“STUDENTS LIKE YOU GET IN THE WAY”: EXAMINING NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Sarah Elizabeth Billingsley
B.A., California State University, Sacramento, 2009
M.A., California State University, Sacramento, 2013

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“STUDENTS LIKE YOU GET IN THE WAY”: EXAMINING NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

A Dissertation

by

Sarah Elizabeth Billingsley

Approved by Dissertation Committee:

_____
Carlos Nevarez, Ph.D., Chair

_____
Jolynn Langslet, Ph.D.

_____
Robert S. Nelsen, Ph.D.

SPRING 2020

“STUDENTS LIKE YOU GET IN THE WAY”: EXAMINING NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS.

Student: Sarah Elizabeth Billingsley

I certify that this student has met the requirements for format contained in the University format manual, and this dissertation is suitable for electronic submission to the library and credit is to be awarded for the dissertation.

_____, Graduate Coordinator _____
Rose Borunda, Ed.D. Date

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Elizabeth Galpin.

My mother is my nontraditional student role model. Women of my mother's generation were not encouraged to pursue higher education. Rather, they were encouraged to get married and start a family after high school, which she did, and for which I am grateful. However, once my brother and I were teenagers, my mother left her job as a dental assistant in our little hometown and went to college full-time.

Both my parents completed their bachelor's degrees as nontraditional students, actually. My father, Gary Hicks, used the G.I. bill to earn his degree from Empire State College as a distance learner, in an era long before the internet. I do not know much about my father's experience – he quietly chipped away at his degree, I assume mailing homework and exams back and forth to his teachers. Sadly, my father passed away in 2008, just as I was headed back to college on my own degree completion journey, and I never asked him what it was like for him to finish his degree as an adult. I am often told how proud he would be for how far I have come academically. I do not think often enough about how proud I am of him.

My mother's return to college had profound effects on me. As a teenager, I was ridiculously proud that my mother was a full-time college student. Nothing could have been cooler to 17-year-old me. I cherish the memories of my mother working on her math homework from the little desk in the dining room as I pouted my way through high school. My mother diligently worked on completing her degree while still attending all our games and performances, and running the occasional marathon. She

drove over an hour (each way) to SUNY Geneseo, sometimes through terrible snow storms, and eventually earned her Bachelor of Science in Mathematics.

Out of high school, I was accepted and enrolled in Syracuse University for Music Theatre but I left the university before the end of my first semester. My story is not unique, nor is it particularly interesting. I made choices and lost out on rare opportunities because of poor, childish decisions I made as a young woman. For most of my adult life, I regretted those choices.

Now, however, I have no regrets. My choices led me to my beautiful life, including a healthy marriage to the best person I have ever known, a rewarding career, and the completion of my doctorate in Educational Leadership. I would never have believed it was possible had my mother not shown me the way. When I thought my time had passed to ever finish college, I thought of my mom, working out math problems with her mechanical pencil and her beloved T.I. - and I knew that I could do it, too.

I credit the example of my mother's perseverance for my own ability to complete my bachelor's degree, and that journey compelled me to study the nontraditional student experience throughout my doctoral program. My mother paved the way for me, and I hope my study helps improve the experience for those brave souls who persist in their own academic journey. I pursued this research with love, and I hope I have done it justice. My mother is my hero, and I hope I have made her as proud of me as I have always been of her.

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To Co-heart 11, you are my family. I have learned so much from each of you. Thank you for your leadership. Especially my tribe (Amy, Nate, and my dearest friend, Cassie), thank you for reading all my papers and providing desperately needed feedback, and for allowing me to read your work and learn from your thinking, your writing, and your mad APA skills. I survived because of my tribe. Thank you for the hundreds of text messages, for the laughter, for your encouragement, for your friendship. Like it or not, you are all stuck with me forever.

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To my brilliant husband, Michael Billingsley, I literally could not have done this without you. You have been my support system, my sounding board, my comic relief, and my net when I was free falling. Thank you for listening to me as I sat on the kitchen counter with a glass of wine, downloading everything that happened each Friday night after class. Thank you for feeding me a fried egg every Saturday morning before class, and for grilling me a ribeye every Saturday evening while I regaled you with what happened, who said what, how I felt, and what I learned. Thank you for walking me through my multiple linear regressions and helping me conduct my focus groups. These snapshots from the past few years are just glimpses into how well you care for me, and how lucky I am. We will celebrate our 20th wedding anniversary the summer after my doctoral journey ends. I know you will be as relieved as I will be when this part is over and we can get back to the business of living. Thank you for being my partner, my friend, my inspiration, my role model, and my love for so long. Thank you for trusting me with your future. Thank you for this beautiful life. My home, my heart. Thank god you are someone who loves me.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Education

Doctor of Educational Leadership, California State University, Sacramento, 2020

Master of Arts, Communication Studies, California State University, Sacramento, 2013

Bachelor of Arts, Communication Studies, California State University, Sacramento, 2009

Select Professional Employment

Deputy Chief of Staff, Office of the President, California State University, Sacramento
12/19 - present

Special Assistant in the Office of the President, California State University, Sacramento
8/19 – 12/19

Marketing Communications Director, College of Continuing Education, California State University, Sacramento
06/14 – 08/19

Communications & Media Manager, Public Health Institute
06/12 – 06/14

Communications Director, Hanzlik Media Management
02/08 – 04/12

Fields of Study

Higher Education Leadership, Instructional and Organizational Communication Studies

Abstract

of

"STUDENTS LIKE YOU GET IN THE WAY": EXAMINING NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS.

by

Sarah Elizabeth Billingsley

This study examined nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services at Sacramento State. Nontraditional students, also referred to as adult learners, are 25 years old or older (Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017). Nontraditional students are a growing segment in higher education (Wyatt, 2011), and are vital to the economy, because California is facing a degreed workforce shortage of 1.1 million workers with a bachelor's degree by 2030 (Johnson, Mejia, & Bohn, 2015). Findings from this sequential explanatory mixed methods study suggest that nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness at Sacramento State are varied. Some adult learners expressed satisfaction with institutional aspects (such as career planning and instructional teaching methods). However, the prevailing impression was that adult learners are frustrated with their experience due to microaggressions they face (in the form of microinvalidations and microinsults) and institutional barriers at the university. This study uses andragogy, institutional culture, and transformation learning as theoretical lenses through which to examine nontraditional student perceptions.

Recommendations for policy, practice, and leadership involve building on existing (and creating new) institutional bridges to improve the adult learner experience and provide nontraditional students increased opportunities for academic success. Example recommendations are; providing more evening and weekend classes, increasing service hours, offering career services that cater to mid-career professionals, and hiring nontraditional faculty, staff, and administrators who may be more empathetic to the adult leaner experience.

Keywords: nontraditional students, mixed-method study, andragogy, institutional culture, transformation learning, microaggressions

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

"It is students like you who get in the way of regular students." This is what a department chair once told me. I was an upper-division undergraduate student enrolled in an interesting course that fit into my graduation plan. After the first class session of the semester, the professor asked me if I would consider dropping because there were students on the waiting list who needed the class to graduate on time. I met with the department chair who told me that yes, the professor was correct, it was students "like me" that were in the way of regular students' success. Students like me are nontraditional. I returned to college to finish my bachelor's degree as a 38-year-old mid-career professional. As a returning student, there was no way I could graduate "on time" from the perspective of the university. Therefore, my enrollment in a waitlisted class took away the opportunity for a "regular student" to graduate in four years.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine nontraditional undergraduate students' perceptions of their university experience in order to add to the growing body of research on improving academic and student services for adult learners. Returning to school to finish my degree as a nontraditional student was one of the greatest blessings of my life. It was also one of my most challenging experiences. I often felt like a fish out of water in a sea of traditional students whom I sensed the university valued more than me. Even though I was grateful for the opportunity to fulfill a dream, I witnessed first-hand how some policies and practices created additional barriers to my success. I was thrilled to be

a Hornet, and yet I was also frustrated at the perceived lack of support for "students like me." This dissonance compelled me to study nontraditional student perceptions.

Nontraditional students are the topic of much research, perhaps because they are the fastest growing segment in higher education (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Francois, 2014; Kimmel, Gaylor, Grubbs, & Hayes, 2012; Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017; Tilley, 2014; Wyatt, 2011). Nontraditional students, also referred to as adult learners, are typically older than the traditional 18-24-year-old college student, and are most-often considered to be students who are 25 years old or older (Luke & Justice, 2016; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013; Tilley, 2014). Nontraditional students may also be mid-career professionals who work full-time, may have children, and may possess a number of other characteristics that make them different from what is considered traditional for college students (Fairchild, 2003; Osam et al., 2017; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Simi & Matusitz, 2016). Given the stage and nature of their lives, nontraditional students are often only able to attend college part-time, in the evenings, or on weekends (Ross-Gordon, 2011; Simi & Matusitz, 2016), which may make it difficult for them to finish their degrees quickly. However, being different than traditional students does not make them any less important. In fact, as will be detailed in following sections of this study, adult learners are vital to our economy.

According to the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), California is facing a shortage in the number of workers who hold a postsecondary degree (Johnson, Mejia, & Bohn, 2015) and working age adults (25-64 years old) with some college but no degree, may be the key to California's economic health. Most importantly, nontraditional

students who turn their lives upside down to go back to college are daring to dream. Returning to, or going to college for the first time, as an older student is an act of hope and faith (Kasworm, 2008), and colleges have the responsibility to help adult learners reach an important goal, just like any other student. Therefore, this study examines nontraditional student experiences in an effort to understand how Sacramento State is doing in the areas of academic and student support for adult learners. Further, it seeks to understand how the university can improve adult learners' experiences and help nontraditional students succeed in their journey to fulfill their dream of finishing what they started, or daring to start something that will forever change their lives. As such, the purpose of this study is to examine nontraditional student perceptions of Sacramento State's effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services.

Nature of the Study

In order to understand the perceived barriers and opportunities of nontraditional students, this study examines nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness related to curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. Through the adult learning theoretical frameworks of andragogy and transformation learning theory, this study examines how nontraditional student students learn, and how they critically assess what they have learned and how they fit in the university. The study considers adult students' experience through the lens of culture. How does the institutional culture (such as the institution's vision, mission, values, and goals) contribute to nontraditional students' perceptions? To examine student

perceptions, this study utilizes a sequential explanatory mixed method approach in order to gain both a broad and deep understanding of nontraditional student experiences. The research questions and methodology are listed below.

Research Questions

RQ1: Can levels of perception of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services be predicted from nontraditional student characteristics? (Quantitative)

RQ2: What are nontraditional students' perceptions of Sacramento State's institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services? (Qualitative).

RQ3: What can the institution do better to enhance nontraditional student success? (Qualitative)

Background Information

Why is it important for working age adults to earn a college degree? If they are already working, why would they need to worry about going back to school? Earning a college degree brings multiple benefits and provides opportunities for individuals, their families, their communities, and society (Johnson et al., 2018; Nevarez & Wood, 2010; Porter, 2002; Ritt, 2008; Rose, 2013). In actuality, postsecondary education is more valuable than it has been in decades (Johnson et al., 2018). For instance, college graduates earn substantially higher wages (an average of 45% more income) and experience lower unemployment rates than those with only a high school education (Johnson et al., 2018; Nevarez & Wood, 2010; Rose, 2013). So, while someone may be a

part of the workforce, and holding a steady job, they may be earning significantly less than someone without as much work experience, but who has earned a college degree. For a mid-career professional, a bachelor's degree might make the difference in getting a promotion or even having the opportunity to provide for his or her family.

Higher education is a critical driver towards economic progress (Johnson et al., 2015), important to the U.S. economy as a whole, as well as individual members of society (Schanzenbach, Bauer, & Breitwieser, 2017). Earning a college degree provides both personal and societal economic benefits (Harmon, Oosterbeek, & Walker, 2003; Johnson et al., 2015; Ma, Nevarez & Wood, 2010; Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016; Schanzenbach et al., 2017; Trostel 2017). Society, in general, benefits from higher education (Ma et al., 2016; Stiles, Hout, & Brady, 2012). College graduates pay more taxes than those who do not attain a college degree and taxpayers derive direct benefits when citizens have access to postsecondary education because government spending on social programs is decreased (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010; Ma et al., 2016; Nevarez & Wood, 2010; Trostel, 2010).

Education also offers other positive social externalities, or spill-overs, such as reducing crime and increasing civic engagement (Lovenheim & Turner, 2018; Shaw, 2010; Yakovlev, & Leguizamon, 2012). The average worker in the United States with a college degree makes an average of $1 million more over their career than one with only a high school diploma (Moses, 2005). Earning a college degree can also help buffer job loss during economic downturns (Schanzenbach et al., 2017). When companies downsize, or when they experience hiring freezes, those with a postsecondary education

tend to fair better than those workers who have not earned their degree (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013; Schanzenbach et al., 2017). During the Great Recession of 2009, the least educated members of society were those who were laid off first, and the workers who were rehired soonest were those with higher levels of educational attainment than their predecessors (Carnevale et al., 2013). For working age adults with some college but no degree (or no college at all), vulnerability is heightened during an economic downturn.

Consider a long-time employee with some college but no degree who has worked at a company for many years. Likely she has strived to prove her worth and fought for promotions because she did not have the same education as her coworkers. After several years of sacrifice for the company, she may have earned a managerial position and a competitive income. Sadly, during an economic downturn, her position was eliminated and the company hired less experienced employees with bachelor's degrees who cost less for the organization because they are compensated at lower rates. The ousted manager can no longer compete for an entry level job, let alone her previous position. So, she decides to go back to college.

Figure 1 depicts the difference in wage earnings for workers with no high school diploma, high school graduates, some college no degree, associate degree, and a bachelor's degree or higher in the state of California.

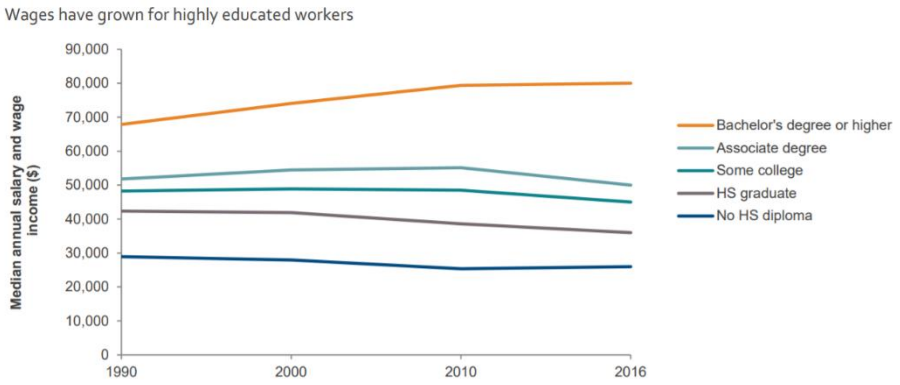


Figure 1. Wage Earnings by Attainment Level. (Source: Johnson et al., 2018)

Workers with only a high school diploma (or less), make less than $40,000 per year, and those with a bachelor's degree or higher earn double (PPIC, 2018). For working age adults, therefore, whether or not they have earned a college degree can make a measurable difference for their families.

Why do people earn so much more throughout their life as a result of earning a degree? Human capital theory and signaling theory are two theories that can explain this phenomenon. Human capital theory assesses the return on education by considering the investment in skills, knowledge, and attributes that are rewarded with higher future earnings (Lovenheim & Turner, 2018). Human capital theory argues that people gain productivity-enhancing human capital from higher education (Kjelland, 2008). For some, the choice to attend college is based on the potential economic returns, as posited by human capital theory (Chevalier, Harmon, Walker, & Zhu, 2004; Kjelland, 2008).

Another way to assess the value of a college degree, however, is with signaling theory, whereby, since employers cannot know the actual knowledge, skills, and abilities of potential workers, they rely on signals, or proxies for productivity, when making hiring

decisions (Lovenheim & Turner, 2018). The choice to attend college, therefore, may signal a level of education in order to prove their competency and worthiness. The level, and perceived quality, of an individual's education can serve as a signal of worker productivity (Chevalier et al., 2004). Signaling theory predicts that college completers will earn higher wages than college dropouts, even if they have equivalent years in college (Park, 1999; Vuolo, Mortimer, & Staff, 2016). Researchers also consider the sheepskin effect, which is the phenomenon that the actual degree is the most important signal for some employers (Park, 1999). Whether by considering educational attainment through the human capital or signaling theory lens, it is evident that earning a degree brings potential economic gains.

Beyond economic advantages, an abundance of research indicates that educational attainment brings personal benefits, as well (Nevarez & Wood, 2010; Porter, 2002). Earning a college degree is negatively correlated with health problems (Hummer & Lariscy, 2011; Trostel, 2017), particularly highly preventable causes of death, such as diabetes and lung cancer (Hummer & Lariscy, 2011). Educational attainment is also positively correlated with good overall individual and family health (Ma et al., 2016; Porter, 2002) and life expectancy (Meara, Richards, Cutler, 2008). Further, college attendance is shown to have other positive societal effects, such as decreasing prejudice and enhancing knowledge of world affairs (Porter, 2002). Working age adults with some college but no degree lose out on the benefits that earning a postsecondary education would offer them. They may work, but they probably earn less and their jobs may be vulnerable during a recession. They may have racked up credits at various institutions,

but without the signal of a degree, they get passed over for a promotion or do not meet the minimal educational requirements needed to qualify for a career change. And, working age adults without their degree may have also always *wanted* to go to college, but may think they have missed their opportunity. Personally, that I had not earned my bachelor's degree was the biggest source of shame in my life. I dreaded when a conversation turned to talking about what college my colleagues went to, and I became adept at changing the subject or excusing myself from the conversation. I had a hole in my heart that began to fill when I dared to believe in myself and I returned to college. I realized the world *is* for me, and that it was never too late.

Clearly, there are multiple benefits to completing a college degree. However, in the United States, less than half of students who enroll in college actually earn a postsecondary credential (Lumina Foundation, 2017), leaving millions of working age adults with some college, no degree, a statistic that is not lost on institutions of higher education. Universities and colleges continually develop policies and practices designed to help students graduate, preferably in as little time as possible. The following section describes efforts to increase graduation rates, on a national, state, and institutional level. These noble efforts may help students graduate in a timely manner, but, by nature, these student success initiatives only benefit a relatively small group of students and neglect the large percentage of nontraditional students enrolled in colleges and universities.

From a national perspective, the number of Americans with college degrees has increased substantially in recent decades. However, the United States has not kept pace internationally, and the U.S. graduation rate has fallen in comparison to other countries

(Hauptman, 2013; Mullin, 2012; Russell, 2011). Over the past few decades, the United States has been steadily losing ground in global graduate rate competitiveness (Russell, 2011). To address the concern, early in his first term, President Barack Obama focused national attention on U.S. graduation rate initiatives by proposing the American Graduation Initiative which would have established measurable targets for improving graduation rates as an incentive to access available federal funds (Cook & Pullaro, 2010; Schneider & Yin 2011). While the initiative was not passed, twenty-two states heeded President Obama's call and promised to develop specific plans to improve national degree completion rates (Cook & Pullaro, 2010).

In California, the California State University System (CSU) embraced the challenge and set high-reaching goals to raise graduation rates with the California Promise (Smith, 2017). The California Promise is intended to eliminate achievement gaps and significantly increase graduation rates for specific student groups; first-time full-time four-year freshmen, and transfer full-time two-year students (CSU Graduation Initiative 2025). Sacramento State's strategies towards fulfilling the California Promise include the "Finish in Four" and "Through in Two" campaigns. At the heart of Sacramento State's campaigns is a student pledge stating they intend to enroll in 30 units per academic year. Students are encouraged to take 15 units per semester or supplement fewer credits in the fall and spring semester with summer session courses. The university website states that students who sign the pledge receive benefits including priority registration, grants of up to $1,000 for summer session courses, and other incentives such as vouchers on campus services (csus.edu, n.d.). The "Finish in Four" initiative has

proven successful. Since the launch of the campaign, the university's graduation rate has increased dramatically. In 2019, Sacramento State reported that over 20% of graduates completed their degree in four years, up from 8.8% in 2016 (Hubert, 2019). These initiatives are designed to incentivize students to take 30 units per academic year. If students cannot take 15 credit units during the fall and spring, the university encourages students to take summer session classes. But what about students who need to work during the day and care for their families? Does Sacramento State offer enough night and weekend classes during the fall and spring (or summer) that are convenient for adult learners?

Importantly, for four-year universities, the term "graduation rate" specifically refers to the percentage of first-time, full-time freshman who complete their degree within six years of entering college (Selingo, 2012). Therefore, graduation rate incentives often fail to acknowledge, or provide funding for institutions to support all other student groups reach their educational attainment goals. Graduation rate initiatives designed to help a specific group of students graduate in four years beg the question, what about all the other students? Some students return to college to finish their degree after years away from higher education. They may have jobs that prevent them from taking a full course load of 15 units per semester, which means they are excluded from opportunities to earn financial incentives for summer session, and might never earn priority registration. Do incentives for traditional students, such as priority registration, create barriers for those students who are returning to college? Nontraditional students who juggle multiple roles piece together a complicated puzzle of family, work, and life as

a student. When they cannot get into classes, or when they are asked to drop classes so "regular" students can have priority, what message are they receiving from the university?

Nontraditional Students

Labelling a group of students as "nontraditional" may not seem helpful, or even kind, as the term inherently places them outside what is considered normal (Westbrook & Sedlacek, 1991). Perhaps this is why researchers have yet to settle on the appropriate term for nontraditional students. The term "nontraditional students" means something different in nearly every research study (Tilley, 2014). However, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, there are characteristics that typically define nontraditional students (Saunders & Bauer, 1998) which include those that make them *different from* the typical 18-24-year-old college student (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Tilley, 2014; Witkowsky et al., 2016). As previously established, nontraditional students are typically older than traditional students (Kimmel et al., 2012; Osam et al., 2017), may have children, may work full-time, and may only be able to attend college part-time (Ross-Gordon, 2011; Simi & Matusitz, 2016). Other characteristics include the amount of time they have been away from college, or the gap in years between higher education enrollment (Kasworm, 2008; Tilley, 2014; Williams & Seary, 2011), marital status (Meehan & Negy, 2003), parental status (Johnson & Nussbaum, 2012), employment status, financial independence, self-identification (Johnson, Taasoobshirazi, Clark, Howell, & Breen, 2016), and socioeconomic status (Taylor & House, 2010). However, the most common factor that earns students the title "nontraditional" is their age,

particularly those who are 25 years old or older (Luke & Justice, 2016; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013; Tilley, 2014).

Determining how to identify the population of nontraditional students is, to some degree, a matter of choice. It makes sense to consider students who have children, or have full-time jobs, or fund their own education, or are returning to college after a long hiatus as nontraditional students. However, learning those details about students is cumbersome which makes it difficult to know how many nontraditional students are enrolled. At Sacramento State, students that are 25 years old and older were recently surveyed as part of a national study, conducted in partnership with the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), examining perceptions of adult learners. Choosing to select students based on age alone is imperfect, but since being 25+ is the most common factor for characterizing adult learners, and because the university has access to every students' age, Sacramento State decided that age would be the determining factor for whom to study. Those data were analyzed further for this study and created the basis for more in-depth qualitative research. According to the National Center for Education Statistics NCES (n.d.), "Exactly what constitutes a nontraditional student has been the source of much discussion in recent research. Most often age (especially being over the age of 24) has been the defining characteristic for this population" (Definitions and Data section, para. 1). Therefore, for this study, the working definition of nontraditional students (interchangeably referred to as adult learners) is undergraduate college students who are 25 years old or older.

Problem Statement

Millions of working age adults have not earned a college degree. Less than half of 25-64-year old's in the United States hold a credential beyond high school (U.S. Census, 2010). Yet, more than two-thirds of all jobs require some sort of postsecondary credential or degree (Carnevale et al., 2013; Lumina Foundation, 2019). Many people who do not hold a degree started college but at some point, dropped, or stopped out of college. As many as one in six Americans were in college at one point but did not complete their degree (Steele & Erisman, 2016), and there are more than 31 million people who attended college but left without earning a degree (Shapiro & Dundar, 2014; Steele & Erisman, 2016) over the last 20 years nationwide. Millions of employed Americans have some college, but no degree, and as previously established, they earn less income than their colleagues who have earned a bachelor's degree, and their jobs are often vulnerable during a recession. Figure 2 depicts the U.S. educational attainment levels (Lumina Foundation, 2019).

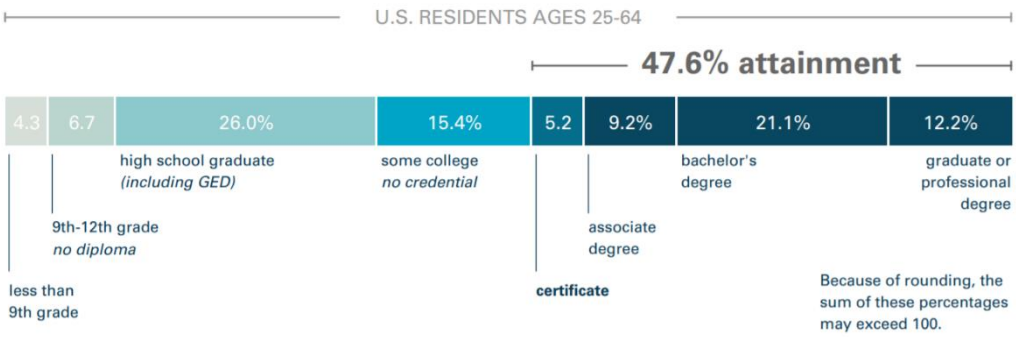


Figure 2. U.S. Educational Attainment Levels. (Source: Lumina Foundation, 2019)

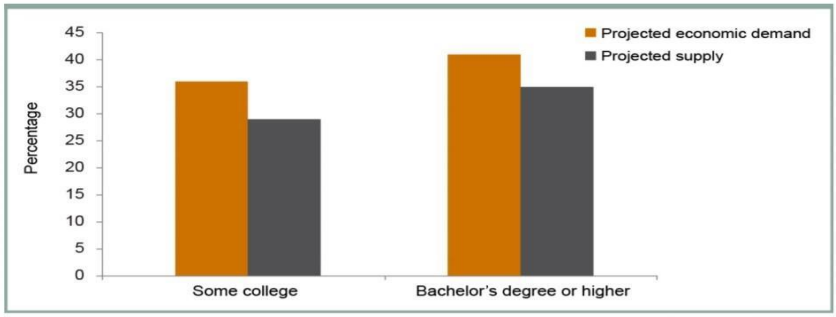
While millions of working age adults have not earned a degree, it is predicted that 65% of all jobs will require some form of postsecondary education by 2020 (Carnevale et al., 2013). In the near future, there simply may not be enough degreed or credentialed workers to meet workforce demand. In 2013, Carnevale et al. predicted that the United States would fall short 5 million workers with postsecondary education by 2020 if production trend persisted. Neumark, Johnson, and Mejia (2013) asserted that the impending retirement of the "baby boom cohort" will likely contribute to an even greater skill-shortage for the United States, particularly in heavily populated states with dense migrant populations, like California, where Johnson et al. (2015) predict a shortage of over a million workers with a bachelor's degree by 2030.

Complicating the issue, according to California Competes (2018), the degreed workforce gap cannot be met by traditional-aged graduates. In order to meet the state's degreed and credentialed workforce gap, every high school graduate from 2018 to 2022 would need to attend college, and the entire class of 2022 would need to graduate from college in 4 years (California Competes, 2018). Given that less than 38% of high school graduates go on to earn a bachelor's degree, the workforce cannot rely on traditional-aged students to meet the needs of the state. In other words, "California cannot meet its needs for an educated workforce without looking beyond traditional-age students, and the four million adults in California who have already attended college without obtaining a degree represent a prime opportunity" (California Competes, 2018, p. 11).

In California, 21.8% of adults have some college but no degree ("A Stronger Nation," n.d.). An additional 7% of Californian's highest educational attainment is an

associate's degree, bringing the number of Californians with some college but no bachelor's degree to 29.5%. Such low educational attainment rates may call into question the efficacy of graduation rate initiatives, or at least create an argument for initiatives that serve a wider range of students. What happens when a student falls behind and is not on track to graduate in four years, such as adult learners? Do the policies designed to increase graduation rates for first-time-full-time freshmen make it harder for nontraditional students? To put it differently, if a student exits the higher education freeway for some life-maintenance, how easy is it for them to merge back on? It is as if the freeway is full of diamond lanes that only traditional college students can drive on and everyone else has to fight to merge back onto the slow lane. Perhaps this contributes to low educational attainment rates in California. If students do not finish "on time," maybe it becomes harder and harder to finish at all.

Working age adults with some college but no degree obviously do not meet the minimum qualifications for jobs that require a bachelor's degree, and California is falling short of degreed workers. If current trends continue, California will have a shortage of 1.1 million workers with a bachelor's degree by 2030 (Johnson et al., 2015). Thirty-eight percent of California jobs will require a bachelor's degree but only about 33% will have earned one by the year 2030, which means that even though our state is rich with human resources, California businesses may need to seek a workforce from outside the area, or worse, may move to a state with higher educational attainment rates. This indicates a clear workforce skills gap. Figure 3 depicts California's looming degreed worker force gap.



SOURCE: Based on projections in D. Reed, *California's Future Workforce: Will There Be Enough College Graduates?* (PPIC, 2008), and H. Johnson and R. Sengupta, *Closing the Gap: Meeting California's Need for College Graduates* (PPIC, 2009).

NOTE: Underlying methodology developed in D. Neumark, "California's Economic Future and Infrastructure Challenges," and H. Johnson, "California's Population in 2025," both in in *California 2025: Taking on the Future,* ed. E. Hanak and M. Baldassare (PPIC, 2005).

Figure 3. California's Degreed Workforce Gap. (Bohn, 2014)

There are more than 36 million working age adults who attended college but left without earning a degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). In California, over 4.5 million working age adults have earned some college credit but have not earned their degree, a disproportionate percent being people of color (Lumina Foundation, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Nationwide, there are significant attainment gaps based on race and ethnicity, which exacerbates the problem for a huge number of working age adults with some college but no degree. For example, 47.1% of people who have earned an associate's degree or higher in the U.S. are white, while only 30.8% are African American, and 23.7% Hispanic (Lumina Foundation, 2017). This trend exists in all states, including California, where 35.2% of people who have earned an associate's degree or higher are African American, and 19.1% are Hispanic, compared to 54.1% White (Lumina Foundation, 2017). This means that white adults are 35% more likely to have earned an at least associate's degree than Hispanics in California. These data represent persistent and troubling educational attainment gaps for underrepresented students, such as African American and Hispanic adults in California ("A Stronger

Nation," n.d.). Given these statistics, one might wonder, what does the educational attainment gap reveal about the institutional effectiveness of policies and practices for minority adult learners? Educational attainment is not equitable, and it is important to ask, how do existing institutional underpinnings of structures and practices reinforce this inequity? Figure 4 depicts attainment rates by race/ethnicity in California.

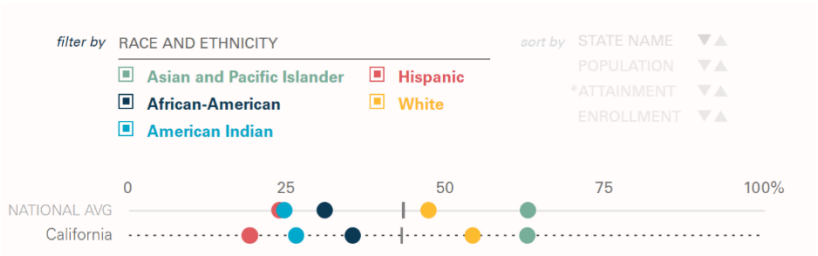


Figure 4. California's Attainment Rates Across Five Racial and Ethnic Groups. (Source: Lumina Foundation, 2017)

Workforce demand may be a reason for the continual increase in the nontraditional student population (Compton et al., 2006). Research suggests that the majority of nontraditional students return to college as a result of a career change or some other major life transition, such as divorce or other changing family dynamics (Compton et al., 2006). It stands to reason that career changers are reacting to workforce demand. In some cases, people return to school because they were pushed out of their jobs, such as the ousted manager who was laid off due to corporate downsizing, and they realize they cannot compete without earning an advanced degree (Hardin, 2008). According to Rossiter (2007), more than 80% of adult nontraditional students cite career transitions as their primary reason for returning to postsecondary education. Millions of working age adults are returning to school to earn their degree in order to be competitive with newly

degreed workers with a fraction of work experience (Bohonos, 2014). For example, according to California Competes (2018), adults with some college but no degree earn less than the state's median wage of $35,984. Further, unemployment rates are three points higher for workers with some college, no degree (PPIC, 2018). For working age adults with some college, returning to school to finish their degree, earning their degree means qualifying for better jobs and earning higher wages (California Competes, 2018).

As such, perhaps in response to workforce demands, and/or perhaps because of personal motivations, nontraditional students make up the fastest growing segment in college populations (Bye et al., 2007; Francois, 2014; Kimmel et al., 2012; Osam et al., 2017; Tilley, 2014; Wyatt, 2011). According to Rabourn, BrckaLorenz, and Shoup (2018), 18-24-year-old college students, or those that are considered to be traditionally-aged, made up about 58% of higher education enrollment in 2012, but nontraditional student enrollment is set to outpace them through 2020. In 2008, NCES projected that the rise in the numbers of nontraditional college students was expected to dwarf the growth of traditional undergraduate enrollment (Osam et al., 2017) and nontraditional student enrollment is estimated to have increased as much as 50% in the past 15 years (Bye et al., 2007; Tilley, 2014).

Given the steady increase in nontraditional student enrollment, and the vital role they can play in helping meet the degreed workforce gap, why are student success initiatives only designed to increase the graduation rate of first-time, full-time freshmen and transfer students who can graduate in four and two years, respectfully? While student success policies and practices, such as priority registration, may help those

traditional students graduate faster, they do not help nontraditional students, and they may create barriers to their success. For example, the majority of undergraduate classes are offered during the day when older students are working (Genco, 2007; Kasworm, 2010; Keith, 2007; Saar, Täht, & Roosalu, 2014), which may make it impossible for nontraditional students to take 30 units per academic year, rendering incentives such as those offered to first-time full-time freshmen moot for nontraditional students, and potentially disincentivizing them to persist in their academic journey (Kasworm, 2010; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Plus, student services, such as financial and academic advising, are offered during the weekday when nontraditional students are unable to go to campus (Goto & Martin, 2009; Kasworm, 2010; Keith, 2007) which can create additional institutional barriers. The irony is that nontraditional students make up the fastest growing segment in higher education, and our communities are in desperate need for more degreed workers. Therefore, it stands to reason that colleges and universities would create student success initiatives to help nontraditional students finish their degree. To do so would require universities to consider nontraditional students' unique motivations to go to and get through college, as well as the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers they face. This study aims to seek an understanding of nontraditional student perceptions related to Sacramento State's academic and student services.

Theoretical Constructs and Frameworks

This section will provide the theoretical lenses through which nontraditional student perceptions will be considered. First, andragogy, the most prolific notion of how adults learn that posits that adults learn differently than children, is examined.

Andragogy provides a foundation for nearly all research related to nontraditional students. After addressing how adults learn, nontraditional student experiences will be considered in the context of institutional culture. It important to be mindful of culture when considering how students perceive their experience because, as the saying goes, culture eats strategy for lunch. Therefore, this theoretical review will pose critical questions about what might shape Sacramento State's adult learners' perceptions of institutional effectiveness in terms of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services.

Andragogy

Adults learn differently than children (Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1978; Lindeman, 1926; Merriam, 2001). However, for centuries, educators have pursued practices and techniques designed around the principles of *pedagogy*, which literally means, "the art and science of teaching children" (Knowles, 1970, p. 44). The central premise of pedagogy that knowledge and skills are transmitted through fact-laden lectures, quizzes, and rote memorizing does not necessarily promote learning for adults (Knowles, 1970). Adults learn best when what is being taught *means something* to them. For adults who pay their own bills, math class may have a whole different meaning than for students who live with their parents. For a nontraditional student who works as a supervisor or manager, an organizational communication studies class has real-life applications that make an immediate and meaningful impact on her career.

Adults are self-directed and learn best when information is contextualized through life experiences (Chen, 2014). Adults are not empty receptacles in which to deposit

information (Freire, 1970). This banking concept of education, with its top-down hierarchical approach to teaching, assumes that students are blank slates and encourages "passivity, dependence, and, ultimately, withdrawal on the part of would-be learners" (Nelken, 2009, p.182). However, adult learners bring a wealth of life experiences to the classroom, and therefore respond best when they are active participants in their learning (Nelken, 2009).

So, if *pedagogy* and the banking method of education do not promote learning for adult students, the logical question is, what does? In answer to pedagogy, the art and science of teaching *children*, the theoretical construct of andragogy has prodigiously undergirded the building blocks of adult learning theory (Merriam, 2001). Andragogy is "the art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles, 1970, p. 43). Malcom Knowles was the most visible proponent of the concept of andragogy (Cox, 2015; Hawk, 2018; Merriam, 2001; Pratt, 1988; Rachal, 2002) and is attributed with popularizing the underlying assumptions and recommendations about adult learners.

Andragogy is a constructivist approach to learning that draws on adult learners' experiences and creates new learning based on previous understandings (Cox, 2015). For example, the nontraditional student who works full-time applies what she learns in class, and that knowledge builds on her life and work experiences to create new meaning. The central tenets/underlying assumptions of andragogy are that an adult learner (a) has an independent self-concept and is oriented to self-directed learning, (b) has accumulated a wealth of life experiences that serve as a rich resource for learning, (c) has learning needs that are aligned with his or her changing social roles, (d) is problem-centered in his or her

learning and interested in immediately applying knowledge, (e) is intrinsically motivated to learn, as opposed to being motivated by external forces, and (f) needs to know the reason for learning something new (Chan, 2010; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Holmes & Abington-Cooper, 2000; Kelly, 2013; Merriam, 2001; Pew, 2007; Rachal, 2002; Taylor & Kroth, 2009). Basically, andragogy is a set of assumptions about adults as learners and a series of recommendations on how to plan, manage, and evaluate adult learners (Pratt, 1988).

Knowles (1970) believed that the single most important difference between children and adult learners is the assumptions made of their self-concepts. Therefore, from these assumptions, Knowles (1970) recommended practical applications for teaching in an andragogical environment: (a) the learning climate should be comfortable for adults and free of symbols of childishness, (b) emphasis should be placed on the adult learner's self-diagnosis of his or her learning needs, (c) adult learners should be involved in the planning of their own learning, (d) teaching and learning is a mutual responsibility and practice between students and teacher, and (e) learning evaluations are formative, rather than summative, and include self-evaluation for adult learners.

Table 1 provides a comparison between the assumptions of pedagogy and andragogy as Cross (1980) summarized.

Table 1

Comparison of Assumptions of Pedagogy and Andragogy

	Assumptions	
	Pedagogy	Andragogy
Self-concept	Dependency	Self-directed

Experience	Of little worth	A rich resource for learning
Readiness	Socially determined	Learner "need to learn"
Time perspective	Learn now, use later	Learn now, use now
Learning orientation	Subject-centered	Problem-centered

Source: Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1978

Table 1 compares the underlying assumptions of andragogy and pedagogy and is not meant to position effective teaching approaches as *either* pedagogical *or* andragogical, nor is it meant to advocate for one style over the other. Rather, it may be more helpful to think of pedagogy and andragogy in terms of a Venn diagram, as seen in Figure 5, where teachers and students can, and perhaps *should*, negotiate what approaches work best for them at any given time.

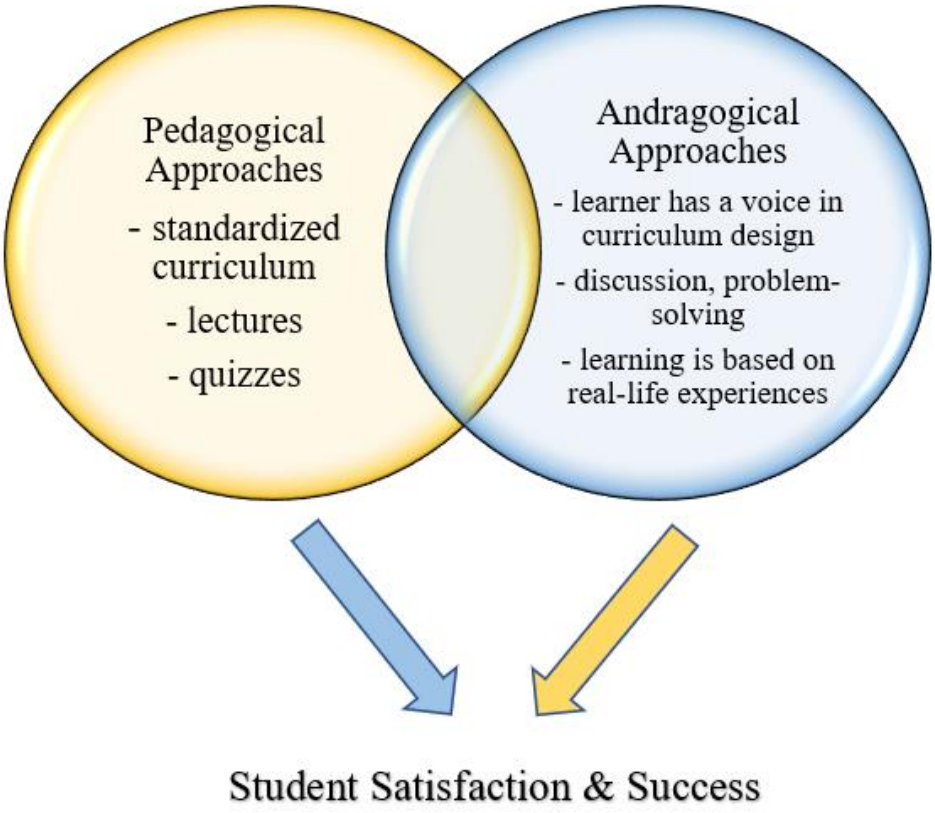


Figure 5. Venn Diagram Depicting Overlap of Pedagogy and Andragogy.

