first time
> when I was here, the size was intimidating and then figuring out how to enroll and who to
> reach out to get the program started, just because it was very vague, I mean you could go
> off on what you have on the web-site but there wasn't any clear directions given to me.

Deggs (2011) focused on three barriers adult learners face in higher education. The third

barrier is the dispositional barrier, related to self-perceptions about oneself as a student. To

expound on this, Deggs referenced academic related barriers such as understanding and utilizing

technology and balancing course loads. The students who claimed to have no fear about

returning to or starting college elaborated on the lack of fear by citing many positive aspects of

being an adult student. Some of the students used the word "excited" to explain how they

felt. A few of the students felt comfortable in school because they had previously attended

college and viewed this time around as an opportunity to improve academically. One student,

Juliette, stated her biggest fear of attending NSU was paying for it, but she tried to put that fear

aside to concentrate on completing her degree. She claimed that this experience was very

different from her past experience at [local community college]. Juliette further illustrated this

by stating:

> Academically I thought it would not be a problem which I quickly realized was not the
> same as community college, they expected a lot more time and work performance at any
> class ya know, English Lit., versus Graphic Design, any of those courses no matter what
> it was the time that they wanted you to put in was much more than I expected so if you
> ask me after the fact (laughs) I would be fearful of how much time I had to put in for
> homework but primarily when I went into this it was just like how am I going to pay for
> it?

When asked, the majority of the participants claimed they feel confident in the

classroom. Interactions and relationships with faculty played a large role in the students'

confidence. As Bravo noted:

> I think that the professors really made a point of reaching out to me especially the day
> classes when they knew I was an older student each day they would make a point, pretty
> much all of them, starting with the first class, even just saying hello and asking me about
> my background and that was really nice, it's just they treat all the students well but it was
> like an extra level of I guess respect or professionalism from the professors really went a
> long way.

Because the participants were balancing many roles outside of the classroom, they felt like non-

traditional students who were not always secure in their careers or were in pursuit of new careers

but their life and work experience and good relationships with faculty played into their

confidence as students.

Adult learner experiences at Northern Stark University

Another student mentioned they were able to engage with their professors off campus

through Canvas, the online learning management system for Northern Stark. Because Tyrion

had endured challenging communication experiences in the past at a different institution, being

able to easily access professors on and off campus was very important to him. The fact that

professors were obtainable in person and through email and office hours further boosted

confidence in other participants. A few participants cited their age and life experience as another

platform for confidence. The ages, life experiences, and work experiences, mixed with the

decision to go back to college or attend it for the first time, demonstrated that all of the

participants really knew themselves and what they wanted in life, which is reflective of Baxter-

Magolda's (2008) self-authorship theory, which happens when young adults engage in complex

experiences and guide them to reflect and make sense of these experiences through curricular

and co-curricular settings to draw out students' internal voices.

Sarah was the only participant who did not feel confident in class but she mentioned a

writing class where she felt the professor was "amazing" and that all students were attentive in

that particular class. She stated she felt a little more confident in that class because she

"understands the way the world works, where some of the other students don't." She elaborated

with the following:

> When the professor asks a question, they answer the question the way they think that the
> professor wants them to, rather than actually thinking about it from like a marketing
> standpoint. And for the last 20 years, between high school and now, my husband and I
> owned our own business. So I see things in that perspective. I have that experience, that,
> I don't think any of these other people have.

Classroom experiences of adult learners at NSU

Participants were questioned about what teaching styles they preferred with the options

being lecturing, experiential, group work and/or practical application which I explained as

incorporation of life experiences. Lecture format was the expected and most favored teaching

method among the adult students. Another popular option was life experiences/practical

application tied into lectures, discussions, or problem solving. The lecture and discussion format

preference is demonstrated by Stevie when she expressed:

> I like the lecture format but I like the interaction, so I want to have the human interaction, I want people's opinions to come out um when you know, people should read the chapter beforehand, you shouldn't be lecturing a chapter of that, that you want to discuss that week right? It should have been previous reading and let's discuss it and what's your opinions? There's a lot of students that I find haven't read the material and they're using the lecture to take their notes instead of reading the material.

Chen (2014) suggested that adult students could learn more effectively when the

professors connect the course to personal experience. Adult learners in Chen's study made class

content as personal as possible which could sometimes lead to personal transformation. Tyrion's

experience reflected Chen's findings, when he declared:

> I prefer the lecture format with the professor making a point to show how it relates to their life, my organic chemistry professor I have now is constantly talking about how he has worked for the department of defense and here are some interesting projects that I have worked on that would relate back to this and how it's practical if you want to do that type of work but here is how it related to real life so kind of grabbing us so we're not bored.

None of the participants enjoyed group work, indicating they often felt other students would not

contribute to the group, leaving them to do most of the work. They felt group work was an

unfair activity. No one really commented about experiential learning except for Brad who hopes

to do his internship on historical searches he is currently involved in with in his church.

Advising and support leading to student persistence

When the question about whether or not the participants felt a connection to other adult

students on campus was posed, the answer was equally divided with yes and no responses. The

adult students who answered yes often met other adult students in class and often had some type

of employment connection to their peers. A few students worked together or had once worked

together. Others bonded over their roles as full-time employees outside of school. Jon was able

to assist another adult student with employment, and explained:

> I mean, there's a few guys in the class, that we met. It was kind of we're on the same
> level. We took the same process. One of the guys, I ended up working with. I got him a
> job at my old job. We actually worked together for a long time.