In this perspective, the intersection between approaches is where optimal nontraditional student satisfaction and success occurs. Adults learn differently than children; however, is it possible to only utilize pedagogical *or* andragogical approaches? No. Rather, it makes more sense to acknowledge that optimal learning for adults occurs when andragogical approaches are *infused into* policies and practices. I posit that teaching approaches, such as lectures and quizzes, are *enhanced* when nontraditional students' perspectives are taken into account. Including andragogical practices improves the adult learner experience. Pedagogy *plus* andragogy equals *pedandragogy,* and creates greater opportunity for adults, because students benefit from the traditional structure of classroom learning while their stage in life and self-concept are simultaneously acknowledged and considered.

Educators, researchers, and practitioners have adopted andragogical assumptions and recommendations world-wide (Chan, 2010; Savićević, 1991). Andragogical practices can be found in multiple disciplines and professional areas, such as curriculum design (Fornaciari & Lund Dean, 2014; Holton, Swanson & Naquin, 2001; Thompson & Deis, 2004), educational assessments (Bolton, 2006), management training and professional development programs (Forrest & Peterson, 2006), criminal justice/ police training design (Birzer, 2003), graduate courses (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2013), online nursing education (Decelle, 2016), and in education-based health interventions for older adults (Chesbro & Davis, 2002). According to Charungkaittikul and Henschke (2018), employers and organizations in both the public and private sector have demonstrated that investing in andragogical adult learning for their workers is indispensable for

competitiveness and growth. "Focusing on the learning and development aspects of adults in the context of their professional work, andragogy has offered valuable principles for organizing meaningful learning environments" (Charungkaittikul & Henschke, 2018, p. 81); thus, Human Resource Development (HRD) and andragogy share interest in facilitating adults in their learning and professional development.

Fornaciari and Lund Dean (2014) offered examples of andragogical practices in curriculum design, specifically, revising course syllabi. Their recommendations include modifying the syllabus-as-contract approach to more of a co-created negotiation between instructor and students. Traditional syllabi often contain punitive language reminiscent of treating a student like a bad child for missing a deadline (Fornaciari & Lund Dean, 2014). For example, rather than saying there is a 50% penalty for late work on the syllabus, Fornaciari and Lund Dean (2014) recommend reframing the claim to be additive, such as "Let me encourage you to turn in work even if it is late. You may earn 50% of the graded points for late work" (p. 715). Reframing policies in the course syllabus provides agency for the student and allows him or her ownership of their choices. This type of andragogical approach honors Knowles' (1970) assumptions of adult learners and applies his recommended practical applications for teaching adults.

Andragogy is widely accepted and applied in academia and the workplace, but the construct is not without controversy (Blondy, 2007; Cross, 1981; Davenport & Davenport, 1985; Holmes & Abington-Cooper, 2000; Pratt, 1988). Criticism of andragogy mostly stems for a lack of empirical evidence that supports the basic assumptions and effectiveness of andragogy (Blondy, 2007; Davenport & Davenport,

1985; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Rachal, 2002; Taylor & Kroth, 2009). Rachal (2002) asserted that an inherent "catch-22" exists in Knowelsian andragogy because effectiveness is typically determined by student achievement and measured through tests and grades, which are "anathema to the very idea of andragogy" (p. 211). Rachal (2002) provided multiple examples of existing research dedicated to examining the effectiveness of andragogical assumptions and recommendations, most of which, sadly, are buried in unread dissertations. The prevailing wisdom is that, due its "fluidity" and "amoeba-like formlessness," andragogy's "art will forever be paramount and its science forever elusive" (Rachal, 2002, p. 224). Researchers have been unable to provide scientific evidence that andragogical approaches result in significant differences in learning outcomes from students (Rachal, 2002). However, andragogical practices are extensively utilized in education and professional development. Further, nearly all educators would agree that adult learners are unique and that the spirit of andragogy should be infused in learning situations for nontraditional students (Rachal, 2002). Therefore, this research considers nontraditional student perceptions through the art and spirit of andragogy. This research also acknowledges that replacing pedagogical policies and practices with andragogical approaches is not optimal, nor is it practical. Instead, pedagogy is *enhanced* when adult learners' perceptions are considered, and a combined approach, or *pedandragogy*, is implemented.

Pedandragogy was first coined by Samaroo, Cooper and Green (2013). "Pedandragogy is based on constructivist learning theory that suggests ways in which learners can become self-engaged, along with the roles teachers, instructors, and

institutions can play in helping facilitate this approach to learning" (Samaroo et al., 2013, p. 77). Pedandragogy suggests learners can become self-engaged while acknowledging the roles teachers, instructors, and institutions can play in helping facilitate this approach to learning (Samaroo et al., 2013). Pedandragogy is a model of teaching and learning that *combines* the notions of pedagogy and andragogy. The core premise of pedandragogy is the promotion of self-engagement of the learner, as well as maintaining a central role for the facilitator-educator in the university and other settings independent of the age of learners. (Samaroo et al., 2013).

Andragogy/Critical Pedagogy. The assumptions and recommendations of andragogy are reminiscent of critical pedagogy. In critical pedagogy, the assumptions and practices of the dominant culture are questioned (Gruenewald, 2003). For example, Freire's (1970) concept of critical pedagogy includes the notion that students are not blank slates on which to write, or empty vessels that can be filled with knowledge. Freire (1970) asserted that in the banking concept of education, a person is not merely a spectator; rather she should be a co-creator of her reality and, learning occurs through critical thinking and problem-posing (Freire, 1970). Similarly, Knowles (1970) asserted that adult learners have a wealth of life experiences that enrich their learning and that adult students are not blank slates. Further, Knowles (1970) posited that adults learn best when they have the opportunity to co-create their learning environment. As such, andragogy is, basically, a critical pedagogy for adults. Considering *how* adults learn provides a helpful theoretical lens for understanding nontraditional student perceptions because it takes into account that adult learners experience education differently than

traditional students. It stands to reason, though, that there is more to the learning experience than just *how* adults learn best. The environment in which the learning occurs may also influence how nontraditional students perceive their college experience.

Institutional Culture

An important aspect of nontraditional student experiences when returning to college is the institution's culture because the students' experiences are nested within the culture of the institution. While extent literature examines what influences nontraditional students to go to and get through college, such as their intrinsic motivation (Archer, Cantwell & Bourke, 1999; Bennett, Evans, & Riedle, 2007; Bye et al., 2007; Eppler & Harju, 1997; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013), and how adults learn (Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1978; Lindeman, 1926; Merriam, 2001), little research considers how the culture of the institution may affect student perceptions. This study posits that it is also imperative to consider the environment in which learning occurs when examining student perceptions of institutional effectiveness. For example, what can we deduce about the institutional culture of a public, four-year university, and how that culture affects nontraditional students? Does the culture of the university celebrate adult learners and make them feel welcome? Are nontraditional students recognized as a major population of the student body and honored for what they contribute to the university? How does the institution's culture influence nontraditional students' perceptions of their experiences?

Institutional culture consists of the shared artifacts, beliefs, values, assumptions, and ideologies that bind a group together (Bess & Dee, 2012; Kuh & Whitt, 1988;

Schein, 1992; Toma, Dubrow, & Hartley, 2005). According to Kuh & Whitt (1988), institutional culture in colleges and universities conveys a sense of identity (who we are), facilitates what the institution is committed to (what we stand for), enhances tradition and stability (how we do things around here), guides sense making (how we understand events), and defines who has power and authority (who is influential). Culture can be described as patterns of shared assumptions that a group learns as it navigates problems of adaption and integration that have worked well enough to be considered the way things should be done and are therefore taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel (Schein, 1992). For example, when the Division of Student Affairs hosts an event at Sacramento State, each presenter announces their pronouns, "My name is Sue Smith and my pronouns are she, her, hers." This practice demonstrates the university's commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and aspect of the university's institutional culture. Another example would be the policies and practices designed to help students *Finish in Four*. Such practices indicate an institutional culture that values the timely success of traditional students who have the ability to attend college full-time over those who have to work full-time and can only attend college part-time. In these ways, culture can create both a supportive environment and one that makes certain students feel undervalued.

An organization's culture can create a sense of belonging for employees and students (Nevarez, Wood, & Penrose, 2013). In fact, "when institutions create an inclusive, supportive, and positive campus environment, it facilitates student success" (Nevarez & Wood, 2010, p. 87). So how do we know what an institution's culture is?

Culture is expressed in many ways. An institution's culture is expressed through its vision and mission statement, stated strategic goals, artifacts (such as the physical environment, social environment, written and spoken language, and symbols), rituals, and assumptions (Bess & Dee, 2012; Bolman & Deal, 2013; Schein, 1992). A vision is "the long-term aspiration of an institution" (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). The vision links historical legend and offers a mental picture of core precepts to the future (Bolman & Deal, 2013). The mission statement describes the core, value-driven efforts the college undertakes in order to achieve its vision (Nevarez & Wood, 2010).

When considering how institutional culture may affect adult learners' experiences at the university, it is important to consider if Sacramento State's vision, mission, stated values, goals, rituals, etc. celebrate, or even recognize nontraditional students. Do university artifacts demonstrate that Sacramento State values adult learners? More specifically, is the campus (or a satellite campus) in an accessible, convenient location for working adults? When are classes scheduled (day of week and time of day)? How are classrooms arranged? Are the majority of classrooms arranged in traditional configurations with the teacher at the front with child-like desks all facing the same direction? When are student services available? What is the social environment like for adults? Are there clubs and activities that are accessible to, let alone designed for adults?

Other important elements of institutional culture include written and spoken language, symbols, and assumptions (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Schein, 1992). Taking these elements into consideration, one might ask if nontraditional students are prevalent on the university's website, campus signage, in recognition and awards, in stated university

initiatives, or in student government. Does the university's mascot ever represent an adult student? In other words, is there a "professional Herky?" Do nontraditional students feel a part of rituals, such as welcome events and graduation ceremonies? What kind of language does campus leadership use when describing their students? Do they say things like, "we're trying to support these kids" when describing the student body? Would a thirty-something-year-old student identify as a "kid?"

Questioning how the institution's culture is perceived and received by nontraditional students is important to understanding their experiences, and how effective the university is for adult learners. Sadly, as Sissel, Hansman, and Kasworm (2001), state, "Adult students are often viewed as invisible and of lesser importance to the traditional core student group, as evidenced by higher education mission statements, publicity and image, and exclusion of adult requirements in the shaping of policies, programs, and outreach" (p. 18).

In conclusion, institutional culture may significantly affect nontraditional student perceptions of themselves and their experience in higher education. As Maher and Tetreault (1994) reflected:

> When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female, or speak with a different accent than theirs, when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. (Adrienne Rich, cited in Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001, p. 18)

Thus far, it has been established that nontraditional student perceptions may be influenced by many factors, such as how adults learn and the context in which learning occurs. Put another way, how well the university employs andragogical practices, or the notion of pedagogy and andragogy practices combined (*pedandragogy*), may affect nontraditional students' learning experience. For example, nontraditional students learn best when their life experiences are honored and when what is being taught means something to them (Knowles, 1970). Nontraditional student perceptions of their college experience may, therefore, be influenced by how well the university infuses policies and practices that are conducive for adult learners. And, how well the university employs andragogical policies and practices may lie within the cultural norms of the institution. In other words, does the institutional *culture* create an environment that works for adults?

How do the principles of andragogy align with the university's culture? Or, maybe a better question is, how much does the deeply ingrained institutional culture influence how (and if) the university infuses pedagogical or andragogical policies and practices? Andragogy and institutional culture appear to be connected, in that how institutions approach curriculum and instruction, career planning, and student services is nested within the longstanding tradition of an institution's culture. For example, university curriculum and instruction are often youth-oriented (Kasworm, 2010).

Consider a college instructor who tells her class that the organizational communication theory they are reading about will be useful to them someday when they get a job in the real world. This message is geared towards traditional-aged students who may have entered college right out of high school, and reflects how the culture of the

institution influences pedagogical *and/or* andragogical approaches. Culture is expressed through artifacts, such as the written and spoken language used in an organization (Bess & Dee, 2012; Bolman & Deal, 2013; Schein, 1992), so, in this instance, youth-oriented culture is expressed through curriculum and instruction. However, adult learners learn best when their life experiences are honored in the classroom (Knowles, 1978), so when a teacher tells the class that what they will be learning will be useful someday in the future, the adult students' life experiences are essentially ignored. This cultural practice of pedagogy may influence how nontraditional students perceive their college experiences. A *pedandragogical* approach to the above scenario would be, after the instructor explains to students that the theories will be useful someday, she invites nontraditional learners to share how what they are learning applies to their current professional role.

Nontraditional students may have similar experiences with institutional practices related to career planning and student services. For example, how does a mid-career professional who visits the university Career Center feel when the services are geared towards traditional college students who are seeking their first real job? When that student seeks advice, do the staff understand her perspective and honor her unique circumstance? Auguste, Packard, and Keep (2018) examined nontraditional student advising experiences and found that adult learners are often underestimated and face condescension by their advisers. In their study, 83% of adult learners expressed having had negative advising experiences (Auguste et al., 2018). Advisers were not accustomed to discussing issues that adult students encounter, and the students felt that the advisers either did not understand or did not care about their circumstances (Auguste et al., 2018).

Perhaps because the culture is such that institutional strategic goals and policies focus on traditional students, career advisers lack training about how to help adult learners navigate potential career changes.

The previous example speaks to the culture of student services, as well. Student services, such as advising, are geared towards traditional students, and their work is extremely important. Newly graduated young adults do need to know how to conduct meaningful job searches, and what to expect from interviews. These types of career planning/student services prepare young adults for what comes after college. They may not, however, honor the life experiences of not-so-young adults who may also be seeking advice and counsel. Figure 6 is a graphic conceptualization of how an institution's culture may influence the university's pedagogical and/or andragogical practices employed in curriculum and instructions, career planning, and student services, which may, in turn, influence adult learner perceptions.

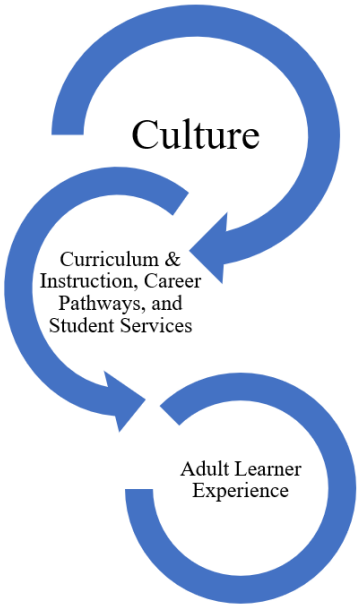


Figure 6. Graphic Conceptualization of how Culture May Influence Pedagogical Practices of Curriculum and Instruction, Career Planning, and Student Services, Which may Influence Nontraditional Student Perceptions.

Figure 6 depicts how an institution's culture influences pedagogical and/or andragogical approaches to curriculum and instruction, career planning, and student services, which logically influence adult learners' perceptions of their university experience. Granted, it may be impossible for institutional culture *not to* influence policies and practices, so what happens when institutions begin to take adult learners' perspectives into consideration?

Perhaps when universities begin to consider nontraditional students' perspectives (such as how they perceive curriculum and instruction, how the institution provides information about career planning, and the institutions comprehensive student services), they may begin to revisit their policies and practices. Such alteration may eventually begin to shape institutional culture. Figure 7 depicts how, when institutions understand

and honor the adult learner experience, perhaps through studies such as this one that highlight nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness, cultural norms may begin to shift.

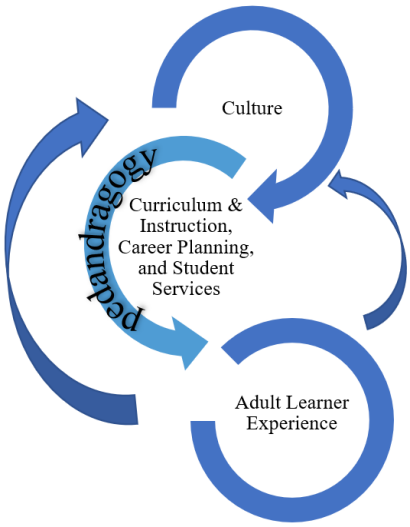


Figure 7. Graphic Conceptualization of how the Adult Learner Experience Could Inform Institutional Culture and Practices.

Figure 7 depicts how adult experiences may eventually begin to influence culture. When the culture begins to shift, more andragogical practices may be infused, and a *pedandragogical* approach will improve adult learners' experiences.

Adult learners' perceptions are influenced by how they learn and the environment in which learning occurs (Cross, 1981; Kasworm, 2005). Culture may influence andragogical practices, which may impact learner experiences, and the adult learner experience may, in turn, influence institutional culture. Institutional approaches are nested in culture, such as youth-oriented lectures and classroom configurations (Kasworm, 2010), and these approaches may shape nontraditional student perceptions.

How adults experience their academic journey is connected both to their classroom experiences and the overarching culture in which their experience resides. For instance, when institutions create inclusive cultures, student outcomes improve (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). Institutional inclusiveness for students leads to "student success, increase of involvement in extracurricular activities, and an environment that facilitates that cognitive and affective development of students" (Nevarez & Wood, 2010, p. 87). Therefore, the theoretical frameworks of andragogy and institutional culture complement and interact with each other. Practices that influence student perceptions of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and student services are nested in the context of culture, and those perceptions have the potential to influence cultural norms. Hence, the theoretic lenses of andragogy and institutional culture provide a helpful paradigm through which to examine adult learners' perceptions of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services at Sacramento State.

Operational Definitions

Adaptivity Principle

The institution adjusts to shifting external market forces and is able to adapt to the changing expectations of internal stakeholders, students, and employers. The institution understands the needs of students and develops creative academic solutions (CAEL, 2019).

Adult learner

Term often used interchangeably to describe nontraditional students.

AL360

CAEL's diagnostic online survey that assesses adult learners' perceptions of institutional effectiveness within the Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adults.

Andragogy

The art and science of teaching adults, or helping adults learn (Knowles, 1990).

Assessment of Learning Outcomes Principle

The institution defines and assesses the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired by adult learners both from the curriculum and from life/work experience in order to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor (CAEL, 2019).

CAEL

Council on Adult and Experiential Learning

Dispositional Barriers

Intrapersonal attributes, such as one's self-perceptions and attitudes, such as self-doubt or feeling out of place in an environment (Cross, 1981).

Educational Attainment

Refers to the highest level of education that an individual has completed (U.S. Census)

Extrinsic Motivation

Performing a task for the consequence of reward (such as getting a job or earning money) or to avoiding negative outcomes, such as criticism or punishment (Rothes, Lemos, & Gonçalves, 2016).

Financing Principle

The institution promotes choice using an array of payment options for adult learners in order to expand equity and financial flexibility (CAEL, 2019).

Graduation Rate

Refers to the percentage of first-time, full-time freshmen that graduate in four years, and transfer students that graduate in two years (California Promise)

Institutional Barriers

Policies, procedures, and practices that are enshrined in colleges and universities that prevent, or even exclude, nontraditional students from educational activities (Cross, 1981).

Institutional Culture

Shared artifacts, beliefs, values, assumptions, and ideologies that bind a group together (Bess & Dee, 2012; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Schein, 1992; Toma et al., 2005).

Intrinsic Motivation

Satisfaction and pleasure is derived from doing the task itself (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013).

Life & Career Planning Principle

The institution addresses adult learners' life and career goals before or at the onset of enrollment in order to assess and align its capacities to help learners reach their goals (CAEL, 2019).

Microaggressions

Brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color (Sue, et al., 2007, p. 271).

Nontraditional Students

Older than traditional students (25 years old or older) may have children, may work full-time, and may only be able to attend college part-time (Osam et al., 2017)

Outreach Principle

The institution conducts its outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers of time, place, and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities (CAEL, 2019).

Pedandragogy

Model of teaching and learning that combines the notions of pedagogy and andragogy. The core premise of pedandragogy is the promotion of self-engagement of the learner, as well as maintaining a central role for the facilitator-educator in the university and other settings independent of the age of learners. (Samaroo, Cooper & Green, 2013).

Prior Learning Assessments

Any knowledge-building or skills attainment that occurs prior to enrollment or outside of enrollment at a post-secondary institution, assessed for the purpose of awarding college credit (Zucker, Johnson, & Flint, 1999).

Situational Barriers

One's life circumstances that may create challenges for nontraditional students, such as the need to balance caring for a family, working, and focusing on school (Cross, 1981).

Some College, No Degree

Some college credit, but less than one year of college, or, one or more years of college credit, no degree (U.S. Census).

Strategic Partnerships Principle

The institution engages in strategic relationships, partnerships, and collaborations with employers and other organizations in order to develop and improve educational opportunities for adult learners (CAEL, 2019).

Student Success

Four-year graduation rate of first-time, full-time freshmen, two-year graduation rate for transfer students (California Promise)

Student Support Systems Principle

The institution assists adult learners using comprehensive academic and student support systems in order to enhance students' capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners (CAEL, 2019).

Teaching-Learning Process Principle

The institution's faculty uses multiple methods of instruction (including experiential and problem-based methods) for adult learners in order to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills (CAEL, 2019).

Technology Principle

The institution uses information technology to provide relevant and timely information and to enhance the learning experience (CAEL, 2019).

Transformation Learning Theory

The process by which we transform our taken-for granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 7).

Transitions Principle

The institution supports guided pathways that lead into and from the institution's programs and services in order to ensure that students' learning will apply usefully to achieving their educational and career goals (CAEL, 2019).

Working Age Adults

25-64-year old's (U.S. Census)

Assumptions and Limitations

There were several assumptions made in this study, including, (a) a students' age is a dominate characteristic when assessing their sense of otherness, (b) nontraditional

students are aware of the unique nature of their challenges and opportunities when returning to college to finish their degree, (c) nontraditional students have opinions about how their institutions could improve their academic and student services.

There were also several limitations to this study. Only nontraditional students were surveyed and invited to participate in focus groups. The findings would be even more rich if nontraditional student perceptions were compared to traditional-aged students. Are these opinions unique to adult students, or do traditional-aged students have similar perceptions? A stronger argument about nontraditional student perceptions can be made when they are compared to other groups of students at the university.

Further, the working definition of nontraditional students was limited to only the students' age, which was a limitation. As was established earlier in this study, there are multiple factors that make students' experiences different from those of traditional students, such as having children, working full-time, attending school part-time, caring for dependent parents or other family members, etc. These conditions are not limited to students who are 25 years old and older. Therefore, future research should broaden the definition of *nontraditional* to encompass more students who do not fit the traditional mold.

Another limitation of the study was the data collection timeframe. Focus groups were conducted during the first two weeks of the Spring semester which means that nontraditional students were likely still flustered from the usual upheaval of starting a new semester. Some of their complaints and negative perceptions will likely evolve and

resolve as they navigate the system and change their habits. In other words, some of their complaints may have be due to the usual beginning-of-the-semester jitters.

Also, there was a relatively small number of AL360 participants, which was a limitation of this study. The AL360 survey was disseminated to all nontraditional undergraduate students enrolled in October, 2018 (total = 6,021). A total of 322 undergraduates responded to the survey, which was an approximate response rate of only 5.3%. A higher response rate likely would have provided a more diverse sample that more closely matched the nontraditional student population. A more diverse sample would be ideal because students from different backgrounds and cultures have diverse experiences. Learning from a more diverse sample would have produced stronger results for this study. Further, the independent variables (class load, progress to degree, hours the student works in a week, and student's commute time to school) were only established with one survey question each. Asking more questions about nontraditional student characteristics would establish a better understanding of what factors are predictors of their perceptions of institutional effectiveness.

Additionally, the CAEL survey examines nontraditional student perceptions related to Ten principles for Effectively Serving Adults. In order to examine nontraditional student perceptions in three major areas (curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student Services), this study combined some of the principles to create three new variables. Scores from the principles titled Teaching & Learning and Technology were averaged to create Curriculum and Instruction. Scores from the principles titled Life & Career Planning, Transitions, and Adaptivity were

averaged to create Career Planning. Scores from principles titled Financing and Student Support Systems were averaged to create Comprehensive Student Services. Averaging scores from a preexisting survey to create new variables is a limitation because there is no way to test for construct validity. The original scale has been found valid and reliable, but the original measure was modified so the validity and reliability of the new variable is not given.

A delimiter of this study is the definition of nontraditional students. Researchers and adult educators define nontraditional students using multiple variables in addition to age, such as marital, parental, and employment status. There is no real consensus on how to characterize nontraditional students. However, for this study, age was the sole variable used to determine students' nontraditional status. Because the university has access to students' age, students 25 years old and older were surveyed as part of CAEL's national research study examining nontraditional student perceptions. These data will be analyzed further and will serve as the basis for determining what questions to ask when gathering qualitative data from adult learners at Sacramento State.

In addition to assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study, it is important to acknowledge possible researcher biases. For example, as was highlighted in the introduction to this study, I was a nontraditional student who experienced challenges and opportunities during my undergraduate career. Having personal experience as a mid-career student returning to college to finish my bachelor's degree provides me with my own perspective of what nontraditional students face; however, it may also create bias as I develop research and interview questions. Further, I was an undergraduate student at

the university at the heart of this study. Because I have first-hand experience at the university, I may hold implicit biases about how study participants respond.

Significance of Study

In 1960, California created a Master Plan for Higher Education. In a 2018 review of the master plan for education in California and state workforce needs, the Governor's Office of Planning and Research (OPR) summarized the plan and evaluated its relevance for current workforce needs. According to the report, nearly 60 years after its creation, the Master Plan "occupies a mythic place in conceptions of Californian and American education" (OPR, 2018, p. 1). The Master Plan is credited with ensuring universal access to affordable higher education while honoring the missions of three distinct systems – California Community Colleges (CCC), California State University (CSU), and the University of California (UC) (OPR, 2018).

The major features of the Master Plan for Higher Education in California are:

1. differentiation of functions among the public postsecondary education segments (CCC, CSU, and UC),
2. universal access and choice (UC is to select from the top 12.5% of high school graduates, CSU is to select from the top 33.3%, and CCC are to admit any student who would benefit from college instruction),
3. tuition-free enrollment,
4. provision of student aid (now known as CalGrant),
5. established governance structure for the three segments (Board of Regents for UC, Board of Trustees for CSU, and Board of Governors for CCC),

6. established the Coordinating Council for Higher Education, which was replaced in 1973 by the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC) and ultimately defunded (UC Office of the President, 2007).

These features of the Master Plan for Higher Education in California are lauded for "offering its citizens the opportunity to pursue an education as far as their ability and ambition can take them" (Geiser & Atkinson, 2013, p. 68).

However, graduation rates remain low in California and the achievement gap persists throughout the state (Geiser & Atkinson, 2013; Johnson, Mejia, & Bohn, 2018), which begs the question if the goal of offering Californians the opportunity to pursue an education as far as their ability and ambition can take them is at all being realized. Further, OPR (2018) claims, "The expected gap in degree, certificate and skills production, the lack of alignment with regional economies, the impending technological and economic transformations, the growing needs of adult learners…are all challenges that go well beyond what the architects of the Master Plan ever contemplated, as well as beyond the system of higher education that was designed" (p. 2).

The Master Plan for Higher Education in California memorialized an emphasis on access to higher education for traditional-aged students, but it may not provide an adequate plan for the changing needs of the state. By 2020, it is projected that 65% of all jobs will require educational attainment beyond high school nationwide, yet the nation's educational attainment rate is only 46.9% (Carnevale et al., 2013; Lumina Foundation). This presents a threat to our economy because we may not be able to fill high-skill jobs, making them vulnerable to outsourcing. If the current trend does not change, California

will fall 1.1 million graduates short of economic demand by 2030 (Johnson, Mejia, & Bohn, 2015). Even if every high school student from 2018 to 2022 were to attend college, and the entire class of 2022 graduates from college in 4 years, traditional students cannot meet the workforce demands of the state (California Competes, 2018). Therefore, working age adults who return to college to finish their degree may help the state meet California's degreed workforce gap, and, coincidentally, adults make up the fastest growing segment in college populations (Bye et al., 2007; Compton et al., 2006).

As OPR explained in its 2018 review, the Master Plan for Higher Education in California "was designed to provide a broadly traditional education to a broadly traditional student body. Today, neither traditional education nor the traditional student is or can be the sole focus of educational planning" (p. 54). As such, the current iteration of California Master Plan fails to provide adequate incentive for higher education institutions to create policies and practices that help nontraditional students succeed, as is evident by the stubborn low attainment rates of adult learners. Instead, the current iteration focuses on policies and practices aimed at increasing graduation rates for traditional-aged students.

Existing policies and practices that are designed to help traditional-aged students graduate within four years may create barriers for nontraditional students (Kasworm, 2010; Keith, 2007; Genco, 2007; Saar et al., 2014). For example, adult learners may only be able to take classes on certain days and at certain times due to their busy schedules. When traditional students are offered priority registration, nontraditional students may have even more difficulty getting the classes they need. Developing policies and services

that *support* nontraditional students should be a priority for higher education institutions (Hawk, 2018), because adults may provide a solution for a potentially critical economic problem.

This study adds to existing research and advances the understanding of how nontraditional students perceive their university experience in order to improve student satisfaction and success. Prior research has examined nontraditional student motivations (Allen & Zhang, 2016; Bennett et al., 2007; Luke & Justice, 2016; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013; Taylor & House, 2010) and barriers (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Cross, 1981; Osam et al., 2017; Novak & Thacker, 1991; Padula, 1994; Spellman, 2007), and has begun to seek understanding of their perceptions of institutional effectiveness. For example, Hawk (2018), examined nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness based on CAEL's principles for serving adults. The premise of Hawk's (2018) study is similar to this research; however, the sample population was small (total = 78), and only three of the Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adults were examined.

This study builds on the burgeoning research on nontraditional student experiences and provides both a broader and deeper view of adult learners' perceptions. This study adds to existing research by including more principles in the analysis, and analyzing data from a larger study population. Further, by talking with adult learners in focus groups, this study digs deeper into the lived experience of nontraditional students at the university. About one in five undergraduate students at Sacramento State is over 25 years old (California State University, Sacramento, 2018), and, if current trends continue, that number will continue to increase (Chen, 2014; Markle, 2015). Adult learners are a

pivotal demographic for the university and for the community at large. This study provides a better understanding of adult learners' perceptions of this university's effectiveness for nontraditional students on the path to fulfilling a dream. Finally, this study informs policy, leadership and practice.

Understanding nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness informs policy related to curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. For example, nontraditional students may have less than positive experiences with student services because they cannot get to campus before the registration office closes, or academic advisors are only available during the day, when adult students are working. Understanding nontraditional students' perceptions will inform university policy such that adults' needs may be considered. For instance, counseling and advising hours could be extended a few days a week so that working adults have access to them; more classes can be offered in the evenings or weekends so nontraditional students have options that fit their schedules. It stands to reason that the university needs to understand how policies effect nontraditional students in order to eventually make modifications that will improve their experiences; therefore, this study aims to inform potential policy improvements for adult learners.

California Governor's Office of Planning and research acknowledged that the Master Plan for Higher Education was designed to serve a traditional student body. California's higher education policies and practices are shaped by the Master Plan. Evolving institution-level policies and practices to better serve adult learners may not be enough. Instead, perhaps the time has come for California to rethink the Master Plan for

Higher Education, since, as OPR (2018) stated, “Neither traditional education nor the traditional student is or can be the sole focus of educational planning” (p. 54). Rethinking the Master Plan for Higher Education in a way that broadens the definition of student success to include returning students would reshape the landscape for California. When student success metrics for institutions include helping returning students cross the finish line, new funding streams can open, partnerships with industry sectors can be encouraged, and institutional cultures will shift in a way that celebrates adult learner success and encourages nontraditional students to successfully return to college.

Finally, this study seeks to inform leadership and practice. Just as policy is unlikely to be modified unless and until the university understands how current conditions effect nontraditional students, leaders who are unaware of the plight of adult learners likely will not know how to shape university practices without garnering an understanding of nontraditional students. Therefore, this study increases awareness around nontraditional student perceptions in order to inspire university leadership to consider practices in areas such as curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services that improve adult learner experiences. University leaders who are concerned with social inequities facing a diverse student population, or transformative leaders (Nevarez et al., 2013) will be inspired to infuse andragogical approaches to curriculum and instruction, create career planning that make sense for adults, and improve student services. This study will enlighten Sacramento State leaders of the pain points of a growing population of students in the hope of improving their college experience and increasing their success.

Organization of Chapters

Chapter 1 described the purpose, nature, and significance of this study. The following chapters will be organized in the following format: Chapter 2 will provide a review of relevant literature and highlight a gap in research related to nontraditional students. Chapter 2 will also flesh out the theoretical underpinnings of the study and provide examples of best practices for adult learners. Chapter 3 will describe how the study will be conducted, including: (a) setting, population and sample, (b) research questions, (c) the study's research design, including; methodology, data collection, instrumentation, and analysis (d) how participants will be protected, and (e) the role of the researcher. Chapter 4 will provide and analysis of the quantitative data results using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software and qualitative data gathered (using HyperRESEARCH). Chapter 5 will provide a discussion of the study and interpretation of the findings, including recommendations for policy, practice, and leadership, as well as recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness related to curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. This chapter provides an in-depth review of the literature and research related to nontraditional students, including characteristics of nontraditional students, their motivations to go to and get through college, and the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers they face. Next, this chapter examines curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services policies and practices as they relate to nontraditional students who are entering college, or returning to school to finish their degree. This chapter then visits the notion of Adult Learning Theory, including Transformation Learning Theory, to provide a framework for leaders to set theory to practice. The chapter then describes promising best programs and practices in adult education, including CAEL and the Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adults, Lumina Foundation, and various initiatives and programs from around the country. Finally, this chapter concludes with an overview of the epistemological theoretical paradigms through which the three research questions will examine how nontraditional students perceive institutional effectiveness.

Characteristics of Nontraditional Students

What makes a student nontraditional? And what does *traditional* even mean? Aren't all college students *adults*? These are longstanding questions in the realm of

nontraditional student research. As Kasworm (2018) succinctly stated, "For both program leaders and for researchers of adult undergraduate students, defining who and what characterizes the uniqueness of the adult undergraduate student has become a *stubborn and messy* problem in the literature, in collegiate services, and in research studies" (p. 78). Consequently, the inconsistent rhetorical efforts to identify these students may have complicated efforts to improve access, policy, instructional design, and research related to adult learners (Kasworm, 2018). So how do researchers and educational leaders wade through the muddy nontraditional student/adult learner research waters with such a polysemous construct? An abundance of research indicates that the most common characteristic that deems a student "nontraditional" is his or her age, particularly being 25 years old or older (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014; Chao & Good, 2004; Chen, 2014; Luke & Justice, 2016; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013; Tilley, 2014; Wyatt, 2011). As previously mentioned, the NCES (n.d.) states, "Exactly what constitutes a nontraditional student has been the source of much discussion in recent research. Most often age (especially being over the age of 24) has been the defining characteristic for this population" (Definitions and Data section, para. 1). However, NCES goes on to say that, "age acts as a surrogate variable that captures a large, heterogeneous population of adult students who often have family and work responsibilities as well as other life circumstances that can interfere with successful completion of educational objectives" (para. 1). In concurrence with the most-common understanding on nontraditional students, this study focuses on undergraduate students who are 25 years old and older with the assumption that students who are over the age of

25 possess multiple *nontraditional* characteristics, which shape their perceptions of their university experiences. For instance, adult learner perceptions of curriculum and instruction may be influenced by the presence or lack of andragogical approaches to instruction. Since adults learn differently than children, their age and stage in life may influence their perceptions of institutional effectiveness.

In a seminal study of nontraditional students, Bean and Metzner (1985) articulated that traditional and nontraditional students cannot easily be classified into dichotomous variables. For example, it is unlikely that a student attending college part-time one semester is *nontraditional*, but that same student becomes *traditional* the next semester by adding more credit hours (Bean & Metzner, 1985). However, Bean and Metzner (1985) asserted that it is necessary for nontraditional students to be at least 24 years old, commute to school, or attend part-time. More importantly, nontraditional students are "distinguished by the lessened intensity and duration of their interaction with the primary agents of socialization (faculty, peers) at the institutions they attend" (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 488.), and the findings of the study center around this notion. For nontraditional students, external environmental factors, such as family and career, paired with decreased interaction with faculty and peers, affected attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985), with environmental factors being most influential. Importantly, however, at the time of their study, Bean and Metzner (1985) asserted that nontraditional students' primary purpose was to take courses for vocational or other utilitarian reasons, not necessarily in pursuit of a degree, which is not the case for today's nontraditional students.

The next significant study on nontraditional students was conducted in 1996 by Horn and Caroll and entailed an in-depth investigation of adult learner characteristics (Kasworm, 2018). Horn and Caroll (1996) acknowledged that a student's age is the commonly accepted delimiter of their nontraditional status and focused on other characteristics in an effort to understand nontraditional student persistence and attrition. Interestingly, the authors constructed a scale to determine the degree to which students were considered nontraditional. Students who were considered *minimally nontraditional* generally only possessed one nontraditional characteristic, usually either they were older than the typical student or enrolled part-time. *Moderately nontraditional* students had two or more characteristics; they were typically older, lived independently from their parents, and attended college part-time. *Highly nontraditional* students had four or more characteristics, including those previously mentioned plus they worked full-time or had dependent children (Horn & Caroll, 1996).

The overwhelming consensus is that age alone does not define a student's status as a nontraditional, or adult learner. In order to understand who nontraditional students are, it might be easier to think about a traditional college student, one who graduates from high school and enters right into community college or university. Maybe she lives in a dorm for her first year or two and then moves to an apartment with a few roommates where she stays until she graduates after about four years as an undergraduate. A traditional college student, therefore, is between 18-23 or 24 years old. She might work to make extra cash, but for the most part she spends her time going to class, studying, and socializing. Maybe she participates in sports or the arts, and belongs to a few campus

organizations. This is the typical/traditional college student. Now, think of everyone else. Of course, some 18-24-year-old's do not fit into the above scenario either. Some 18-24-year-old students are married, or have children, or work full-time because their parents cannot afford to pay their tuition. Others, whom this study has focused extensively, are over 24 years old and have gone off the beaten path and have travelled a less-traditional journey on their way to (or back into) college. There are countless ways in which a student can be nontraditional. However, being over the age of 24 is the one common characteristic for the vast majority of research related to nontraditional students. Even when other characteristics are considered, age is an important factor in determining a student's nontraditional status.

Age is a surrogate variable (NCES, n.d.) around which most research is on nontraditional students is based. Students who are over 25 years old have different life experiences than traditional students, which may affect how students perceive their college experiences. Nontraditional students have unique motivations to attend or return to college, and they face unique barriers, characteristics that also undoubtedly shape their perceptions of their college experiences. The next sections provide an overview of the research related to these unique characteristics of adult learners.

Motivation

Enrolling in college as a nontraditional student takes courage. For adult learners, pursuing higher education is an intentional choice and a life changing decision (Hardin, 2008; Kasworm, 2008). Nontraditional students are motivated to enter college for myriad reasons (Hardin, 2008), and their motivations serve as driving forces towards success as

their lives are turned upside down by entering or returning to college as working age adults. Being older than traditional-aged students, nontraditional students often have responsibilities beyond their academic pursuits. Adult learners may wear the proverbial multiple hats; they may be parents, or care for their own aging parents or family members; they hold careers and may only be able to attend college part-time, at nights or on weekends (Fairchild, 2003; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Simi & Matusitz, 2016). Adults are embedded in their communities and often have commitments that demand their time, energy, and resources. The coexistence of family responsibilities and commitments along with academic demands can create barriers for nontraditional students, especially female adult learners (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Novak & Thacker, 1991; Padula, 1994; Quimby & O'Brien, 2004).). Often, women who stopped out of college to raise their children return to higher education to finish their degrees. While they take on the role of student, their roles as mom, wife, employee, boss, caretaker do not go away. The intersectionality of multiple roles may influence how adult learners perceive their college experience (Auguste et al., 2018). For example, a busy mom who works to support her family and returns to college to finish her degree may be frustrated when she cannot access student services, such as academic advising that is only offered during the weekday. She may draw on whatever it was that motivated her to return to college in order to contend with barriers she faces.

As will be explicated in the following sections in this chapter, nontraditional students face unique challenges when returning to school (Cross, 1981). Adult students face internal barriers, such as self- doubt (Kasworm, 2008), complicated life

circumstances, such as all the many hats they must wear, and institutional barriers, such as policies and practices designed to help traditional students graduate faster. Yet, Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) found that nontraditional students perform at higher academic levels than traditional-aged students, even in the face of more stressors and less sources of support. Hoyert and O'Dell (2009) claim that nontraditional students consistently maintain higher grade point averages (GPA) than traditional college students. Nontraditional students often have different goal-orientations than traditional students, and can draw on their life experiences in order to make sense of material. Adult learners' motivations serve as drivers for academic success, even in the face of adversity (Hoyert & O'Dell, 2009). Even in online environments, where younger students are allegedly more comfortable in and accustom to adult learners often perform better (DiBiase & Kidwai, 2010). Why is it that nontraditional students experience success, even in unlikely environments, and even against unique challenges? What motivates them to overcome the barriers they face and persist and succeed in higher education?

Motivation is a critical element for understanding student achievement, engagement, level of academic achievement, and satisfaction (Rothes et al., 2016). Therefore, when examining nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness in terms of the university's approach to curriculum and instruction, career planning, and student services, it is important to understand adult learners' motivations for success. Even if students are frustrated and feel under-supported, perhaps their motivation to succeed outweighs the barriers they face. As such, a growing body of research is dedicated to understanding nontraditional student motivation (Allen & Zhang,

2016; Bennett et al., 2007; Luke & Justice, 2016; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013; Taylor & House, 2010). So, what motivates adults to go to and the persist through college, even despite all their challenges? Bennett at al. (2007) assert that nontraditional student success may be indicative of their goal orientation.

Goal orientation has two categories; learning goal orientation and performance goal orientation (Bennett et al., 2007). When students are performance goal oriented, they tend to focus on proving their aptitude and avoiding negative evaluation. They tend to compare themselves with other students, and avoid demonstrating incompetence (Davis, Carson, Ammeter, & Treadway, 2005). Students with a performance goal orientation tend to feel anxiety about evaluations and prefer easier tasks as to ensure success (Bennett et al., 2007). Learning goal-oriented students, on the other hand, actively seek challenges and persistently and effectively problem solve (Bennett et al., 2007).

Eppler and Harju (1997) compared traditional and nontraditional student academic motivation and found that the majority of older students (74%) endorsed a learning goal orientation, including higher levels of concentration, satisfaction, and intrinsic motivation. These findings were later supported in a subsequent study that also found that nontraditional students held significantly higher GPA's than traditional college students (Eppler, Carsen-Plentl, & Harju, 2000). Bennett et al. (2007) extended this research by considering distance learning students in addition to traditional and nontraditional students. Their research supported findings that nontraditional students (and distance learners in this case) were more learning goal oriented (Eppler & Harju,

1997; Eppler et al., 2000). In these studies, younger traditional students tended to be performance goal oriented while older traditional students and nontraditional students tended to be more learning goal oriented and therefore, more intrinsically motivated.

Nontraditional students tend to be intrinsically motivated (Archer et al., Cantwell & Bourke, 1999; Bennett et al., 2007; Bye et al., 2007; Eppler & Harju, 1997; Francois, 2014; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). Being intrinsically motivated towards a task means that satisfaction and pleasure is derived from doing the task itself (Archer et al., 1999; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Rothes et al., 2016; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). For example, intrinsic learners seek to learn about something simply because they find it interesting (Rothes et al., 2016). Intrinsically motivated students tend to work autonomously and are self-directed (Bye et al., 2007). These characteristics align with Knowles' (1970) central tenet of andragogy, that adult learners have independent self-concepts, are oriented to self-directed learning, and are is intrinsically motivated to learn. So not only are adult learners intrinsically motivated, they learn better when their learning is self-guided, characteristics that may play a part in their perceptions of their institution's effectiveness. As such, nontraditional students may be compelled to persist through their academic journey, even when they face challenges or obstacles.

Conversely, students who are more extrinsically motivated tend to engage in learning as a means to an end (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Rothes at al., 2016; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). Extrinsic motivation is related to performing a task for the consequence of reward (such as getting a job or earning money) or to avoid negative outcomes, such as criticism or punishment (Rothes et al., 2016). Research on motivation and educational

outcomes shows that intrinsic motivation is generally considered a more powerful form of motivation for educational outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Rothes et al., 2016). Intrinsic motivation is linked to student persistence and higher grades/increased academic performance (Bye et al., 2007; Vallerand & Bissonnette,1992; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004).

Of course, it is probably unrealistic to think that nontraditional students' motivation to go to (and get through) college is purely and solely for the love of learning. Rather, as previously indicated, nontraditional students cite career changes as their primary reason for returning to college (Compton et al., 2006; Rossiter, 2007), which would point to a more extrinsically motivated decision. The more likely scenario is that there are a combination of motivations and factors that compel nontraditional students to go back to school. Adult learners may be motivated both by the need to earn their degree as a signal to current and future employers that they are just as qualified as any other worker, *as well as* following their heart and finally completing a lifelong goal. Nontraditional students may have multiple motivators for pursuing a postsecondary degree (Rothes et al., 2016) and performing well in the academy.

In some cases, adult student success may simply be a matter of practicality. Perhaps nontraditional students perform well in higher education because they finance their own education; they protect their investment by working hard, attending class, and welcoming the opportunity to apply academic learning with life and work experiences (Graham, & Donaldson, 1999; Fairchild, 2003). Going to college is expensive. Not only are there out of pocket costs (like tuition, books, and other supplies), but time in class

means time away from work. Perhaps even more expensive is the time spent away from loved ones. Time is precious, especially for adult learners who juggle family, career, and student life, therefore, succeeding in school may be a matter of efficiency.

Maybe nontraditional students are motivated to go to and do well in college because they are finally fulfilling a promise made to themselves years before, or to prove to others (and themselves) that they actually can succeed academically. In many cases, nontraditional students are compelled to succeed in college in order to set a good example for their kids (Goto & Martin, 2009; Markle, 2015). Some adults never considered going to college until they realized it was up to them set an example for their children (Goto & Martin, 2009). The decision to go to and/or complete a college education is motivated by their desire to create a better life and set a good example for their children (Davis-Kean, 2005). Regardless of why and how they are motivated, nontraditional students tend to have better academic outcomes than traditional undergraduate students (Carney-Compton & Tan, 2002; Eppler & Harju, 1997; Eppler et al., 2000; Hoyert & O'Dell, 2009; Morris, Brooks, & May, 2003).

Surely, nontraditional students' unique motivations shape their perceptions of their classroom experiences and the services they receive from the university. How does a busy mom who works full time and attends college to earn her degree so she can set a positive example for her children view her experience? How does a military veteran who has completed several years of instruction, training, and service to our country perceive college curriculum that assumes that if students are not held accountable through pop quizzes or other traditional pedagogical practices, they will not read their textbooks or

participate in class? And how does that veteran perceive the university's commitment to her success when her training does not count towards her degree and she does not have access to advisers because they are only available during the work day? She may be motivated and determined to succeed, yet, she may also face an abundance of unique challenges, or barriers to success that likely also shape her perceptions of institutional effectiveness.

Barriers

Nontraditional students face unique challenges that are important to consider when seeking to understand their perceptions of institutional effectiveness. Unlike traditional college students, adult students often juggle multiple roles, such as balancing work, personal lives, and school (Giancola et al., 2009; Englund, 2019; Hardin, 2008; Kasworm, 2018). As Auguste et al. (2018) describe, "Nontraditional students may find themselves at the intersection of multiple identities" (p. 46). This is not to assert that traditional students do not juggle multiple roles; many traditional-aged students work and have families. In fact, over eighty percent of students work while in school, and nearly half of all traditional-aged students work, with almost one in ten working at least 35 hours/week (Darolia, 2014).

However, for nontraditional students in particular, going (or returning) to college usually constitutes a major life change (Hardin, 2008; Kasworm, 2008). Older students often have established lives outside of academia. Therefore, older students with job and family responsibilities live in at least two worlds, where their colleagues and family may not be able to relate to their academic aspirations and pressures, and where their

classmates and instructors may not understand their outside responsibilities (Auguste et al., 2019; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Kasworm, 2008; Kosut, 2006). As such, nontraditional students face barriers as a result of their life circumstances (situational barriers), their perceptions of themselves as they struggle with multiple roles (dispositional barriers), and institutional barriers created by a system that is designed for traditional students who attend college full-time (Cross, 1981; Osam et al., 2017). In 2017, Osam et al. published an integrated literature review of the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers faced by traditional students. Tables 2, 3, and 4 provide an update on Osam et. al's (2017) summary of findings.

Situational barriers. Situational barriers consist of one's life circumstances that may create challenges for nontraditional students (Cross, 1981; Spellman, 2007). Examples of situational barriers include the need to balance caring for a family, working, and focusing on school (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Nontraditional students often have increased financial responsibilities, such as mortgages, car payments, preexisting financial debt (possibly major outstanding student loan debt from previous college experiences), and/or the cost of raising children. Adult learners sometimes face financial insecurity, and find the cost of tuition and supplies to be prohibitive and difficult to overcome (Flynn, Brown, Johnson & Rodger, 2011). For many nontraditional students, arranging for and working around childcare creates hardships when pursuing a college degree (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011).

For many adults, going (or returning) to college can disrupt their family's lives, which can cause stress. Especially when pursuing higher education to fulfill a life goal,

Deutsch and Schmertz (2011) found that some women feel a combination of stress, pressure, financial burden, and guilt for returning to college. Some nontraditional women returning to school feel like they are embarking on a selfish journey (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011), a phenomenon that definitely resonates with me, personally. When they are in school, adult learners are away from their family and work. When they are at work or with their family, they are not focusing on their school work. Even though they may be pursuing their education to help improve their family's financial situation in the long term, the idea of taking time away from the family creates emotional confusion for many nontraditional students (Kasworm, 2008). Parents often weigh the opportunity cost of spending time away from their children and earning a degree which will help the family in the long run (Taniguchi, & Kaufman, 2005). Time is precious for many nontraditional students, with or without children. In addition to family responsibilities, many adults work multiple jobs and participate in civic, church, and community organizations (Goto & Martin, 2009). Adult learners' life contexts may create barriers for them to enter or re-enter college, and their busy lives may be a cause for stress during their academic journey. These factors may influence their perceptions of their university experience, and are important to bear in mind when seeking to understand their perceptions of institutional effectiveness.

Though nontraditional learners face increased stress due to family, career, and academic pressures, adults often consider their stage in life to be both a benefit and a motivation to succeed. For example, Goto & Martin (2009) found that students with children felt a need to be positive role models. Deutsch and Schmertz (2011) found that,

"families emerged as omnipresent sources of both constraints and support" (p. 491). While adult learners may feel guilty about being away from their spouses and families when they are at school or studying, married students often benefit from spousal support (Taniguchi, & Kaufman, 2005). So, while their situation may create barriers and stress for students and their families, adult students may be *propelled* by a desire to set a positive example and improve their family's lives. Further, older students often feel better equipped to learn in the classroom because they are more mature, and can apply what they are learning to real life experiences (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Therefore, situational barriers for adult learners may also serve as a catalyst to succeed in higher education. Table 2 summarizes and updates Osam et al.'s (2017) findings on the types of situational barriers faced by adult learners.

Table 2

Updated Summary of Osam et al.'s (2017) Findings of Situational Barriers

Study	**Design**	**Barriers**
Bowl (2001)	Qualitative	1. Time demands 2. Financial
Deutsch and Schmertz (2011)	Qualitative	1. Childcare 2. Family responsibilities 3. Financial
Flynn et al. (2011)	Qualitative	1. Family concerns 2. Frequent moves 3. Financial
Genco (2007)	Qualitative	1. Multiple roles (family, work) 2. Time demand

Goto and Martin (2009)	Quantitative	1. Financial 2. Transportation 3. Work conflicts 4. Childcare 5. Health problems
Hostetler, Sweet, and Moen (2007)	Quantitative	1. Childcare and work responsibilities
Saar, Täht, and Roosalu (2014)	Quantitative	1. Financial 2. Transportation
Shepherd and Nelson (2012)	Qualitative	1. Childcare 2. Work responsibilities 3. Marriage 4. Commute

Situational barriers for adult learners, such as challenges with childcare and work and financial constraints, may create life-obstacles that not only make it difficult for adults to navigate their way into and through college, but may also shape their perceptions of institutional effectiveness. Goto & Martin (2009) contend that situational barriers for nontraditional students are multifaceted and impact students' psychological well-being. Therefore, when examining adult learner perceptions of institutional effectiveness, it is important to keep life-contexts and situations in mind.

Dispositional barriers. Another set of obstacles that adult learners face has to do with how they view themselves (Cross, 1981). Dispositional characteristics refer to intrapersonal attributes, such as one's self-perceptions and attitudes (Cross, 1981; Keith, 2007). Genco (2007), found that nontraditional students were open about their dispositions and the barriers they face. Dispositional barriers encountered by

nontraditional students include apprehension about not fitting in as an older student in college, anxiety about their ability to succeed academically, and feeling out of place in an educational environment (Genco, 2007). Because nontraditional learners are often (re)entering school as a result of a major life transition, such as divorce or separation, work reasons, or due to a change in family dynamics (such as children leaving for school), adult learners often experience self-doubt (Compton et al., 2006; Hardin, 2008; Kasworm, 2008). Some adult learners "display emotional chaos as they develop a student identity, contemplate future success in a collegiate classroom, and psychologically manage their turbulent life circumstances" (Kasworm, 2008, p. 28).

As is the case with situational barriers, dispositional characteristics likely influence how students perceive themselves and their university's effectiveness. And, their dispositional characteristics may also provide benefits for nontraditional learners. Adult students tend to be intrinsically motivated, compelled to pursue a better life through education (Goto & Martin, 2009; Ross-Gordon, 2011). This type of disposition tends to serve nontraditional students well, as intrinsic motivation is associated with positive student outcomes (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). However, while adults may be intrinsically motivated to learn and determined to improve their family's situation, they sometimes feel out of place, insecure, and isolated in traditional academic settings (Flynn et al., 2011; Genco, 2007; Kasworm, 2008; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012).

One important self-perception is academic self-doubt (Simi & Matusitz, 2016). For some adult learners, self-doubt derives from an awareness of their minority status as older students (Simi & Matusitz, 2016). This phenomenon, known as Imposter

Syndrome, may cause anxiety for nontraditional students. Older students often feel like they do not belong in college, that higher education is not meant for them, and they should not even be there (Clance & Imes, 1978; Simi & Matusitz, 2016). In some cases, high achieving students perceive their academic success to be a result of luck or hard work, rather than their actual ability (Clance & Imes, 1978; Chapman, 2017; Knights & Clarke, 2013), a sentiment that also resonates with me, personally. Nontraditional students who suffer from Imposter Syndrome often feel the need to constantly prove themselves (Chapman, 2017) and fear their incompetence will be discovered (Knights & Clarke, 2013). Feeling like they do not belong in college can create dispositional barriers for nontraditional students. How will a student who feels like she does not belong in a classroom full of younger students perceive her university experience? Will her own self-doubt color her perceptions? What can the university do to make her feel more welcome, and less like an imposter among her peers? These are important questions to consider when examining nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness.

Table 3 summarizes and updates Osam et al.'s (2017) findings of dispositional barriers faced by nontraditional students.

Table 3

Updated Summary of Osam et al.'s (2017) Findings of Dispositional Barriers

Study	**Design**	**Barriers**
Deggs (2011)	Qualitative	Fear of failing
Englund, 2019	Quantitative	1. Feeling marginalized 2. Stress associated with multiple roles

Flynn et al. (2011)	Qualitative	1. Perceived differences between adults and other students 2. Feelings of exclusion from school environment
Genco (2007)	Qualitative	1. Feeling out of place 2. Anxiety about succeeding academically
Goto and Martin (2009)	Qualitative	1. Anxiety/fear of the unknown about returning to school 2. Low self-efficacy stemming from anxiety, low performance from previous schools, and low self-esteem
Kasworm (2010)	Qualitative	1. Adult learners' perceived lack of acceptance into research culture 2. Low self-esteem/ Imposter
Shepherd and Nelson (2012)	Qualitative	1. Lack of confidence due to perceived faculty perception about adult learners' low academic skills 2. Insecurities about ability to succeed

Nontraditional students face many dispositional barriers, such as feelings of anxiety around their ability to succeed (Goto & Martin, 2009; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012) and feeling like they do not belong in the classroom when they are surrounded by traditional-aged students (Flynn et al., 2011; Kasworm, 2010). How adults feel about themselves inevitably impacts how they perceive their college experience. Therefore, it is important to consider the dispositional barriers adults face when examining their perceptions of institutional effectiveness in terms of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services.

Institutional barriers. In addition to life-contexts (or situational barriers) and self-perceptions (or dispositional barriers), nontraditional students face institutional barriers in organizations designed for traditional students (Cross, 1981; Kasworm, 2008). Institutional barriers consist of policies, procedures, and practices that are enshrined in colleges and universities that prevent, or even exclude, nontraditional students from educational activities (Cross, 1981; Osam et al., 2017). Examples of institutional barriers include (but are not limited to) inconvenient class schedules or locations, limited faculty availability, and lack of financial options (Cross, 1981; Spellman, 2007). In her seminal work, Cross (1981) claimed that institutional barriers are often subconsciously erected by education providers and can be grouped into five main areas: scheduling problems; location and transportation issues; lack of courses that adult learners find interesting, relevant or practical; time requirements and procedural problems; lack of information about programs and procedures.

Interestingly, these findings are consistently found in research on institutional barriers for nontraditional students spanning over three decades. For example, 30 years after Cross's book was published, Deggs (2011) examined perceived academic barriers for nontraditional students and found the two most common themes of institutional barriers were *understanding and utilizing technology* and *lack of face to face interaction with faculty and peers*. Malhotra, Shapero, Sizoo, and Munro (2007) found that institutional barriers for adults included transportation issues and too much red tape when trying to enroll. Kasworm (2010) found that nontraditional students had problematic situations with admissions and advising staff, and catalogs, websites, policies, and

schedules were youth-oriented, meaning they did not account for those who work full time and have other responsibilities.

Institutional barriers hinder adult students' success and heighten their sense of otherness when policies, practices, and procedures exclude them (Kasworm, 2010). Nontraditional students are "often sensitive to cues suggesting that they did not fit into this environment for the best and brightest of undergraduates." (Kasworm, 2010, p. 150). These signals are systematically reinforced through institutional barriers. Table 4 summarizes and updates Osam et al.'s (2017) findings on institutional barriers faced by nontraditional students. Common institutional barriers include policies and procedures that work against adult learners, such as not enough evening and weekend classes and limited access to faculty (Hardin, 2008; Osam et al., 2017).

Table 4

Updated Summary of Osam et al.'s (2017) Findings of Institutional Barriers

Study	**Design**	**Barriers**
Deggs (2011)	Qualitative	1. Technology 2. Lack of face-to-face interaction with faculty and peers
Goto and Martin (2009)	Qualitative	1. Difficulty navigating educational system 2. Lack of clear institutional pathways
Kasworm (2010)	Qualitative	1. Admissions and advisement directed primarily toward younger students 2. Policies, procedures, websites 3. Curricular scheduling 4. Getting up to speed with college work
Keith (2007)	Quantitative	1. Class times and university flexibility 2. Parking

		3. Tuition costs
Genco (2007)	Qualitative	1. Course scheduling conflicts 2. Limited course offerings 3. Problems with college resources, e.g., financial aid and enrollment services
Malhotra et al. (2007)	Quantitative	1. Transportation issues 2. Too much red tape to enroll
Saar, Täht, and Roosalu (2014)	Quantitative	1. Inconvenient class schedules

As is evidenced by Table 4, nontraditional students face a plethora of institutional barriers. It is important to consider how these institutional barriers manifest in curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. For example, do most courses offer curriculum designed primarily for traditional-aged students, and are they offered during weekdays in traditional modalities? How is that curriculum perceived by nontraditional students? Does the university offer career services or programing that are accessible to, relevant for, and needed by, adult learners? And, if student services are only available during the weekday, an institutional barrier may be erected for nontraditional students, which will likely affect their perceptions of the institution's effectiveness related to comprehensive student services.

Pros and Cons

Researchers have examined why nontraditional students go or return to college as working age adults, and what barriers they face in their journey. Nontraditional students tend to be intrinsically motivated (Archer et al., 1999; Bennett et al., 2007; Bye et al., 2007; Eppler & Harju, 1997; Francois, 2014; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Shillingford & Karlin,

2013), but motivation alone does not guarantee success, especially in light of the unique barriers nontraditional students encounter. Often, their life-experiences and their ability to immediately apply what is being taught in the classroom contributes to success and serve as positive characteristics for nontraditional learners (Nelken, 2009). For example, a mid-career nontraditional student may understand concepts of differing management styles taught in organizational communication studies classes in a way that a traditional-aged student who has never had a full-time job cannot, because she may have actually experienced managers with different styles throughout her career. She very well may also manage her own staff and have the opportunity to immediately apply strategies and tactics discussed in her classes and textbooks. Older students are often disciplined and focused, and are more likely to adopt comprehension-focused learning, rather than rote memory in order to pass a quiz or exam (Justice & Dornan, 2001). Perhaps this is because adults face life experiences and transitions that require the ability to adapt and adjust, such as career and family responsibilities (Justice & Dornan, 2001; Richardson, 1994). Nontraditional students can draw on past and current life experiences in order to make purposefully meaningful learning (Richardson, 1994). Such experiences allow adults to modify, transfer, and reintegrate ideas differently than traditional-aged students (Richardson, 1994).

However, adult learners face challenges due to their life-circumstances (Cross, 1981; Spellman, 2007), their own self-perceptions (Cross, 1981; Kasworm, 2008; Keith, 2007), and institutional policies and practices that work against them as they pursue their education (Genco, 2007; Kasworm, 2010; Keith, 2007; Saar, Täht, & Roosalu, 2014).

Yet, many adult learners (myself included) consider going back to college to be one of the best experiences and decisions of their lives, so there are obviously pros and cons for going or returning to college as a working age adult. Therefore, this study seeks to understand institutional effectiveness for nontraditional students, and what the university can do to improve curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services for adult learners. Table 5 provides an overview of some of the aforementioned characteristics of adult learners (both positive and challenging) and their experiences as nontraditional students.

Table 5

Positive and Challenging Characteristics of Adult learners and Their Experiences as Nontraditional Students

Challenging Characteristics	Positive Characteristics
Situational barriers - Career responsibilities - Family	Extrinsic motivation + Career opportunities + Family
Dispositional barriers Self-doubt Feeling out of place Love of learning	Intrinsic motivation + Goal-orientation +Fulfilling a lifelong dream
Institutional barriers -Curriculum and instruction, career planning, and student services policies designed for traditional-aged students	Life experiences + Maturity + Self-directed learning + Meaning-making (what is being taught is often immediately applicable)

Nontraditional students encounter situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers as they go to or return to college, but their motivations and their personal characteristics may lend to positive experiences for them as they pursue their degree.

Adult learners are often motivated both by their desire (and/or need) to pursue career changes and an inner desire to complete something that they may have started long ago. Being nontraditional provides benefits for nontraditional students, such as life experience, maturity, and unique motivations. Yet the barriers adult learner face may create challenges as they progress through their academic journey. Therefore, a tension exists between the pros and cons of going or returning to college for nontraditional students. The institution plays an important role in the adult learner experience, and whether nontraditional students are inhibited by their barriers or compelled to succeed by their motivations. The institution's culture influences nontraditional students. Policies and practices, such as the amount of andragogical teaching techniques (e.g. promoting a climate of mutual respect and encouraging group discussions) that are infused in curriculum, undoubtedly impact adult learners' perceptions of their experience.

Research question one examines if nontraditional student perceptions can be predicted by their personal characteristics. For example, can the number of hours a student works in a week predict how she perceives the institution's effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, or student services? Many adult learners work full time and attend college part time, which means their life context creates situational barriers for them that prevent them from fully immersing themselves in college. Therefore, it is important to consider what the university can do to help nontraditional students succeed. It is also important to understand the role institutional culture, policies, and practices have in facilitating nontraditional students' perceptions as they move along the continuum of barriers to motivators. Figure 8 depicts how

institutional culture and *pedandragogical* policies and practices surround nontraditional students and influence adults as they move through the continuum of facing their barriers while being propelled by their motivations. When culture and practices facilitate students towards their motivations, they move closer to academic success.

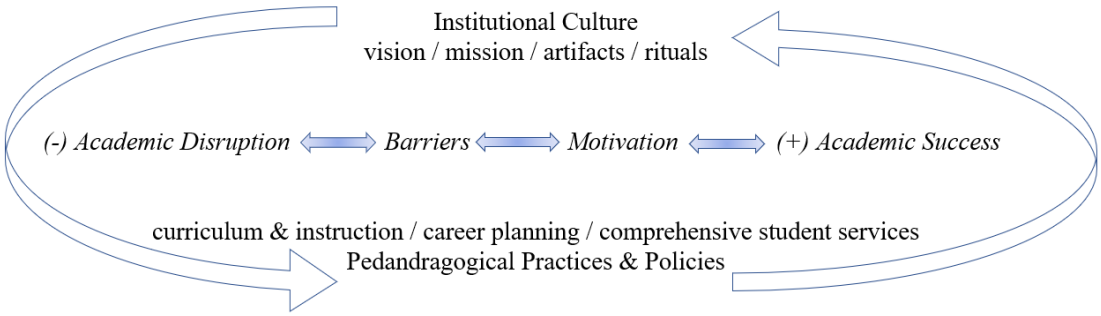


Figure 8. Graphic Conceptualization of how Institutional Culture and Pedandragogical Practices Surround Adult Learners and Influence Their Progress Towards Success.

Figure 8 depicts how culture and practices may influence adult learners towards success as they progress through their academic journey, and it also depicts how institutional culture and practices can hinder nontraditional students and pull them away from their motivations and towards further disruption of their academic journey.

Research questions two and three dig deeper into the lived experience of adult learners. Why do adults perceive their experience negatively or positively, or even *both* positively and negatively? Does the institution's culture help keep them focused on their motivations to go to and get through college, or does it contribute to the adult feeling like they do not belong, and therefore add to the barriers they face? Do university policies and practices help them overcome their barriers and capitalize on their intrinsic motivation to succeed? Existing research focuses on the characteristics of adult learners,

but little research considers how those students perceive their experience, how institutional culture and policies contribute to those perceptions, and if the institution can, and should, alter its policies to help them succeed.

Institutional Effectiveness for Adults

What makes an institution effective for adult learners? It is important to consider nontraditional student motivations (Allen & Zhang, 2016; Bennett et al., 2007; Luke & Justice, 2016; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013; Taylor & House, 2010), and barriers (Cross, 1981, Deggs, 2011; Osam et al., 2017). It is also important to consider how adults experience the traditional university environment. Yet, research on institutional effectiveness for adults often focuses on distance education and online learning (Pontes, Hasit, Pontes, Lewis, & Siefring, 2010; Pontes & Pontes, 2012; Rabourn et al., 2018). This focus poses inherent challenges when seeking to understand nontraditional student perceptions because adult learners are the fastest growing segment in higher education, not just *distance* education. For example, more than one in five undergraduates at Sacramento State is 25 years old or older, over 5,500 students (California State University, Sacramento, 2018a). One might assume those students are enrolled in degree completion programs, designed specifically for nontraditional students. However, while Sacramento State does offer degree completion programs through the College of Continuing Education (CCE), those enrollments only represent a small portion of the adult learners. CCE offers five degree-completion programs with around 150 enrollments per year (California State University, Sacramento, n.d., About CCE), which is less than 3% of the population of nontraditional students at Sacramento State.

Importantly, distance and online education do provide vital options for nontraditional students, and adults may make up the majority of students in online courses. Online courses and degree programs are often preferable for adult learners because of time constraints (Ausburn, 2004; Rabourn et al., 2018). Empirical analysis of data from the 2004 National Postsecondary Students Aid Survey (NPSAS) confirmed that preference for enrolling in distance education is greater for nontraditional students than traditional students (Pontes et al., 2010; Pontes & Pontes, 2012; Rabourn et al., 2018). Given that adult learners have busy schedules with multiple roles (spouse, parent, employee, boss, and caretaker), it stands to reason that nontraditional students find distance and online learning options attractive (Pontes & Pontes, 2012). Therefore, research on distance and online learning is meaningful for adults, though it represents a small percentage of nontraditional students, at least at Sacramento State. Notably, insights gleaned about nontraditional students, regardless of whether or not they are enrolled in distance or continuing education programs, may be helpful to mitigate institutional barriers for all adult learners in higher education. To understand how this study operationalizes institutional effectiveness, in the following sections, nontraditional student research is grouped into three categories; curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. The notions of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services will be expanded and described in the following section.

Curriculum and Instruction

This study seeks to understand how nontraditional students perceive their institutions' effectiveness related to curriculum and instruction. But what does that mean? Based on CAEL's Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adults, curriculum and instruction can be comprised of elements such as the Teaching and Learning Process and Technology. CAEL (2019) describes effective teaching and learning as using multiple methods of instruction that connect concepts from curriculum to useful knowledge and skills for adult learners. Effective use of technology means that information technology is utilized to provide relevant and timely information for adults and to enhance the overall learning experience (CAEL, 2019). But how is curricular and instructional effectiveness for nontraditional students operationalized?

One way to operationalize curricular and instructional effectiveness for nontraditional students is to consider andragogical practices. To what degree are courses designed for adult learners? Or, how much are andragogical practices infused into the curriculum and lesson plans? For example, one tenet of andragogy is that adults learn best when curriculum is problem-centered, and the information being taught is immediately applicable (Chan, 2010; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Holmes & Abington-Cooper, 2000; Kelly, 2013; Merriam, 2001; Pew, 2007; Rachal, 2002; Taylor & Kroth, 2009). Therefore, a way to operationalize curricular effectiveness for adult learners would be to review course syllabi and determine how well it aligns with nontraditional student needs.

Take, for example, the aforementioned organizational communication class. Are the theories taught in the course applicable to a mid-career professional? At Sacramento State, one theory that is taught in some organizational communications courses is Maslow's (1954) Hierarchy of Needs. In this traditional motivation theory, students learn human beings' *needs* determine their motivation. According to Maslow (1954), someone whose physiological needs are not met (if they are hungry or live in an unsafe environment), those needs drive their motivation. The second most basic level of Maslow's Hierarchy is safety, which includes security of employment, an issue that is likely top of mind for nontraditional students. As basic needs are met, people's motivations progress towards areas of intellectual and emotional fulfilment. Learning about this theory might be immediately impactful and applicable for an adult learner. A mid-career nontraditional student who is seeking her bachelor's degree may gain a deeper understanding of her own motivations as she progresses through her educational journey, and this understanding may help her contextualize her challenges and gain perspective as she continues to seek her degree. In this way, the course aligns with andragogical tenets, and the nontraditional student may perceive the organizational communications course to be effective in terms of curriculum and instruction.

To operationalize nontraditional students' perceptions of institutional effectiveness with curriculum and instruction, researchers have examined adult learners' preferences, satisfaction, and success with technology. Research has examined whether or not adults have the right attitude and technical expertise to succeed in online programming (Carter; 2001; DiBiase & Kidwai, 2010; Lefor, Benke, & Ting, 2003).

Other studies have examined adult learners' digital and informational literacy (Rapchak, Lewis, Motyka & Balmert, 2015; Roberts, 2017). Given that nontraditional students are usually older than traditional students, one assumption may be that they are not as technologically savvy. Manner (2003) referred to adult learners as "e-immigrants" who "have never learned the language or customs of the receiving land" (p. 32), and recommends instructional strategies for supporting students who may struggle with technology. For example, Manner (2003) recommended that instructors conduct some sort of orientation with students *in person*, when possible, even in a fully online class. Adult learners who are returning to college sometimes feel intimidated by online classes and overwhelmed with online course websites (Filipponi-Berardinelli, 2013), and may be less likely to ask for help. Manner (2003) recommends that instructors assure all students, young and not-as-young, to connect with their e-classmates and not to panic if technology fails. When something goes wrong in an e-classroom environment, students who are less comfortable with technology invariably think it is their fault. Manner (2003) purposefully shares stories with her students about times when she has been kicked out of her own virtual classroom by the "cyber-genie" who has no regard for her rank as the professor. Granted, Manner's depiction of nontraditional students as technologically timid stereotypes adult learners in a way that is overly simplified and dismissive of their probable digital adeptness. However, providing helpful technology tips may not only make nontraditional students feel more confident in the classroom, it may help increase success for all students.

Even if adult learners enter the classroom (or e-classroom) with trepidation due to their perceived lower levels of digital literacy, nontraditional students are goal-oriented and eager to finish what they started (Francois, 2014; Scott & Lewis, 2011). Dibiase and Kidwai (2010) found that older students are more inclined to adapt learning strategies as necessary and can manage time limitations more effectively than younger students. Even in online environments, where younger students are more likely to be digital natives, and are perceived as more comfortable in and accustom to technology, adult learners often perform better than nontraditional students (Dibiase & Kidwai, 2010).

Wikle (2010) examined the technological, curricular, and strategic planning needed for developing effective online geographic information systems (GIS) degree and certificate programs. This was a unique study because, in addition to considering the nontraditional student needs, Wikle (2010) also discussed how other stakeholders, such as faculty, the academic institution, and employers, can benefit from online course delivery. Recognizing and highlighting the impacts of online instruction on, and for, other stakeholders, such as employers, is a helpful insight. Wikle (2010) described how online education can benefit employers through the new knowledge and competencies their employees can gain, potentially without ever needing a leave of absence or, in many cases, any time spent away from work. In other words, when employees increase their educational attainment through online curriculum, employers may benefit because their workforce is gaining knowledge and skills without the employer affording many (or any) accommodations to their employees. For adults, time is everything. Many nontraditional students work full-time, have families, and juggle other roles (Kasworm, 2008), so online

options can be extremely helpful for them. When employers understand the benefits of educational attainment for their employees, *as well as* for their businesses, more nontraditional students may find more avenues for success.

Whether or not instructors infuse andragogical practices in their curriculum with theories that are relatable, and how well technology is incorporated in the classroom, are two ways to operationalize curriculum and instruction and how effective they are for nontraditional students. Considering an institutions' approach to teaching and learning and how instructors utilize technology may affect nontraditional learners' perceptions of their institutions' effectiveness. As such, this study aims to assess how nontraditional students perceive institutional effectiveness in the areas of curriculum and instruction. The study will also assess how adult learners perceive their institution's effectiveness in the areas of career planning and comprehensive student services.

Career Planning

Making the connection between academics and career is especially important for adult learners (Kasworm, 2008, Klein-Collins, 2011), and institutions that adapt to market demands may be more effective for nontraditional students. Increasingly, adults are returning to school to gain the skills and educational attainment needed for career advancement or to support a change in careers (McMahon, Watson, & Zietsman, 2018). But how well do traditional universities assess nontraditional students' career needs? Further, how well do institutions align their programs to student needs? To employer needs? The needs of the workforce in general? A major problem that was identified during the Great Recession was that, in addition to low educational attainment levels,

unemployment rates were largely a result of the mismatch between the skills required for available jobs and those of the potential workforce (Kelly, Prescott, & Weeks, 2017).

One indicator of institutional effectiveness for adult students is how well the institution collaborates with industry, business and employers, and other community partners (Ritt, 2008). Such collaborations provide nontraditional students with educational pathways that help guide them towards career advancement. In a working paper from the Rutgers University Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, Cleary and Van Noy (2014) proposed multiple activities that can be enacted in order to increase this kind of collaboration through Labor Market Alignment (LMA) for higher education. In the paper, Cleary and Van Noy (2014) define higher education LMA as, "activities and related outcomes with the goal of ensuring that higher education institutions graduate the correct numbers of graduates with the necessary skills for the job market in a way that supports students' career goals and is consistent with institutional mission and economic conditions" (p. 3).

Cleary and Van Noy (2014) suggest two main goals for LMA; job vacancy alignment and skills alignment. *Job vacancy alignment* refers to matching the number of graduates to the demands of the workforce. So, for example, do universities produce the number of nurses or teachers needed to meet workforce demand? In many cases, the answer is no. Research suggests that higher education institutions should produce significantly more science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) graduates in order to meet growing national labor market demand (Carnevale et al., 2013; Cleary & Van Noy, 2014; Wilson, 2014). *Skills alignment* involves aligning the skills taught in higher

education with those in demand in the labor market (Cleary & Van Noy, 2014). Aligning skills seeks to mitigate the skills gap, where employers simply cannot find enough potential workers that possess the necessary skills to fill open positions (Wilson, 2014). Imagine a student who graduates with a computer science degree whose university did not teach current programs and technology. That student may have a degree that is in high demand, but she may not necessarily possess the skills needed by employers in Silicon Valley. For adult learners seeking to advance their career, or pursue a new career path, how relevant the degrees that are offered and the skills that are taught in higher education are to workforce demand is extremely important.

According to Cleary and Van Noy (2014), alignment activities can occur across various levels and aspects of higher education. A few of their proposed activities include curricula approaches (such as offering programs that align with market demand), relevant program content and curriculum development, instructional strategies (such as andragogical practices), work-based learning (such as internships and apprenticeships), and ensuring that career advisers understand current labor market needs (Cleary & Van Noy, 2014).

In addition to aligning the number and kinds of degrees and skills offered at colleges and universities, Bohonos (2014) posited that understanding the career context of adult learners is another way of improving institutional effectiveness for nontraditional students. Bohonos (2014) identified five categories of career context in which nontraditional students are returning to college, they are: (a) students with work histories in occupations generally labeled nonprofessional, (b) professionals who want to change

career fields, (c) displaced professionals, (d) workers who are concerned about being displaced, and (e) professionals who need a degree to make the next vertical step within their organizations. Of course, these five categories are not the only contexts in which nontraditional students are entering or returning to higher education. However, if institutions consider the workforce and contexts that create conditions that compel adults to return to college, their programming may better align with students' needs.

For example, displaced professionals who have some college but no degree may need to earn their credential or degree as quickly as possible in order to return to the workforce so they can provide for their families. Institutions may consider policies and practices that help nontraditional students earn credit for their work experience as a mechanism for attaining their educational goals in a timely manner. One such policy is offering Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) through Prior Learning Assessments (PLA) (Bohonos, 2014; Travers, 2012), which provide mechanisms that institutions use to assess and offer academic credit (Klein-Collins & Hain, 2009).

Offering PLA is a process where colleges and universities assess the college-level knowledge and skills gained outside of the classroom (Klein-Collins, 2010). The types of skills and knowledge considered include a student's employment history, military training and service, civic activities and volunteer service, among others (Hawk, 2018; Klein-Collins, 2010). As Klein-Collins (2010) states, "PLA recognizes and legitimizes the often-significant learning in which adults have engaged in many parts of their lives" (p. 6). PLA consist of multiple methods of assessment, including, but not limited to; individualized student portfolios, evaluation of corporate and/or military training as

established by the American Council on Education (ACE), institutionally customized examines (such as Challenge Exams), and standardized exams (such as Advance Placement and College Level Examination, or CLEP).

Offering CPL for nontraditional students who have been in the workforce for multiple years, even decades, is a way to help displaced workers earn credit towards their degree. For example, a degree completion program offered at Sacramento State through CCE offers up to 30 semester units of elective coursework based on students' work history (California State University, Sacramento, n.d., About CCE). So, for a displaced worker with some college but no degree, entering into the Bachelor of Science in Career and Technical Studies Program at Sacramento State may help her finish her degree faster and secure her reentry into the workforce. Understanding adult learners' career contexts and creating programs and policies that honor their life and work experience may be a way for institutions to be more effective for nontraditional students. As such, the purpose of this study is to examine nontraditional student perceptions of Sacramento State's effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services.

Comprehensive Student Services

Institutional barriers for nontraditional students include issues with admissions, enrollment, and financial services (Cross, 1981; Genco, 2007; Kasworm, 2008, 2010; Keith, 2007), as was aforementioned in this chapter. As Brown and Nichols (2013) explain, the increase in nontraditional student enrollment over the past several decades has not necessarily correlated with an increase in resources, programs, and services for

adult students. For example, for students with children, lack of childcare services creates both an institutional barrier for adult learners (Brown & Amakwaa, 2007; Duquaine-Watson, 2007), and a sense of isolation due to feeling stigmatized by the lack of support services (Brown & Amakwaa, 2007; Brown & Nichols, 2013; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Yakaboski, 2010).

Additionally, colleges and universities too often only provide student services from 8 a.m. – 5 p.m. during the work week, which makes accessing support extremely difficult for adult students who work full time (Sissel et al., 2001). Nontraditional students may feel marginalized by the lack of services available to them. Worse, nontraditional students sometimes feel marginalized when they *do* seek services, such as advising, and the advisers do not understand, or are apparently not interested in, the unique circumstances of older students. Auguste et al. (2018) found that advisers sometimes lack interest in or an understanding of the unique challenges that nontraditional women students face. In some cases, the advisor acted dismissive and communicated low expectations when meeting with adult women who face challenges associated with being nontraditional students (Auguste et al., 2018). Similarly, Englund (2019) found that, in addition to the anxiety and stress nontraditional nursing students feel due to balancing life priorities, adult nursing students also feel marginalized in a largely homogenous population of nursing students. From lack of campus programs available to nontraditional students to hours of operation and course schedules, nontraditional nursing students are “constantly marginalized by their surroundings” (Englund, 2019, p. 168).

Nontraditional students also face challenges due to a lack of financial services and options to help them pay for going back to college (Keith, 2007). Working adults may earn too much income to qualify for financial aid, yet may not be able to afford, or simply may not be interested in, accumulating increased debt. There are no federal financial aid student programs designed for adult students (Hatfield, 2003) which may create challenges for nontraditional students who support themselves and/or their families. For nontraditional students, the lack of access to comprehensive student services may create challenges and barriers and may decrease institutional effectiveness (Cross, 198; Osam et al., 2017). According to Klein-Collins (2011), in order to be effective for nontraditional students, institutions need to provide comprehensive student services to support the adult learner with academic and student support. With this in mind, how do nontraditional students perceive the institutional effectiveness of comprehensive student services at Sacramento State? Are the institution's academic and career advising services available to them at convenient times? If not, does the lack of convenience affect nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness? Do advisers understand and appreciate the unique challenges nontraditional students face? Are there student organizations designed by and for nontraditional students? Are there networking opportunities? Does the institution provide information about financial aid for nontraditional students? Are childcare services provided for students with children? These are the types of questions that should be considered when seeking to understand nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness of comprehensive student services.

Adult Learning Theory

Thus far in this study, much attention has been dedicated to characteristics of nontraditional students and what institutional effectiveness means to them. It has been established that nontraditional students have unique motivations to enter or return to college and face unique barriers. Further, literature related to curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services has been described. However, the one missing element in the literature is a central comprehensive adult learning theory.

The vast amount of research on nontraditional students indicates the importance of developing an adult learning theory. A frustration for researchers and practitioners of adult learning is the notable lack of an agreed-upon centralized adult learning theory (Cross, 1981) to help leaders develop meaningful policy and practice. No one theory or model explains all that is known about how adults learn and the contexts in which learning occurs (Merriam, 2001). The lack of a centralized theory of adult learning is problematic because in any applied profession there must be a constant interaction of theory and practice (Cross, 1981). Consequently, "Theory without practice is empty, and practice without theory is blind" (Cross, 1981, p. 110).