The adult students who did not feel connected to their adult peers cited their part-time status as a

student, little time spent on campus due to employment and family, and also being new to the

program as possible reasons why they did not feel a sense of a peer connection. Their reasons

coincide with Deggs' (2011) barriers that adult students face in higher education. Students who

did not have a connection to other adult learners were dealing with the situational barriers Deggs

(2011) mentioned which stem from home and job responsibilities.   A couple of the adult

students in this study have only completed two or fewer semesters and one student, Brad, only

takes one class per semester, so he did not expect to meet a lot of peers. Brad explained this as

follows:

> I take one course a week, in the evening at 6:30 for example, you don't get a lot of young
> people there and all the people are, and I love this, you get mothers and you can clearly,
> they have young children but they are there and they are just as focused as anyone else
> they are clearly in their mid 20's, early 20's single mothers and they are going to school
> that, just blows my mind when you think about, those folks deserve an award.

> Although Brad may not have a lot of peer connections, his respect for his fellow peers

was quite inspiring.

When asked what the participants use for support, I defined support as an academic

advisor, a service such as a math or writing center, or any kind of support outside of NSU. A

few participants said they had an advisor while a couple of other participants said they did not

have an advisor, and one was unsure if they had an advisor, thus a common theme was the lack

of advising at Northern Stark. I got the sense that advising at NSU is confusing or non-existent

for most evening students, as my participants often sought out professors, the registrar's office,

or department heads for advice. The participants had positive things to say about the faculty and

their availability by citing they respond quickly to emails and will spend time before and after

classes to assist students. They also will make their office hours, phone numbers, and email

addresses available. There was a lot of confidence in terms of faculty being reliable, but no

confidence in the advising system as pointed out by Sarah:

> Apparently, the day student advisors are great. It's the evening student advisors, they
> [the students] get nothing. And I think we pay more, as night students, than the day
> students.

> Some students mentioned their professors acted as their advisor and as mentors. Once

again the relationship with faculty was mentioned as a system of support. Bravo illustrated this

connection when he discussed his situation:

> My advisor, he wasn't used to dealing with adult learners so I guess um, a little bit more
> advice that was geared towards um going back to school and as well as being reissued
> that program, the Northern Stark program, it's a jumping out point to a Master's degree
> which is what I ended up doing again, I found the support elsewhere from another
> professor so it might have just been a personality thing but that could have been yea, they
> could have been better, the advisor, if he had offered some sort of transfer advice.

Another student felt they received little support at the school but received support from

family members. Juliette elaborated on this when she said she felt support from her husband and

her aunt, who is a school teacher, when she stated the following:

> Well, they would like you to see the advising department or center um and I had, I was
> able to get the same advisor so you're not really assigned to someone, you just go and
> take a number and you get the person that's available but I was a couple of times able to
> get the same advisor um so at least somebody on campus knew my name because literally
> without that there is nobody on campus that knows that I am even going there.

Once questioned directly about their advisors and experiences with them, the participants all had negative connotations in their responses. No one had a positive advising experience. A few students had never met with an advisor in their time at Northern Stark University. Several adult students said they figure out which classes they need through using the NSU Navigator site and they register for classes online rather than meet with an advisor. Advisors seemed to be randomly assigned and some students said there is a general advisory group who meet with you in person at the Center for Excellence. Common complaints about the advisors were they were hard to contact, only made day appointments, and just assisted students with registration and schedules. Another common complaint was that advisors were not proactive about reaching out to students, as Carl stated:

> It's not proactive, no one reaches out and says hey, you need to make an appointment for you to come in at this time, but at least not in my experience so far. Maybe for people who are in the School of Continuing Education like traditional students might have to do that, but for me it's like I said, it just hasn't been um aggressive, hasn't been made available.

Gordon et al. (2008) stated that because many adult students are going through personal transitions, some of them may want to share their experiences with their advisors and accept guidance. The authors suggested when working with adult students, it is important to remember that many of them see education as a service they have purchased and therefore they expect prompt and reliable service. Many of the participants expressed these sentiments and when advisors could not meet with them, they would not go to campus to register for classes and instead chose to register online and not discuss any scheduling or class changes or additions with an advisor.

A few of the students had used the math center for assistance, and other students claimed they would utilize the writing center for assistance with papers and resume writing in the near

future. Most of the participants suggested they want support whether it was in the form of

services NSU offers or through advising, but one student indicated they liked their independence

and did not want to use any support services and would just reach out to a professor when

necessary.

Participants were asked if they felt a connection to the campus or their classes. The adult

students who felt they had a connection to the campus mentioned they enjoyed the diverse

student body, meeting people with similar family backgrounds and core values, and enjoyed the

aesthetics of the campus as it continues to expand. Tyrion focused on the connection he felt in

his classes, he expressed this as:

> I do, I feel I belong in the science classes, it's kind of a community, they like to see your
> faces there every single day I see familiar faces so the longer I spend time there, the more
> that I notice that I am being recognized and being acknowledged so in that sense I feel a
> connection.