This is not to suggest that there is a complete lack of theoretical frameworks and models that improve understanding of how adults learn (Cross, 1981). As previously addressed, andragogy is a strong example of a theoretical construct that helps researchers and practitioners understand how adults learn best. But, while andragogy provides the basis for developing principles and best practices for adult learning, the construct does not constitute a theory of adult learning that can be empirically researched. One idea that

attempts to accomplish a deeper understanding of nontraditional students is Jack Mezirow's (1978) Transformation Learning Theory. Transformation Learning Theory builds on the idea that andragogy is, essentially, a critical pedagogy for adults. The theory addresses a critical consciousness, or, as Freire (1970) would say, their *conscientização*, that adult learners face as they progress through their higher education journey.

Transformation Learning Theory

> Transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 7)

Transformation learning theory is also referred to as transformative and transformational learning theory (Allen & Withey, 2017; Calleja, 2014; Merriam, 2001, 2004; Nohl, 2015) and generally posits that, as adult learners progress through phases of learning, they begin to challenge their frames of reference and generate new beliefs. Frames of references are developed from one's personal experience, and are composed of values, beliefs and assumptions, which create the lens through which sense is made (Merriam, 2004). Transformative learning acknowledges that adults view life through their limited experiences that shape their perspectives (Nerstrom, 2014). Working age adults with some college but no degree may be living in what Freire (1970) refers to as a limit situation. Freire (1970) posited that the oppressed may not be able to see a possible

different future (such as freedom from oppressors) because they are deliberately limited by their situation. They may not see themselves as capable or worthy of succeeding in college because they have either never tried, or have failed in the past, and they cannot imagine a situation where they would be capable of attaining an education. However, as adults encounter new experiences, their existing frames of reference are challenged and their perspectives change (Allen & Withey, 2017; Nerstrom, 2014; Wang & Cranton, 2011). Transformative learning involves becoming aware of one's assumptions and expectations and beginning to reassess their relevance in order to make new interpretations (Calleja, 2014; Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Nontraditional learners, therefore, may begin to see themselves differently, and they may begin to assess critically their own abilities, and the environment in which they are learning and living.

Mezirow's work was influenced by Freire and Habermas (Kitchenham, 2008; Pietrykowski, 1996). Freire (1970, 1973) asserted that education has a liberating effect, but to achieve liberation, one must achieve critical consciousness, or, *conscientização* (Javed, 2017). Further, Freire regarded dialogue as the primary element in knowledge building (Durakoğlu, 2013). Dialogue is "the encounter between men mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (Freire, 1970, p. 88). In other words, only through dialogue can men and women understand the world (Freire, 1970). Mezirow's theory of transformation follows these ideas. For example, for both Freire and Mezirow, change is brought about by inner-reflection (Javed, 2017). Transformation theory holds that frames of reference may be transformed only through critical reflection, and the resulting

interpretations are validated through *discourse* which involves the assessment of beliefs, feelings, and values (Mezirow, 1996a, 2003).

Mezirow's concept of perceptive transformation is based on Habermas' framework of communicative action (Connelly, 1996). Habermas' three domains of learning: technical (rules-based empirical knowledge, ask-specific), practical (involves social norms), and emancipatory (self-knowledge, self-reflection, introspective) were the basis of Mezirow's theory of transformation (Javed, 2017; Kitchenham, 2008). In transformational learning, Mezirow described the three learning processes as instrumental (learners ask *how* they can best learn new information), dialogic (*when* and *where* learning can best occur), and self-reflective (*why* they are learning the new information) (Javed, 2017; Kitchenham, 2008). In other words, transformation is based on communicative learning (Mezirow, 1996b). But how does transformation learning relate to adult learners, and how are adult learner perceptions of institutional effectiveness related to transformation learning?

Transformation learning theory is rooted in nontraditional student perceptions and experiences, and was first developed based on what happens when adults re-enter college (Allen & Withey, 2017; Calleja, 2014; Kitchenham, 2008; Merriam, 2001, 2004; Nohl, 2015). In the 1970s, in response to the women's movement, Jack Mezirow conducted a seminal study examining the factors that impede or facilitate women's success at reentering school or work after a long time away (Calleja, 2014; Kitchenham, 2008; Nohl, 2015). Mezirow (1978) developed ten phases of transformative learning. Through his research, Mezirow asserted that transformations generally follow some variation of

these phases of meaning creation, or clarification: a disorienting dilemma, self-examination, a critical assessment of assumptions, awareness that others share this experience, exploration of options, planning a course of action, acquisition of knowledge and skills to implement plans, provisionally trying new roles, building self-confidence and competence, and a reintegration into one's life on new terms (Erickson, 2007).

So, when an ousted manager who never finished her bachelor's degree returns to college, she builds on her existing knowledge and begins to create new meaning. The experience is disorienting, and she embarks on some self-assessment, critically examining her assumptions. She also begins to question critically her existing work relationships, and why she has thought a certain way about herself and others throughout her life, and she begins to realize that she is not alone in her journey of self-discovery. She begins to see herself in a new light, and reimagines what she can do and what success means to her. The transformation makes her reassess how she perceives her experiences in college, in her career, and helps her redefine her own sense of self-worth.

Clearly, this is a simplified scenario of the kind of transformation nontraditional students experience when they return to college. However, examining adult learners' perceptions through the lens of transformation learning helps understand how they perceive themselves and their institutional experiences. Some learners are operating under their existing frames of reference, which influences their perceptions of their role in the classroom, and of the institution's effectiveness. For example, the nontraditional student taking organizational communication studies experiences feelings of self-doubt throughout the semester. She feels like she does not actually belong in the classroom

because she is older than all the other students. She perceives the course as insignificant or ineffective for her, simply because she cannot see herself as a valued member of the class. As the semester progresses, she feels like any success she has is a result of luck, rather than the long hours she has dedicated to studying. But after several weeks of academic success, her thinking begins to transform. She begins to realize that she is perfectly capable of accomplishing anything her fellow students do, maybe even more. She begins to realize that her frustrations really lie in the lack of real-life examples the instructor uses in the classroom, or that she has difficulty visiting the teacher because her office hours are during the weekday when the student is at work. The student's perceptions of curricular and instructional effectiveness begin to evolve.

Mezirow (1978) asserted that nontraditional students traverse through ten phases during their transformative learning (listed in Table 6).

Table 6

Mezirow's (1978) Ten Phases of Transformative Learning

Phase	Phenomenon
1	A disorienting dilemma
2	A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
3	A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
4	Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
5	Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6	Planning of a course of action
7	Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8	Provisional trying of new roles
9	Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10	A reintegration into one's life dictated by one's perspective

SOURCE: Kitchenham, 2008, p. 105

Mezirow's (1978) phases are most-likely more formulaic and prescriptive than any one person experiences in real life. Rarely do humans progress from one phase to another in such a linear fashion. However, taken in broad terms, the phases of transformative learning provide a lens through which nontraditional learners perceive themselves and their institution. Learners who have not begun to question their existing frames of reference view themselves and their institution differently than students who have begun to transform their points of view around their own abilities. Those learners begin to question the service they are receiving. They begin to wonder if they deserve more from the offered curriculum and instruction, career planning, and student services at their institution.

The addition of transformation learning theory to the idea of andragogy provides an additional helpful theoretical lens for understanding nontraditional student perceptions. Both concepts take into account that adult learners experience education differently than traditional students, but transformation learning builds on the idea that, not only do adults learn differently, their frames of reference also completely change. In other words, andragogy addresses how adults learn and transformation learning theory considers the transformative process that adults experience when their frames of reference evolve and their perceptions are altered. Transformation learning theory posits a metamorphosis of sorts, that as nontraditional students progress through their degree attainment journey, they begin to change. Adult learners critically assess their preexisting frames of reference and create new ideas and perceptions of themselves and the world around them. Therefore, nontraditional students perceive the institution

through this lens of critical consciousness. That transformative learning process frames nontraditional student experiences, and must be considered when seeking to understand their perceptions of institutional effectiveness.

Alas, considering adult perceptions through the combined lenses of andragogy, transformational learning, and institutional culture begins to get at the heart of the development of a holistic adult learning theory, where one may consider how these three concepts interact to more fully capture nontraditional student experiences. It is important to consider how the university's culture influences the degree to which andragogical practices are embedded throughout instruction. *And,* how do andragogical practices, such as in the development and implementation of curriculum, affect adult learners' perceptions? *And finally,* how do these elements interact and contribute to the adult learner's transformation? Figure 9 depicts a graphic conceptualization of how transformative learning may complete the picture for what constitutes a theory of adult learning.

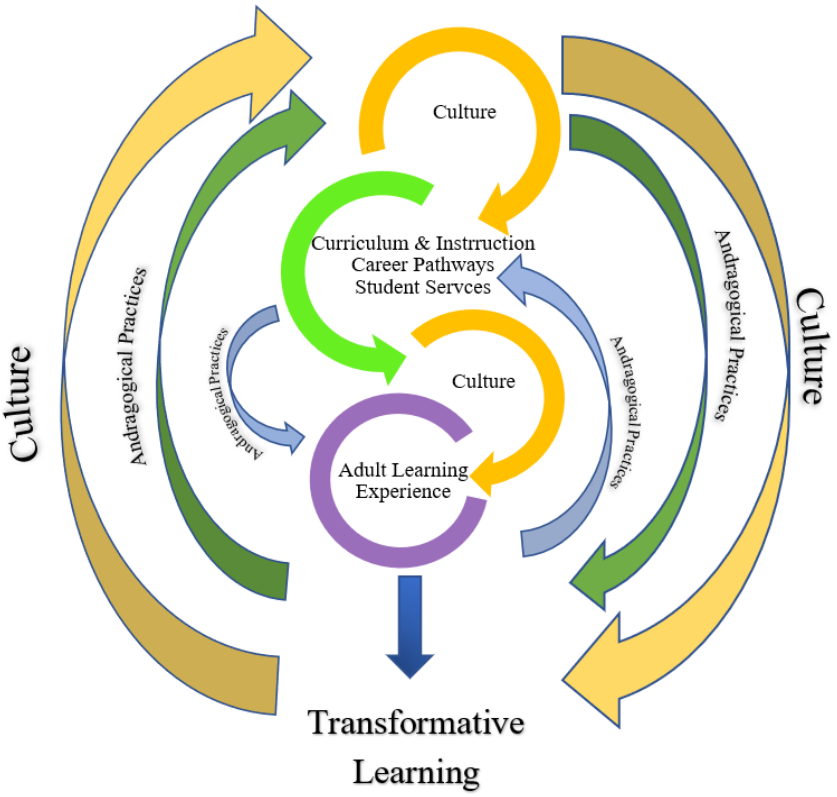


Figure 9. Graphic Conceptualization of How Culture, Curriculum and Instruction, Career Planning, and Student Services May Influence Adult Learning Experiences and Lead to Transformative Learning.

In this more complex model, culture is ubiquitous – culture surrounds the institution, and is embedded in all layers. When andragogical practices are infused in and throughout the institution, transformative learning occurs. For example, when teachers encourage discussion, and adults have a voice in the classroom, nontraditional students feel valued at the institution and their perceptions and frames of reference evolve. Considering the complexities of how the three constructs of institutional culture, andragogy, and transformation learning interact may create the foundation for a holistic adult learning theory. The infusion of andragogical (and *pedandragogical*) policies and

practices influences all aspects of the adult learner experience, and all practices and policies are imbedded in, and influenced by institutional culture. Only when the full picture is considered can a theory of adult learning begin to take shape. Analyzing problems through theory provides a roadmap to guide thinking and decision making (Nevarez et al., 2013) so that leaders can set theory to practice. Considering the combination of institutional culture, andragogy, and transformative learning is helpful when seeking to understand nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness. Considering the theoretical lenses of andragogy, institutional culture, and transformative learning *together* will help leaders understand nontraditional student perceptions.

Theory to Practice: Promising Best Programs and Practices

Many promising programs and initiatives around the United States focus on creating positive and successful experiences for nontraditional students. Creating programs designed to improve nontraditional student experiences and increase adult learner success is not a new idea by any stretch of the imagination. Multiple nationwide organizations focus on nontraditional student success, a trend that is growing, especially here in the Sacramento Region, and flagship organizations such as CAEL and Lumina Foundation have been dedicated to increasing educational attainment beyond high school for working age adults for decades.

Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)

CAEL is “a national nonprofit that works at all levels within the higher education, public, and private sectors to make it easier for people to get the education and training

they need" (cael.org, n.d.). Research on institutional effectiveness for nontraditional learners is often rooted in CAEL's principles for effectively serving adults (Hawk, 2018), and CAEL's principles form the basis of inquiry for this study. How well does the university serve nontraditional students? How do Sacramento State's nontraditional learners perceive university effectiveness in curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services? These are the questions CAEL's research addresses in an effort to support adult learners.

CAEL is one of the most prolific leaders and proponents of adult learning practices (Stevens, 2014). CAEL's approach to increasing educational attainment links not only academic institutions with employers in the workforce, but also cities, states, and regions that share common goals. CAEL serves as a convener of stakeholders and partners. They also facilitate research, such as the project Sacramento State is participating in as part of a cohort of Hispanic Serving Institutions examining how we service adult learners (specifically Latinx adults), and creating solutions for improving those nontraditional students' success. Probably most importantly, CAEL has dedicated years to establishing best practices for serving adult learners (Stevens, 2014).

In the early 2000s, CAEL, with funding from Lumina Foundation, designed an assessment tool for helping institutions understand how well they serve adults (Frey, 2007 Ritt, 2008). The Adult Learning Focused Institution (ALFI) Assessment Toolkit, offers colleges and universities a formal mechanism to assess how well they do in providing academic and student programs and services for adult students (Frey, 2007). The assessment is based on CAEL's Ten Principles of Effectively Serving Adults (Frey,

2007). The principles are evidently based in andragogical practices, and describe policies and practices that institutions can effectively serve adult learners. For example, the Teaching-Learning Process principle states that in an effective institution "the institution's faculty uses multiple methods of instruction (including experiential and problem-based methods) for adult learners in order to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills" (CAEL.org, n.d.). One of the central tenets of andragogy is that adult learners are *problem-centered* in their learning and interested in immediately applying knowledge (Chan, 2010; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Holmes & Abington-Cooper, 2000; Kelly, 2013; Merriam, 2001; Pew, 2007; Rachal, 2002; Taylor & Kroth, 2009). CAEL's Ten Principles provide a way for institutions to measure their effectiveness in serving adults. The principles also provide a roadmap for how colleges and universities can help nontraditional students succeed. Table 7 depicts CAEL's Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adults.

Table 7

Council on Adult for Experiential Learning (CAEL)

Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adults	
Adaptivity	This institution adjusts to shifting external market forces and is able to adapt to the changing expectations of internal stakeholders, students, and employers--understanding the needs of those they serve by developing creative academic solutions.
Strategic Partnerships	The institution engages in strategic relationships, partnerships, and collaborations with employers and other organizations in order to develop and improve educational opportunities for adult learners.

Assessment of Learning Outcomes	The institution defines and assesses the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired by adult learners both from the curriculum and from life/work experience in order to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor.
Student Support Systems	The institution assists adult learners using comprehensive academic and student support systems in order to enhance students' capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners.
Financing	The institution promotes choice using an array of payment options for adult learners in order to expand equity and financial flexibility.
Teaching-Learning Process	The institution's faculty uses multiple methods of instruction (including experiential and problem-based methods) for adult learners in order to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills.
Life & Career planning	The institution addresses adult learners' life and career goals before or at the onset of enrollment in order to assess and align its capacities to help learners reach their goals.
Technology	The institution uses information technology to provide relevant and timely information and to enhance the learning experience.
Outreach	The institution conducts its outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers of time, place, and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities.
Transitions	The institution supports guided pathways that lead into and from the institution's programs and services in order to ensure that students' learning will apply usefully to achieving their educational and career goals.

SOURCE: Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adults. CAEL.org

CAEL's principles provide a helpful framework for assessing how effective institutions are in serving nontraditional students. Using these principles as a foundation, this study examines how Sacramento State's adult learners' satisfaction with curriculum and instruction (comprised of the *Teaching and Learning* and *Technology* principles), career planning (comprised of the *Life & Career Planning*, Transitions, and Adaptivity principles), and comprehensive student services (comprised of the Financing and Student Support Systems principles). Understanding nontraditional student perceptions in these three areas will help the university gain a better understanding of how well we are serving nontraditional students.

Lumina Foundation

Lumina Foundation is "an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all" (Lumina Foundation, n.d.). Lumina Foundation works to bring about change by collaborating with government, nonprofit, and private sector organizations nationwide (Lumina Foundation, n.d.). Lumina Foundation was founded in August, 2000, and is the largest philanthropic organization in the country that is solely focused on increasing educational attainment beyond high school (Lumina Foundation, 2018). Lumina Foundation has set a nationwide goal of 60% educational attainment for working age adults by the year 2025 (Lumina Foundation, 2018) that has been adopted by many states.

Lumina Foundation works with local and regional partners to create positive changes in their areas in an effort to incrementally increase educational attainment for working age adults. In 2017, Lumina Foundation designated 17 cities as "Talent Hubs"

for supporting local efforts to increase postsecondary educational attainment (Lumina Foundation, 2017). To earn the designation, cities had to meet "rigorous standards for creating environments that attract, retain, and cultivate talent, particularly among today's students, many of whom are people of color, the first in their families to go to college, and from low-income households" (Lumina, 2017, para. 1). The Hubs were offered $350,000 each to be used over 42 months to develop talent in one of three areas; 18-22-year-old students, working age adults with some college no degree, or adults who had not earned any postsecondary credit (Lumina Foundation, 2017). Lumina Foundation has provided support for educational attainment efforts nationwide, including the research and training CAEL provides to help institutions maximize their effectiveness for nontraditional students.

Institutional Partnerships with Major Employers

The following section highlights programs and initiatives around the country designed to increase access to educational attainment, and help adult learners navigate their way into and through their college journeys. Many of these initiatives focus on partnering with the workforce to provide services or circumstances that increase access for nontraditional students. An exemplar of such a partnership is Starbucks and Arizona State University. In 2017, Starbucks launched a program offering full-time and part-time employees free college tuition to Arizona State University ("Starbucks College Achievement Plan," 2017). Starbucks recognizes the importance of earning a degree, and is committed to creating opportunities for their employees to increase their educational attainment ("Future leaders start here," n.d.). In reply to why Starbucks chose to partner

with Arizona State University, Starbucks stated "Starbucks is proud to join with an academic institution that recognizes the need for innovation to offer more people an opportunity of a quality higher education, and the freedom to pursue their passions in any field" ("Future leaders start here," n.d.).

Arizona State University (ASU) online provides opportunities and access for students to increase educational attainment, wherever they may live, and regardless of their socio-economic status (Dusst & Winthrop, 2019). ASU online can be considered an exemplar for nontraditional students in curriculum and instruction, career planning, and student services. According to Dusst and Winthrop (2019), in a Brookings Institute interview with ASU's president, Michael Crow, ASU is dedicated to identifying and implementing effective learning strategies, designing programs that respond to market demands, and tailoring services for students to maximize access. Crow's approach is to identify effective learning strategies, tools, and options for student success at every level (Dusst & Winthrop, 2019). Kissel (2019) asserted, "ASU is a public university that also is an enterprise under Michael Crow. Technological innovation, inclusion, education, and strategies for retention and completion are mutually reinforcing under the bold strategies led from the top" (p. 72). The ASU/ Starbucks partnership is one example of President Crow's transformation leadership (Kissel, 2019). In 2018, ASU also partnered with Uber to provide funded education for the company's more dedicated employees (Kissel, 2019) because "flexibility is foundational" (p. 72) to both enterprises. ASU online currently offers over 175 online degree programs and serves over 46,000 students (Dusst & Winthrop, 2019). ASU Online's design and the institution's partnerships with

Starbucks and Uber exemplify how organizations and institutions of higher education can partner to increase educational attainment for working age adults.

Arizona State University most likely is not partnering with Starbucks and Uber out of sheer benevolence. Undoubtedly, President Crow cares about working age adults, and intends to create access for nontraditional students so they can pursue their lifelong dreams. And, there is likely a strong profit motive. ASU likely benefits financially from the partnerships with major businesses and from the increased enrollments of adult learners. So, how does this relate to this study? I posit that it is imperative to consider what would compel public institutions in California to implement similar partnerships and strategies. As previously mentioned, a re-imagining of the California Master Plan for Higher Education could create such change. A retooling of the California Master Plan would generate funding streams for universities based on adult learner success. When adult learner success becomes integral to institutions' success, as seen at ASU, policies and practices will change. Andragogical practices will be infused in curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student success. Why would andragogical practices be infused? Because with a reimagined California Master Plan, adult learner satisfaction will be fiscally important to institutions. Policies that promote adult learner satisfaction and success will also promote increased success for California higher education institutions.

Programs and Initiatives Around the United States

There are multiple programs around the country that are working towards increasing educational attainment for working age adults. Understanding what is

working related to policies and practices designed to increase educational attainment is important to improving nontraditional student outcomes (Hawk, 2018). The following section will describe some of the efforts that have been launched nationwide. Some of the programs originated in cities that were designated as one of Lumina's first cohort of 17 Talent Hubs. Others have developed programs based on initiatives with similar goals, but perhaps different funding or accountability models. Some are statewide initiatives, some are regional or local networks of associations and programs, and others are in the early stages of development. Encouragingly, there is a groundswell of initiatives and programs across the country, and only a few will be described in this chapter. The programs that will be described are: KC Degrees (Kansas City Region), The *Graduate! Network* and *Graduate! Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, PA), Tennessee Reconnect (State of Tennessee), Rise to 55/SAIL to 60 (State of Florida), and ProjectAttain! (Sacramento Region, CA).

KC Degrees. KC Degrees is an initiative that was launched by the Mid-America Region Council (MARC) in an effort to help students return to college, and offer support throughout their educational journey (MARC, 2016). KC Degrees, located in Kansas City, MO, but serving the entire Kansas City region, has adopted Lumina's goal of increasing educational attainment to 60% by 2025. KC Degrees focuses on creating partnerships that bring together resources for potential "Reconnectors" (KCDegrees.org, n.d.). KC Degrees serves adults (25 and above) with the help of College Success Navigators. The navigators provide personalized service for people who are interested in returning to college but may need help navigating their way back "to and through" (KC

Degrees, n.d.). KC Degree's navigators are available to meet in community locations because they believe that it is important to meet potential reconnectors where they are, either through in-person or virtual service delivery (KC Degrees, n.d.).

The Graduate! Network. KC Degrees is an affiliate of the *Graduate! Network*. The *Graduate! Network* is a national network that builds on "the dynamics of the local workforce and talent ecosystem and on the needs and characteristics of potential Comebackers" (graduate-network.org, 2018). The *Graduate! Network* began in Philadelphia with *Graduate! Philadelphia* and has grown to a network of over 23 communities around the country (The Graduate! Network, 2018). *Graduate! Philadelphia* began with a partnership between the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board and the United Way of Southern Pennsylvania (Murphy, 2012). The initiative partnered with local colleges and universities, and by 2012, reported 52% college re-enrollment and 95% retention rate for Comebackers (Murphy, 2012). The *Graduate!* model, like KC Degrees, is designed to meet Comebackers where they are "academically, financially, geographically, and with regard for the complexity of their lives and responsibilities" (The Graduate! Network, 2018, para. 1). The network provides tools, such as a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) so that members can keep track of, and stay in communication with potential Comebackers and their potential institutions. The network also provides periodic and on-demand training for coaches and other advisors (The Graduate! Network, 2018) as they continue to help working age adults return to and get through college.

Tennessee Reconnect. The state of Tennessee has adopted a statewide attainment goal of 55% of Tennesseans earning a college degree or certificate by the year 2025 (tbr.edu, n.d.). The Drive to 55 is a statewide alliance that considers educational attainment to an important goal for the future of the state's workforce and economy (Drive to 55, 2018). The State of Tennessee's initiative is called TN Reconnect (also members of the *Graduate! Network*), and connects potential students with higher education institutions around the state. The TN Reconnect website provides helpful tools for potential students such as a cost calculator, college descriptions (so students can find the right college for them), course equivalencies, exam equivalencies, and other programs (Tennessee Reconnect, 2019). Tennessee's statewide goal and partner initiatives are a good example of systems working together. In 2017, Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam challenged the state to increase educational attainment to 55 percent by 2025 (Echols, 2019). The Drive to 55 Goal includes the Tennessee Promise (the first program in the nation to offer high school graduates two years of free community college) and TN Reconnect (Drive to 55, 2018). Since then, over 1,500 adults have enrolled in TN Reconnect all across the state (Echols, 2019).

Florida's SAIL to 60. The state of Florida has also adopted a statewide 55% attainment goal. The state offers a Rise to 55 educational attainment toolkit, which is funded by CareerSource Florida, Helios Education Foundation, and Lumina Foundation (Rise to 55, 2019). Interestingly, the Rise to 55 toolkit links to the Florida College Action Network (FCAN), which evidently has adopted Lumina's goal of 60% attainment, with a deadline of 2030 (FCAN, 2017). Florida seems to have already increased their

attainment goal from the initial 55% to 60%. Like the other initiatives around the country, FCAN is a network of community alliances between educational institutions, employers, and local government, designed to increase educational attainment for working age adults. In June, 2019, Florida's Governor Ron deSantis signed House Bill 7071 (Ceballos, 2019). With the signing of HB7071, Florida adopted "SAIL to 60." SAIL stands for Strengthening Alignment between Industry and Learning, and provides a line item in the Florida budget for helping increase educational attainment for working age adults.

ProjectAttain! ProjectAttain! is Perhaps the newest initiative to increase educational attainment for working age adults. ProjectAttain! was launched in May, 2018, by Dr. Jenni Murphy, Dean of the College of Continuing Education at Sacramento State. The initiative was born out of the Summit on Educational Attainment for Working Age Adults (ProjectAttain!, 2018). The Summit was a collaborative effort of Sacramento State, Align Capital Region, Valley Vision, CAEL, KC Degrees, Shasta College, The *Graduate! Network*, and other local, state, and regional educational attainment advocates (Align Capital Network, 2018). Following the Collective Action Model, an A-team of stakeholders is developing a strategic plan and business model for how ProjectAttain! can help raise educational attainment for working age adults in the Sacramento Region to 60% by 2025 (Align Capital Network, 2018). Like some of the other programs around the nation, ProjectAttain! is not focused on increasing educational attainment through any one institution. While the initiative was started out of Sacramento State, ProjectAttain! is a true collaboration of regional stakeholders from higher education to business, to local

government, who are dedicated to increasing educational attainment (Align Capital Network, 2108). In 2019, this "coalition of the willing" plans to roll out pilot programs, such as the Near Completers Project (personal communication, J. Murphy, 2019). Near Completers are stopped out students who are less than 15 units away from a degree, and the pilot project will serve as an incubator for ProjectAttain! As ProjectAttain! evolves, it will be interesting to see what impact the improved policies and practices have on nontraditional student perceptions of Sacramento State's institutional effectiveness.

Whether working age adults with some college but no degree are called "reconnectors" (Kansas City and Tennessee) or "comebackers" (Philadelphia and *The Graduate! Network*) or have yet to be named, nontraditional students who want to go or return to college are clearly a focus of initiatives around the country. The programs described above are just a snapshot of the efforts that are being undertaken across the country. These promising best programs and practices paint an encouraging picture of how important nontraditional students are to our communities, and how some institutions dedicate resources to help adult learners get, or return, to college.

Table 8 summarizes the programs and initiatives described above, including their stated educational attainment goals and highlighted best practices.

Table 8

Summary of Programs and Indicatives

Program/Initiative	**Attainment Goal**	**Best Practice**
KC Degrees	60%	Navigators Workforce Partnerships
Graduate! Network	60%	Navigators Workforce Partnerships

		Online Tools for service providers Coaching
Tennessee Reconnect	55-60%	Online Tools for service providers Online tools for learners Workforce Partnerships State-level support (leadership and policy)
Florida's SAIL to 60	60%	Statewide policy Industry Partnerships
ProjectAttain!	60%	Collective Action Model Industry Sector Partnership Endorsed by Education Leaders

As summarized in the above table, many of the programs feature concierge-type services, where navigators and coaches meet adult learners where they are, because one size does not fit all, and higher education systems are confusing, especially for someone who is new or returning to college. These services may be helpful for nontraditional students who are unfamiliar with the bureaucratic layers of higher education as they try to (re)enter college and navigate their way through institutional barriers. However, a local mayor provided an important insight at a recent regional meeting of educators, business owners, and elected officials. He said, "Speaking as someone who comes from the municipality perspective, when our constituents have difficulty getting answers or getting help in our crappy systems, our first response is not to advise that resident on how to navigate the crappy system. It is to fix our system" (C. Cabaldon, personal communication, 2019).

This study seeks to understand, for lack of a better term, if we have a crappy system so we can help nontraditional students succeed. Or, as more eloquently presented

by the Governor's Office of Planning and Research, "Higher education leaders observe that it is inadequate to continue to ask, 'are students ready for education?' They urge that it is instead necessary to ask, 'are institutions of higher education ready for today's students?'" (OPR, 2018, p. 3).

Implications

The promising programs and practices outlined in the previous section have the potential to make profound impacts on policy, leadership, and practice. Lumina Foundation calls for a national educational attainment goal of 60% by 2025 (Lumina Foundation, 2018). According to Lumina Foundation, raising educational attainment in the U.S. "requires policy action across state systems, higher education systems and institutions" (State Policy Agenda," n.d.). Public policy, according to Lumina Foundation "shapes academic delivery, content, cost and structure of public higher education" (State Policy Agenda," n.d.). In other words, policy drives action, and Lumina Foundation has clearly begun to shape public policy. As of 2017, all but 14 states had established a statewide educational attainment goal (Lumina Foundation, 2017). Sadly, California is one of the states that has yet to set a statewide educational attainment goal, but with programs such as ProjectAttain!, setting statewide policy and improving experiences and success for nontraditional students may not be far away.

Finally, the best practices outlined above have the potential for profound impacts on leadership and practice. ProjectAttain! is a perfect example. The dean of the College of Continuing Education at Sacramento State had a vision to increase educational attainment in the Sacramento Region. In May, 2018, Sacramento State hosted the

Summit on Educational Attainment for Working Age Adults. Dean Jenni Murphy said, "when the idea was developing, I would have been happy if we had 30 of the right people in the room to start talking about educational attainment. As it turned out, more than 100 leaders showed up" (J. Murphy, personal communication, 2019). Leaders in higher education, state government, private business, and the nonprofit sector all attended the Summit. And ProjectAttain! is beginning to shape their institutions' and organizations' practices. Their leaders are making a difference, and their focus on best practices in educational attainment for working age adults will shape policies that improve the experience and success of nontraditional students in California.

The programs and partnerships outlined above provide compelling examples of how leaders can transform lives. The programs and practices mentioned above highlight services that help returners get back into college, and some help them navigate barriers found in traditional higher education institutions. Each of these initiatives represents transformational leadership in practice. Transformational leaders empower others to go beyond the call of duty for the greater good of the organization (Nevarez, et al., 2013). Each of the programs and initiatives described above are successful because of transformational leadership. Transformational leaders lead the way with exceptional work ethic, excellent communication, and an understanding that people have various skills and desires (Nevarez et al., 2013). As seen in initiatives like ProjectAttain!, increasing educational attainment for working age adults sometimes requires outside of the box thinking, like the collective action model and partnership with Align Capital Region. Leaders play a vital role in increasing access for nontraditional students and in

creating policies and practices that shape adult learners' experiences when they do go or return to college to pursue their dream of completing their degree.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to examine nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness related to curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. The major sections of this chapter include (a) characteristics of nontraditional students, (b) unique motivations of nontraditional students, (c) the situational, dispositional, institutional barriers faced by adult learners, (d) an examination of the pros and cons of going, or returning, to college as an adult learner, (e) an explanation of how institutions demonstrate effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services for adult learners, (f) the idea that Transformation Learning Theory may complete the notion of a centralized Adult Learning Theory, and (g) promising best programs and practices across the nation that provide opportunities for success for nontraditional students.

Nontraditional students are often interchangeably referred to as adult learners, and are typically older than traditional students and often are specifically defined as students who are 25 years old and older (Kimmel et al., 2012; Osam et al., 2017; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Simi & Matusitz, 2016). Adult learners may be attending college for the first time, or may have experienced a gap in years between higher education enrollment (Kasworm, 2008; Tilley, 2014; Williams & Seary, 2011). Nontraditional students might be married, have children, and might work full-time and attend college part-time (Johnson et al., 2016; Johnson & Nussbaum, 2012; Meehan & Negy, 2003). An in-depth review of

nontraditional student motivations to go to and get through college was provided in this chapter. For example, adult learners are often goal-oriented (Bennett et al., 2007) and intrinsically motivated (Archer et al., 1999; Bennett et al., 2007; Bye et al., 2007; Eppler & Harju, 1997; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). Adult learners are also motivated by external factors, such as a desire to move up or change careers (Compton et al., 2006; Rossiter, 2007), or the desire to set a positive example for their children (Goto & Martin, 2009).

For adults, being goal-oriented and motivated by both extrinsic and intrinsic factors may help them when confronting the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers nontraditional students face. Adult students' life circumstances sometimes create situational barriers, such as the need for childcare or the inability to attend college full-time because they must maintain employment in order to support their family (Cross, 1981; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012; Spellman, 2007). Further, adults going or returning to school often face dispositional barriers, such as apprehension about not fitting in as an older student in college, anxiety about their ability to succeed academically, and feeling out of place in an educational environment (Genco, 2007). Other barriers are institutional, such as policies, procedures, and practices which prevent or exclude adults from participating in educational actives and are enshrined in colleges and universities (Cross, 1981; Osam et al., 2017). Examples include class schedules or locations that are inconvenient for adults, or limited faculty availability, and lack of financial options (Cross, 1981; Spellman, 2007). The dichotomy between the unique motivations and challenges faced by nontraditional students was presented in this chapter, and the

potential tension created by this dichotomy provides the background for understanding nontraditional student perspectives. In light of this evident push-pull for adult learners, how do nontraditional students perceive institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services?

Chapter 2 also examined how curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services policies and practices relate to nontraditional students as they enter college for the first time, or return to school to finish their degree. For this study, curriculum and instruction is based on the Teaching and Learning Process and Technology elements of CAEL's Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adults. The construct of effective teaching and learning for adults is described as using multiple methods of instruction that connect concepts from curriculum to useful knowledge and skills for adult learners. Effective use of technology means that information technology is utilized to provide relevant and timely information for adults and to enhance the overall learning experience (CAEL, 2019). Institutional effectiveness with career planning for adult learners relates to how well the institution connects programming to the job market and how well students are prepared for relevant careers upon graduating (Carnevale et al., 2013; Cleary & Van Noy, 2014; Wilson, 2014). Awarding Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) through Prior Learning Assessments (PLA) is another way for institutions to be effective for adult learners (Bohonos, 2014; Klein-Collins & Hain, 2009; Travers, 2012). Institutional effectiveness of comprehensive student services for adults relates to having convenient access to student and academic services, such as admissions, enrollment, and financial services (Cross, 1981; Genco, 2007; Kasworm, 2008, 2010; Keith, 2007).

The notion of a centralized theory of adult learning was explored, which may provide a roadmap for leaders as they consider meaningful approaches to policy and practice. Mezirow's (1978) Transformation Learning theory was introduced and was suggested as the missing link in the development of a centralized theory of adult learning. An agreed-upon centralized theory may assist researchers in understanding and synthesizing the experiences of adult learners and how they transform as a result of going or returning to college.

Despite the absence of a centralized adult learning theory, much is known about adult learners, as was explicated in chapter two. Given what is known about nontraditional students, such as their unique intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to go, or return, to college, as well as the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers they face, several questions arise. What shapes their perceptions of institutional effectiveness? Do characteristics, such as whether or not they work full time, or have to drive long distances to school effect their perception of institutional effectiveness? How do nontraditional students perceive their access to and quality of academic and student services at the university? Does the institution understand their unique financial needs, and are options in place to help adult learners overcome financial hardships? What else can (or should) the university do to improve adult learners' experiences?

This study will examine nontraditional students' perceptions of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services through both quantitative and qualitative research methods. This chapter now concludes with an overview of the epistemological theoretical paradigms through which

the three research questions will examine how nontraditional students perceive institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services.

The research questions in this study will be examined through multiple epistemological theoretical paradigms using an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, which will be more fully described in chapter three of this study. Research question one will be examined with quantitative data. Research questions two and three will be qualitative. Examining research question one with quantitative data provides the opportunity to explore nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness through a positivistic theoretic paradigm. The positivistic epistemological approach assumes there is a universal truth that can be discovered through scientific methods and analyzing empirical data (Bess & Dee, 2012). That is not to say that there is one truth for all nontraditional students, but analyzing quantitative data will provide a broad understanding of adult learners' perceptions of institutional effectiveness at Sacramento State.

Research questions two and three will be examined using qualitative data, and analyzed through a social-constructivist paradigm. In the social-constructivist paradigm, researchers assume that individual's realities are constructed through their own contextual experiences (Bess & Dee, 2012). In other words, the quantitative data will provide the statistical data about institutional effectiveness for adult learners, and the qualitative data will dig deeper into those students' experiences at the institution (Creswell, 2014). Every person is different, and qualitative data will provide a richer

understanding of the students' lived experiences. Using this mixed-methods approach will provide a well-rounded picture of adult learners' perceptions of Sacramento State.

Finally, the data will also be analyzed through a postmodern epistemological theoretical perspective. The postmodern perspective assumes that "knowledge claims must be set within conditions of the world today and in multiple perspectives of class, race gender, and other group affiliations" (Creswell, 2013, p. 27). Postmodernism questions the status quo and considers the power dynamics that create current conditions. For example, transformation learning theory posits that when adults critically assess their previously held assumptions and frames of reference, they begin to develop new understandings about themselves and the world they live in (Mezirow, 1994, 1996). Are nontraditional students questioning the status quo of their experiences with the institution? Do they have previously held assumptions and frames of reference about what they deserve from their university? Have they considered how the university creates institutional barriers to their success? Why or why not? And why do policies designed to help a narrowly defined group of students exit? In particular, research question three attempts to learn what nontraditional students think the university can do better to enhance adult learners' success.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine nontraditional undergraduate college student perceptions of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. Chapter 1 provided an overview of the study and explained its significance. Chapter 2 provided a review of literature related to nontraditional student characteristics including their motivations to go and return to college, and the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers adult learners face. Chapter 2 also provided an overview of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services as they relate to nontraditional students. The chapter also provided promising best programs and practices for serving adult learners. Chapter 3 describes how the study will be conducted, including: (a) the research design, (b) the role of the researcher, (c) research questions, (d) setting, population and sample, (e) data collection and implementation, (f) data analysis, and (g) how participants will be protected.

Research Design

This study utilized a sequential explanatory mixed method approach whereby existing quantitative data were analyzed and the findings were used to inform the questions asked in focus groups. The mixed method approach provides both a broad and deep understanding of nontraditional student perceptions, and the strengths in each approach overcome the weakness in the other, rendering a more robust understanding of

nontraditional student perceptions (Creswell, 2014). Analyzing nontraditional student perceptions quantitatively provided an overview of nontraditional student perceptions, such as how satisfied they are with curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. Quantitative data revealed if perceptions of institutional effectiveness can be predicted by nontraditional student characteristics, such as how far along they are in their academic journey, how many hours they work per week, and how many credit hours they attempt in a semester. These quantitative data afford the opportunity to examine nontraditional student perceptions through the rigor of statistical analysis.

Quantitative analysis falls short, however, by not proving a rich understanding of student perceptions. *Why* do students perceive their experience the way they do? The numbers cannot tell the whole story. Thus, qualitative data are also beneficial. Through talking with nontraditional students in focus groups, a deeper examination into the lived experiences of nontraditional students occurred (Creswell, 2014). Conversations with nontraditional students provided a well-rounded understanding of their life situations, their perceptions of themselves and how they fit in the university, and how various institutional factors affect their experience. Using a mixed method approach combined the rigor and precision of quantitative research methods with the depth of understanding that can be garnered through qualitative research (Rudestam & Newton, 2014). The benefit to the sequential explanatory mixed methods approach is that the quantitative data inform what questions should be asked in the focus groups. In the approach, questions are tied to responses from nontraditional students, and are relevant for focus group

participants. Qualitative data also help explain the quantitative data in more detail (Creswell, 2014).

Role of the Researcher

In 2018, Sacramento State was selected as one of 15 Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) contributing to a national research project to better serve Latinx adult students (25+ years old). CAEL, in partnership with *Excelencia* in Education, launched the three-year project in order to examine how well Latinx adult students are supported and identify areas for improvement. Research began in October with a campus-wide survey administered by CAEL. Over 8,000 Sacramento State undergraduate and graduate adult students received an online survey assessing their perceptions of institutional effectiveness within the Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adults in a diagnostic assessment called the Adult Learner 360 (AL360). The CAEL project is centered around improving outcomes for the growing population of Latinx adult students, but data were collected from adult students of all race/ethnicities.

When Sacramento State was accepted into the AL360, I became the project lead. My role in the AL360 was to act as the liaison between CAEL, *Excelencia* in Education, and the university, not as a principal investigator. I formulated a committee that consisted of leaders and researchers at Sacramento State who determined our population of students and provided nontraditional student contact information to CAEL. For example, the committee determined that we would survey all students who were 25 years old and older. We made age the determining characteristic because we had immediate access to student age, while we do not know what of the other common nontraditional

student characteristics our students possess. For instance, we would need to survey students to learn if they had had prolonged time away from school before their enrollment in Sacramento State. According to the NCES (n.d.) "Age acts as a surrogate variable that captures a large, heterogeneous population of adult students who often have family and work responsibilities as well as other life circumstances that can interfere with successful completion of educational objectives" (para. 1). Therefore, Sacramento State defines nontraditional students (interchangeably referred to as adult learners) as those who are 25 years old and older.

Once the population was determined, Sacramento State's Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning (OIREP) provided contact information so CAEL could disseminate the surveys. Before that occurred, I wrote the request for participation emails that the students received, and all other communication specific to Sacramento State Students, such as Frequently Asked Questions for students who wanted to learn more about the study before participating. Once all stakeholders agreed on and approved the communication plan, CAEL distributed the surveys to Sacramento State's 25+ year old undergraduate and graduate students. Survey responses were received by CAEL's research portal.

CAEL analyzed the data and provided an executive summary and research report with survey findings. Sacramento State gained access to a password-protected data portal that contains the full survey results. The interactive portal allows stakeholders to see how students responded to every question and to compare our students' responses to other institutions participating in the AL360 project. The portal is relatively user-friendly and

is a helpful tool for leaders to see a snapshot of nontraditional student perceptions. The portal, however, does not allow leaders to disaggregate the data to learn what students answered what questions. For example, do students who are enrolled full-time perceive Sacramento State's use of technology differently than those who take less than six units? The portal provides an overview of responses but does not allow leaders to analyze the data in different ways. These questions were asked in the survey, but the comparisons were not made in the initial analysis. Fortunately, as the AL360 project lead, I received all the de-identified student responses, and I conducted secondary analysis on these raw data for the quantitative portion of this study.

Research Questions

To examine nontraditional student perceptions of Sacramento State's effectiveness related to curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services, the following research questions were addressed:

RQ1: Can levels of perception of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services be predicted from nontraditional student characteristics? (Quantitative)

RQ2: What are nontraditional students' perceptions of Sacramento State's institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services? (Qualitative).

RQ3: What can the institution do better to enhance nontraditional student success? (Qualitative)

Setting, Population, and Sample

Setting

Sacramento State is a large, public university in northern California. Sacramento State is one of the California State University's (CSU) 23 campuses and is considered California's capital university (California State University, 2018; California State University, Sacramento, 2018a). The university is located on a beautiful 300-acre campus and is surrounded by rivers and more than 3,500 trees (California State University, Sacramento, n.d., About the university,). Being located in California's state capital provides unique opportunities for public policy partnership opportunities (California State University, Sacramento. 2018a). As explained in the Public Policy and Administration program catalog, "The proximity of Sacramento State to the State Capitol offers significant advantages to students by providing them with a ready 'laboratory' for observing the policy and administrative issues they will confront professionally, and for gaining experience alongside existing practitioners in public policy and administration" (California State University, Sacramento, 2019, "Special Features.").

Sacramento State is comprised of eight colleges (Arts & Letters, Business Administration, Continuing Education, Education, Engineering & Computer Science, Health & Human Services, Natural Sciences & Mathematics, and Social Sciences & Interdisciplinary Studies) and offers 60 undergraduate programs and over 40 graduate programs (California State University, Sacramento, n.d., About the university). According to the most recently published university fact book, Sacramento State is largely a commuter campus with 93.9% students regularly commuting to campus. Half

of the student population is considered low income and over 34% are first-generation college students (California State University, Sacramento, 2018a). Sacramento State claims an annual economic impact of nearly $900 million on the region and more than $1 billion on the statewide economy (California State University, Sacramento, n.d., About the University).

Population

Sacramento State has a headcount of 30,510 students, 91.4% of which are undergraduates (California State University, Sacramento, 2018b). The reported ethnicity breakdown is as follows; 1,719 African American (5.6%), 103 American Indian (0.3%), 6,141 Asian (20.1%), 8,983 Latino (29.4%), 223 Pacific Islander (0.7%), 1,012 Foreign (3.3%), 1,891 Multiracial (6.2%), 1,819 Other (6.0%), and 8,619 White (28.2%). The undergraduate student population is 56% female (California State University, Sacramento, 2018a). Most undergraduate students are under 25 years old (76.3%) and the median age of undergraduate students is 22 years old.

Sample

As was previously explained, the sample population for the quantitative portion of this study were nontraditional students who responded to the AL360 survey which was disseminated to all 25+ year old students at Sacramento State. The AL360 survey was distributed to all currently enrolled undergraduate (total = 6,021) and graduate students (total = 2,088) who were 25 years old or older in October, 2018. Surveys were sent to 6,020 undergraduate students and 2,088 graduate students. The age range of surveyed undergraduates was; 5,045 25-34 years (83.8%), 701 35-44 years (11.64%), 196 45-54

years (3.26%), 66 55-65 years (1.1%), and 12 65+ years old (0.2%). The race/ethnicity of surveyed undergraduate students was; 354 African American (5.88%), 28 Alaska Native/ American Indian (0.47%), 1,073 Asian (17.82%), 1,542 Hispanic or Latino (25.61%), 45 Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander (0.75%), 335 Multiracial (5.56%), 589 Other (9.78%), and 2,054 White (34.12%). The 25+ year old undergraduate student population is 50.3% female. In an effort to recruit a representative sample of the university's nontraditional students, multiple emails were sent to Sacramento State's adult learners encouraging their participation in the survey.

For the qualitative portion of the study, focus group participants were a mix of students who responded to the AL360 in Fall 2018, and those who either did not receive the survey because they were not enrolled at Sacramento State at the time, or simply did not participate. As such, qualitative focus group research participants were selected via nonrandom convenience sampling. The selection criteria for focus groups was similar to the quantitative survey participants, in that participants were all 25+ years old and currently enrolled undergraduates of Sacramento State.

An email was sent to all undergraduate students enrolled in Fall 2020 classes, who are 25 years old and over (total = 5,621). Since the AL360 survey was sent to all nontraditional undergraduate students who were enrolled in Fall 2018, some of those students who participate in the focus groups and were a subset of the original survey participants. The focus group invitation was sent via email to the students' Sacramento State email and contained a link to a doodle poll where students indicated the days and times that they were available to participate.

The goal was to recruit a cross-section of nontraditional students and alumni from a variety of backgrounds, ages, and academic programs in order to gain a well-rounded understanding of how nontraditional students perceive institutional effectiveness. When recruiting participants, I explained that the study is designed to learn about nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services, as well what Sacramento State can do to enhance their experience and success.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Quantitative Data

Quantitative data for this study were collected in October, 2018 as part of the aforementioned AL360 project. For the project, students received two different surveys, each with questions related to five of the Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Students. Group A received questions related to five of the ten principles (Adaptivity, Assessment of Learning Outcomes, Life & Career planning, Outreach, and Transitions), and Group B received questions for the other five principles (Financing, Strategic Partnerships, Student Support Systems, Teaching-Learning Process, and Technology). The AL360 is a proprietary tool, however, example scale items included: “Obtaining career advising is easy and convenient” and “I can easily find tuition information and payment options.” The surveys consisted of five-point Likert-type items plus demographics questions, and each student received roughly 55 questions. Student responses were uploaded to CAEL’s research portal and at the end of data collection, CAEL sent the de-identified raw student data back to Sacramento State.

Response Rate

The AL360 survey was disseminated to all currently enrolled nontraditional undergraduate students (total = 6,021). Nontraditional students were determined to be those who were 25 years old or older in October 2018. A total of 322 undergraduates responded to the survey, which yielded an approximate response rate of 5.3%. The survey was open for four weeks and those who did not respond were sent reminder emails asking them to participate in the study.

Notably, Sacramento State had planned to solicit more responses to the AL360 survey in November 2018; however, due to an emergency campus closure, the decision was made to cease seeking survey responses from nonparticipants. Once the campus re-opened after a two-week closure due to nearby wildfires that produced dangerous levels of smoke and particulate matter, CAEL and Sacramento State decided to close the survey and to not re-open it in order to avoid the history threat to internal validity.

Threats to internal validity "affect the confidence with which a researcher can state that the independent variable caused an effect on the dependent variable" (Boudah, 2011, p. 65). A history threat to internal validity happens when something occurs during a study that could potentially impact the way participants respond (Boudah, 2011). In this case, the concern was that the deadly wildfires and the uncertainty around the length of the campus closure could impact nontraditional students' responses. For example, a nontraditional student who was stressed about how the closure would impact the final weeks of the semester may have responded differently before the closure than she would have after the campus was unexpectedly closed for two weeks. Therefore, to mitigate the

history threat, Sacramento State decided that the 322 undergraduate responses were enough data. Further, while 5% is a relatively low response rate, a similar response rate was achieved by Hawk (2018), who received 78 responses from her 1,499 surveys (5.2%), which was an earlier version of the AL360.

Validity and Reliability. Regarding validity and reliability of AL360, the AL360 is a proprietary instrument that is designed, tested, and administered by CAEL. Upon request, CAEL provided the following information from the Internal Validity section of an internal report from a study CAEL conducted in partnership with National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS). Alpha-reliability statistics were computed for each of the ten principles on the two Institution survey scales and the two Student survey scales and are reported in the tables below. All alpha-reliability statistics fall at the high end of generally-accepted ranges. The high alphas demonstrate there is high interrelatedness between items from the same principle. As expected, moreover, principles with greater number of items generally have a higher alpha than those comprised of fewer items (B. Nickerson, personal communication, 2018).

Table 9

Alpha Reliability Results AL360 Principles: Student Satisfaction Scale

Principle	**Number of Items**	**Alpha**	**N**
Outreach	15	0.925	268
Life & Career planning	13	0.942	171
Financing	9	0.919	115
Assessment of Learning Outcomes	11	0.925	148
Teaching & Learning Process	16	0.950	106
Student Support Systems	13	0.951	74
Technology	8	0.889	163

Strategic Partnerships	8	0.966	68
Transitions	10	0.958	102
Adaptivity	6	0.921	124

SOURCE: B. Nickerson, Council for Adult and Experiential Learning

According to the information provided, the reliability of the student satisfaction scale was very high for the ten principles (α = .925 for Outreach, α = .942 for Life & Career planning, α = .919 for Financing, α = .925 for Assessment of Learning Outcomes, α = .950 for Teaching & Learning, α = .951 for Student Support Systems, α = .889 for Technology, α = .966 for Strategic Partnerships, α = .958 for Transition, and α = for Adaptivity).

Decisions About the Scale. Importantly, the survey assessed students' level of satisfaction with the principles, and it also asked students how important each Principle is to them. For example, for the item "Obtaining career advising is easy and convenient," students rated how *important* it is to have easy and convenient access to career advising, as well as how *satisfied* they are with the service they receive from the institution. For the CAEL AL360 project, understanding how important the principles are for nontraditional students versus how satisfied students are is helpful because the university can make strategic resource decisions based on those data. For this study, only satisfaction scores were considered. Further, while perception data were gathered from both undergraduate and graduate students for the CAEL AL360 project, this study only examined undergraduate students' perceptions of institutional effectiveness, therefore, only nontraditional undergraduate student data were analyzed. Graduate student data was separated out and not included in this study.

Additionally, for this study, the Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adults were grouped together to create three variables. The principles were grouped based on the over-arching area they address. For example, principles that address instructional methods and modalities will make up "Curriculum and Instruction." Also, since not all students received the same survey, not all principles will be included in the research. For instance, Group B received Teaching & Learning and Technology, but Group A received Assessment of Learning Outcomes. Even though Assessment of Learning Outcomes addressed how the institution "Defines and assesses the knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired by adult learners—both from the curriculum and from life and work experience—in order to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor" (CAEL, n.d.), the students who received items related to that principle are not the same as those that received items related to Teaching & Learning and Technology. Therefore, in order to combine the principles and assess how students rated their satisfaction with curriculum and instruction, the Assessment of Learning Outcomes responses were not included.

The two other principles that were *not* included in this study are Outreach and Strategic Partnerships. The Strategic Partnerships Principle would logically be grouped together with Adaptivity, Life & Career Planning, and Transitions to form the new variable titled Career planning. However, Group B received the Strategic Partnerships Principle, while Group A received the other three. Therefore, to maintain consistency when calculating the scores, Strategic Partnerships were eliminated. Finally, the Outreach Principle was not included. This principle assesses how the institution "Conducts its outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers in time, place and

tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities" (CAEL, n.d.). Since no other principle addresses institutional outreach, these items were not grouped with the other principles. Table 10 provides a visual showing how principles were grouped for this study, and how they associate with each of the research questions

Table 10

Grouping the Ten Principles to Form Research Questions by Research Question

Curriculum & instruction	Career planning	Comprehensive student services
Teaching & Learning:	Life & Career planning:	Financing:
The institution's faculty uses **multiple methods of instruction** (including **experiential** and **problem-based** methods) for adult learners in order to **connect** curricular **concepts** to **useful knowledge and skills**.	The institution addresses adult learners' life and **career goals** before or at the onset of enrollment in order to **assess** and align its capacities to help learners reach their goals.	The institution **promotes choice** using an array of **payment options** for adult learners in order to expand **equity** and **financial flexibility**.
Technology:	Transitions:	Student Support Systems:
The institution uses information technology to provide relevant and timely information and to enhance the **learning experience**.	The institution supports guided **pathways** that lead into and from the institution's programs and services in order to ensure that students' learning will apply usefully to achieving their **educational** and **career goals**.	The institution assists adult learners using **comprehensive academic and student support** systems in order to enhance students' capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners.

	Adaptivity: This institution adjusts to **shifting external market forces** and is able to adapt to the changing expectations of internal stakeholders, students, and employers--understanding the needs of those they serve by developing creative academic solutions.

New variables were created by combining the principles, as outlined in Table 10, and by averaging the separate Likert-scores to create three new variables titled Curriculum and Instruction, Career planning, and Comprehensive Student Services.

Qualitative Data

Qualitative data were collected via five focus groups for research questions two and three. Focus groups were held on campus, each with four to six participants, and each session lasted around 60 minutes. As the facilitator, I began the focus groups by setting the ground rules for the session (McLafferty, 2004). I read an opening script that explained the role of the facilitator, the goal of the study, and an overview of what participants could expect during the course of the conversation, such as roughly how many questions would be asked (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016).

Following explanatory sequential mixed methods design, the quantitative data that were gathered via the AL360 were analyzed and provided a guide for writing the focus group questions (Creswell, 2014). In other words, focus group questions were developed from the quantitative responses to elucidate a more in-depth understanding of

nontraditional students' perceptions of Sacramento State's effectiveness related to curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. Students were asked probing questions designed to learn more about how they perceive their experience. A sample focus group question related to RQ2 is, "Does Sacramento State offer the kinds of programs and classes you need when you want and need them"

There were two questions per focus area (curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services), plus a request for open discussion around research question three. At the beginning of the focus group session, each participant signed the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix A) and was offered a copy to take with them at the conclusion of the session. Participants were also asked to complete a short survey to gather their basic demographic information (such as race/ethnicity, age range, and gender), and to prepare them for the kinds of questions that would be asked during the focus group (see Appendix B for focus group survey).

Focus groups provide the opportunity for participants to explore their own perceptions through talking with other participants. Focus groups foster talk and allow study participants the opportunity to articulate their perceptions or help them realize their own views in a way they would not be able to without interacting with others who have similar experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). Nontraditional students who are going, or returning, to college have a unique shared experience, but they may not understand that other students on campus are going through (or have been through) similar experiences. Therefore, communicating with students in focus groups generated rich qualitative data.

The answers participants provided to the facilitator's pre-written questions, and the discussions among participants, comprise the qualitative data collected for this study.

All focus group sessions were transcribed by the researcher. To aid in transcription, the focus groups were both audio and video recorded. The purpose for recording in two media was, if one strategy were to fail, data would still be recorded in the other method (McLafferty, 2004) as a backup. Further, because multiple people participated in the discussions, the use of video served helpful for the researcher when discerning which participant was talking during the session. Ultimately, focus group recordings "act as validity checks, in that raw data are available for scrutiny" (McLafferty, 2004, p. 191). Focus group participants were informed that the session was recorded for the purpose of transcribing the conversations, and they were assured that once the session was transcribed, the audio and video files would be destroyed.

Response Rate

Currently enrolled nontraditional students were invited to participate in focus groups with the goal of receiving enough volunteers for 5-7 participants in 3-5 focus group sessions. A contingency plan was in place in the event that not enough students would respond to the initial email invitation. The plan consisted of enlisting the help of various program managers, administrators, and faculty to reach potential focus group participants. However, the initial invitation was sent to all enrolled nontraditional students (total = 5,621) and yielded 182 volunteers; therefore, no follow up recruitment was required. All volunteers were sent a focus group participant survey, and five focus

groups were conducted on campus, with a total of 24 participants. Participant survey responses were also received from an additional 23 nontraditional students.

Data Analysis

Quantitative

To determine if perceptions of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services can be predicted from nontraditional student characteristics, multiple linear regression was used. Multiple regression is used to "assess the association between two or more independent variables and a single continuous dependent variable" (Sullivan & LaMorte, n.d., "Multiple Linear Regression Analysis," para. 1). The dependent variables for each regression were the student satisfaction scores for curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student Services. The student characteristic that were assessed, and the continuous independent variables for each of the regressions were: (a) class load, (b) progress to degree, (c) hours the student works in a week, and (d) student's commute time to school. In other words, secondary analysis on the CAEL AL360 data assessed if how many credits a student takes in the semester, how far along they are in their program, how many hours they work each week, and/or how long they have to commute to school affect adult learners' perceptions of institutional effectiveness. Multiple regression was the statistical test used to determine if any of those characteristics affect nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services.

The underlying assumptions of multiple linear regression are: (a) the variables are normally distributed, (b) a linear relationship exists between the independent and dependent variables, and (c) the data are from a random sample and the scores are independent of each other (F. Adamson, 2018, interpersonal communication). Effect sizes and adjusted R^2 are reported in order to demonstrate goodness of fit of the model, or the variance between the predicted and observed values (Green & Salkind, 2014). The Statistical package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 19 was e used to compute and analyze the results.

Qualitative

Transcribed qualitative data were open coded. Open coding is the process of organizing data into chunks and labelling those chunks, or categories, with a term (Creswell, 2014). The categories were then separated into themes based on the three main research categories (curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services), as well as unexpected themes that emerged in the data. Data were analyzed using the qualitative data analyses software HyperRESEARCH. HyperRESEARCH, which enables researchers to code transcribed interviews and focus groups (Bigden & Biklen, 2016). HyperRESEARCH was useful to find, categorize, compare, and combine similar words and phrases used by participants to identify themes in their responses (Bigden & Biklen, 2016). According to Creswell (2013) HyperRESEARCH is a preferable because it is “an easy-to-use qualitative software package” (p. 204) that enables users to code text and identify themes. HyperRESEARCH is “well-suited for mixed-methods approaches to qualitative research” (Bogdan & Biklen,

0216, p. 124) therefore this was an appropriate qualitative data analyses software for this study.

Protection of Participants

Because the quantitative data were collected by CAEL and Sacramento State received de-identified student responses, Institutional Review Board (IRB) was not required at the inception of the CAEL AL360 project. Secondary analysis on those archival data also did not require IRB approval (L. Vargas, personal communication, 2018). However, before conducting the qualitative aspect of this research, IRB approval was obtained. Nontraditional students who were invited to participate in focus groups were informed of the nature of the study and that their participation was completely voluntary (Creswell, 2014). Further, no research occurred without signed informed consent forms from participants, steps were taken to ensure the anonymity of participants (such as the use of pseudonyms instead of participants' actual names), all participant data was secured on password-protected electronic files, and participant data was destroyed at the conclusion of the study (Creswell, 2014). Once transcribed using de-identified coding, audio and video recordings was destroyed. Both participants and the focus group facilitator(s) were asked to sign a Promise of Confidentiality form (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016).

Chapter 4

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness related to curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. Student perceptions of institutional effectiveness were examined through three research questions:

1. Can levels of perception of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services be predicted from nontraditional student characteristics?
2. What are nontraditional students' perceptions of Sacramento State's institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services?
3. What can the institution do better to enhance nontraditional student success?

This chapter is organized in six sections:

1. the demographic profile for AL360 survey participants;
2. demographic profile for focus group volunteers;
3. the quantitative data that address research question one: Can levels of perception of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services be predicted from nontraditional student characteristics?;

4. the qualitative data that address research question two: What are nontraditional students' perceptions of Sacramento State's institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services?;
5. the qualitative data that address research question three: What can the institution do better to enhance nontraditional student success?; and
6. a summary of the data.

AL360 Survey Participants

The vast majority of the AL360 survey participants were between the ages of 25 and 34 years old (total = 227; 70.5%), which mirrors the population of nontraditional undergraduate students in October 2018. Figure 10 provides a comparison of the *student population* age ranges (meaning the all nontraditional undergraduate students who were sent the survey), and the *sample* (all students who participated in the AL360).

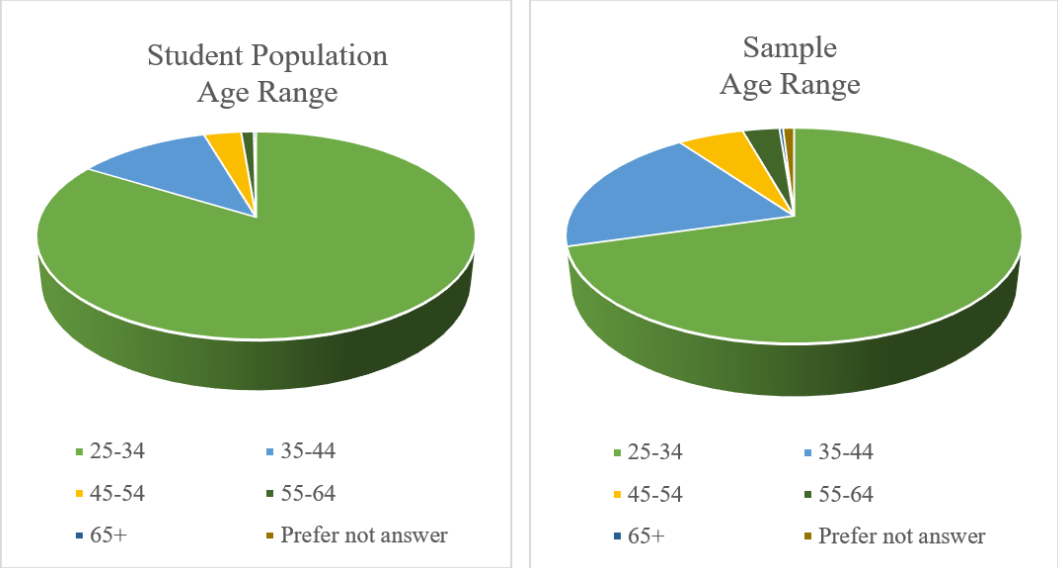


Figure 10. Age Ranges of the Student Population (All Sacramento State Nontraditional Undergraduate Students) and the Al360 Sample.

AL360 sample age ranges mirror those of the nontraditional undergraduate student population. The vast majority of nontraditional undergraduate students are between the ages of 25-34 years old. The demographics are even more closely mirrored for the 25-44 age range. Over 95% of the Sacramento State nontraditional undergraduate student population is 25-44 years old, and 90% of AL360 participants fall within the same age range.

While the sample was similar to the nontraditional undergraduate student population in age breakdown, unfortunately, the race/ethnicity of the AL360 participants was less diverse than the nontraditional undergraduate student population. Having a less diverse sample is not ideal because students from different backgrounds and cultures have diverse experiences, which are not fully captured when the sample does not perfectly reflect the student body. Figure 11 provides a comparison of the *student population* race ethnicity (meaning the all nontraditional undergraduate students who were sent the AL360 survey), and the *sample* (meaning all students who participated in the survey).

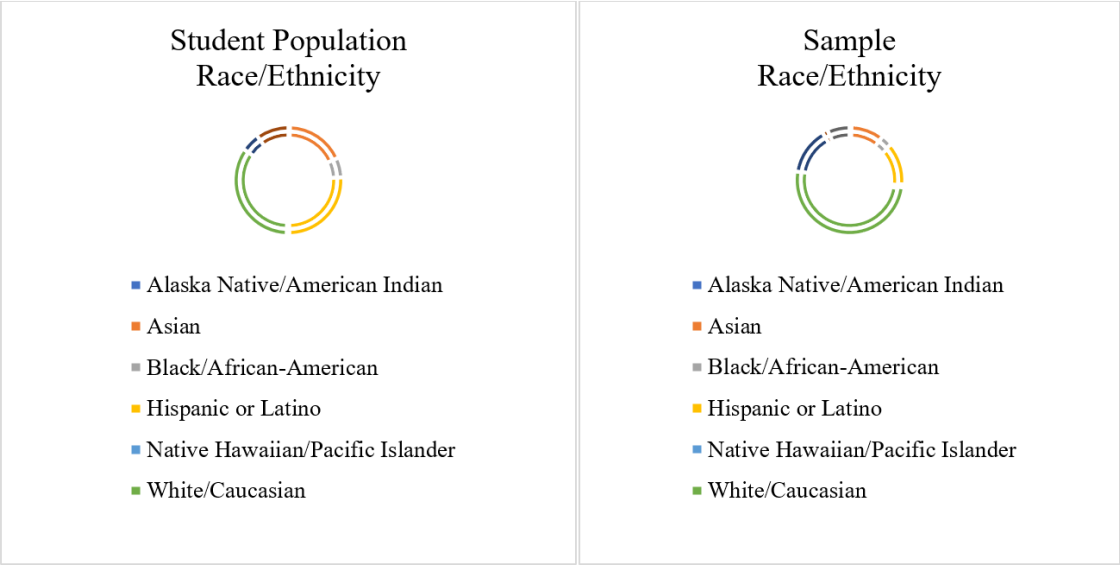


Figure 11. Race/Ethnicity of the Student Population (all Nontraditional Undergraduate Students at Sacramento State) and theAL360 Sample.

At Sacramento State, Hispanics make up about 26% of the undergraduate nontraditional student demographics, yet they were under-represented in the survey (only 12.4% participated in the AL360 survey), and white adult students were over-represented. AL360 survey participants were 49.7% white, where the sample population is only 34.12% white at Sacramento State.

Nontraditional undergraduate AL360 survey participant demographic details appear in Table 11.

Table 11

Frequency Distribution – Nontraditional Undergraduate AL360 Survey Participants

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	98	30.4%
Female	214	66.5%

different identity	3	0.9%
prefer not answer	7	2.2%
Age range		
25-34	227	70.5%
35-44	63	19.6%
45-54	18	5.6%
55-64	10	3.1%
65+	1	0.3%
Prefer not to answer	3	0.9%
Race/Ethnicity		
Alaska Native/American Indian	2	0.6%
Asian	31	9.6%
Black/African American	12	3.3%
Hispanic or Latino	40	12.4%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	3	0.9%
White	160	49.7%
Two or more	45	14%
Other	5	1.6%
Prefer not to answer	21	6.5%
Marital Status		
Single, never married	165	51.2%
Married	100	31.1%
Domestic partnership	14	4.3%
Divorced or separated	30	9.3%
Prefer not to answer	13	4%

The AL360 sample are not a proportional representation of the nontraditional undergraduate student population. To be perfectly representative, the AL360 sample would be like the nontraditional student body in all respects (Singleton & Straits, 2010). The AL360 sample did not mirror exactly the gender, age, and ethnic make-up of the university's nontraditional undergraduate student population. For example, the race/ethnicity of the sample is less diverse than that of the nontraditional undergraduate student population, which means that the perceptions of some students may not be

accounted for in the AL360 responses. It is important to keep this in mind when interpreting survey results. Are the findings generalizable to the nontraditional student population at Sacramento State? To other institutions? In an effort to gather data from a more representative sample, a plan was devised to encourage focus group participation from under-represented groups of nontraditional students at Sacramento State. The goal was to recruit 15-35 focus group participants, with the intention of drawing a diverse sample of the undergraduate nontraditional student population. The initial focus group participation invitation yielded 182 volunteers, so I felt confident that not only would 15 people participate *at the very least*, the focus groups would be comprised of a diverse sample of adult learners that represented the gender, age ranges, and ethnic make-up of the university's nontraditional student body.

Focus Group Participants

The initial focus group invitation yielded 182 volunteers, all of whom were sent a focus group participant survey. Five focus groups were conducted on campus at Sacramento State, with a total of 24 participants. Participant survey responses were also received from an additional 23 nontraditional students. Similar to the quantitative survey, the majority of focus group participants were between the ages of 25 and 34 years old, as shown in Figure 12.

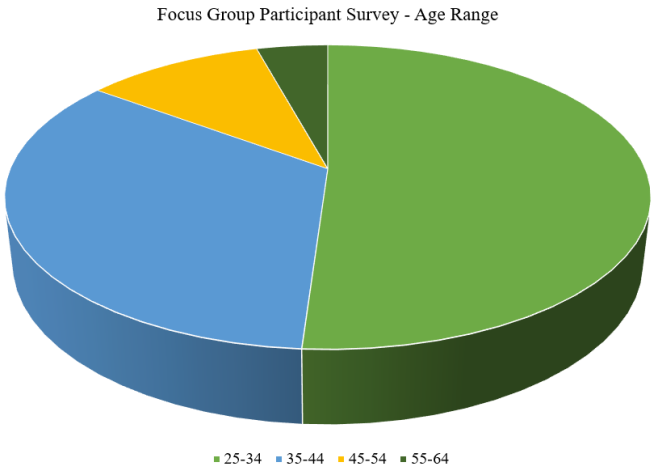


Figure 12. Focus Group Participant Age Ranges.

The age ranges of the focus group participants were similar to the age ranges of the nontraditional undergraduate student population (all nontraditional undergraduate students at Sacramento State) and the AL360 survey participants. The majority of nontraditional students are between the ages of 25-34 years old.

The ethnic makeup of the focus group participant survey respondents was similar to that of the AL360 survey respondents, as depicted in Figure 13.

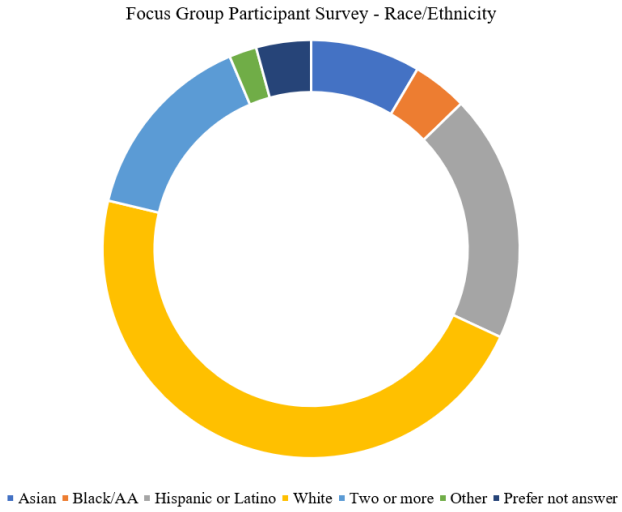


Figure 13. Focus Group Participant Race/Ethnicity.

The focus group participants included a higher percentage of Hispanic or Latino nontraditional undergraduate students (19.1%) than the AL360 participants (12.4%). The focus group participant demographics better reflect the overall characteristics of the general nontraditional student population, which is important because their experiences better represent those of the nontraditional student population. Sacramento State is a large, public university with a diverse student body, and it is important to hear the varied perspectives of students in order to have a well-rounded understanding of the nontraditional student experience. Focus group participant survey demographic details appear in Table 12.

Table 12.

Frequency Distribution – Nontraditional Undergraduate Focus Group Participant Survey Respondents

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	22	46.8%
Female	24	51.1%
Age range		
25-34	24	58.3%
35-44	16	33.3%
45-54	5	8.3%
55-64	2	4.3%
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian	4	8.5%
Black/African American	2	4.3%
Hispanic or Latino	9	19.1%
White	22	46.8%
Two or more	7	14.9%
Other	1	2.1%
Prefer not to answer	2	4.3%

While the focus group participants also did not mirror exactly the gender, age, and ethnic make-up of the university's nontraditional undergraduate student population, the participants shared more characteristics with the university's student population (Boudah, 2011; Stingleton & Straits, 2010) because the focus groups were more racially diverse. Like the AL360, the focus group participants were not a perfect representation of the nontraditional undergraduate student population. By definition, a sample is a subset of a population, and therefore can never match all characteristics of a population perfectly (Stingleton & Straits, 2010), but unless every person in a population participates, a sample is a necessary evil. However, the ethnic make-up of the focus group was closer to that of the student population. Therefore, the voices of focus group participants are a better representation of nontraditional undergraduate students at Sacramento State than the AL360 participants.

Research Question One

Research question one was, "Can levels of perception of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services be predicted from nontraditional student characteristics?"

Variables

The dependent variables examined in this study were student perception scores created from the Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adults. To create the three dependent variables, CAEL's principles were grouped together into categories based on the over-arching areas they address; curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. The independent variables, as previously mentioned

were: (a) class load, (b) progress to degree, (c) hours the student works in a week, and (d) student's commute time to school.

RQ1 Findings

Multiple linear regressions were conducted to determine if student characteristics were predictors of nontraditional student perceptions of Sacramento State's effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. Curriculum and instruction and student services were not found to be significant when using a multiple linear regression model; however career planning was found to be significant. Table 13 depicts the results of the three multiple linear regressions, and indicates that Career Planning is the only regression that produced significant findings.

Table 13

Findings from the Study's Three Linear Multiple Regressions

Dependent Variable	Adjusted R^2	Sig.
Curriculum & Instruction	-.011	.655
Career Planning	.35	.039*
Student Services	-.008	.588

* significant at $p < .05$

The linear combination of predictors was significantly related to career planning, $F(4, 173) = 2.59$, $p < .05$. The adjusted R Square is .035, indicating that approximately 3.5% of the variance of student perception of satisfaction with career planning can be accounted for by the linear combination of student characteristics. The effect size

estimate (0.19) is considered to be between small and medium effect size according to Cohen (1969).

Table 14 depicts the multiple regression output that demonstrates the model fit for career planning.

Table 14

Model Fit

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.240[a]	.057	.035	.79923

a. Predictors: (Constant), commute, progress_degree, hours_worked, Class_Load

The model summary indicates that the combination of the set of variables (class load, progress to degree, hours worked, and commute time) is a good predictor of student perceptions of institutional effectiveness of career planning.

Progress to degree and number of hours worked were found to have a negative and significant effects on student perceptions of instructional effectiveness of career planning. As such, findings from multiple linear regression analyses informed some of the questions asked of focus group participants, particularly related to career planning. Table 15 shows the results of the multiple linear regression for a single set of predictors.

Table 15

The Results of the Multiple Linear Analysis for a Single Set of Predictors

Coefficients[a]

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Correlations		
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Zero-order	Partial	Part
1 (Constant)	4.118	.339		12.165	.000	3.450	4.787			
class load	-.124	.095	-.098	-1.302	.195	-.311	.064	-.077	-.099	-.097
progress degree	-.140	.057	-.184	-2.443	.016	-.253	-.027	-.158	-.184	-.182
hours worked	-.067	.033	-.151	-2.015	.045	-.133	-.001	-.136	-.153	-.150
commute	.010	.047	.016	.220	.826	-.083	.103	.009	.017	.016

a. Dependent Variable: Career_Planning

Progress to degree and hours work were both found to be significant predictors of nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness of career planning with 95% statistical probability as shown in Table 15. In other words, how far along a student is in her academic journey, and/or the number of hours she works in a week can predict her perception of Sacramento State's effectiveness with career planning. The regression findings also indicate that progress to degree and hours worked are *negatively* related to student perceptions of institutional effectiveness of career planning.

Given these findings, one may tend to assume that the further along adult students are in their academic journey, or the more hours they work in a week, the less satisfied they are with Sacramento State's effectiveness with career planning. However, while multiple linear regression is useful in determining that nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness of career planning *can be* predicted by students' progress to degree and/or the number of hours they work in a week, the quantitative data do not explain why a negative correlation exists, or if students who are close to graduating have a more negative perception of Sacramento State's effectiveness of career planning.

Therefore, analyzing student perceptions qualitatively, through conversation with adult learners, was important.

Summary

Research question one examined if nontraditional student characteristics can be predictors of their perceptions of institutional effectiveness. Multiple linear regression was conducted to determine if nontraditional student characteristics (class load, progress to degree, hours the student works in a week, and student's commute time to school) were predictors of student perceptions of institutional effectiveness. Findings indicated that student characteristics, such as their class load, their progress to degree, the number of hours they work, and their commute time are *not* predictors of their perceptions of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction or comprehensive student services. However, the linear combination of predictors was significantly related to student perceptions of institutional effectiveness of career planning. Specifically, progress to degree and number of hours worked were found to have a negative and significant effects on student perceptions of instructional effectiveness of career planning.

Research Question Two

Research question two was, "What are nontraditional students' perceptions of Sacramento State's institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services?" The findings are summarized by category (curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services) in the following sections. Findings for RQ2 and RQ3 are plotted individually in Figures 15-18, and, at the end of the chapter, the full picture of qualitative themes can be

found in Figure 19. Major themes are plotted on graphs in Figures 15-19. The top half of the graphs are labeled *positive themes*, and the lower half the graphs are labeled *negative themes.* Some themes cross the midline to indicate they are a combination of both types of opinions. Although the terms *positive* and *negative* are simplistic, the word choice is deliberate, and was made solely for the sake of creating a clear visual representation of the opinions expressed by nontraditional students. Granted, when someone asks me how I am, and I reply, "I'm fine," I do not always mean that I am perfectly fine and everything in my life is positive. Therefore, it would not be accurate to just represent my mood as *positive*. Similarly, the thoughts and feelings that were shared by focus group participants are more complicated and nuanced than simply being *positive* or *negative*. Rather, the terms *positive themes* and *negative themes* are used in the graphs and in some of the following explanation of findings as a way to capture the overall tenor of the thoughts and feelings that were shared.

In the graphs, the size of the bubble indicates how frequently and how strongly opinions were shared. For example, the largest bubbles in the graphs indicate opinions that are most frequently and most strongly expressed, and the smaller bubbles indicate opinions that were expressed less frequently, and/or with less emphasis. Also, the location of the bubbles indicates level of negativity of the opinions (dissatisfaction) or positive opinions (satisfaction). The lower in the graph, the more negative the theme and the higher above the midline, the more positive the opinions expressed. Themes that consist of a combination of sentiments are positioned across the midline, with the bulk of the bubble positioned either above or below the center line, graphically representing the

negative or positive opinions of study participants for that theme. For anonymity, participant names have been changed.

Curriculum and Instruction

Three major themes evolved related to curriculum and instruction: (a) inconvenient class times (with subthemes of frequency of classes and the importance of online classes), (b) method of instruction matters (such as use of technology), and (c) otherness. Some of the themes that emerged are positive, meaning the participants expressed satisfaction with their experience. For example, many students are pleased with the methods of instruction their teachers employ in the classes. Other themes were clearly negative, such as the frustration that nontraditional students feel because they do not think the university offers the classes they want and need, when they want and need them. Other themes straddle the line between negative and positive themes, such as students' perceptions of online classes. Some students are dissatisfied with the amount of online class offerings (they wish the university offered significantly more online classes), while others, who are enrolled in online courses, expressed satisfaction with their classes. Figure 14 is a graphic representation of themes that emerged related to curriculum and instruction.

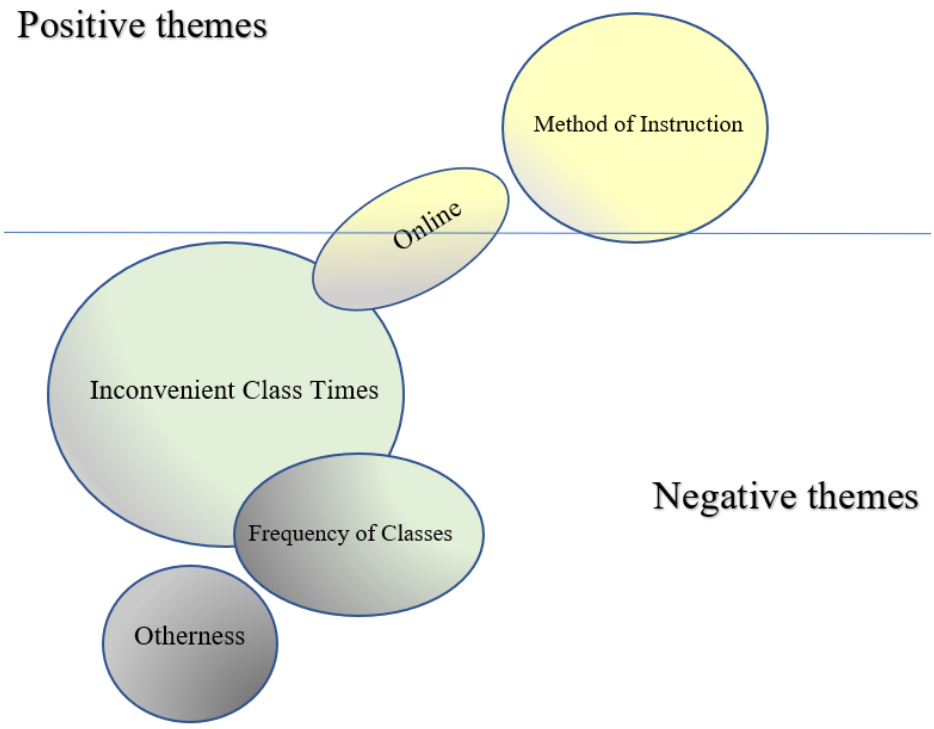


Figure 14. Graphic Representation of Themes Related to Curriculum and Instruction.

In Figure 14 (and subsequent figures depicting focus group themes), the size of the bubble indicates how frequently and how strongly opinions were shared. For example, Theme one, *Inconvenient Class Times,* is the largest bubble in Figure 14 because it was the most frequently expressed (and most strongly emphasized) theme. The location of the bubbles indicates whether the theme is negative (the lower in the graph, the more negative the theme), positive (the higher above the midline, the more positive the opinions expressed), or a combination of sentiments. Figure 14 demonstrates that *Method of Instruction* was a predominantly positive theme because most of the bubble is above the midline. *Otherness* was the most negative theme that emerged related to curriculum and instruction. A discussion of the major theme follows.