Some students felt no connection citing that they never attended any on-campus events

and were only on campus for their classes. Explanations for this revolved around their full-time

jobs, commuting, and the lack of parking on and around campus.

Balancing the adult student role with other life roles

To obtain a deeper understanding of their experience as adult learners, participants were

asked how they balance their role as an undergraduate student with their roles outside of

Northern Stark. This question received a variety of answers with just one commonality between

participants which was they wanted more classes offered. A couple of the adult students said

they take advantage of the summer classes and enjoy taking them because it's a faster way to

earn credits. Brad loves the summer classes and demonstrated it by stating:

I do take advantage of the Summer program, absolutely because I can get courses I can't get otherwise in the Summer and there are two semesters in the Summer and that gives me a chance to get two more courses under my belt.

Another student, Stevie, enjoys the eight hour Saturday classes and elaborated by saying that "any quicker way to earn credits is good" because she cannot take a lot of classes during a regular semester due to her full-time job. Jon said he wanted more online class options and more night class options. He is currently taking a class at a local four year institution because they offer more online options, which is easier for him with a nine month old baby at home. A few of the younger students mentioned that not being parents or having significant family obligations, and having a supportive partner, was very helpful in balancing multiple roles. Sarah has an extremely busy life outside of school, so her answer revolved around multitasking by utilizing a Kindle for homework, voice-talking her emails, eliminating less important home tasks, and reading her homework to her son in the evening instead of a bed-time story. Juliette is another adult learner with multiple roles including care-giver to many of her aging relatives. She never had children and is extremely career-focused, but her weekly balancing act has led her to some self-discovery as she discussed her interest in working with children:

But you know in general I'm worried about oh my god I'll be needing a walker to go down the aisle and then who's going to hire me but I'm like maybe I don't have to have a traditional job, maybe there is something else to use my degree along with and getting personal benefits out of it [like working with children].

Plageman (2011) suggested creative programming, program planning, and the need for advocacy as preparation for the large number of adults returning to higher education. Some of the recommendations were to assist adult students with comprehensive advising and access to resources, services, and classes at times which are convenient for adult students. With this literature in mind, I asked the participants if they felt like advisors, faculty, or support services were available when they need them, and if there were any evening or weekend hours. The

overwhelming general response was, once again, about the lack of advising, especially for

evening students. In terms of advising and student services, there are no weekend hours. Most

of the participants said there are no evening advising hours, except for Stevie, who claimed her

advisor is available on some weeknights but holds an open time slot so no one can make

appointments.

Suggested services and recommendations for improved practice

Participants were asked what services they would like to see on campus that could be

beneficial to adult students. The most popular answer centered on advising and the second most

popular answer revolved around classes. In terms of advising the suggestions were: more hours

available, an initial meeting/check-in with an advisor, advising on course selection, tracking

student progression in terms of where they are in the process and progressing towards

graduation, and more outreach. All of these suggestions demonstrate a need to address the lack

of communication between the students in the School of Continuing Education and the advisors

who work for that part of NSU. Some students specifically asked for more advising availability

for adult students who attend night classes and/or work full-time jobs. Again, the perceived

difference between the treatment of day students and night students shines through in these

answers. When I questioned Brad about his advising experiences, he explained:

> I only take one class [per semester] so it's [the advising] not really a big deal but I do
> miss the notion of someone being my champion, say okay...so you do this and then come
> back and talk to me and we can talk about where to go next, something like that.

When it came to class improvements, the suggestions were: More weekend classes, more

outside learning and connection to life experience, and more condensed classes. Southern New

Hampshire University was mentioned as a great framework for condensed classes and a college

that is more geared towards adults. When some participants mentioned weekend classes and

condensed classes, it demonstrated a lack of communication and knowledge of course

availability because a few participants had mentioned condensed courses that occur in the winter

semester and that there are eight hour long Saturday classes available. Jon demonstrated this

lack of knowledge when he reflected:

> Yea, I mean, the weekend classes in general, I think are nonexistent at Northern
> Stark. There's a lot [that] could be done during the two days, you know. I think a lot of
> adult students would opt out and – I mean, I would gladly go there on Saturday or Sunday
> morning, for even two or three hours, do the class and move on. There's no traffic, you
> know. It's the weekend, so [if] you have the classes [they] would be huge [in popularity]
> if they implemented it.

> To expand on which services could benefit adult students, I asked what kind of changes

participants would like to see on campus for adult learners. Some mentioned more advising

outreach to new students, a center or a room for continuing education students, an orientation for

new continuing education students, and wishing more of their previous classes had

transferred. Throughout the course of the interviews, Brad, Stevie, Jon, Juliette, and Carl, all

admitted they had to strongly advocate for transfer of credits from other institutions. They

thought more of their classes from previous institutions should have passed on and counted

towards their degrees at NSU. Some students said there was a lot of "back and forth" between

the heads of their departments, deans, professors, and sometimes advisors, over what classes can

and cannot count towards credit accumulation. Carl elaborated on this credit confusion when he

expressed his frustration with the lack of advising:

> You basically show up and they just say oh, 'what are you looking for help with?' and
> you tell them that you, and I do this a lot coming in because I had to argue for certain
> credits to be recognized to account for my next degree and I was not going to take certain
> classes over again especially where they were not directly supporting what I was going to
> do so I had to go a number of times to kinda get some assistance on how to get the credits
> applied and then try and figure out ways to fill up my schedule.