Theme 1: Inconvenient Class Times. Overwhelmingly, the number one complaint for nontraditional student focus group participants is the ability to find the classes that they want and need to graduate at times that are convenient for them. Many adult students juggle work, family, and school, and they are frustrated by the lack of evening class offerings. Ann, an interior architecture transfer student in her late twenties, remarked, "The scheduling, it makes it hard for a lot of us to have jobs." Participants commented that they were struggling to adjust their work schedules, or are even often facing tough decisions about whether or not they will need to quit their jobs altogether in order to continue in school. A sample of their responses are displayed in Table 16.

Table 16

Sample Responses Regarding Inconvenient Class Times

Sample Responses: Inconvenient Class Times.
In my major there are no night classes. Like there aren't any. It's just during the day. So, it's still, pretty much catered to younger people, or people that maybe have more like, financially stable background, or something.
A lot of our classes, there is one section. And a lot of the classes, or a majority of them, are morning classes.
It's tough, it's a challenge when I don't have so much of a flexible work schedule, that will allow me to take an hour off during the day, come in to class, and then go back to work, so I'm like, keeping my fingers crossed that I'm going to be able to find… it's like, I'm struggling, it's a struggle to find that perfect schedule, and classes that will fit with my work schedule- the kids, the family life.
I had trouble too - okay my economics class, and I contacted the Dean, he said there's a total of six evening classes, but some of 'em, I don't have the requisite yet, and the other ones were too full. Like too many people are trying to add. So, it's really hard to get into classes.

Most of mine are… one section of the class. Period. And it starts at 3pm.

I'm an English major, so I typically can't find any evening class as opposed to somebody in math or engineering or what have you. But I'm currently in my last year I'm fulfilling my upper division courses, and there are three specific courses over the past three years (I've been tracking them) have been at the same time - in the morning, back-to-back. And it doesn't seem like that is going to be an option for me unless I get a different employer, or I work grave shift, or I just make an alternative lifestyle. So that's what it's gonna come down to next semester for the three classes I have left.

I would like to share that as a nontraditional student, discovering after orientation that this school is a "traditional M-F 8-5 school" is not helpful; the lack of evening/online classes should be noted on transfer student information packets. The idea that many of our professors teach the online/evening classes at local JC's that get students to Sac State but we do not even offer one online/evening option for most classes is a huge disappointment.

There are not very many courses offered in the evening which makes it difficult for one to complete their educational goal without having to arrange their work schedule around. Some employers are lenient and will work with the student's schedule but not all are, so it takes us longer.

The lack of online/evening classes has forced me to extend my semesters at Sac State…giving the impression people can graduate in "2 for transfers" is only possible if you have no job, kids - totally open and free schedule. It is not realistic for any transfer student.

These comments demonstrate the frustration nontraditional learners face when they try to find the classes they want and need to graduate. *Time* was a strong theme throughout all categories. For focus group participants, the frustration was not only about what time of day classes are offered, but also the frequency with which classes are offered. Several students lamented that required classes (in some cases *pre-requisites*), are only offered once per year.

In addition to the major theme of inconvenient class times, two related subthemes emerged (frequency of class offerings and the importance of online classes). Students

were frustrated with classes that are offered infrequently, and had mixed opinions about the availability of online classes. Findings for these two subthemes follow.

Theme 1a: Frequency of classes. When required classes are only offered once per year, adult students feel stressed and frustrated. "Getting pushed back an entire year is not convenient," said Jen, a Geology major who feared she would not be able to graduate on time because the class she needed is only offered once a year. Table 17 contains some of the comments made by focus group participants related to the frequency of class offerings.

Table 17

Sample Responses Regarding Frequency of Class Offerings

Sample Responses: Frequency of Class Offerings.
Some of the courses are only offered specific semesters and then if you miss the chance to take it during that semester, you get pushed back an entire year.
I missed getting a seat in one of the classes that I needed, in the sequence, so I just scratched the whole thing. I'm like, I can't. I'm not going to spend an extra year. I didn't even really want to do it, but they say it's helpful. But, if you can't get in the class, it's not really helpful.
Sometimes you feel forced to be that, sort of traditional student, where the classes are only offered at this time, and you're put back a year, you know?

Several nontraditional student focus group participants voiced concerns about classes only being offered once per year, which led them to fear falling even further behind in their academic journey. Participants also shared opinions about the importance of online class offerings.

Theme 1b: Importance of online classes. Focus group participants frequently mentioned the importance of online class offerings. Some nontraditional students expressed a desire for more online classes as a way to fit coursework into their busy lives. Others are grateful for the options they have, and are hopeful that online courses will continue be offered in the future. Table 18 contains sample comments related to the importance of online course offerings.

Table 18

Sample Responses Regarding the Importance of Online Offerings

Sample Responses: Importance of Online Offerings.
I haven't really seen a lot of online options. It's mostly, I have to come down here.
More online classes would be nice.
Not so many online courses are available for my major.
It was an online course, and what I did notice there is we were just as capable of having profound and critical discussions over an online course as it would have been in a classroom. And I figured, if this was an option for any upper division course, I think it would be just as functional for me in the long term, so I do see a difference there.
They offer a lot of online courses that I needed, so even though I work full time, I am able to take the classes I need to here. That's why I was so happy I could get those online classes.

The desire for online course offerings was evident, especially because online courses can fit into busy schedules. While some students were pleased with the number of online courses, several students expressed frustration at the lack of online offerings they need.

The next important theme that emerged related to curriculum and instruction was that method of instruction (including the use of technology) is impactful for adult learners.

Theme 2: Method of instruction matters. In general, focus group participants are more engaged with classes when instructors employ multiple teaching methods, and they appreciate the efforts instructors make to stay current and to keep their classes interesting. Nontraditional students appreciate when classes are interactive. Even professors who have been teaching the same subject for many years make an effort to create an engaging learning environment, which adults particularly appreciate. One participant said, “I've had some that have been teaching for 20 years, and they are very into using the latest websites, and posting, and trying to paperless, and, or even just being dynamic and constantly updating the lectures” (Don, a 37-year-old History major). However, not all professors make the effort, and nontraditional students were not shy about sharing their opinions of their teaching styles. Table 19 contains focus group responses related to multiple teaching methods.

Table 19

Nontraditional Student Responses Regarding the Importance of Multiple Methods of Instruction

Nontraditional Student Responses: Method of Instruction is Impactful.
My very first semester, I took a homelessness and poverty class, and an assistant professor was teaching it, and we did movies, presentations, group work, discussions… she had guest speakers, and, it moved all the time, so there was never, like, this boring, you know, you’re looking at your watch.. never not wanting to be there. I thought that that was really great.

So far, that's all online. Watching videos, and online lecture. My other class is a mix of both, which, that's the first time I've ever had a hybrid class. When I signed up, I didn't know that it was hybrid, which… it kind of works out, because then I'm really not missing, or readjusting my schedule the whole semester. So far so good.

And like my upper division GE, it's nice because you can have, like canvas and blackboard, and they'll have, like the lecture videos, and you can catch up on your own pace. In case, like something happens during lecture. Like, you get cut off with work or something, so it's like, you have some flexibility.

I've got some pretty good teachers this semester, but I had one, who basically read her PowerPoint, and she basically read her PowerPoint in class and it was, it was very annoying. There was just nothing, like, why don't we just read your PowerPoint? You know, you weren't even fluffing it up in the middle there.

Many instructors, especially older instructors, still use methods of teaching from the 50s and 60s that are not supported by the current research in learning. These instructors use lecture and give a midterm and a final. We have known for years that this is not any especially effective way to learn, especially for adult nontraditional students. Unfortunately, because these instructors are tenured, there is no way to get them to change their methods to the teaching techniques that the research proves are better. The classes I did end up getting into have all been really great. They incorporate different learning styles so I never feel like each day is the same routine, and that helps keep my brain stimulated and receptive to learning.

A lot of our classes, we use a lot of video, YouTube… and Ted talks, and guest speakers. And we do class activities, quite a bit, where we have to talk to each other. (laughter).

Undoubtably, all students appreciate classes that are interesting, not just nontraditional students that are over 25 years old. However, adult learners are tuned into the methods their teacher use, and appear to be particularly grateful when they feel their time is well-spent and frustrated when they do not perceive professors are attempting to engage students. Based on the nontraditional students' comments, adult learners at Sacramento State generally perceive their classes to be engaging. They also find the

methods of instruction utilized by their professors to be relevant and appropriate for the content of the classes.

Theme 2a: Technology. A subtheme related to the importance of the method of instruction is the impact of how technology is used in the classroom. Some adult students are exposed to applications they have never heard of, and find them effective. Nontraditional students said they find new technology to be helpful for them as returning students. They recognize the advantages of using technology, even if they were a little intimidated by it at first. Others appear to be relatively tech savvy and appreciate the opportunity to use cutting edge technologies that will be helpful in their careers. Table 20 provides focus group participants' comments related to technology in the classroom.

Table 20

Nontraditional Student Responses Regarding the Use of Technology

Nontraditional Student Responses: Use of Technology.
I appreciate that because otherwise I'd be writing everything down. And, so, the two professors I do have, they actually uploaded their slides beforehand, so if you miss something, which, I, you know, coming back as a student… I'm like *thank God* that I have that now. Because before it was all screen, you know? Or they didn't really use their computers. It was all like, you know, that was difficult, like overhead projectors. So, this is so much easier.
We are really fortunate in our department, in our program, to use a lot of newer technology in the field, so that does make us more prepared for our industry, and wherever we go after that, so it's a good mix.
At first, I didn't even know what it was…she kept, she kind of glazed over it… and she was like, "oh just sign in on Kahoot." And I was like, I don't know what that is. I was like going through Canvas… I was like, I don't know where I'm going…and I had to ask somebody.

I have never heard of any of this. And it's funny, because I've been here, and I've been to Sac City, and I've been to ARC, and I've never heard of any of the things that you are talking about. Not even not using them, I've never heard of them.

I had a professor who recorded the lectures, and it really did help. If, you're, if like if they went too fast, or if you want to go over something, look back at it… you know if certain areas, maybe you're struggling with, it helps with that.

Nontraditional students evidently appreciate multiple methods of instruction. They also value technology that makes their experience more enjoyable, and makes it easier for them to keep up in the classroom. Even if they have not used, or even heard of, the technology used in the classroom, adult learners seem grateful for the technology incorporated into the curriculum and instruction at Sacramento State.

Theme 3: Otherness. The final major theme that emerged from the discussion related to curriculum and instruction was that nontraditional students feel *different from other students* in the classroom. Sometimes adult learners feel like they are treated like kids. Other times, adults are singled out by their professors for being older than other students. Veronica, a Child Development major in her thirties said, "Yeah, in my classes, I've been singled out, like once or twice, as, 'oh, you probably understand because you are older,'" and the student sitting next to her said, "Oh that's happened to me too!" In other cases, adult learners sometimes they feel like the curriculum is primarily geared towards younger people, which makes them feel invisible in the curriculum. These experiences create an environment where older students are hyper-aware of their *otherness* at the university. Table 21 contains nontraditional students' comments about

how they feel they are treated differently in the classroom, or are acutely aware of being different because they are older than their classmates.

Table 21

Sample Responses Related to Feeling Different Because of Their Age

Sample Responses: Feeling different because of age.
The faculty here, is kind of a they are kind of anachronistic? little bit stuck in you know, I had one who's like, oh we get to go on a field trip. it's here, and we get to see a film, an analogue film! A rare treat. And I was like, really? And again, we're not all 19 and so I'm like, really? So it's going to be like that.
She talked to us like we were kids. Which, I mean, it was a lower division class… I don't know if the … "kids" noticed…but, yeah, it was kind of cringey.
My partner had to take a whole class on that exact subject, and it was actually a bunch of BS, because he's 36, and it was literally a class on, hey, you might have to tell your friends that you can't go to a party on Friday night because you're an engineering major. And I was like, wow, a *whole semester class*.
Everything is so geared, every single thing that they, teach, that they say. I mean, I have an astronomy class, and he was like, oh you guys weren't even born yet… I was like, can we just like, knock it off with that sort of… everything is geared to you being 18. They speak to you like you don't know who you are, you don't have children, you've never driven, you've never bought a house, or you've never driven a car, you know?
It was a great class, you, she made it fun, once you got past being talked to like a sixth grader.
It's like, okay, well, they ask, "if you were out in the real world and you saw this, like how would you have reacted if you saw this… when you were in high school or middle school?" And I'm like…ok that was like a really long time ago.
She used me as an example a lot, because it was Child Development and I have two kids. So, it was it was nice to be able to tell, like, you know, my story or whatever, but it was also like…I'm so old to these other students that, like, can you just stop talking to me? Stop calling on me? Stop calling me out?

And I'm like, looking at myself in my phone, going, "boy I don't look that old..." which, I just have to remind myself, that it's just…obviously, I'm looking older than a lot of the other students, because they are all really young. So, it wasn't a bad thing, and I'm, like, "OK own it, yeah, great, I'm older so maybe I have some more wisdom in some areas."

The expectations of the class are totally molded around people who don't have jobs, life, children, whatever… and then you ask them for advice, like, "ok so, do you have any points, pointers or tips for me, how I can do this differently?" They look at you like you're crazy. And they don't have a suggestion for you because they're like, well, you just have to figure it out. And I'm like, not everybody has the luxury of not working and going to school, you know?

Nontraditional students are hyper-aware that they are older than their classmates and it makes them feel *different*, it makes them feel like *others*, which ultimately makes them feel unwelcome at the university. In some instances, adult learners seem to feel like their perspectives are not taken into account, and in other cases, they are singled out and made examples of by their professors for being older and presumably having more experience than their younger classmates. Additionally, curriculum is sometimes geared primarily towards younger people (or traditional-aged students), which seems to have a negative effect on adult learners.

Career Planning

Three major themes evolved around career planning: (a) career services are offered at inconvenient times for nontraditional student, (b) the career services are irrelevant for adults, and (c) major matters. Figure 15 is a graphic representation of themes that emerged related to career planning. As with the previous figure, the size of the bubble indicates the frequency and strength of opinions that constitute the themes. Bubbles below the midline indicate themes of dissatisfaction, or negative perspectives.

The bubble that straddles the midline indicates both positive and negative opinions were expressed.

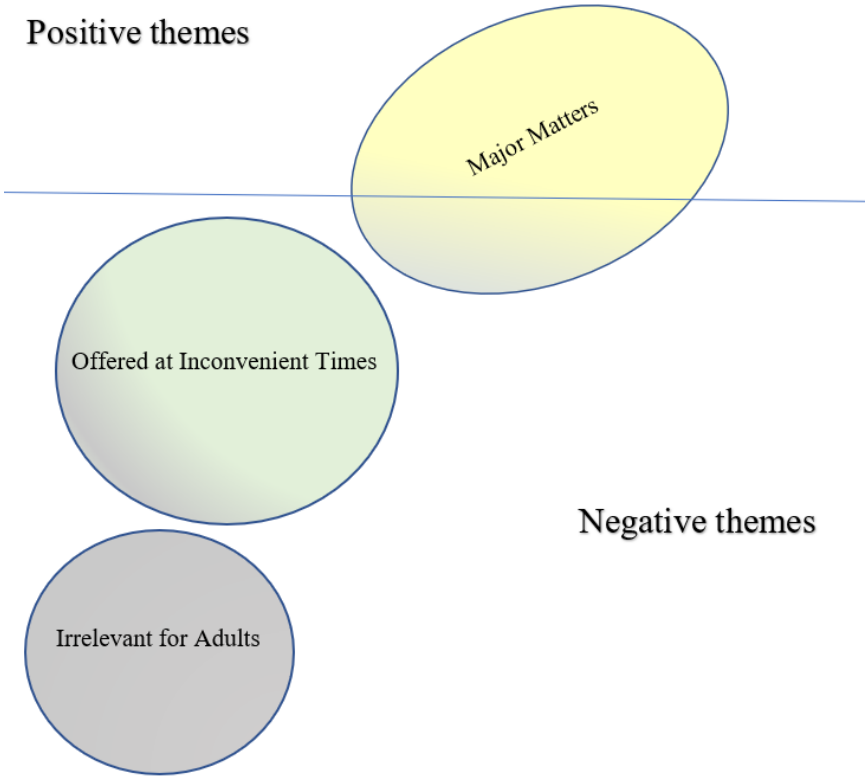


Figure 15. Graphic Representation of Themes Related to Career Planning.

Theme 1: Inconvenient Times - Career Services. As was the case with curriculum and instruction, *time* emerged as a major factor for nontraditional students. For the most part, students seem to be aware that the university offers various career services, such as career fairs, advising, and guest speakers, but they feel excluded because the services are offered at times that are inconvenient for them because they work full time. As Gary, a 25-year-old Political Science major said, “I think it’s probably more convenient for the younger ones who aren’t working as much… I mean, I haven’t

been able to go to all of them, because I do work, too." Table 22 provides samples comments from participants related to the inconvenient times career services are offered.

Table 22

Sample Responses Related to Career Services Offered at Inconvenient Times

Sample Responses: Career Services Offered at Inconvenient Times.
I get a lot of communication from the advisers, sending out internship emails, they have a Facebook, so they're on the media, they are communicating…job fairs…they are communicating that this speaker is coming in to talk about HR, and they'll have it at the union. I think there is a lot of resources available… it's just me. How am I going to find the time to go in and sit in – take advantage of these resources? That's my dilemma.
I think a lot of the school activities are based around the people that don't work.
…but a lot of it's during the day, so… (all – yep, yes). It's all during the day.
That's why people ask me, oh are you involved in anything on campus? No, not really, I don't have time.
And people were saying, "well we have workshops," but they are during the day.
Everything's at 1pm. It's like the middle of the day. If it was at least morning, or evening, that would be easier.
I live an hour away, so it's really hard to find something that's within my available timeframe…
If they would be more diverse in offering internships, maybe a couple hours, or a certain amount of hours per month or something like that, so you can…with more flexibility, or weekends.
Not being able to actually make an appointment at the Career Center makes things difficult for those of us who are busy. I don't have the time to sit waiting for a counselor to see me. It would be extremely helpful for the Career Center to allow appointments.

These findings align with, and begin to explain, the results of the multiple linear regression that found that the number of hours a student works in a week can be a predictor of her satisfaction of institutional effectiveness of career planning. Many adults work and find it difficult to get the classes they need, let alone take advantage of career services. Perhaps adding insult to injury, nearly half of focus group participants mentioned career aspirations as something that motivated them to enroll in college now, which was a question asked on the participant survey. The inability to access career services may be even more frustrating for adults who were motivated to return to school to advance their career.

Theme 2: Irrelevance. The second major theme that emerged from nontraditional student comments about career planning was that the services offered by the university are often not relevant, or helpful, for adult students. Sometimes staff members, such as at the career center, simply do not know how to help someone who is not seeking an entry-level job, or someone who has challenges unique to being a nontraditional student. Also, career fairs are not appealing to adults, and, in some cases, are bad experiences for nontraditional students. One student said that as soon as employers at a career fair saw her grey hair, all opportunities disappeared, “This lady, a student, stopped me at the career fair and she's, like I'm not gonna fill out a survey, but I'll tell you, as soon as they see my gray hair, the job offers get taken it off the table” (Veronica, Child Development major).

Students also commented that career fairs are primarily helpful for networking, but, if they work full time, they cannot attend career fairs. “Networking is never really a

possibility just because of the time constraints" said Josh, working adult student majoring in English. In that way, the services that are offered are not helpful for adults. Table 23 contains a sampling of comments made by nontraditional students about how career services offered by the university are not helpful for them.

Table 23

Sample Responses Related to Career Services Not Helpful for Them

Sample Responses: Career Services Not Helpful for Adult Learners.
I've sought out… in the career center, because it had been a while since I updated my resume, so I wanted to kind of talk to somebody to develop it up, and I talked to three people and they just didn't know how to look at an adult's resume. You, know, with just my experience, and how to put it in. And you know, I thought, well, I'll make another appointment, but just, they're young, you know? They were trying to be helpful. It just wasn't… it just wasn't. And I've run into that more often than not. Just not understanding what an adult's needs are.
As an employed nontraditional student, the lack of professionalism does not encourage me to reach out, nor would I suggest their mentoring to fellow students. It is a disappointment to deal with career centers with no apparent dress code, employees that openly complain to coworkers in front of students, etc. Due to these experiences, I no longer use career advising/counseling unless absolutely required to graduate. Severe lack of professionalism from the very departments encouraging our students to get jobs; flip flops, ripped jeans, poor customer service, finishing a private conversation before greeting people who approach the front desks. Overall experience has been an awful disappointment in person.
You have to do a non-paid internship during the day, you got to go to school at night, which leaves me asking, so how am I going to work?
And one out of the ten that we listened to was doing paid internships. And its competitive. And it's not, you know, it's $15/hour, you know? And it's 15 hours a week or something, I mean its pennies. I mean it's not even worth your time, except it's giving you experience.

And then, if you're doing it for a job that you know, you get like $100 a week, it's like, what is this for? Is this even worth it? So, to like try to do it all, like have a job and try to go to school, it's really challenging.

I know I'm already pretty established in my career, so it's not really something I would use.

I have almost participated in it, but I have talked to people who have gone to it, and it's just very general and very broad. So, if you want a general resume, they'll make that, but if you need anything catered to your sector, you're done. I guess through my employer I've had better luck, but, going to the career fairs, it's better for just networking in general, for actual catering to sector-related stuff, it didn't seem that useful.

They send out emails and there's like job fairs, but like skimming the companies that will be there, there is never anything remotely interesting….

Networking wasn't really a part of the curriculum that I have.

I'm probably gonna have to take off another one or two days to be able to meet with anybody.

Most networking opportunities are weekdays during the day time. It's tough to squeeze in meeting other people while I'm in class or at work.

Nontraditional students predominantly expressed frustration with general career services offered, such as career fairs and the career center. The services are not offered at times that are convenient for them, and when they do seek help, they are often disappointed because the services are not relevant for them or helpful for them in their current career trajectory. Unpaid internships, as an example, do not make sense for working adults. Jen said, "It's usually an unpaid internship. I mean, I can do an internship, but I'd rather get paid for it because I have more bills, than maybe an 18-year-old." However, while adults do not find general career services helpful, some programs

at Sacramento State evidently do an outstanding job of providing discipline-specific career advising and other services.

Theme 3: Major matters. This theme was made up three subthemes – career development is imbedded in some curriculum, departments are good at career planning and advising, and adults appreciate when subject matter experts/professionals are brought in to speak with students. Table 24 contains nontraditional student comments about how career development is imbedded into curriculum.

Table 24

Sample Responses Related to Career Development Embedded in Curriculum

Sample Responses: Career Development Embedded in Curriculum.
We have a center in NSM that's dedicated to… that's mostly what they do.
They host, like professional development classes.
I'm doing the Arts & Letters seminar, I guess, T/Th, where it's going to over networking, and linked in, and resumes, and all that stuff. It's just like a one unit 199, Comm 199. It's like 6 weeks or something. It's the first time I've seen it, but I mean they have the work fairs, or job fairs, or whatever, but this is the first time I saw this kind of thing. I'm gonna be doin' something, so…
I know there's one next month, and I know Sac State partnered with JC Penny's, to offer a discount for clothing. Like, have our resumes all reviewed before we go, and we have to have a binder with all the tabs, and all this information… there's a lot of competition, too.
I feel like my department really does. It's built into our curriculum, that the two classes, our capstone classes, that I'm in right now, and those are the ones that we can put on our resumes, and say I've used this equipment, I've done these sort of biochemistry and most people who graduate from our program find jobs within months of graduating if not sooner and/or grad school.

There's a lot of opportunities for Pol-Sci students. And they spread them out, there's the Pol-Sci internships, there's the sac internship, which is, multiple students get to intern for the governor's office. And then, there's the Panetta internship where one student from sac state can go work at the white house. And then there's also internships which I am signing up for today, too. For either state legislator, an executive agency, or lobbying. And then there's also the executive fellows you can sign up for, senate fellows, judicial fellows, you know? There's plenty of options, and I feel like everyone knows what they want to do in the Pol-Sci department. It seems pretty solid for career planning.

Nontraditional students appreciate when career planning is built into the curriculum. Especially for busy adults, it is more convenient when career planning is built into coursework, which also aligns with quantitative findings. Nontraditional students often work full-time, which makes it difficult to attend events and to take advantage of services that are offered during the workday. Quantitative findings indicated that the number of hours a student works can be predictive of her satisfaction with institutional effectiveness of career planning. It makes sense, then, that students appreciate when career planning in built in, as opposed to in addition to their coursework, because they have competing responsibilities.

Based on respondents' comments, certain programs are doing an excellent job of imbedding career planning opportunities into their curriculum. Likewise, some programs are helpful with career advising and planning. "They're always there for you, like if you go talk to them, and they say, ok you need this, and you need this to graduate, so it's not like a long drawn out process" (Jorge, Business major). Table 25 contains responses related to helpful career planning and advising in some programs.

Table 25

Sample Responses Related to Certain Programs Provide Helpful Career Planning and Advising

Sample Responses: Certain Programs Provide Helpful Career Planning and Advising
But, yes, I believe that they make a good effort in my field at least, that they want to set you up for success. And they offer, they have the resources to get there.
I feel like the business department does send out a lot of information about, you know, like job fairs, help with resumes, that kind of stuff.
They're very much making sure we are on a path, and we have to like sign a through in two pledge. And, you know, when you meet with your advisor, you write it all out, you take this class this term, and you have to get into this one, and everything just seems like it's all planned out.
For my major, again, they have specific clubs or things that you can go into they have a pre-law Club, they have the Lexx program, so if you want to go into CHP, or Sac PD, they have these specific things that you can go into if you're interested in those things. And they do have advisors, even if, that you haven't already gone to that advisor, even if you're in their class they will send you information to let you know that these works resources are available to you.
There's always some type of thing going on, like with a mixer, with people in California govt, or other local govts too.
I don't know how it is for other majors, but ours is through, a faculty member that we are assigned to, so scheduling a time with them is a little more flexible.
I think they make you do the necessary preparation for it by having you meet up with the counselors, a lot of time there's so much on the table, it's kind of overwhelming, so it seems like you have to go talk to the counselors about it, so it's like, it just gets to be so confusing, but they're always there for you, like if you go talk to them.
We have the ECA the engineering and computer science career. We have our own career fair we have our own Career Center into it.
Overall, it I really can't see there is much more the department could do for us to make us career ready.

While nontraditional students appear frustrated with general career services offered by the university (inconvenient times and lack of understand for adult's needs), some are impressed by, and pleased with, the career planning and advising offered by their academic program. One student said, "We have a lot of opportunities." Another student remarked, "And I feel like the department is really good about advising and keeping you on that path that you set" (Mike, Music major).

Another aspect of career planning that nontraditional students appreciate is when subject matter experts are brought in to speak with students. "Yeah, when they come, you learn what's going on and what they do. Like real world. Like, what you're really doing – not just in a classroom" said Carla, a Criminal Justice major in her late twenties. Students also appreciate it when their instructors maximize connections with their professional communities. Tom, a Civil Engineering student said, "I think the Civil Engineering department is doing a really good job, they are really tight with the community." Table 26 contains more of these comments.

Table 26

Responses Related to Subject Matter Experts and Community Connections

Responses: Subject Matter Experts and Community Connections.
And then, like having the guest speakers that come in… I'm part of the Social Work association, so we have opportunities to volunteer, which we can use on our resume, because you know, of course, the jobs are going to want that. And then, having the internships – like, a lot of people have said they basically have a job, when they are done with the internship.
Teachers using their like personal work experience with their teachings helps me figure out what job I'm gonna try to it go for.

They actually have people will come here and talk about their company.
I like having the guest speakers that come in.

We've had guest speakers come in from companies in Sacramento that tell about their job, and then they say, if you're interested, in the future when you graduate, come see us.

They have had guest speakers come and do seminars, and everybody is welcome, you know, current architects doing current projects, and sustainable projects, and things like this industry is kind of moving toward. So, it's really cool to attend those and listen.

They prepare them for career readiness without a hitch... most of their faculty works at the places that they're going to work at, so they build those relationships and they know what's expected of them… they definitely prepare them for career readiness.

According to focus group participants, when academic programs embed career planning into the curriculum, make an effort to provide advising for students in the major, bring in subject matter experts, and maximize community connections, adult learners are impressed and satisfied with career planning. These findings do not support the multilinear regression results which indicated that progress to degree and number of hours worked are predictors of nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness of career planning. Rather, these findings suggest that the academic programs' approach to career planning influences students.

Comprehensive Student Services

Two major themes emerged related to comprehensive student services for nontraditional students: (a) student services are offered at inconvenient times, and (b) adult learners find various student services are poorly managed. Unfortunately, both major themes that emerged related to student services expressed predominantly negative opinions. Nontraditional students expressed mostly dissatisfaction with the availability of services, and with the quality of the services they receive, they had strong opinions

about student services at the university. Figure 16 is a graphic representation of themes that emerged related to career planning.

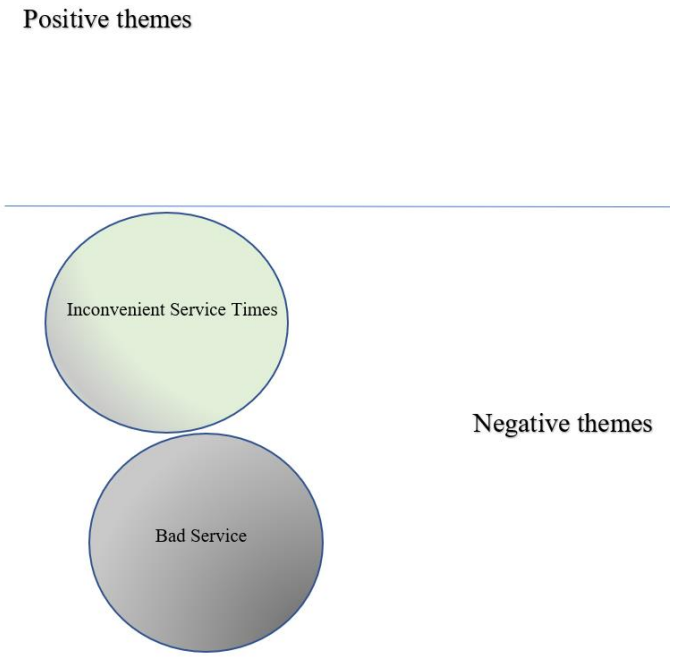


Figure 16. Graphic Representation of Themes Related to Career Planning.

The lack of major positive themes related to comprehensive student services does paint a stark picture in Figure 16, because both bubbles are below the midline and labeled as negative themes. However, based on the opinions of nontraditional students, a few small changes in student services can go a long way in improving their experiences.

Theme 1: Inconvenient times - Student Services. As was the case with curriculum and instruction and career planning, *time* emerged as the most overwhelming major theme in the category of student services. Adult learners find it difficult to take advantage of services because they have responsibilities outside of school. Carla, a Criminal Justice major who lives over an hour away from campus said, “And that’s like

crazy, I mean there are students that work. You can't go on campus for an hour and try to get an appointment and then leave and then come back... that's crazy." Table 27 contains a sample of the responses related to frustration with student services being available at inconvenient times for adult learners.

Table 27

Sample Responses Related to Student Services Offered at Inconvenient Time for Adults

Sample Responses: Student Services Offered at Inconvenient Times for Adults.
I haven't really used a lot of the services, besides like the financial aid or the advising center, not those other places because I have to go back to Vacaville and go to work. I would like to use the Well and stuff before I leave here, but I haven't really had any opportunity because of my own life style.
Everything's at 1pm. It's like the middle of the day. If it was at least morning, or evening, that would be easier.
Even getting major advising, I couldn't do it because I get out at 4, at the latest, and everything is during the day.
Unless it is at 7:30 in the morning, which also means making major rearrangements getting the kid to school…
Dealing with areas outside of our college is a huge pain, even though I'm on campus. I'm usually stuck in Sequoia doing my own classes or work, so trying to get to Lassen in time to deal with financial aid, well once I finally do get there, like, my issues get figured out, but getting into there when they are open is not really conducive to the rest of us.
I took today off to like figure stuff out.
Service being available outside of work schedule would be really nice.
I heard someone call in, and he's like, our hours – it's only, it's a walk-in basis that they take you in, but I hear that the latest they will put you down on the schedule for is 3:30. So, if you're not there, signed in by 3:30, they will turn you away, because they want to get through everybody that has already been there. But for the people who can't get there, they can't even sign in. I mean we have all this technology, why can't we skype appointments?

I live up in Shingle Springs… and I have to commute down, and so there are days where I'm like, ok I'm working full time, and I have a full-time schedule at school…Why can't the advisors set out certain times of the day when people who do have to commute can get appointments, where it's just like a video call, and you don't have to drive an hour down to do this meeting and then drive back?

I think a lot of the school activities are based around the people that don't work.

How much are you really servicing the community? If you're not always available.

All services stop at 4. At least when I tried to call today at 4… like I called the 278-1000, and sorry, we're not available right now, it's after hours - at 4pm. And it was like, they had sent me an email at 3:54… from financial aid, and I was like, ok, let me just call them because this doesn't make sense. And it was like, too late now. But you can't reply to this email!

I come from Stockton, and I'm like, I can't just come to stand in line at 7am so I can be the first one there. Or wait four hours until class,

It is difficult to get advising time and especially get time to do business with finial aid and student services if you are a student with children.

Nontraditional students' number one frustration, across all categories, was related to time, and student services is certainly no exception. Students expressed frustration with services closing long before any working person could access them. "It closes at 5, which I always thought was inconvenient. Almost all the Financial Aid places close at 5" remarked on respondent. However, time was not their only complaint about student services. Adult learners also have strong opinions about the quality of student services at the university.

Theme 2: Bad Service. Unfortunately, the second major theme that emerged from nontraditional students was the sentiment that various student services are generally poorly managed. Perhaps because they are older students, adult learners have higher

expectations of professionalism and customer services than what they have experienced at the university. Students believe that Sacramento State is well-intended, however, as Don said, “There’s a big gap between their intent and their execution.” Table 28 provides a sample of their responses.

Table 28

Sample Responses Related to Poorly Managed Student Services

Sample Responses: Poorly Managed Student Services.
So, I’m calling the registrar, and they are like, “oh, you have to contact the department,” and so I contacted the Economics department, and the Dean says, “oh, we can’t do it. You have to go to this…” and I call them, “oh no, you have to go to Economics.” It’s like, what do I do? They send me in circles, it’s like they don’t know, maybe, what to do? Or they don’t want to be there. I don’t know, but it’s a constant run around.
You asked about services, and I gave them a 5 [out of 10], because the services are not always the most organized, they are there. I think the intention is there, but they are not always the most organized.
It’s people who are doing the work, and people can very easily fall short.
How much are you really servicing the community? If you’re not always available. Or if the information is all over the place, there’s always, there’s one person who’s in charge, and then they’ve got these little people, kind of giving out information, and you just never know. I mean it could be different between other people and you… and you’re just kind of looking to having the information being universal.
I submitted a loss of income appeal, so having to call in all the time just to make sure, just to check up… and it would be nice to, maybe have an assigned representative that I can just go to every time, rather than having a different student, and getting a different student, and getting a different answer every time. That can be very frustrating.
Or if you call, you’re on hold for like 40 minutes before someone picks up….
Financial aid has just been… (people begin murmuring and talking over each other) … I give up on them.

The CARES office is very inefficient and does not portray itself accurately. The office is not open the posted hours and the website is even more misleading. I applied for assistance and it took a month to finally get a negative response that did not even address the request.

Severe lack of professionalism from the very departments encouraging our students to get jobs; flip flops, ripped jeans, poor customer service, finishing a private conversation before greeting people who approach the front desks. Overall experience has been an awful disappointment in person.

The advising process is broken. Splitting the advising responsibilities between the major adviser and the academic advising office results in students receiving different advice from different people.

If it wasn't for the student success person in the psychology department helping students with the advising needs and her understanding how to get people through system, no one in psychology would graduate on time. This desperately needs to be fixed. Proper advising is the key to having people graduate on time. I am graduating on time in spite of the system that in place because I have successful at navigating the bureaucracy that is Sac State but not everyone is successful. I have talked to many nontraditional students about this (we tend to hang out together). They all have this complaint.

While nontraditional students had concerns with, and complaints about, student services, they did also express gratitude. For example, as Tom the Music major said, “as far as wellness, financial aid, and advising, that’s great here. I really don’t have any complaints. I mean, we have a gym that is also a medical center, I mean, so that stuff is incredible.” And, students find veterans’ services helpful, as well. Four out of the five focus group sessions contained at least one veteran, and they all had mostly positive comments about the services they receive. Don said, “I’m blessed that I’m a veteran. I get allowances and my tuition paid for to go to school.” Don told the group that he was 18 years old when 9/11 happened, which is why he is a nontraditional student. He said

that the veterans' services are helpful, but there is always more that they could do for veterans:

> There's a lot more to it than that. There are things that should be specific to veterans because we have…some veterans are not as well adjusted, as say, I am. You know, and they are going to need people to help them with that, with managing their anxiety and PTSD while they are in a classroom with a bunch of 19-year-olds. That's, that's a trigger for a lot of people. You know, as much as it bothers us [nods to other adult students in the room], it bothers someone that's got combat fatigue immensely more.

Summary

Research question two was, what are nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services? To examine nontraditional student perceptions, all currently enrolled adult learners at Sacramento State were invited to participate in focus groups. Impressively, 182 nontraditional students volunteered. Every volunteer received a focus group participant survey, and roughly 50 students were invited to attend focus groups on specific days and times. Five focus groups sessions were held, and 24 students participated. Another 23 students submitted focus group participant survey responses.

Focus group questions were designed to gain a rich understanding of nontraditional student perceptions of the three major categories that operationalize institutional effectiveness for this study – curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. Following the sequential explanatory mixed method

design, specific questions about career planning were asked in the survey, and probing questions were posed during focus group discussions. Multilinear regression that was conducted on pre-existing data from October, 2018 indicated that nontraditional student characteristics (specifically where they are in their academic journey, or progress to degree, and the number of hours they work in a week), can be predictors of nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness of career planning.

Overwhelmingly, findings indicated that *time* is the number one complaint for nontraditional students. Adult learners said they have difficulty getting the classes they need at a time that is convenient for them, and expressed a desire for more evening classes. Nontraditional students also expressed frustration that career services are not offered at times that work with their schedules, a complaint that was also prevalent when discussing their perceptions of student services. A general lack of understanding of what adult students need was also a common thread across categories. Nontraditional students expressed frustration with the university's general career services and other comprehensive student services.

Multiple linear regression findings were somewhat explained, in that students who work cannot get to campus to take advantage of career services and events. However, their progress to degree did not emerge as a characteristic that necessarily influences their perceptions of career services. Rather, their academic program's approach to career planning, such as embedding opportunities into curriculum and instruction, focusing on advising, introducing subject matter experts, and maximizing

connections with professional communities, plays a role in nontraditional student perception of institutional effectiveness.

Finally, adult learners expressed frustration with student services, perhaps because they are older and expect a higher level of customer service and professionalism than what they have perceived at the institution. However, students, especially veterans, are grateful for student services that are offered to them. Nontraditional students' lives are complicated which may be why their perceptions of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services are mixed. Nontraditional student responses mirror the complexity of their lives.

RQ3 Findings

The third research question for this study asked, "What can the institution do better to enhance nontraditional student success?" Much of the answer was provided as students shared their overall perceptions of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. For example, it is clear that adults would like more evening classes, and for career planning and student services to be offered with extended hours so that working adults can access the services they want and need. Those ideas are evident in the responses that have been shared throughout this chapter, and will not be re-explained in the following pages. However, additional themes emerged related to what the institution can do to enhance nontraditional student success. The additional themes that will shared in this section were: (a) more access to tutors, (b) feeling undervalued, and (c) you are not alone.

Figure 17 is a graphic representation of additional themes that emerged related to research question three. As with the previous figures, the position of the bubbles relative to the midline indicates expressions of negative or positive feelings, and the size of the bubbles indicate the frequency and strength of opinions shared for each theme. A subtheme emerged for Theme Two, *Feeling Undervalued*, which is that nontraditional students face Ageism at the university, which is indicated with overlapping bubbles below.

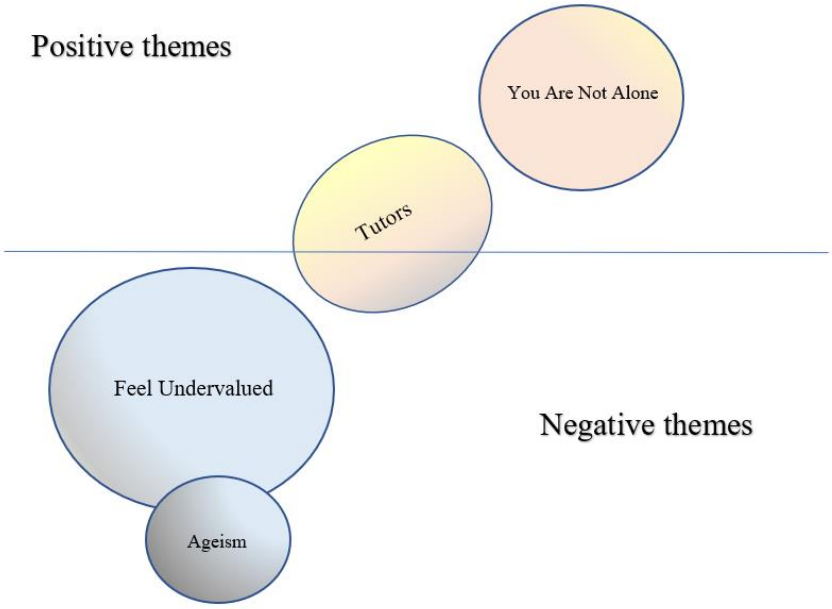


Figure 17. Graphic Representation of Additional Themes for What the Institution can do Better to Enhance Nontraditional Student Experiences.