Plageman (2011), in discussing how to keep adult students engaged and keep retention high, stated that adult learner persistence was often impacted by length and type of program, course-related or institution-related factors, inadequate advising and not feeling connected to the institution. Research in this study indicated that students may be more likely to withdraw from the institution when personnel is not available for the students to assist them with various collegiate issues.

In my pursuit of discovering the best possible service to assist adult students at NSU, I asked the participants if they would be open to having a younger mentor, attend an orientation specifically for adult students, attend a library/research orientation or a writing workshop if they were available. Half the participants immediately said no to a younger mentor and a few students said yes to all of the services I proposed. A couple of the students attended an orientation when they started at Northern Stark University but Sarah's orientation was led by a student and she was the only adult student in attendance. Several of the students would participate in a writing workshop if one was offered because they want to learn the writing formats as they prepare to apply to graduate school. Several students suggested a library research orientation, a tutorial on Canvas and Brad, who is 65, mentioned an adult student mentor. Brad suggested:

> Another adult learner yes, who can tell you how to get around the ropes…with the older people it's more like what are the ropes, how do I get to somebody, how do I, what if I can't get this class, how do I do that?

I ended the interviews by asking the participants what advice they have for adult learners attending Northern Stark University. Out of all the advice given, three themes were identified: orientation, time management, and the role of being a student. One was the importance of what might be called "orientation activities" such as: getting an advisor, knowing the campus and your

bearings, knowing the rules, registering early, making sure your classes transfer, and figuring out

the parking situation. Time management was another point several students touched upon

because it is a critical resource.   Juliette really honed in on the time concept when she reflected:

> Give yourself enough time so you don't feel so stressed out and trying to get your work
> done but you're paying for this, you wanna learn something and have it benefit you and if
> you're just skimming everything, you're not going to learn everything…and get a maid
> (laughs).

The last point revolved around achieving balance in their role as a student, while also

understanding the commitment they are making as students, find a routine, be consistent, and

batch cook if you have a family. Bravo had a positive quote that nicely concludes the spirit of

these students and their commitment to learning. He stated:

> NSU is a great school and there's a lot of really good professors out there so yea, I would
> just stick with it and if you're frustrated with that particular professor, don't be afraid to
> either switch classes or reach out to another professor because there's no reason not to
> have a good experience at Northern Stark. There's a lot of great professors out there.

The participants provided important data for these findings. They had a lot of positive

experiences ranging from the excitement of being a student, good relationships with their faculty

and peers and a lot of confidence in the classroom. They suggested improvements with advising

outreach, the enrollment process, and classes being added to evenings, weekends and Summer

sessions. They stated that a center for adult students and an orientation for adult students would

be very beneficial to new adult students attending NSU.

Recommendations

I have integrated the data from my study with the literature in order to construct concrete recommendations for improving practice at Northern Stark University. These recommendations pertain to advising, a student center, class improvements and new student services to improve upon some of the aspects of the adult student experience at NSU. All of the participants in my study shared many of their positive experiences at NSU with me throughout the interview process. They all appear to be thriving and excited as they pave their ways towards their degrees so the recommendations are intended to guide faculty and staff in continuously boosting student experiences at NSU.

Recommendation 1: Northern Stark University should institute improved advising for adult Continuing Education students.

Through the interviews with eight participants at North Stark University, it became clear that their biggest concern, in terms of student services, was the advising system, or lack thereof. Some of the participants did not have an advisor, others had unpleasant advising experiences, and some students said they could not make appointments with their advisors because advisors' hours are not convenient for these students who are only on campus at night. One student mentioned that advising in the evening is a first come, first serve basis so if they had limited time, they were not able to meet with an advisor. Because NSU explicitly advertises to adult students on their web-site, advisers ought to be mindful of adult student's lives outside of the institution which often entails full-time employment and family obligations, thus limiting their time on campus.

The participants expressed they wanted to be contacted by an advisor to meet in person and discuss their classes, programs of study, and their path towards graduation. Gordon et. al (2008) expressed that establishing trust and mutual levels of respect and providing a less formal environment are some ways for advisors to establish positive relationships with adult students. In addition to offering hours that are workable for adult students, advisors should find creative ways to engage their adult students in their limited time on campus.

In terms of ideas for making advising more accessible, NSU should offer evening and Saturday advising with a sign-up schedule which can be done through the institution's learning platform (Canvas), or using a similar multi-use platform like google docs. All adult students should have access to the schedule and should be able to sign up for times to meet with an advisor in 30 minute blocks. There should be an initial outreach to students at the start of each semester reminding them to make an initial mandatory appointment with an advisor; this can be done via mass email to all students in the School of Continuing Education. Judging by the good response I received through a mass email to NSU adult students, it is clear students check their emails and have a quick response time, and thus would likely also be responsive to advisors.