Theme 1: Tutors. An unexpected theme that emerged across focus groups was a desire for more access to tutors. Adult learners are often returning to college after an extended period of time away and they lack confidence in their pre-existing knowledge of subjects, such as math. As Don said, “I don’t math.” However, while they expressed a

desire for tutors or peer-driven study groups, nontraditional students are unclear what options are available to them, and they sometimes feel awkward seeking help. Table 29 contains responses related to the desire for more access to tutors.

Table 29

Responses Related to More Access to Tutors

Responses: More Access to Tutors.
I would like to have more… have tutoring more available. Or, I know it's available, but if it was more announced. Like, "we have ten people on these days, so feel free to come..." because it's just, I don't know, going in and asking for help…
You know, I tried to go to tutoring with somebody for my language last term, and I walked in, and I felt like I was inconveniencing them. They were like, "oh, well, yeah she can help you…" and then one person started helping me, and then she just started doing something else, and somebody else started helping me. And I didn't… I just felt so… it was an awful feeling.
I would say more study groups, or more tutoring. A lot of times, there's a limited tutor availability for classes in general.
Yeah, they are students who are tutors, and sometimes they are not available.
So, Sac State… do we have math labs? I know we have a reading and writing lab, but is there a math lab, too? Do you guys know?
I ask about the tutors, because that was one of my first questions I asked of my stats professor, because, I haven't taken a stats class in 20 years. And now, what am I getting myself into? It's a foreign language right now. And so, I'm kind of concerned. I know I'm going to need some help. I know I'm going to need to go in and ask some questions and get a refresher on this stuff. Who can I go to? Where can I go?
Yeah, YouTube shouldn't be your tutor.

Returning students are understandably nervous about keeping up with the coursework. Sue, a Social Work major said, "For me, being 42, I feel like I'm one of the oldest ones in the class, and it's very fast. So sometimes I feel like I'm way behind." Across all focus groups, students expressed a desire for more access to tutors. They also acknowledged that there may be plenty of tutoring services available, they just do not know how to access them. Also, they sometimes feel uncomfortable asking for help, perhaps because they do not feel like the university values them as students. This idea, that adult learners want their professors, classmates, and university service providers to understand, *and care about*, the complexity of their lives was another theme that emerged related to what the university can do to enhance their experience.

Theme 2: Undervalued. The second theme did not necessarily emerge from explicit comments from nontraditional students. However, as they told their stories, it was evident that adult students sometimes feel like the university does not understand their situational and/or dispositional circumstances. At times, focus group participants seemed sad that their professors and classmates do not understand them, or worse, do not even consider that their experience is different than those of traditional college students. One student said, "it is a lonely experience." Table 30 contains comments related to this theme.

Table 30

Responses Related to Nontraditional Students Feeling Undervalued and Seeking Understanding of and Empathy for their Complex Lives

Responses: Nontraditional Students Seeking Understanding and Empathy.
I mean a lot of my professors are just a little bit older than me, you know? So, I mean the examples that they are bringing out are probably more familiar to me than to the students, but a lot of times, it's something that I just have to be cognizant about – that, like if we're going to talk about the history surrounding 9/11, that, yeah, I was 18 years old when that happened, but most of my classmates were infants, or not even born yet at that point. It blows my mind every time, and it has happened several times.
I feel awkward, hanging out with young kids.
My life outside of school has busy all week and is slightly off balance. I am having to balance financial changes from the loss of my parent, I am having to look for a FT job that will work with my school schedule (none of the school posted jobs offer year round FT positions to students who actually need to work FT and attend school FT), I have church commitments, social commitments, and school. There were no student service options available to me last year when my parent was in the hospital. My options were staying enrolled, withdrawing from classes without penalty, or having the option to take one semester off without having to reapply to the school. There were no student resources available to me for my family emergency which turned into death of my parent. Since I am almost done, I chose to stay in school.
Counseling appointments are not offered at a later time in the day making it difficult for me to request days off from work. I don't really see any support for nontraditional students at Sac State. My first semester at Sac State was really difficult the first two weeks and almost discouraged me to stop attending all together, but I persisted because there were other students who helped me when I didn't know who I can contact. It's difficult to balance the many responsibilities that a nontraditional student carry. However, it doesn't mean that we don't want to succeed; if anything, having our responsibilities makes us want to work even harder.
I may be over 25, but I am attending the school as a traditional student. Financial has been helpful to me. I feel that students in my situation should be offered more like extra funds for low income students. Most of the resources are geared toward students under 21. I know that the parent I was living with passed away and was a Veteran. Since the school considers me to be independent based on my age, I am not able to check for resources in the VA office for help. Because they are not able to help me.

Nontraditional students sometimes feel invisible, as if their professors, classmates, and university service providers do not understand, nor do they care, that they are juggling multiple roles and living complex lives with responsibilities outside the university. Worse, some students have experienced ageism.

Theme 2a: Ageism. Sadly, a handful of students explicitly mentioned being treated differently because of their age by fellow students and professors. Table 31 contains nontraditional student comments related to the ageism they have experienced.

Table 31

Responses Related to Nontraditional Students Experiencing Ageism

Responses: Nontraditional Students Experience Ageism.
Sometimes it feels like, the teachers will be, sometimes I feel that ageism kind of a thing. And I don't know if it happens at night, but during the day, some of the teachers… it's kind of a weird dynamic, being a… a.. And I just think, "oh is it me feeling insecure and uncomfortable?" But it really was, because I've talked to other people, and they're like no, you're right. The teachers don't want to… it's just awkward sometimes.
There are some teachers who prefer teaching "college students."
I do notice that people are like, "Wow, you're way older than I thought you were." And I'm like, "I'm not that old, but OK."
They're like…it's like they say, "how old are you?" and they're like, "Oh! You're *that* old?"
I actually stopped telling people how old I am. I stopped talking about how old my kids are. Because, it's like, their whole attitude towards me changes. Like, "you're so old. Like, you're my mom's age."

The overarching theme is that nontraditional students would like to be *seen*, understood, and valued. For some, they would just like to not be treated differently because they do not fit the 18-24-year-old mold.

Theme 3: You are not alone. The final theme that emerged related to what the institution can do to enhance their experience emerged from nontraditional students' realization that they are not alone at the university. In the invitation to participate in focus groups, and in the session introductions, I cited the statistics that one in five undergraduates at Sacramento State is over 25 years old, and that nontraditional students are the fastest growing segment in higher education. Learning that there are many more students, just like them, at Sacramento State, seemed to bring comfort to adult learners who participated in the study. Table 32 provides those responses.

Table 32

Responses Related to Nontraditional Students Learning They are Not Alone

Responses: You are Not Alone.
I'm here. I guess it was more of an ego thing, being so old, but, I'm not the only one. I mean, look at us here.
I feel like once you get to a certain age, they're like, oh, so where did you… well, at least from Shingle Springs, most people that I knew went directly into college. They went elsewhere. Most of them are working on their masters, or have their masters, and now they can't find a job, and I'm like, "well, I have a job, I just haven't gotten as far education-wise." And it's definitely been different here, especially, like, just talking to you guys, knowing that other students do have to balance sometimes a full-time job, and full school workload. Together, it's so... like, you know, you're basically not by yourself.
It was really good to kind of have some shared experiences... and I think it's really cool.

Even though nontraditional students sometimes feel out of place and do not know where to turn to seek help, and even though they sometimes feel like they are treated differently, they found comfort in the knowing that there are other adult learners at the university, and that they are not alone. Perhaps the institution can enhance their experience by highlighting them in marketing materials, celebrating their success through university-wide communication, and facilitating social gatherings or organizations so they create a stronger network at the university.

Summary of Themes - RQ3

Research question three asked what the institution can do to enhance nontraditional students' experiences. The obvious answers to RQ3 are inherent in responses to questions about curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. For example, nontraditional students are dissatisfied with when classes and services are offered, so it is clear that offering classes and services at times that are more convenient for their schedules is something the university could do to enhance their experience. Rather than reiterating the obvious answers, this section focused on additional explicit and implicit themes that emerged in *addition to* offering more evening and online classes, and offering services at times that are convenient for adult learners.

One of the additional explicit themes that emerged across all focus groups was that nontraditional students would like more access to tutoring. Adult learners sometimes lack confidence in their preexisting knowledge, and they are, at times, uncomfortable seeking help. Two more implicit themes that emerged for enhancing nontraditional

students' experiences are that they would like to be better understood, and they want to know they are valued by the university. Finally, nontraditional learners are comforted knowing they are not alone, which implies the need for greater community, something the university could help facilitate.

Additional Themes

In addition to the aforementioned themes related to curriculum and instruction, career planning, comprehensive student services, and what the institution can do to enhance nontraditional students' experiences, it would be remiss not to include two more common threads emerged from the focus groups: (a) inclusivity, and (b) gratitude. Tables 33 and 34 provide remarks related to these positive common threads.

Table 33

Positive Common Responses- Inclusivity

Positive Common Responses: Inclusivity
I do think sac state does a good job of mentioning that they are like a multicultural campus. They do. They don't discriminate. I will give Sac State that. They have been very welcoming. They're a non-discriminatory campus in my experience. You have the Multicultural Center... they've been very welcoming. Typically, you don't see any type of biasing.
I think I really enjoy the diversity here.
You do see, at least DACA and Dreamer stickers stuck on faculty doors, on their doors, so you know that they can answer your questions for you.
Also noticed, there's some really cool emails we're getting about pronouns, and stuff like that – it seems like Sac State is on top of it.

I think that Sac State is doing well. I do appreciate, I saw some posters about black history month, so I think there is good effort to be made.
I think Sac State values community and inclusivity.

While focus group participants were all 25 years old or older, they were diverse in many ways and they were pleased that the university values diversity and inclusivity. In general, adult students consider Sacramento State to be a welcoming campus, and they appreciate that the university makes a concerted effort to be inclusive. And, despite their frustrations with various aspects of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services, many nontraditional students are also grateful to be here. Table 34 provides comments related to the gratitude nontraditional students feel for being able to attend college.

Table 34

Positive Common Responses- Gratitude

Positive Common Responses: Gratitude
I've been pretty lucky.
But for the most part, you know, I'm grateful to be here.
I feel fortunate, I really do…
So, I'm grateful.
I feel fortunate. I feel blessed to be here, I really do. I mean, I took, I have 20 years, coming back, but I'm here. And I'm grateful.

Gratitude did not emerge as a major theme of this study. However, in every focus group, *someone* mentioned how grateful they feel to be in school. Even though they sometimes feel frustrated and neglected, several nontraditional students expressed gratitude for the opportunity to attend the university. The notion is important to highlight because it demonstrates that even though nontraditional students experience (and freely expressed) dissatisfaction, they are still connected to what motivated them to go to or return to college, which is important as they navigate the barriers they face on their journey towards academic success.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to examine nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness related to curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. This study utilized a sequential explanatory mixed method approach whereby existing quantitative data were analyzed and the findings informed questions asked in focus groups. Student perceptions of institutional effectiveness were examined through three research questions:

1. Can levels of perception of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services be predicted from nontraditional student characteristics?
2. What are nontraditional students' perceptions of Sacramento State's institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services?
3. What can the institution do better to enhance nontraditional student success?

This chapter provided the relevant quantitative and qualitative findings for this study.

Research question one assessed if nontraditional student satisfaction could be predicted from student characteristics (class load, progress to degree, hours the student works in a week, and student's commute time to school). Progress to degree and number of hours worked were found to have a negative and significant effects on student perceptions of instructional effectiveness of career planning. Therefore, specific questions related to nontraditional student perceptions of career planning, as well as where students are in their academic journey, and how many hours students work, were incorporated into the focus group participant survey and in questions asked during focus group sessions.

Research question two assessed nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. To gain a rich understanding of their lived experiences, five focus groups were conducted with 24 nontraditional student participants. An additional 23 responses were provided via a focus group participant survey. Focus group participants' demographics were reflective of the quantitative survey respondents. Further, quantitative and qualitative research respondents were similar to the overall makeup of nontraditional students at the university. Responses were transcribed and grouped into themes based on curriculum and instruction, career, planning, and comprehensive student services.

Three themes emerged for curriculum and instruction: (a) inconvenient class times (with subthemes of frequency of class offering and the importance of online classes), (b) method of instruction matter (such as use of technology), and (c) otherness.

Nontraditional students are hyper-aware that they are older than their classmates and it makes them feel like *others*, ultimately making them feel unwelcome at the university. In some instances, adult learners seem to feel like their perspectives are not taken into account, and in other cases, they are singled out and made examples of by their professors for being older and presumably having more experience than their younger classmates. Curriculum is also sometimes geared primarily towards younger people (or traditional-aged students), which has a negative effect on adult learners.

Three themes also emerged for career planning: (a) inconvenient times – career services, (b) irrelevance, and (c) major matters. Findings that career services are offered at inconvenient times for nontraditional students align with, and begin to explain the results of the multiple linear regression that found that the number of hours one works in a week can be a predictor of their satisfaction of institutional effectiveness of career planning.

It stands to reason that nontraditional students appreciate when career planning is built into the curriculum. Especially for busy adults, it is convenient when career planning is built into coursework. As such, adult learners are impressed and satisfied with career planning when they are embedded into their academic programs. Adults also appreciate when professions bring subject matter experts to campus, and maximize their professional community connections. These findings do not necessarily support the multilinear regression results that one's progress to degree and number of hours worked can be predictors of nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness of

career planning. Rather, these findings suggest that the academic programs' approach to career planning is impactful for nontraditional students.

As was the case with curriculum and instruction and career planning, *time* is a frustrating factor related to student services. Two major themes emerged for comprehensive student services for nontraditional students: (a) student services are offered at inconvenient times, and (b) adult learners find various student services are poorly managed. Students are vexed at the notion that services they need are not accessible for them. Student services close as early as 4 p.m. which makes it nearly impossible for working adults to get the help they need. Worse, adult learners had low opinions of how several departments and programs are managed. Perhaps because they are working age adults, nontraditional students expect a higher level of professionalism and better overall customer service than what they perceive they receive at the university. However, while nontraditional students freely expressed dissatisfaction with some student services, adult learners are grateful for services, particularly veterans.

Research question three sought to learn what the institution can do better to enhance nontraditional student success. Answers were inherently provided as students expressed the desire for more evening and online classes and extended hours for career and student services. Those sentiments are evident in the responses that have been shared throughout this chapter. Other themes also emerged including: (a) more access to tutors, (b) feeling undervalued, and (c) you are not alone.

Adult learners often lack confidence in their pre-existing knowledge and wonder where, and to whom, they can turn for support. Asking for help is difficult at times, so

nontraditional students would like the information readily available, in a format that is easily accessible. Yet, even though nontraditional students sometimes do not know where to turn to seek help, and even though they sometimes feel like they are treated differently, they are glad to know that there are other hundreds of adult learners at Sacramento State. "We are not alone," said one participant gratefully. Finally, nontraditional students feel grateful for the opportunity to go to or return to college, and they are pleased with and impressed that Sacramento State is an inclusive and caring campus. Figure 18 depicts a graphic representation of the major themes that emerged for this study.

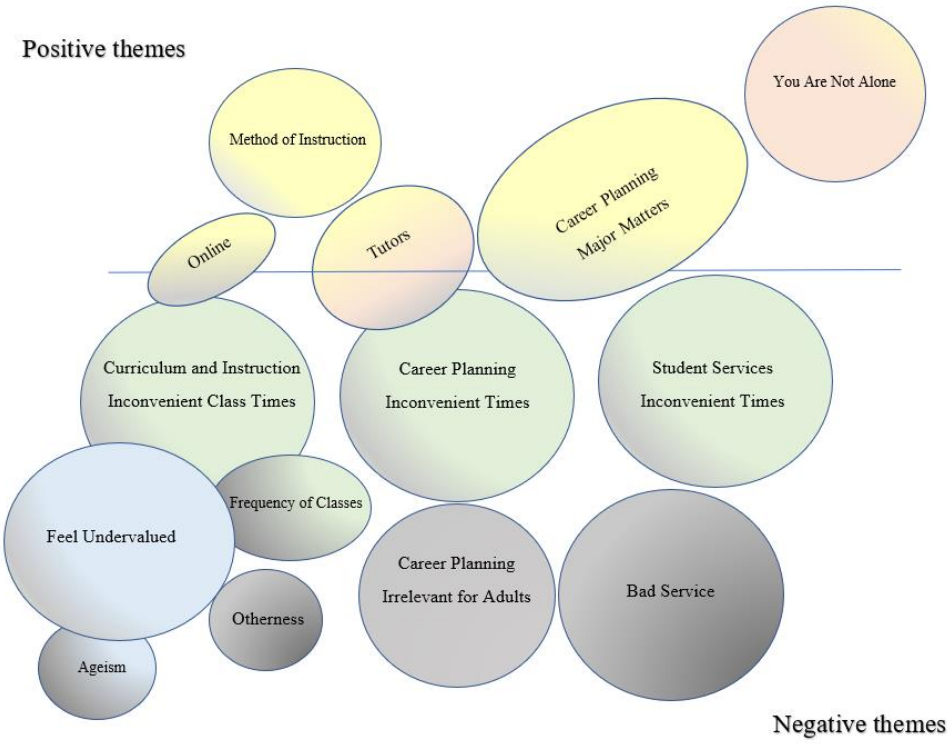


Figure 18. Graphic Representation of Major Qualitative Themes for Study.

Figure 18 depicts the full picture of themes that emerged in this study. As is represented by the cluster of bubbles beneath the midline, the majority of major themes unveiled challenges that adult learners face at the university. Nontraditional students expressed dissatisfaction with institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. In particular, their complicated lives make it challenging for them to access classes and services that are only available during the workday, which causes stress and creates difficulties for nontraditional students. Three themes, however, contained both positive and negative sentiments, which underscores the complexity of the university experience for adult learners. These themes are represented by bubbles that cross the midline in the graph. For example, online learning is key for nontraditional students, but they had mixed feelings on the topic. Some students expressed a strong desire for more online classes and they are disappointed that the university does not offer more hybrid or online classes. However, the students who *are* taking online classes are satisfied with the courses they are enrolled in and confident in their ability to succeed in them.

Other themes were predominantly positive, such as the opinions nontraditional students shared about the method of instruction employed by their instructors. These themes are represented by bubbles above the midline, and for the whole graph, the size of the bubbles indicates how frequently, and how strongly opinions were shared. Positive themes were related to curriculum and instruction, particularly the method of instruction faculty choose for their classes at Sacramento State. Additionally, students shared positive opinions about career planning that is embedded into the curriculum for certain

programs. For example, adult learners especially appreciate when their instructors invite professionals from their respective fields to visit the classroom and share real-world experiences with them. When career planning is infused into curriculum and instruction, adult learners feel like their time is respected because they are provided the same opportunities as traditional students who may have more freedom to hear from subject matter experts who come to campus during the day when nontraditional students are working. And, while student services did not reveal any major positive themes, focus group participants were thrilled with the opportunity to share their experiences with other adult learners, which implies that if Sacramento State can find a way to help nontraditional students stay connected, their experience with student services will improve.

The qualitative data in this study revealed the challenges that nontraditional students face and their frustrations with the university's institutional effectiveness, and these data also shined a light on some areas that work well for adult learners. The findings of this study highlight areas of opportunity for policy, practice, and leadership that could vastly improve nontraditional students' experiences at Sacramento State, for our region, and for the state of California.

Chapter 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study is to examine nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness related to curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. Student perceptions of institutional effectiveness were examined through three research questions:

1. Can levels of perception of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services be predicted from nontraditional student characteristics?
2. What are nontraditional students' perceptions of Sacramento State's institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services?
3. What can the institution do better to enhance nontraditional student success?

This chapter provides an overview of the study, analysis of findings, and recommendations for future research as well as recommendations for policy, practice, and leadership in response to the three research questions. The organization for this chapter is: (a) Summary of findings for each research question, (b) Findings related to theoretical frameworks, (c) Implications for policy, practice, and leadership, (d) Recommendations for future research, policy, practice, and leadership, (e) Conclusion and author's note.

Findings Related to Research Questions

Results from research question one indicated that progress to degree and number of hours worked can be predictors of nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness of career planning. However, probably because adult learner are a heterogenous group of students who hail from all socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, some focus group findings contradicted what was learned from the quantitative analysis. Not surprisingly, focus group participants described the barriers faced by adult learners, and their feedback supported the notion that their situation can predict their perceptions of institutional effectiveness of career planning, and those findings are quite meaningful. Recall that nontraditional students are likely to work full-time and may only be able to attend college part-time (Cross, 1981; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Simi & Matusitz, 2016). In this study, those characteristics were shown to be predictive of nontraditional students' perceptions of institutional effectiveness of career planning. In other words, certain situational barriers cause adult learners to perceive institutional policies and practices as *barriers*, a notion that should inform institutions who serve nontraditional students.

Given these findings, a logical question is, what are the implications for institutions who serve adult learners as a growing population? Universities are not in the business of perpetuating challenges for their students. Sacramento State undoubtedly will take heed of the challenges adult learners face, and consider how shifts in policy and practice can improve nontraditional student perceptions, and help them be successful.

Personal characteristics were not shown to be predictive of nontraditional students' perceptions of effectiveness of curriculum and instruction or comprehensive student services, which suggests that other factors, not included in this study, may influence nontraditional student perceptions in those areas. For example, students were mostly happy with the method of instruction and the technology their teachers use in the classroom. Maybe student perceptions of curriculum and instruction have less to do with them, and everything to do with the *instructor*. How an adult learner perceives institutional effectiveness is all in the *instructor*'s hands, regardless of how many hours a student works, how long their commute is, how many credit hours she takes in a semester, or how close she is to graduating.

Consider a student who worked all day and barely had time to scarf down a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on the way to class from the office. That student is poised to be grateful for a teacher who is prepared for class and works to keep students engaged in the discussion, or annoyed by an instructor who delivers boring lectures or makes no effort to infuse technology in her teaching. While that student's opinions will likely be affected by her teacher's choices, so will all the other students' opinions. *Everyone* is busy and everyone has stressors in their lives, not just nontraditional students. The choices the instructor makes throughout the course will affect all students, not just the nontraditional students. The quantitative results of this study indicate that nontraditional student characteristics do not predict their perceptions of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction (or student services), so it is likely that the

power to affect student perceptions lies within the instructors and within institutional policies and practices that create the learning environment.

This study's results do align with research that finds that adult learners perform best when andragogical practices are utilized (Knowles, 1970). Adults are problem-centered in their learning and are interested in immediately applying knowledge (Chan, 2010; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Holmes & Abington-Cooper, 2000; Kelly, 2013; Merriam, 2001; Pew, 2007; Rachal, 2002; Taylor & Kroth, 2009), therefore, career planning that is imbedded in curriculum is not only more convenient for adults, but also provides immediate application of knowledge. Adults want to know why they are learning something, and the information they learn can never be applied fast enough.

Unlike school-aged children who think, "Why am I learning this algebra? I'm never going to use it in real life." Adults think, "Why am I *just now* learning this? This would have been helpful in real life." Working adults bring their past and current experiences to the classroom (Nelken, 2009). They want to know the relevance of what they are learning and they want to apply it to their lived experiences. Nontraditional students critically think about what they are learning and assess how and when they can use the information, which is why adults appreciate when andragogical practices (like curriculum that acknowledges their perspectives) are implemented. Curriculum that acknowledges their perspectives is that which embeds career planning into the regular coursework, which draws an immediate connection to what is being taught and how it translates into a career. Embedding career planning into curriculum also uses time efficiently, which is imperative for nontraditional students.

Most majors at Sacramento State offer some form of career planning, but those that infuse career advising, networking, and invite current working professionals into the classroom create a pedandragogical environment (Samaroo et al., 2013). A pedandragogical classroom combines traditional teaching with the consideration of how information is meaningful for adults, a practice that resonates well with nontraditional students. Nontraditional students are busy. They often work full time and attend school in the evenings. But this does not mean that they are any less interested in, nor are the less deserving of, opportunities to learn from subject matter experts and to network with industry professionals.

When classes and services are offered during the day while adult students are at work, they feel left out of the institutional equation. Just because they are nontraditional students does not mean that they do not want to hear from other working professionals. Adults are just as eager to learn how they can advance their career as traditional aged students. Pursuing their degree is an act of hope (Kasworm, 2008). Adult learners are daring to hope for a better future, and they are clearly willing to be vulnerable in a situation that is not designed for them. Institutions should recognize their unique situations and create access to all the services and classes the university has to offer. Nontraditional students are hopeful – and they are the hope of the future for the state of California.

It is my hope that findings from this study will compel the university to assess how institutional effectiveness is assessed by nontraditional students and consider creating and maintaining institutional bridges to help them succeed. Adult learners are a

growing population, and they are vital to the economy. Serving nontraditional students is an economic imperative for our region, especially in light of the potential workforce gap of over one million degreed workers by 2030 (Johnson et al., 2015). Serving adult learners effectively is also a moral imperative in my estimation. The nontraditional students at Sacramento State may not have started at the university, or if they did, maybe it was long ago. But they are here now, and the university has the responsibility to help them finish here with as much support as any other student at the university.

Research question two asked, what are nontraditional students' perceptions of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services? In general, all categories yielded mixed results, which speaks to the complexity of the nontraditional student experience. For example, nontraditional students are frustrated with classes and services that are primarily geared to younger, traditional-aged students. Whether it be that not enough classes are offered in the evening, or student services offices close before any working adult would have a chance to make it to campus, students are frustrated. And yet, for the most part, nontraditional students are happy with *how* their classes are taught. They think their instructors use the appropriate method of instruction for their classes. But how do this study's results align with previous research on nontraditional students? Unsurprisingly, focus group participants talked about issues that are associated with the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers presented in literature about nontraditional students. Nontraditional students at Sacramento State face all the known barriers to academic success that are presented in the literature, and their experiences highlight

opportunities for the university to improve the success of the entire student body. Nontraditional students also face barriers that are swept under the rug in research about adult learners, such as microaggressions in policy and practice, as will be explicated in following sections.

Time

Consistent with literature regarding nontraditional students, adult learners face situational barriers, such as the need to work full-time and care for families while attending college (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Flynn et al., 2011; Goto & Martin. 2009, Osam et al., 2017). Therefore, it makes sense that time was the predominant and consistent thread through all categories (curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services). Adult learners said that classes are not offered at convenient times for them, and they have difficulty accessing career and student services because they are most-often offered during the day when nontraditional students are working. Students expressed frustration with the lack of evening and weekend classes, and were disappointed when needed classes are only offered once per year, sometimes even less often. For a 38-year-old mid-career professional who upended her life to go back to college, and is depending on her husband to support her financially and emotionally, a year is a long time. A year probably means something different for her than it does to a 19-year-old whose parents are paying for tuition. Time is no joke for nontraditional students. Time is money. Time is freedom. Time is opportunity. Time is everything.

Nontraditional students are frustrated because they are unable to attend events, such as workshops, career fairs, and career center activities, because the services are offered during the day when they are at work. What message does this send to the university's adult learners? Does the university care that the adult learner population does not have access to the same career opportunities as traditional aged students who have yet to enter the workforce? Should they? Or is the university meeting its responsibility to the community by offering career fairs that introduce occupations and provide internships for students who have no prior work experience? Is it feasible for the university to offer well-rounded career services? Would employees trust that enough adult learners are seeking career opportunities to invest the resources needed to present opportunities for mid-career professionals? Should they?

Student services are also offered during the day, which is especially frustrating for students who need to perform simple, yet vital, tasks such as paying tuition fees, buying a parking pass, or meeting with an advisor. Understandably, the university may doubt whether or not they can, or should, begin offering information and advising about career opportunities for mid-career adults who are seeking advancement or career changes. Such an idea would also require buy-in from employers who may not see as much return on the investment as mass-advertising entry-level positions for new graduates who are fresh to the workforce. This is a legitimate consideration. But is there any legitimate reason why nontraditional students should not have the same access as traditional-aged students to seek guidance about financial aid? Is there any business reason to make it more difficult for 22% of the student population to pay their fees? Currently, adult

students have to take time off from work to get to campus to meet with an advisor. Participants in this study said they have to use sick time from work to go to campus and take care of the business of going to school. Yet, they take the steps they need to in order to finish what they started. Working adults seems to accept that this is the way of their world. They recognize that the sacrifices they are making now will pay off when they finish their degree and are able to return to the workforce armed with both more knowledge and the signal of a degree. It is my hope, however, that the university will recognize that with very little sacrifice on the part of the institution, it can make student services more accessible to nontraditional students which will dramatically improve their experience.

Curriculum and instruction, career planning, and student services are designed for traditional-aged students. Classes are offered during the work day, and there are limited online class offerings. Career fairs are offered during the day, and the employers that visit campus are not prepared to discuss options for mid-career professionals – they recruit traditional-aged recent graduates with limited work experience. And student services offices, such as the Bursar's Office and Financial Aid, make no effort to accommodate working professionals. But the world is changing. More and more students are over 25 years old, which means a large percentage of students are working adults. Nontraditional students are the fastest growing segment in higher education (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Francois, 2014; Kimmel, Gaylor, Grubbs, & Hayes, 2012; Osam et al., 2017; Tilley, 2014; Wyatt, 2011). More than one in five undergraduates at Sacramento State is over 25 years old, and extent research indicates that number will

likely increase. Does that matter? Should the university think about ways to improve the adult learner experience? Doesn't the university care that so many adults want (and need) to go back to school, and that their numbers are rising? One school of thought may be that if students are having a hard time getting into the classes they need, then the university does not need to worry about the fiscal contributions of nontraditional student enrollment. But what happens when something in the world changes and the university faces a decline in traditional student enrollments? Is the university prepared to shift focus and meet the needs of a nontraditional population that is chomping at the bit for an affordable, rigorous, and widely respected education from Sacramento State? The university should consider how it can accommodate more nontraditional students by making classes and services more available and accessible to them, and by creating a welcoming culture for adult learners.

The vast majority of nontraditional student respondents in this study expressed frustration that they cannot get the classes they want and need when they want and need them. Granted, this is likely not a complaint unique to nontraditional students. As a public institution, Sacramento State cannot feasibly offer every class that every student wants exactly when they say they want them. However, adult learners perceive the lack of evening and weekend offerings as an institutional structure that impedes their academic success (Fairchild, 2003; Keith, 2007), a sentiment that was clearly supported through the focus group discussions.

Otherness

Also consistent with literature related to nontraditional students, a major theme that emerged in this study was that adult learners feel *different from* their classmates (Englund, 2019; Genco, 2007; Kasworm, 2008; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Participants in this study face these same dispositional barriers. Students are aware of being different than traditional students (Flynn et al., 2011). Teachers sometimes call them out for being older than other students, which makes them feel mixed emotions. Students said they like when teachers acknowledge their experience, and ask them to share their perspectives with the class. Yet, at the same time, they feel embarrassed because they feel judged by their classmates. As Veronica shared with the group, her classmate said "Oh! You're *that* old?"

The feeling of otherness is represented as a dispositional barrier in literature about nontraditional students (Cross, 1981; Genco, 2007; Englund, 2019; Flynn et al., 2011, Kasworm, 2010). However, throughout the literature, dispositional barriers are depicted as self-concepts that are based in insecurity and self-doubt (Compton et al., 2006; Hardin, 2008; Kasworm, 2008). What this study found, however, is that nontraditional students' perceptions of their experience are also impacted by how they are treated by *others*, not only by how they treat or think about themselves. When fellow students say, "Oh, you're *that* old?" or when they are singled out in the classroom by their teacher for looking older, or when they are told "students like you get in the way," as I was many years ago, nontraditional students are facing microaggressions.

Extent literature blames nontraditional students' dispositional barriers on feelings of insecurity, which undoubtedly is the case for students returning to college. However, this study fills a gap in the literature by identifying the microaggressions nontraditional students face, which contribute to dispositional barriers for adults. Sue, et al. (2007) define racial microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (p. 271). In this study, nontraditional students expressed similar indignities because they are older than other students.

Robinson-Wood et al. (2020) claim "microaggressions occur across visible as well as invisible identities such as skin color hue, body size, ability, age, and class" (p. 44). There are three forms of microaggressions; microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue et al., 2007). Understandably and justifiably, research primarily examines racial microaggressions, and those faced by members of the LBGTQ community. It is not my intent to equate the microaggressions nontraditional students face to the microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations people of color endure. However, adult learners at the university have felt the sting of flippant comments about how old they look, and their life experiences have been ignored and invalidated, which has left them feeling self-conscious and undervalued at the university. As Ann said, "They speak to you like you don't know who you are, you don't have children, you've never driven, you've never bought a house, or you've never driven a car, you know?"

Not every theme that emerged from conversations with nontraditional students was negative. Several positive themes were present, as well. Nontraditional students appreciate the multiple teaching approaches employed by their instructions. Additionally, they found the technology used in the classroom to be helpful, even if they had never been exposed to the technology before the class. Adult learners also value when career planning is embedded in their curriculum, and when subject matter experts are invited into the classroom.

Institutional Bridges

Appreciating multiple teaching methods and subject matter experts align with andragogical practices, which will be addressed in the next section of this chapter. These positive perceptions also identify another gap in the literature about nontraditional students that this study begins to bridge. Research on nontraditional students identify institutional barriers as policies, procedures, and practices that are enshrined in colleges and universities that prevent, or even exclude, nontraditional students from educational activities (Cross, 1981; Osam et al., 2017). Missing from the literature, however, are the institutional *bridges* that exist (or should be created) for nontraditional students. *All* positive themes from this study can be considered institutional bridges for adult learners. For example, students expressed a desire for increased online offerings, which would create a bridge for them to access the classes they want and need. And, students who are fortunate to take online courses reported feeling happy with their classes and hopeful that they will experience success through online learning. This study examines nontraditional

student perceptions of institutional effectiveness; therefore, it is helpful to consider both the institutional barriers *and* the institutional bridges that exist at Sacramento State.

Bad Service

What do the findings about nontraditional students' dissatisfaction with student services say about the institution? About adult learners as consumers of higher education? Nontraditional students are more likely to be financially independent (Johnson et al., 2016) than traditional students, especially young students who still live at home with their parents, which means they are responsible for earning the income and spending the family's resources. But financial independence does not mean *independently wealthy*. On the contrary, students in all focus groups talked about their dependence on financial aid. Going or returning to college as an adult means spending time and money that, in many cases, families had not budgeted to spend (Hatfield, 2003; Kasworm, 2010; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Therefore, it makes sense that students scrutinize what they are spending their resources on. As we mature, we tend to think more critically about what things cost, and what value we receive in return.

Perhaps because they are older than traditional students and have more life experience, or perhaps because they are spending precious resources on the investment of their education, adult learners are generally disappointed in student services at the university. In line with the other categories and the literature about institutional barriers for nontraditional students, the inability to access student services outside of work hours is frustrating for adult learners (Genco, 2007; Keith, 2007; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). From student advising to paying fees, nontraditional student participants in this study

expressed dissatisfaction at not having access to student services. Additionally, adult learners were outspoken about their poor assessment of the level of professionalism and customer service demonstrated by various departments across the university. Their strong reaction to a perceived lack of access and perceived lack of professionalism makes sense because adult learners are *consumers* of higher education, and they hold the proverbial purse strings. They are student-customers of the services offered by the institution (Allen & Whitey, 2017), and they are seeking a meaningful return on their investments.

Improving customer service and increasing student services office hours present further opportunities for the university to bridge institutional policies and practices to improve nontraditional student experiences. Table 35 provides major themes for each category, including the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers (-) and bridges (+) that emerged in focus groups.

Table 35

Significant Themes for Curriculum and Instruction, Career Planning, and Comprehensive Student Services

Category	Theme	Barrier/Bridge
Curriculum & instruction	Inconvenient class times (-)	Situational/Institutional (-)
	• Frequency of classes (-)	Situational/Institutional (-)
	• Importance online (-/+)	Institutional (-/+)
	Instructional methods (+)	Institutional (+)
	• Technology (+)	Institutional (+)
	Otherness (-)	Dispositional (-)

Career planning	Inconvenient times (-)	Situational/Institutional (-)
	Irrelevance (-)	Dispositional (-)
	Major matters (-/+) • Embedded in curriculum • Department-specific • Subject matter experts	Institutional (-/+) Institutional (+) Institutional (-/+) Institutional (+)
Student services	Inconvenient times (-)	Situational/Institutional (-)
	Bad service (-)	Institutional (-)

Table 35 demonstrates that numerous opportunities exist for the institution to build situational, dispositional, and institutional bridges for success for nontraditional students. An important contribution of this research is the recognition of the importance of creating and maintaining these situational, dispositional, and institutional bridges for adults as a mechanism to help them move through the continuum of their academic journey towards their motivations to succeed, and their ultimate academic success. The university could add more sections of evening or weekend classes, or offer face-to-face classes via hybrid or online delivery. Student services offices could be open an hour later a few evenings a week, or could be available, at least with limited staff, for a few hours over the weekend. Services could also be offered online, such as academic of financial aid advising. Small institutional changes could make a world of difference for nontraditional students.

Of course, this study is not the first time these ideas have been introduced. I have heard adult learner advocates raise similar ideas in meetings and casual conversations on multiple occasions - but a resistance to change the university's existing policies and practices remains. I do not profess to know why, but I suspect, in part, it is because change is hard. Even seemingly small changes can upend entire systems. For example, if the financial aid office were to stay open a few hours later a couple of days per week, someone's work schedule would need to change. Not only would staff in financial aid's work hours have to change, but maybe the cleaning service in the building would be affected, and security service hours might need to shift. One small change can have a ripple effect that travels throughout the institution. And, especially in a bargaining unit environment where the power resides within represented staff (a good percentage of whom have been carrying out their work in the same way, and during the same hours for years, possible decades), making small shifts to work hours can be exceedingly challenging. I am aware that even when something appears necessary, obvious, and simple, it rarely is. My hope is that, where possible, small institutional shifts can be made that create bridges that will improve nontraditional students' experiences, and will provide even more opportunities for them to succeed. A few small changes *can* have ripple effects, and nontraditional students' academic journeys could be immensely improved.

In this study, even frustrated students who feel overlooked by their university expressed gratitude for the opportunity to finish their degree. Imagine what that gratitude could look like if the university invested in them by creating institutional bridges to help

them succeed. What community champions might adult learners become when they graduate from a university who values them and their contributions to the institution?

Most research related to nontraditional students focuses on their barriers, but this study found that nontraditional students' perceptions of institutional effectiveness are *mixed*. Perceptions of curriculum and instruction were mixed in that students are frustrated that they often cannot get the classes they want and need when they want and need them; however, they are impressed with the multiple teaching methods and technology used by their teachers. Perceptions of career planning are also mixed. Students are frustrated when career services are not available after hours, and they often consider the services to be irrelevant for them as working adults. However, students in some majors are extremely satisfied with their career planning. Especially when career planning is embedded in the curriculum and subject matter experts are brought to the classroom, career planning is meaningful for nontraditional students. Unfortunately, though, nontraditional students have a generally negative perception of student services, due to inconvenient hours of operation and a perceived lack of professionalism. Some participants, particularly veterans, said they feel supported by the university, but the overarching theme was that nontraditional students have a negative perception of comprehensive student services.

Findings from this study, therefore, provide a more well-rounded view of the nontraditional student experience than what is presented in existing research. The majority of research focuses on the situational (Cross, 1981; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012; Spellman, 2007), dispositional (Compton et al., 2006; Hardin, 2008; Kasworm, 2008),

and institutional barriers (Cross, 1981; Osam et al., 2017; Spellman, 2007) that students face, but there is more to the story. Nontraditional students do have complex lives and face myriad challenges as they pursue their academic goals, but they are more than their nontraditional status and the barriers they face. They are whole human beings with motivations to succeed. They understand that they are different than traditional students, and they understand they have a great deal to offer. This study shines a light on their perspectives of institutional effectiveness and begins to address the logical next question, which is, "So what?" What can institutions do to enhance nontraditional students' experience and help them move through the continuum from academic disruption to academic success?

Research question three asked what the institution can do better to enhance nontraditional student success. As was mentioned earlier, much of the answer to question three was provided as students shared their overall perceptions of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. Nontraditional students would like more evening and online classes, and would prefer career planning and student services to be offered with extended hours so that working adults can access the services they want and need. In addition to these clear requests, other themes emerged, as well, that provide insight into the adult learner experience, and what the university can do to help nontraditional students succeed.

In every focus group, someone mentioned the desire for better access to tutors. What do these findings reveal about nontraditional students? Where does the responsibility lie to both provide and seek-out extra help? Not only did this study's

participants express a desire for tutors or peer-driven study groups, nontraditional students are also unclear what options are available to them, and they sometimes feel awkward seeking help. Providing tutors for adult learners is a theme found in literature on nontraditional students (Bowl, 2001; Malhotra et al., 2007; Wyatt, 2011). Some researchers make specific recommendations for tutoring services for adults. Wyatt (2011) recommended, "Institutions must provide tutoring labs and services identified specifically for students aged 25 and above staffed by tutors aged 25 and above" (p. 18).

Wyatt's (2011) recommendation speaks to the discomfort adult learners sometimes encounter when seeking help from tutors on campus, especially when they feel dismissed. Most focus group participants admitted that there may be tutoring services offered, but they are uncomfortable asking about what is available, and sometimes when they do seek help, they find the dynamic to be uncomfortable. Imagine being a 42-year-old returning student who has been out of school for many years and asking for tutoring help only to be treated like a nuisance, like Sue who sought tutoring for her Japanese language class. Sue shared with the group that, in addition to meeting her foreign language requirement, she is learning Japanese because her future daughter-in-law is from Japan and she wants to be able to speak with her and her mother at the wedding. However, when she sought help, she felt like the students that were supposed to provide tutoring for her were indifferent to her. She said, "You know, I tried to go to tutoring with somebody for my language last term, and I walked in, and I felt like I was inconveniencing them." Other students mentioned that the tutors they have sought help from are also undergraduate students, most of them younger than them, which made them

feel awkward and uncomfortable. Asking for help can be difficult. It takes courage. Universities have the responsibility to provide help for students of all backgrounds and ages, yet nontraditional students often do not feel comfortable asking for help. They feel like they are in the way, like their needs are less important than traditional-aged students, which is indicative of an institutional culture that privileges traditional-aged students over adult learners.