Offering evening and Saturday advising hours, conducted in person, would also be a good option. They might also consider offering advising over the phone for students who are not on campus regularly or through a Zoom link or Skype meeting for a more personalized meeting off campus. By way of comparison with another local institution that also heavily markets to adult students, UMASS Lowell offers in-person appointments, email consultations, and Skype appointments (UMASS Lowell, 2016). Their advising page states that services are provided by professional staff advisors who are knowledgeable in many aspects of academic advising which include planning, course selection, changing majors, and course deletion/repetitions and SIS

functions which is the online software system of UMASS Lowell which students, faculty and

staff use to input and access all types of student information (UMASS Lowell, 2016). Some of

the NSU students had a difficult time navigating Canvas so advising on how to use the NSU

online system would be beneficial as well and will be addressed upon more later in the

orientation section.

The advising hours should be expanded into the evenings and weekends. By adding

more hours and days, another full-time or part-time advisor should be added to the advising

department who is willing to work on designated evenings and be accessible on designated

weekends. The budget should dictate the full-time or part-time status of the new advisor. Adult

students may feel more comfortable with another adult. One of the participants, Brad, had

mentioned that if they were to have a mentor, they would want another adult student as a

mentor. I liked Brad's idea and agree that the mentor should not be a younger student but I do

think the mentor should be a full-time professional with credentials and experience. The mentor

should be familiar with the higher education process and working with both traditional and non-

traditional students. Some of the participants told me they were uncomfortable having younger

day-time students tutor them or advise them on scheduling and classes. Tyrion was sent to the

admissions office for guidance in enrollment instead of going to the advising center. He

expressed his frustration with working with a student when he stated:

> So what I did was I went to the initial admissions meeting and they set me up with a
> student which was not helpful at all. I had a brief meeting with one of the students who
> was able to go through the navigator site and say okay here is what you know you would
> require for your degree. They didn't really have any ideas as to what classes I should be
> enrolling in, or what the timeline should be.

Tyrion's statement reinforces that advising should occur between a student and a

professional advisor, either in the advising department or in the adult student lounge or gathering

center for adult students. Advising locations should be more centralized, if they are spread out it could become confusing to students. Adult students in the Continuing School of Education should know to either go to the Center for academic excellence which is the main building for advising or the adult student center.

Recommendation 2: Northern Stark University should improve the advising website page, to include more updated and engaging information.

After exploring the North Stark University web-site I was confused by the purpose and execution of the advising page specifically. This page mentioned that day students are assigned to a faculty advisor while there was no mention of evening students. The page states that appointments are strongly suggested and students are linked up to an advisor based on their last names, however I did not see any email addresses or office phone numbers with extensions listed next to the advisor's names and appointments were not mandatory.

I checked the advising syllabus for all grades on the NSU advising page which states that, among other things, to prepare to speak with an advisor, students should mostly utilize the web-site for advising. However, in practice, this appears not to work especially well; None of the participants spoke highly of Navigator or Degree Tracker and seemed to use it out of necessity, or as a last minute resort, not because they wanted to use it or because they enjoyed using it.

Given these challenges, the advising portion of the school's web-site should be more user-friendly and more advising ought to occur at the advising center to avoid confusion. The advising site could be updated by the North Stark IT department, IT adult student interns, or as a class project for Computer Science students. If this is done internally, it should not cost any money and if these modifications are made by adult students it furthers their skill sets and creates

more practical experience tied in with class experience. Kenner and Weinerman (2011) studied

adult student learning strategies and found that adult students are self-directed, take

responsibility for their actions, have an extensive depth of experience which can tie into their

self-identity and are task motivated. While conducting the interviews, students indicated they

wanted classes to connect more to life experiences and their careers. Most of the adult students

attending NSU have or had careers and several had IT backgrounds and could easily contribute

ideas, suggestions, and feedback on how to improve the advising site as a class project or

internship. This could potentially allow them to bring their life experience into the classroom.

At Goddard College, adult learners have contributed to the betterment of their campus

when the college shut down its traditional, core residential program and switched to a low

residency adult program as the sole campus offering (Carlson, 2011). Goddard now has the

highest number of students in decades, and money to refurbish the campus, when in the past it

had come close to financial ruin. Adult students who want something more intense than

traditional distance education and have families or jobs to keep in another part of the country

attend an intense week of residency which include meetings, seminars, private conferences,

social gatherings and meals. The residency includes students obtaining a new advisor who helps

them design coursework for the coming semester. Once the residency ends, new faculty

members and students from another degree program arrive and the cycle continues all year long

bringing about new opportunities for both non-tenured faculty and adult students (Carlson,

2011). Although Goddard is a very different example to illustrate how adult students could

benefit their institutions, I wanted to cite it. I'm not sure NSU could hold a program like the one

provided by Goddard but perhaps it can help foster new ideas on how adult students could have a

distinct program that both benefits them and the institution.

Recommendation 3: Northern Stark University should have a comprehensive student lounge or other gathering center for adult students.

One of the suggestions participants in this study discussed was for a center or a room dedicated to adult students. This room or center could provide a quiet place for adult students to meet their peers, work on projects, study, relax, and feel comfortable. Where most participants admitted to feeling like non-traditional students because of their age, student status, life experiences, and for being mistaken as faculty members, the adult student center could function as an area where students can mix and mingle with other non-traditional students. The adult student center should allow any student access so long as they are respectful, dedicated to learning, and aware of the University's mission.

The center should be run by an advisor, a full-time staff member, and a part-time student intern and could provide a space for tutoring and advising. The full-time staff member will run the center and host events and workshops based on the student's needs and interests such as writing tutorials or study groups. The staff member should create a student council for the center and the council should advocate for the adult student population by identifying any student concerns, increasing awareness of adult students and their presence on campus and play an active role in the success of adult students (University of Wyoming, 2016). The staff member should also act as a liaison between other advisors, faculty and student services. Tables, chairs, a printer, and a small area filled with information about other student services on campus should be provided. Flyers promoting on and off campus events should be posted around the center. The purpose or mission of the center should promote continued academic success no matter what the age of the student may be. The center should foster relationships between adult students, their peers and staff, creating a tighter campus community. It could also serve as a

place for adult students to go between classes. The center will be open for day and evening adult

students as a way to diversify their peer relationships. If it is located in the Center for Academic

Excellence, it will put the students close to the advising center. Many of the participants

interviewed cited a difference in treatment between the "day students" who were often the

traditional aged students versus the "night students" who are typically adult learners. The adult

center could help bridge the gap between these two student populations.

The University of Wyoming (University of Wyoming, 2016) houses a nontraditional

student center geared towards adult students who are twenty-five and older, veterans, students

who are married or parents, responsible for dependents, and staff members who are attending

classes part-time. The center services students who are exactly like the participants in this

study. The center at the University of Wyoming has lounge furniture, computers, a printer and

scanner, refrigerator, and a large table social area for adult students. It hosts events and

workshops "designed to assist adults returning to school and build their skill set for college

success" (University of Wyoming, 2016). The non-traditional student center, which welcomes

all non-traditional students, could be an excellent model on which to base the Northern Stark

University adult student community center.

Recommendation 4: Northern Stark University should hold orientations for adult students
aged 25 and over on evenings or weekends.

When I asked the participants what services they wanted for themselves and other adult

students, some mentioned they wanted an orientation for new Continuing Education students,

while a few participants said they attended an orientation. One participant, Sarah, said she was

the only person to show up for an orientation which was led by a younger student. This clearly

indicates a lack of communication between staff and students if most of the participants were

unaware that an orientation existed. An orientation is a great way to introduce students to the

campus and ease fears about locations, services, parking, etc. I would propose an orientation for

new adult students aged 25 and older who are full-time or part-time which could occur in the

evening or on a weekend so students can attend it without having to miss work. Family members

should also be welcome for students who are parents or want family member support. An

invitation to the orientation could be sent out in the mail and also emailed to students in advance

so they could mark the date and make whatever preparations they need so they can be in

attendance. Several orientation dates should be offered before the start of the school year.

The orientation would include a tour of the north and central campus, time reserved for

students to get their id cards, submit transcripts if they have them, register for classes with an

advisor and visit the bookstore. There should also be information on financial aid with staff

from the financial aid office in attendance to answer any questions, a tutorial on Canvas to

acclimate students to the school's online system, and a Q&A session with the tour guide who

could be a current adult student, staff member or faculty member. Student service buildings, the

library, parking, dining areas, athletic areas, and academic buildings should be pointed out

during the tour. An orientation packet should be provided with a map of the university as there

are 3 campuses at Northern Stark University, a list of academic departments, advisors, faculty

and staff members, student services including the math and writing centers, tutoring, and mentor

opportunities should also be listed. Student clubs and campus events and tips on parking and

information about the area around the campus should also be included. Some students in this

study did not know they needed a student id. Without the id they are unable to access the

parking garage. If an orientation could include obtaining a student id, submitting transcripts,

learning about financial aid, and registering for classes with an advisor, the transition into college would arguably proceed more smoothly.

By way of a compelling example, The University of Southern Indiana holds an orientation for transfer and adult students (University of Southern Indiana, 2016). This is a one day event that begins at the resource fair with advising and registration appointments lined up. The orientation gives students the opportunity to meet their peers, learn the campus, receive their student id card and learn about the University and its mission (University of Southern Indiana, 2016). They also offer an online orientation for students who will not be able to make it to the campus, that orientation is geared for distance learners, students in the military, adult learners who are twenty-five and older and transfer students who have an associate's degree or are transferring with 60 or more credit hours (University of Southern Indiana, 2016). A few of this study's participants worked two jobs so a weekend orientation could be difficult for them to attend but an online orientation could solve that problem.

Recommendation 5: Northern Stark University should improve class availability and structure for adult learners.

Many of the participants mentioned having great support systems through the NSU faculty and department heads. One participant, Bravo, mentioned that a faculty member became a mentor and helped him apply and get accepted into graduate school. Despite the praise of Northern Stark University faculty, participants wanted to see changes made in the classroom in terms of when classes occur, class availability, more condensed classes, and more learning outside of the classroom with more connection to life experience during lectures. Over half of the participants stated that they felt more of their credits that they received from previous institutions should have been accepted and counted towards their degree or certification at

NSU. In order to discover what classes students think should be counted for credit hours, there could be more communication with the students via surveys or focus groups. These types of data collection could help ascertain what else Northern Stark University can do to make the educational experience the best that it can be for matriculation adult students. Brad reiterated this sentiment when he claimed:

> My biggest issue with NSU in this area is, and again, I have great regard for Northern Stark, the teachers and the environment, but it's a little bit old fashioned. If you go in some of these other schools, notably like Phoenix or Southern New Hampshire University, they are very innovative about how they leverage your life experience and how they tailor their objectives of their learning program to get you a degree and the idea is that they are trying to get you a degree not because you're going to go off and become whatever it is you want to be when you're 18 but because you want the degree.