And it bears mentioning that adult learners share in the responsibility. While the university has the responsibility to offer support for students of all ages and backgrounds, nontraditional students could, and should, be part of the solution. Adult students could offer to serve as tutors for other adults. Nontraditional students understand the schedule constraints other adults face, so they should consider supporting each other in the evenings and weekends. Adult students can and should provide support for one another based on their shared perspectives. The university could facilitate a mentorship program for nontraditional students where adults can tutor each other and provide other guidance and support for their peers. Such action would be a step in the right direction in demonstrating that the university values nontraditional students.

All students deserve to feel valued. For nontraditional students, in particular, the most powerful influences are learning successes, and their relationships with faculty who validate their adult identity as worthy and valued (Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Kasworm, 2008; Kasworm, Polson, & Fishback, 2002). It stands to reason that feeling undervalued is equally powerful, which is poignant because a discrete theme that emerged from the focus groups is that nontraditional students feel undervalued. Similar

to what a department chair told me, when after the first class of the semester he asked me to drop because "students like you get in the way of regular students," Steve's name was crossed off the class roster, right in front of him and everyone else in the room, because he was not planning to graduate that semester.

> When I went into that class, I got pushed out...the professor said, you know, you're not turning your portfolio - I have seniors that want to take this class, so she just crossed me off the list. And, you know, because I got pushed out, I had to end up paying the school back for a portion of the Pell grant or whatever they give you... They crossed my name off the list and said I couldn't take the class. (Steve, Digital Art major)

Of course, department chairs and professors must to have the ability to create room in a class section for students who need the class to graduate. To argue otherwise would be hypocritical, especially when students are concerned about getting pushed back a year if they cannot get the class they need. However, there must be a better way than for students than to be nonchalantly dismissed, and literally crossed off a list during the first class session. As one student said, "It's difficult to balance the many responsibilities that a nontraditional student carry. However, it doesn't mean that we don't want to succeed; if anything, having our responsibilities makes us want to work even harder." Nontraditional students feel undervalued, and they are seeking understanding of, and empathy for, the complexity of their lives.

Existing research supports the findings of this study in that nontraditional students face situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers. The participants' feedback

aligned beautifully with what the research says adult learners face when they go, or return, to college. Nontraditional students juggle multiple roles and struggle to fit all that is expected of them, and all they expect of the university, into their busy schedules. Compounding the problem, this study also revealed that, in addition to the barriers that nontraditional students face, adult learners also face microaggressions when they return to college. Whether it is microinsults about how *old* they are, or microinvalidations of being ignored by their teachers, or even crossed off a class roster, nontraditional students run a gauntlet of microaggressions as they pursue their educational goals. However, some policies that exist, such as imbedding career planning into course curriculum, serve as institutional *bridges* for nontraditional students. This study illuminates the opportunities for improvement, and the institutional bridges that could be constructed or enhanced, that will vastly improve nontraditional students' experiences.

The theoretical frameworks of andragogy and institutional culture also proved to be meaningful when interpreting this study's findings. The following section analyzes the results of this study as related to those theoretical frameworks. Do students learn better, or have a better academic experience, when andragogical approaches are utilized? What happens when they are not? And, what do nontraditional students' perceptions about institutional effectiveness reveal about the university's institutional culture?

Findings Related to Theoretical Frameworks

The following section will discuss the research findings as related to the theoretical frameworks of this study; andragogy, institutional culture, and transformation learning. Based on the findings of this study, and in light of the theories that underscored

its overall framework, a re-imagined model of the adult learner experience will be presented in Figure 20. The re-imagined model better captures the interaction between the barriers that adult learners face (including those that are symptoms of institutional culture) and the bridges that support them (including institutional practices, such as infusing pedandragogical approaches in the classroom).

As was earlier established, andragogy is widely accepted and applied in academia (Chan, 2010; Savićević, 1991), but the construct is not without controversy (Cross, 1981; Davenport & Davenport, 1985; Pratt, 1988). Criticism of andragogy stems for a lack of empirical evidence supporting the basic assumptions and effectiveness of employing andragogical approaches (Blondy, 2007; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Taylor & Kroth, 2009). Sadly, this study may add to the controversy because, while empirical findings did reveal that nontraditional students prefer andragogical practices, participants were mostly concerned with instructional practices that *make sense for the course* (not necessarily tailored to their perspectives as adult learners). Participants admitted that, even when teachers used old-fashioned pedagogical approaches and delivered "mind-numbingly boring" lectures, as long as the content is meaningful, nontraditional students can learn from the class. They may not enjoy the class as much, but they can learn from those classic pedagogical approaches. Participants even *prefer* a combination of pedagogy and andragogy. They recognized the value in being taught something by an instructor, *and* they value the opportunity to discover and create their own meaning from what they are learning, and how they can apply it to their lives immediately. The combination of teaching approaches is effective, especially when the

approach aligns with the course material. In the end, andragogy (or at least the more realistic notion of pedandragogy) was an important framework for this study, because findings support the notion that adults prefer a learning environment that honors their perspectives and allows them to build on their existing knowledge to create new meaning.

A central element of that learning environment is the institution's culture, which is operationalized through policies and practices that, unfortunately, create barriers for nontraditional students. Even more than andragogy, institutional culture was shown to be greatly influential on nontraditional student perceptions, because culture is infused in all aspects of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and student services. Institutional culture sets the stage for the learning experience. At Sacramento State, nontraditional students have the perception that the institution values traditional students (such as those who do not work full-time) over nontraditional, working-age adults. The most common theme throughout all categories was that nontraditional students have difficulty accessing the classes and services they need because they are offered at inconvenient times, which is equivalent to microinvalidations for adult learners. Nontraditional students' time is not valued, and their enrollment is valued less than traditional-aged students who can graduate in four years.

Institutional culture is also powerful because it is expressed through attitudes and beliefs (Schein, 1992), and this study's participants have faced microaggressions that make them feel undervalued. One graduating senior, a woman in her early thirties studying Child Development, said, "I actually stopped telling people how old I am. I stopped talking about how old my kids are. Because, it's like, their whole attitude

towards me changes. Like, ‘you're so old. Like, you’re my mom's age’” (Veronica, Child Development major). University culture values youth over age, and the resulting microinsults to nontraditional students, permeate throughout the institution. Culture both surrounds and is infused throughout the institution, and the construct proved to be a meaningful lens through which to examine the adult learner experience.

Table 36 illustrates the theoretical frameworks used to guide this study (andragogy, institutional culture, and transformation learning) and clearly depicts whether or not the characteristics of the theoretical frameworks are consistent with the study’s findings. In the first column, the characteristics of each theoretical framework are summarized. The second column contains findings from the study as they align with the characteristics of each theoretical framework. The third column depicts whether the findings support the characteristics of the theoretical framework (+), do not support the characteristics of the theoretical framework (-), or somewhat support the theoretical framework characteristics (+/-).

Table 36

Comparing and Contrasting the Study’s Findings in Light of Theoretical Frameworks

Theoretical Framework	Characteristics	Findings	+/-
Andragogy	Adults prefer a climate that is comfortable for adults and free of symbols of childishness.	Nontraditional students do not like to be treated like children. However, they feel confident in their ability to learn, even in a climate that is geared towards younger students.	+/-

	Adult learners bring a wealth of experience to the classroom.	Adult learners do bring experience into the classroom and they feel like they disrespected when that experience is not acknowledged by their instructors.	+
	Adults feel the need to understand how what they are learning is immediately applicable.	Nontraditional students are eager to apply what they learn in the classroom to "real life" (e.g. they appreciate when instructors being subject matter experts to class because it helps them understand how the material in the course is immediately applicable in a career).	+
	Adults are problem-centered and need to create meaning. This tenet of andragogy implies that students learn best when their preferred learning style is catered to in the classroom.	Adults do prefer the opportunity to create meaning from what they are learning, so andragogical practices such as classroom discussions are appreciated, but they also acknowledge that they *can learn* from traditional pedagogical methods. Thus, a hybrid (or pedangragogy) is more realistic and effective for adult learners.	+/- -
	Teaching and learning are dual responsibilities, meaning the teacher has a responsibility to recognize how adults prefer to learn and modify their approach accordingly.	Even more important than the instructor matching the nontraditional students' preferred methods of learning is that the method of instruction is relevant to the course.	- +

Institutional Culture	Culture is expressed in the university's mission, vision, and values.	Nontraditional students appreciate that the institution has a strong culture of inclusivity. They believe that Sacramento State has strong academic values and cares about student success- these are important elements of the student experience.	+/-
	Culture is expressed through policies (such as Finish in Four) and practices (such as when classes and services are offered).	Nontraditional students feel that the university values traditional students over nontraditional students, especially because they have difficulty accessing the classes and services they want and need because they are mostly available when older students are at work during the weekday. These policies and practices are manifested in microinvalidations for nontraditional students – they do not feel valued. Existing research does not delve this deep into the lived experience of students, nor does it name the microaggressions nontraditional students endure.	+/-
	Culture is expressed through interpersonal communication between instructors and students, and students with one another.	Culture is expressed though communication and can have profound effects on adult learners. Nontraditional students face microinsults in interpersonal communication when teachers and other students treat them differently because they are	

		older than traditional students which negatively affects the adult learner experience.	
Transformation Learning	Adults have preexisting frames of reference.	Adult learners do come/return to college with preexisting frames of reference, e.g. from their previous academic experiences, their family life, their culture, and their career.	+
	Adult learners' frames of reference are challenged as they progress through their academic journey and are introduced to new ideas.	The participants in this study were more focused on their academic journey than they were in questioning their pre-existing frames of reference. Perhaps with time, they will realize that in order to succeed, some of their preexisting ideas will need to be challenged, but they had not come to that conclusion at the time of this study.	-
	Adults frames of reference begin to change when they realize their own worth as students. Perhaps they did not believe in themselves at first, or had self-doubt when they entered or re-entered college, but eventually realize they are succeeding.	Transformation learning is a construct that would most likely require longitudinal study, to assess how students' thinking evolves over time.	-
	Frames of reference evolve into something new and nontraditional students transform into a	There was insufficient evidence of transformation learning – the study's design was not equipped to examine	

new/better version of themselves as students and community members as they reflect on who they have become.	an evolution of student thinking. It may be years before nontraditional students reflect on their experience and understand if/how they have transformed.

As shown in Table 36, andragogy and institutional culture were appropriate frameworks for this research, but the study provided an even more nuanced understanding of the adult learner experience, and therefore this research builds on, and adds to, the existing literature related to those two theoretical frameworks. Transformation learning did not prove to be relevant for the study because most of the theoretical framework's characteristics focus on the evolution of students' thinking, such as how they view themselves, their place in the university, and their place in the community, and this study's participants simply were not there intellectually or emotionally. Nontraditional students at Sacramento State are focused on finishing what they started, not questioning their frames of reference.

Reimagined Model of the Adult Learner Experience

The original model that I proposed painted a sweeping overview of the adult learner experience based on the theoretical constructs that underscored the study. Upon conducting this research, the picture is now more clear. Given the findings of this study, the previously proposed adult learner experience model must be reimagined with more detail. In the original model, institutional culture influences the policies and practices of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and student services. Those policies and

practices created the adult learning experience, and ultimately resulted in transformation learning. Culture and andragogical practices both surrounded and were imbedded within the model, influencing the adult learner's experience. The original model (Figure 9 from Chapter 2) is shown below in Figure 19.

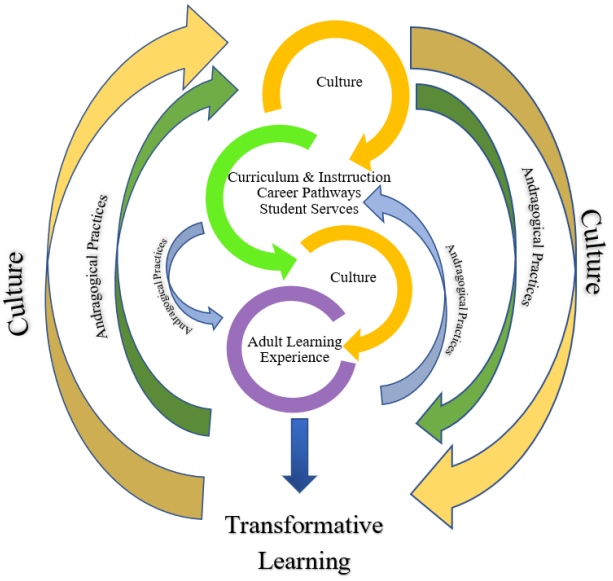


Figure 19. Graphic Conceptualization of how Culture, Curriculum and Instruction, Career Planning, and Student Services May Influence Adult Learning Experiences and Lead to Transformative Learning.

Based on this study's findings, there are many significant elements of the adult learner experience missing from the previously proposed model. Importantly, the previous model led to transformation learning, where this study revealed that the more realistic outcome is the student's academic success (or academic disruption). Transformation learning may be a beneficial biproduct of the adult learner experience; however, the theoretical framework did not prove helpful or necessarily relevant for this

study's nontraditional student participants. Rather, the desired outcome for adult learners is acedmic success. Figure 20 depicts a reimagined adult learner experience.

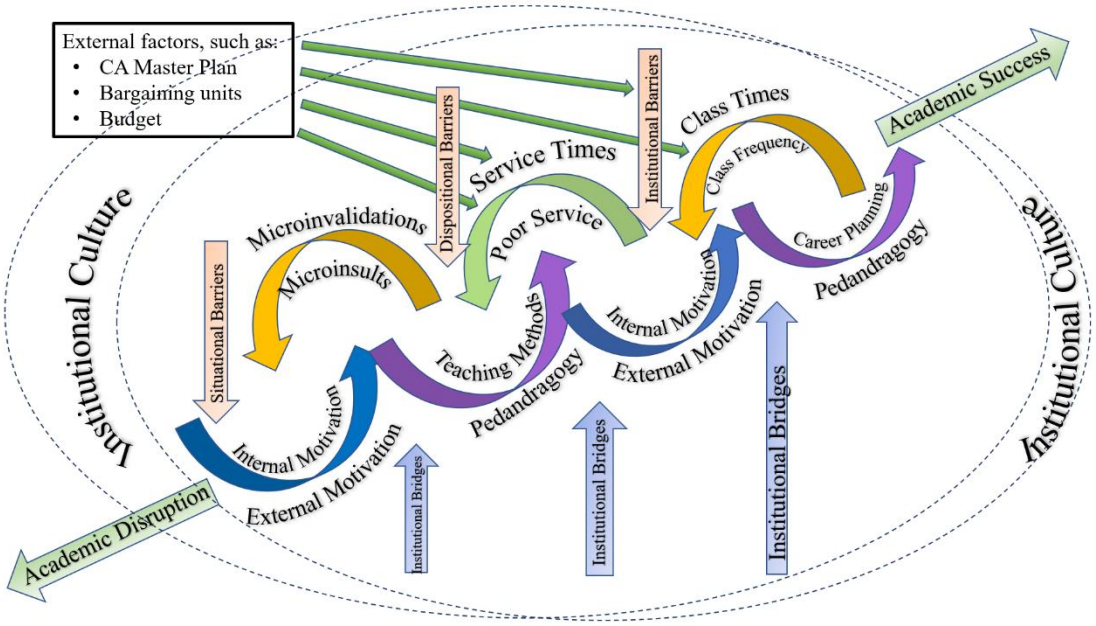


Figure 20. Re-imagined Adult Learner Experience.

Figure 20 more accurately depicts the types of barriers and bridges that create the adult learner experience for students at Sacramento State. In line with existing literature on nontraditional students, this study found that adult learners traverse through their academic journey hindered by barriers that threaten to move students away from success and towards academic disruption. Nontraditional students face the typical situational barriers (work, family, finances, etc.) descbribed in the literature. They also face common dispositional barriers (feelings of self-doubt and insecurity), but adult learners are also confronted with microaggressions at the university (microinsults and microinvalidations), which are newly-introduced constructs in the realm of the adult

learner experience. And nontraditional students contend with insitutional barriers, which were found to be challenges, such as inconvenient class and service times, and student services that do not work well for them.

In addition to the heavily researched and newly defined barriers that nontraditional students face, this study also found that nontraditional students are supported by bridges. Adult learners are encouraged throughout their journey by myriad supports, including their own internal and external motivations. Nontraditional students are also buoyed by insitutional bridges, such the pedandragogical practices of imbedding career planning into course curriculum, and utlizing the appropriate teaching method for the course.

As was originally proposed, institutional culture still both surrounds and is infused within the adult learner experience. The insitution's culture is operationalized through polcies and practices that support nontraditional students (such as pedandragogical classrooms), and in the persistent barriers that nontraditional students face. For example, microagressions towards older students are an example of an insitutional culture that values traditional-aged students. Institutional culture and andragogy (more realistically described as pedandragogy) are influential elements of the adult learner experience. The re-imagined model of the adult learner experience better captures the complex journey nontraditional students travel on their way to academic success, including external factors that may influence institutional decisions.

Andragogy and institutional culture are meaningful frameworks for examining the adult learner experience. However, it is important to reiterate that transformation

learning did not appear to be relevant for the participants in this study. At the outset of this research, I posited that as adult learners progress through their academic journey, their perspectives about themselves and their position in the university would evolve. Perhaps there was no sufficient evidence to support that position because qualitative data were collected during the first two weeks of class, and nontraditional students were operating under existing frames of reference and had not yet had the opportunity to challenge their own perspectives. It is also entirely likely that transformation learning is more *wishful thinking* than reality. It may very well be that adult learners, just like traditional-aged students, are actually just doing their best to navigate a system that sometimes works for them, and sometimes does not, and focusing on what they need to do to pass their classes, rather than challenging their preexisting frames of reference. Nontraditional students are likely too mired in the details of their lives, and the multiple roles they are juggling, to experience some kind of existential transformation. Future research should be more longitudinal in nature in order to examine if nontraditional students' perceptions of themselves and their institutions evolve as they progress through their academic program.

Implications

The findings of this study suggest that nontraditional students perceive some aspects of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services to be ineffective. In particular, classes and services are offered at inconvenient times, and adults face microaggressions, probably as a result of a culture that does not value nontraditional students. Adults also find student services to be poorly managed,

unprofessional, and not helpful for them given their life circumstances. On the other hand, adults find the multiple teaching methods employed by their instructors to be generally useful, and some majors provide excellent career planning. These findings hold implications for higher education policy, practice, and leadership.

Policy

This study's findings have implications for policy on a micro- and macro-level. On a micro-level, institutional policies clearly impact nontraditional students. For example, Steve, a disabled thirty-year-old transfer student, was literally crossed off a class roster at the end of the first class of the semester. He was crossed off because he was not planning to graduate that semester. Policies, such as the California Promise and Finish in Four, privilege students who can graduate in a timely manner. Students who can Finish in Four, or who can be Through in Two, not only receive priority registration before the semester starts, but have the power to bump students out of a class they plan to take once the semester begins. But where is the policy that privileges the adult learner? What policy assures someone who has bravely returned to school after potentially decades away will actually be able to get in (and stay in) the classes they want and need? The lack of such policies has serious and lasting implications for nontraditional students. Not only are there academic implications, meaning nontraditional students are forced to take classes they did not plan to take, but there are fiscal implications (Steve had to re-pay financial aid money after being dropped from a class he had intended to take), and psychological implications. Microinvalidations like being unceremoniously crossed off a

list, or being told, “students like you get in the way,” can make a student feel unimportant and defeated.

Another institution-level policy implication is the need to extend hours for comprehensive student services, making them more accessible to working adults. Extending service hours would have fiscal ramifications for the institution, and some might argue that keeping office hours open for a minority group is not fiscally responsible. In a recent meeting titled *Addressing Administrative Barriers*, the idea of keeping the Financial Aid Office open an extra hour once a week was proposed (not by me, as a point of clarification). A colleague retorted that it would be too expensive, and it would only benefit a small percentage of the student population. I offered the statistic that more than one in five undergraduate students at the university is 25 years old or older, which means a not-so-small percentage of students who would benefit from such a policy.

Further, the approach could benefit the entire student population. It is estimated that over 80% of nontraditional students work while in school, and nearly half of all traditional-aged students work, with almost one in ten working at least 35 hours/week (Darolia, 2014). Extending student service hours beyond 8 a.m.–5 p.m., Monday – Friday could provide better access to student services for nearly all students, not just adult learners. Following this human-centered design approach would mean that the specific change would be intended to improve the experience for one population, but could benefit the whole system.

Human-centered design enhances an experience for a wider range of diverse users, often beyond the original intent (Altay, 2014; Zoltowski, Oakes, & Cardella, 2012). The university could also offer Financial Aid and other student services such as advising via video-conferencing or Chatbots, which is software that simulates a human and can answer questions and concerns digitally. While some fear Chatbots would diminish the human interaction for students, the reality is that students could get their questions answered, day or night, seven days a week. Students may actually be more comfortable with Chatbots in some scenarios, such as asking questions about Financial Aid, because the fear of being judged by another person is removed.

On the macro-level, findings from this study also have statewide implications. As was mentioned earlier in this study, California Governor's Office of Planning and Research (OPR) summarized the Master Plan for Higher Education in California and evaluated its relevance for current workforce needs. OPR (2018) explained that the plan "was designed to provide a broadly traditional education to a broadly traditional student body. Today, neither traditional education nor the traditional student is or can be the sole focus of educational planning" (p. 54). As such, the current iteration of California Master Plan fails to provide adequate incentive for higher education institutions to create policies and practices that help nontraditional students succeed.

The findings of this study indicate that statewide policies may be needed to hold colleges and universities accountable for making classes and services accessible to working age adults, while providing funding in order to make it possible. The CSU's Graduation Initiative is a prime example of what institutions can do when they are held

accountable to create change. The university's response to the statewide Graduation Initiative has drastically increased the number of students who graduate in four years (and transfer students who graduate in two years). It is estimated that the university saved the students who were able to graduate in four years $58 million by not having to continue to go to college (personal communication, J. Dragna, 2019).

There is no question that these policies should continue. And similar policies could be implemented that are designed to help nontraditional students access the classes and services they need. Imagine the economic impact of saving $58 million for nontraditional students who are currently in the workforce. The money saved could help them pay their mortgages, feed their children, and care for their own aging parents. Not only could these students benefit from the savings, but when they graduate, they will be better positioned for career changes and promotions. As these workers move up in their organizations, vacancies will be created for those traditional-aged students who are graduating in four years without work experience who will need those more entry-level positions. However, without a statewide policy, universities will not be incentivized to create programs and services geared toward nontraditional students. If current trends continue, California will have a shortage of 1.1 million workers with a bachelor's degree by 2030 (Johnson et al., 2015). While 38% of California jobs will require a bachelor's degree, only about 33% will have earned one by the year 2030 (Carnevale et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2015), which means California businesses may need to seek a workforce from outside the area, or worse, may move to a state with higher educational attainment rates. This indicates a clear workforce skills gap that could get worse if nontraditional

students who are seeking their degrees face too many barriers to their success. California will benefit from helping working age adults who have some college, no degree return to, and get through, college. Therefore, California has a responsibility to address the issue from a statewide perspective and create accountabilities and incentives for colleges and universities.

Focus group participants were skeptical that the State of California will ever consider their plight as nontraditional students. As Jorge, an Amazon driver in his mid-fifties majoring in Business Administration, said, "But, I don't know, it kind of seems like the State is not going to change for us. I mean it's more like we have to adjust for them. [laughter] The State of California is not going to change for our requests." This may be true, but nothing will change if we do not listen to nontraditional students and advocate on their behalf.

Practice

The findings of this study also have implications for university practices. The vast research examining nontraditional student experiences focus on the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers adult learners face. The findings of this study imply that rather than focusing predominantly on *barriers*, researchers and practitioners should also focus on the situational, dispositional, and institutional *bridges* that can and should be created and enhanced for nontraditional students.

Situational bridges. Programs like ProjectAttain! and others around the country that are reaching out to working age adults with some college, no degree, are building situational bridges for students who want to return to college to finish what they started.

The institution can enhance those situational bridges by creating partnerships with these programs and providing hands-on service for nontraditional students once they return to the academy.

Dispositional bridges. Findings in this study indicate that nontraditional students face microaggressions from their peers, their faculty, and service providers, which is indicative of a culture that privileges traditional students and has implications for university practices. Institutional stakeholders may not be sympathetic to nontraditional students' perceptions because they, themselves, may have followed a traditional path into higher education. One practice that could raise awareness of the nontraditional student perspective could be hiring faculty, staff, and administrators that entered into higher education through nontraditional pathways. A tenured professor who went to college straight out of high school, and continued right through to earn her master's and doctoral degree may not empathize with a student who stopped out of college initially because she had a baby or joined the military. That professor may have also stepped right into teaching without ever working in another industry, so she may have not sense of what it is like to work the traditional work week, and to not have spring break (let alone having summers off). Without having had the experience of working full time while raising a family *and* trying to finish a degree, professors may simply not understand what nontraditional students are going through, and may not think twice about unceremoniously crossing a student's name off a class list, or telling her it is students like her who get in the way of regular students who are trying to graduate. Genco (2007) recommended training sessions for faculty "reasons adults return to college, the academic

experience of returning to the classroom, learning styles of adult learners, and the need for adult students to comprehend that information learned in the classroom has a direct link to the real world" (p. 7). Such training would be meaningful at the university, for faculty, staff, and administrators, to help them understand the challenges nontraditional students face, and the value they bring to university, and the community as a whole. Raising awareness of the adult learner experience and hiring nontraditional faculty, staff, and administrators will go a long way towards changing the culture at the university, mitigating microaggressions faced by adult learners, and building dispositional bridges for nontraditional students.

Institutional bridges. The most common theme across all categories (curriculum and instruction, career planning, and student services) was that classes and services are offered at inconvenient times for nontraditional students. These findings hold implications for university practices that could immediately create institutional bridges for adult learners. Offering more evening classes and extending office hours for services would significantly improve nontraditional students' experiences. Other practices, such as increasing the number and quality of online classes would also improve nontraditional student perceptions. A major theme of this study was that nontraditional students appreciate the multiple teaching methods their teachers employ, and that they enjoy, and believe they will succeed in, online and hybrid classes. Offering increased and improved online classes would be another human-centered design practice that would not only enhance nontraditional students' experiences, but would have benefits for the entire student population.

Leadership

Finally, this study's findings have implications for leadership. Creating and enhancing situational, dispositional, and institutional bridges for nontraditional students must be supported by university leadership. The university's leadership has influence over and obvious impact on the organization's culture. For example, when study participants were asked what the university values, more than half of the respondents referenced diversity and inclusion, which is indicative of Sacramento State's leadership's values, and are aligned with the president's stated imperatives (Student Success, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, Community Engagement, Philanthropy, and Safety). Sacramento State's culture is guided by leadership that values inclusion.

However, other students replied that they believe the university values *traditional* students. Therefore, as awareness of the nontraditional student experience is raised, university leaders will have the opportunity to improve their experience. Therefore, communication to institutional stakeholders about the unique challenges faced by nontraditional students is imperative. For example, the Vice President for Student Services should know that the majority of themes that emerged from this study are that, from the adult learners' perspectives, student services at the university are managed poorly, are often unprofessional, and ineffective for nontraditional students. If he is not aware of students' perceptions, he cannot begin to implement improvements. Ongoing communication to nontraditional students about their value to the institution (and their community) is also vitally important.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on this study's findings, several recommendations for future research are offered. Each suggestion generates new questions that may, and should, be raised with further research into the nontraditional student experience:

1. Collect data from both nontraditional and traditional students and compare their perceptions to determine how unique the experience is for adult learners. Are nontraditional student perceptions different from traditional students? If not, are the study's recommendations even more urgent?
2. Broaden the definition of nontraditional students to include aspects other than just the students' age. Do students with children have different perceptions, regardless of their age? Do military veterans' unique experiences provide more context for their perceptions of institutional effectiveness?
3. Collect data throughout the semester to gauge if perceptions change as students settle into new routines, or if negative perceptions persist. This would provide stronger indicators of adult learners' perceptions. Are beginning of the semester jitters to blame for the majority of nontraditional students' negative perceptions, or do they persist as the semester progresses?
4. Survey more students. Would a larger, more representative sample of study participants generate different results?

Future research should include more students and collect data over a longer time period. Also, future research could include feedback from institutional stakeholders, such as faculty, staff, and administrators to compare their perceptions of institutional

effectiveness to those of nontraditional students. Future research could also employ sequential exploratory mixed methods and conduct focus groups first to learn what themes emerged, and then go back and conduct secondary analysis on the AL360 data which would allow for researchers to examine relationships between other variables. Lastly, future research should examine more closely how the California Master Plan for Higher Education contributes to the plight of working age adults who have earned some college credit, but no degree. The Master Plan is designed to ensure universal access to affordable higher education while honoring the missions of the three distinct systems (OPR, 2018). The plan is not designed to promote *quality* education, and it is especially not designed to address inequities faced by various populations in California. Therefore, future research should not only consider how the Master Plan contributes to the problem, but how modifying the Master Plan could potentially play an important role in improving educational attainment rates in California.

Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Leadership

Several recommendations for policy, practice, and leadership are born from this study. Of course, it would be impossible to implement all recommendations, but following even a few of the suggested changes can vastly improve nontraditional students' experiences. Several recommendations have been mentioned throughout this study, such as offering more evening classes, extending office hours, offering increased and improved online and hybrid classes, and encouraging faculty to invite subject matter experts/working professions to their classrooms.

In addition, on a statewide level, California should consider modifying the Master Plan and adopting an educational attainment goal. Several states, like Florida and Tennessee, have adopted educational attainment goals designed to not only help current students graduate, but to emphasize the importance of reaching back to help students with some college, no degree, attain their academic goals. California should be a *leader* for working age adults. However, we are one of only 14 states nationwide that have failed to adopt a statewide educational attainment goal. California is not a leader in this space, and the lack of focus on working age adults with some college, no degree, may create a skilled workforce gap for our state.

At the institution level, the university should consider starting a Transfer and Returning Student Success Center. The center could be modeled after the First Year Experience (FYE) at Sacramento State. The FYE includes components such as a FYE Seminar course and University Learning Community course "clusters," co-curricular activities embedded in the courses, designed to increase student engagement, peer Mentors who attend courses with first year students, and provide personal, academic, and advising support, a dedicated space to study, work in groups, meet the Go-to Crew or Peer Mentors, and find support (California State University, Sacramento, 2020). Nontraditional students desire a space of their own where they can connect with other nontraditional students. Pam, a Communication Studies student, said, “I know they have something for, like first year, students and stuff, and I’ve wandered in there, and thought, wow this is so cool, why don’t they have something like this, for me?”

Of course, implementing any, let alone all, of these recommendations would be expensive. Change does not happen from good intentions alone. For example, there would be budgetary implications related to extending service hours, investing in technology to facilitate virtual advising, or creating a center for returning and transfer students. These fiscal implications cannot be overlooked, especially since this dissertation was finalized amidst the COVID-19 global pandemic which will alter not only how business is done and how classes are delivered for the foreseeable future, but may also fundamentally shift university priorities due to limited resources and competing priorities. But the budget is a moral document, and dedicating budget to implementing changes that would improve adult learner experiences and help them succeed in their academic journey is morally sound, and morally just.

Finally, leadership should continue to focus on the symbolism of valuing adult learners in order to establish a culture that accepts and celebrates nontraditional students. Symbolic leaders influence the social reality within an organization (Nevarez, Wood & Penrose, 2013). For example, university leaders have made a concerted effort to acknowledge nontraditional students, often celebrating nontraditional students at commencement, such as in 2019 when the university awarded the President's Medal to a nontraditional student, Monaè Williams. Sacramento State's President, Robert S. Nelsen, said "Upon meeting Monaè, I was immediately struck by her intelligence, grace, and heart. She has survived significant challenges in her life, yet still makes time to support those around her and to give back" (Ortiz, 2019). President Nelsen selected a nontraditional student to receive the highest student award in 2019. This is the kind of

symbolic leadership needed to improve the adult learner experience. As Nevarez et al (2013) explain, “When leaders are successful in shaping the meaning of an idea, it then becomes the dominant conception” (p. 130). University leaders should continue to acknowledge and celebrate nontraditional students through symbolic leadership. Table 37 provides recommendations for policy, practice, and leadership, and indicates if the recommendation is from the results of this study (*), existing research related to nontraditional students (†), or both (*†).

Table 37

Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Leadership

Policy	Practice	Leadership
Advocate for revising the California Master Plan to adopt an educational attainment goal (such as the Lumina Foundation’s 60% by 2025). †	Offer more evening and weekend classes. *†	Hire nontraditional faculty, staff, and administrators. *
Create policies that increase access for nontraditional students (such as priority registration for evening and online classes). *†	Offer increased and improved online and hybrid classes. *†	Provide training for faculty, staff, and administrators about the challenges nontraditional students face, how to incorporate andragogical practices in their teaching, and the value of adult learners to the university and the community. *†
Create a Returner/Transfer Student program (similar to the First Year Experience at Sacramento State). *	Offer career services that cater to mid-career professionals, such as more paid internships, or career fairs that promote higher-level jobs. *†	Seek ongoing feedback from nontraditional students about Sacramento State’s culture and practices. *

Increase student services office hours, such as Financial Aid, Bursar's Office, Registration, and Student Advising. *†	Provide tutoring labs and services identified specifically for adult learners and staffed by tutors aged 25+. *†	Continue to celebrate nontraditional students at university events, such as commencement. *†
Offer video advising session and implement Chatbots for students who cannot make it to campus during the workweek. *	Encourage faculty to invite subject matter experts/working professionals to the classroom. *	Encourage nontraditional student involvement in social organizations and student leadership positions. *

** = recommendation from research, † = recommendation from literature*

The state of California and Sacramento State should be leaders for nontraditional students. California should adopt an educational attainment goal and create incentives for colleges and universities to create access for working age adults to return to and get through college. The university should consider implementing human-center designed policies and practices that improve nontraditional students' perceptions of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. Instructors should continue to utilize a pedandragogical approach to teaching in order to provide a well-rounded experience for nontraditional and traditional students alike. The university should also continue to listen to nontraditional students in order to shift to a culture that embraces adult learners and improves nontraditional student experiences.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine nontraditional student perceptions of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services. This study utilized a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design where quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed in

order to understand the university's nontraditional undergraduate students' experiences. This research design provided both a broad understanding of nontraditional student perceptions. This study was comprised of five chapters.

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the study, including a background on nontraditional students and an explanation of the study's significance, especially in light of the degreed workforce gap faced by the state of California. The research questions for this study were:

1. Can levels of perception of institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services be predicted from nontraditional student characteristics?
2. What are nontraditional students' perceptions of Sacramento State's institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services?
3. What can the institution do better to enhance nontraditional student success?

The theoretic lenses of andragogy and institutional culture were introduced. Andragogy and institutional culture provided helpful paradigms through which to examine adult learners' perceptions of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services.

Chapter 2 provided a review of literature related to nontraditional student characteristics including their motivations to go and return to college, and the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers adult learners face. Chapter 2 also provided an overview of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student

services as they relate to nontraditional students and how those categories of institutional effectiveness were operationalized for the study. The chapter concluded with an overview of national and regional promising best programs and practices for serving adult learners.

Chapter 3 was comprised of seven sections. The chapter described how the study was conducted, including: (a) the research design, (b) the role of the researcher, (c) research questions, (d) setting, population and sample, (e) data collection and implementation, (f) how data would be analyzed, and (g) how participants will be protected. Chapter 3 included a comprehensive overview of the steps the study would follow to collect and analyze data, including multiple regression to determine of nontraditional student characteristics are predictors of their perceptions, and focus groups to gain a richer understanding of their perceptions of institutional effectiveness. The dependent variables for each regression were the student satisfaction scores for curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student Services. The student characteristic that were assessed, and the continuous independent variables for each of the regressions were: (a) class load, (b) progress to degree, (c) hours the student works in a week, and (d) student's commute time to school.

Chapter 4 provided the relevant quantitative and qualitative findings for the study. Research question one assessed if nontraditional student satisfaction could be predicted from student characteristics. The combination of variables was found to be significant for category of career planning. Specifically, progress to degree and number of hours work can be predictive of student perceptions of institutional effectiveness of career

planning. Following sequential explanatory mixed method design, findings from research question one determined questions to be asked in focus groups which dug deeper into the lived experience and perceptions of nontraditional students and answer research questions two and three.

The major themes that emerged from the qualitative data were presented in chapter four. The most common theme across all categories was that classes and services are provided at inconvenient times for nontraditional students. The findings revealed the following themes related to research question two, which was "What are nontraditional students' perceptions of Sacramento State's institutional effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services?"

1. Curriculum and Instruction: (a) inconvenient class times (with subthemes of frequency of classes and the importance of online classes), (b) method of instruction matters (such as use of technology), and (c) otherness;
2. Career planning: (a) career services are offered at inconvenient times for nontraditional student, (b) the career services are irrelevant for adults, and (c) major matters;
3. Comprehensive student services: (a) student services are offered at inconvenient times, and (b) adult learners find various student services are poorly managed.

Themes for research question three, which was, "What can the institution do better to enhance nontraditional student success?" were: (a) nontraditional students would like

more access to tutors, (b) they feel undervalued by the university, and (c) they are happy to learn that they are not alone.

Chapter 5 provided an overview of the study, and contained an analysis of study findings. The analysis of findings was presented in relation to each category of institutional effectiveness, and also as related to the theoretical frameworks for the study. As a result of the study findings, a reimagined model of the Adult Learner Experience was offered. Implications and recommendations for policy, practice, and leadership were presented.

Author's Note

Sacramento State's mission is, "As California's capital university, we transform lives by preparing students for leadership, service, and success" (California State University, Sacramento, 2019). As a nontraditional student alumnus, former staff member, former part-time instructor, current doctoral student, and current administrator, I am confident in saying that Sacramento State does prepare students for leadership, service, and success. And Sacramento State does transform lives. I was compelled to research the nontraditional student experience because adult learners are what I call my passion population. I am proud to have returned to school and earned my bachelor's degree at 39 years old, and I am forever grateful for the experiences I had (and am having) at Sacramento State. Upon earning my bachelor's degree at Sacramento State, I began to learn the limitlessness of my own potential. I began to believe in myself, and became eager to unlock my future. Sacramento State provided the key to make that happen. Yes, this study revealed that there is room for improvement in Sacramento

State's curriculum and instruction, career planning, and comprehensive student services for nontraditional students. However, I am not alone in feeling grateful for what the university has offered me. As Tom, a Business Major who returned to school after stopping out 20 years ago said, "I feel fortunate. I feel blessed to be here, I really do." Thank you, and Stingers Up!

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

EXAMINING NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT PERCEPTIONS
OF INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS.

My name is Sarah Billingsley, and I am a doctoral student at California State University, Sacramento, in the Educational Leadership program. I am conducting this research study to examine nontraditional undergraduate students' (25 years old and older) perceptions of their university experience in order to add to the growing body of research on improving academic and student services for adult learners. If you volunteer to participate, you will be asked to share your thoughts about how Sacramento State does in areas such as curriculum, technology, financing, and other academic and student services for adult students. Your participation in this study will last approximately 60 minutes.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right not to participate at all or to leave the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are some possible risks involved for participants. These risks are that, some students may share negative or frustrating experiences in college, which may be upsetting for participants. There are some benefits to this research, particularly that the findings of this study may inform leaders about nontraditional student experiences.

It is anticipated that study results will be shared with the public through presentations and/or publications. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission.

Measures to insure your confidentiality include de-identifying all data, storing audio and video recordings in password-protected devices, and destroying audio and visual files once the focus group sessions are transcribed. Any identifiers will be removed as soon as they are no longer necessary. Therefore, raw data containing infromation that can be identified with you will be destroyed immediately study completion. The de-identified data will be maintained in a safe, locked location for 3 years and may be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from you.

If you have any questions about the research at any time, please contact me at sarah.billingsley@csus.edu. You may also contact my faculty advisor at nevarezc@csus.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research project please call the Office of Research, Innovation, and Economic Development, California State University, Sacramento, (916) 278-5674, or email irb@csus.edu.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX B

Focus Group Survey

Participant Demographics

1) Please indicate you age range (circle one):

25 - 34
35-44
45-54
55-64
65+
Prefer not to answer

2) Please indicate your gender identity:
Male Female Different Identity Prefer not to answer

3) Please indicate your year in school:
Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Other

4) Please indicate your ethnicity:

Alaska Native/American Indian
Asian
Black/African American
Hispanic or Latino
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
White
Two or more
Other
Prefer not the answer

5) Please indicate how many hours per week you work:
Zero hours
1–10 hours
11–20 hours
21–30 hours
31–40 hours
More than 40 hours

6) Please indicate your average commute time to get to school:

Less than 15 minutes
16 - 30 minutes
31 - 45 minutes
46 - 60 minutes
61 - 75 minutes
More than 75 minutes

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

1) The material covered in my classes is useful and relates to my life and work experience.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly Agree

Explain (optional): _____

2) Sac State is helping me reach my career goals.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly Agree

Explain (optional): _____

3) Student services, like financial aid, advising, and counseling, are convenient and accessible for me.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly Agree

Explain (optional): _____

4) When you were accepted at Sacramento State, were you offered college credit for your career or military experience? (please circle one)

Yes No I don't know

Explain (optional): _____

Additional information:

1) What motivated you to enroll in college now?

2) Based on your experience so far, what do you think Sacramento State values?

3) If you could tell your past-self something about what you know now, but wish you knew when you first enrolled at Sac State, what would you say?

Thank you!

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