> When researching alternatives, I found that the SNHU web-site is very easy to navigate

and understand. They have a page specifically dedicated to transferring credits. They accept up to 90 credits of previous coursework and will work with students to see if they qualify for scholarships. They partner with community colleges around the country and the admission team will walk students through each step to make sure the transition is smooth. I also noticed that there are multiple terms that start throughout the year so it's easy for students to jump back into higher education when they are ready (Southern New Hampshire University, 2016). As this example shows, the addition of a credit transfer page could benefit both day and evening students.

Because the participants have busy lives outside of the University, many of them took advantage of Summer classes, condensed classes, life experience credits, or online courses and they want more of these options to be available. If NSU wants to retain their adult student population, offering more condensed classes, life experience credit, and online class options

would be ideal. Offering credit for community service roles could also attract more adult learners, and enhance the experience for those active in their communities.

One of the participants, Jon, started attending a local four year university because they had more online options available which meshed better with his hectic schedule. These additional classes could be advertised via Canvas, flyers around campus, and mass emails so all the continuing education students know they are available and these could be taught by adjunct faculty who are seeking a fuller schedule. A survey should be sent out before anything is even planned to see how many students in the continuing education program would want to take condensed or online classes, and at what days/times. It was very clear through the interview process that these adult learners want to be heard, and want it to be known how seriously they take their education and how they want to make the most of it and be successful.

Recommendation 6: Northern Stark University should invest in new student services and a new staff position.

During the interview process, I gave the participants some suggestions on new services or improved services that could be implemented at Northern Stark University. A few of the suggestions were being paired with a younger student mentor and a writing and research workshop to better understand writing formats such as using APA format in writing and how to utilize library resources both on and off campus. Most of the participants had zero interest in a younger student mentor but one participant suggested an adult student mentor. Considering how much the participants disliked group work with traditional aged students, it follows that they would prefer an adult student if they did choose to work with a mentor. This is an idea I think NSU should be open to or at least mention it to new adult students in the school of continuing education.

Another student service idea for adult learners who cannot make it to campus very often could be offering online tutorials on different writing styles. Merrimack college graduate programs, heavily populated by adult learners, provides an APA bootcamp for students prior to the start of classes. If an NSU faculty member could produce an online tutorial or zoom class for writing formats, I believe many students would reference it, especially if they cannot make it to the writing center. Some of the participants mentioned they were not confident about their writing or research skills. Cannady et al. (2012) stated that the internet and student-accessible online databases and catalogs created perceived technical obstacles for adult students in meeting their research needs. Adult learners also face other sets of challenges which include time and means of access and instruction which can negatively affect their ability to feel academically proficient. This can further lead to intense anxiety which can impact the students' ability to complete their goals or degree attainment. One of the participants, Juliette, said she would happily watch a tutorial while she was on lunch break at her job. The math center ought to produce some online tutorials as well. The tutorials could be uploaded to youtube with links provided to students via Canvas or the NSU web-site. The tutorials could be a step by step process on certain writing formats or ways to use the research materials such as the online databases and set up appointments with a research librarian. The new staff person in the adult gathering center could work with existing resources at NSU to create these tutorials.

My final recommendation is to advocate for a full-time or part-time coordinator position who can create ways to improve upon the entire higher education experience for adult students at NSU. The coordinator position should be for someone who could work in the adult student center, at least twenty-hours per week from the afternoon into evenings and on designated weekends. This person's duties should be to make sure the adult center is always operational

and should serve as a liaison between faculty members, support staff, and students. The

coordinator would perform advising functions, mentorship duties, could lead adult student

orientations, and continue research on the adult student population and ways to transform their

college experience as more research is certainly needed for all higher educational institutions for

this expanding demographic. Assessment of the adult center could occur at the end of each

semester to improve its functionality.

Conclusion

As an adult learner at Merrimack College, I have had both good and bad experiences inside and outside of the classroom during my return to higher education. Many four year institutions can be better prepared to assist their growing adult learner population as they transition back into being a student. This can happen through engaging in a deep understanding of what it is like to be an adult learner and what strengths they can bring to colleges and universities. New programs or services that are developed specifically for adult students could be beneficial to both the students and the institutions they attend. To continue to foster the intellectual growth of adult students, we need to understand the barriers they face and work collectively to bring about positive changes in programs and services to transform their higher education experiences.

Through the literature I collected and the interviews I conducted, I was able to gain insight into the adult student world at Northern Stark University. Many of my participant's stories correlated with the literature I cited in my study. Most participants worked outside of school, attended school part-time, and had family or community responsibilities outside of school. They returned to higher education or started college for reasons pertaining to their careers, new career aspirations, and degree completion. The participants took their roles as students very seriously by always coming to class prepared, spending a lot of time on assignments, leaning on work and life experience to boost their confidence, and reaching out to faculty members and department heads with questions or when they needed support. Participants anticipated and preferred a lecture format in class but also enjoyed life incorporation and practical application tied in with their learning experiences. They also felt like non-traditional

students based on their work and life experiences and age difference when compared to the

traditional day students.

Although the participants had plenty of positive experiences at Northern Stark University,

they had recommendations on how the school can make improvements to better serve the adult

students in the School of Continuing Education. Most positive experiences revolved around

faculty relationships, the campus, meeting new peers, and degree-attainment, but the participants

felt the advising and student services and programs for adult learners could be improved.

Adding evening and weekend hours for advising and student services was greatly encouraged by

the participants. They wanted to feel more of a connection with their advisors through an

advisor out-reach, check-ins, face to face meetings, and tracking their progression towards

graduation. In terms of classes, they asked for more online, evening, and weekend classes and

emphasized how much they both enjoyed and utilized condensed classes as a faster way to earn

credit hours. Together, the participants and I advocated for an adult student center, an adult

student orientation, a more structured advising page on the web-site and more evening and

weekend hours for advising and services.

In the article "Serving adult is beneficial both for students and the institution", Eric

Weldy (2016) stated the following:

> There are certain benefits for institutions if they're able to recruit and retain non-
> traditional students. I think it works both ways. Obviously it's a win-win situation for the
> students, for the university, but also it's a win-win situation for the community when the
> students are successful. Particularly as the students go back into the communities and
> they are able to get better jobs that put them in a position to provide for themselves and
> their families.

Weldy also commented that getting feedback from the adult students and making the

environment more welcoming can retain this non-traditional demographic. His statements also

back up the literature I used in my study and echoed what many of my participants stated as well.

Although my own personal journey back into higher education after a 14 year hiatus has mirrored a lot of the participant's stories, one of my main reasons for returning to Merrimack College was because I wanted to make a change. I want to look back on my life many years from now and know that I helped someone, that I impacted their life in a positive way, that I paved a way for a positive change. I did my study on adult learners because I know we are not the norm and we are sometimes overlooked because people assume because we are older, we can navigate the campus climate without any problBems. I hope by conducting this study, I was able to advocate for adult students and present programs and services that are attainable and can assist adult students in the future at Northern Stark University.

Kuh et al. (2010) stated that in the 1970's graduation rates were calculated on a four year metric while today the standard denominator is six years. Persistence and educational attainment rates, along with the quality of student learning, must improve in higher education to meet the needs of our nation and our world. Because one of the stronger purposes of higher education is to provide access, equity, and more economic opportunity for all, it is imperative that colleges and universities focus on academic preparation and motivation of its' students to ensure success and degree attainment.

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Appendix
Burke: Interview Protocol

1) How are you? How was your winter break? (warmup question_

2) What level of education have you completed before you decided to attend SSU?

3) What are you studying? Can you say why you chose that major/minor?

4) Are you a full-time or part-time student? Do you work outside of school? Do you have

family obligations? How do you balance these?

5) Tell me about the time you took away from college/your path to being an adult learner.

6) Why did you decide to attend college and/or return to college? (examples could be job,

degree, certification, etc.)

7) Were you nervous about starting or returning to school? Please explain.

8) What was your biggest fear about returning or starting college? Were you able to move past

that fear and if so, how did you do it?

9) What helps you to feel confident in the classroom?

10) What type of teaching do you prefer? (lecturing, experiential learning, group work,

incorporation of life experiences.) Why?

11) Do you feel connected to other adult learners on campus? How did you meet?

12) Do you use any support services here at SSU? Describe your experiences with them. Has

your advisor been helpful? In what ways? How could they be better?

13) Do you feel a connection to the campus, your classes and/or peers? Which one/s and why?

14) Do you see other adult learners stay here, leave, and do you have thoughts about why?

15) Do you feel like faculty, advisors or support services are available to you at times you need them? Do they offer any evening or weekend hours? Is it easy to make appointments?

16) Are there other services you would like to see on campus that could be beneficial to adult students?

17) What kind of changes would you like to see on campus for adult students?

18) Would you be open to having a younger mentor? Would you attend an orientation for adult students if there was one? Would you attend a library services orientation if one was available or a writing workshop if one was available?

19) Do you have any advice for adult learners attending SSU, if so what is it?

20) Is there anything you would like to add or tell me or did I leave anything out?

Appendix

To avoid repetition, I have included an excel graph of a demographic overview of the participants which details the participant's student status, current employment, family obligations, prior education and degree attainment upon attending Northern Stark University, area of study, age and desire to further pursue education once they graduate from NSU.

The following table is an overview of the study participants.

	Brad	Bravo	Tyrion	Carl	Stevie	Juliette	Jon	Sarah
part-time student	Yes	No (graduated)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
employed	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
full-time employee	retired	Yes	30 hours	30 hours	Yes	Yes, 2 jobs	Yes	Yes, 2 jobs
kids at home	1 adult child	no	no	no	no	no	yes	yes
college experience	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
degree	2 year (1970)	bachelor	> associate	bachelor	> bachelor	associate	associate	no
major	history	accounting cert.	biology	computer sci.	business admin.	graphic design	computer sci.	history, pre-law
age	65	30	26	30	54	51	33	44
will continue school after SSU	no	yes	yes	no	yes	no	no	yes