A Phenomenological Study of the Older Adult Learner’s Community College Experience

by

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A Phenomenological Study of the Older Adult Learner’s

Community College Experience

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the college experience of older adult learners who are at least 50 years of age and attending full/part time in a California community college. Twenty older adult learners who met these criteria participated in semi-structured interviews conducted during fall 2014. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the community college experience of the adult learner who is 50 years or older?

2. How can institutional support and resources be created or enhanced at the community college to promote a more positive experience for the older adult student?

Analysis of the data resulted in the identification of four major themes offering insight into the older adult student’s college experience: (a) Do I Fit in Here? (b) Returning to College Is Not Easy; (c) Navigating the Institution; and (d) Interactions with Faculty and Peers Impacts the Experience. Overall, participants reported having had a positive experience at the community college and believed that the community college provided them with an opportunity to obtain knowledge and skills that would support or enhance a twenty-first century career. For most of the participants, returning to college was not easy. Students who felt they had the best supports from the institution and their family were the most successful.

Many participants expressed that the lack of financial resources presented a major challenge to the completion of their educational goals. Although many shared that they
had positive interactions with faculty, others admitted feeling they did not fit in within the classroom environment and experienced feelings of stress, anxiety, and fear of failure.

Recommendations as to how community colleges might attract older adult learners include having visual images of older adult students on all college websites, brochures, and other college materials. Institutions need to enhance their resources and services to better support these learners once they enroll. Community college leaders need to advocate for the importance of serving the older adult learner and implement services, resources and programs to support their success.
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CHAPTER 1—INTRODUCTION

One of the most important changes in the early twenty-first century is the aging of the American workforce (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). A report provided by the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), *The Next Four Decades: The Older Population in the United States: 2010 to 2050—Population Estimates and Projections*, estimates, “that by 2050 the number of Americans aged 65 and older is projected to be 88.5 million, more than double its projected population of 40.2 million in 2010” (p. 1). This demographic phenomenon is assured as 78 million Baby Boomers born between the years of 1946-1964 become eligible for retirement over the next 20 years (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2009). A report, *Boomer Bookends: Insights into the Oldest and Youngest Boomers*, by the MetLife Mature Market Institute (2009) found that 50% of older Baby Boomers are working full time, and, of those working full-time, 15% plan on making a career change either before or after they retire.

Community colleges have considerable history serving older adult learners, beginning in the 1960s. Federal grants provided under the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 and the Older American Act (OAA) of 1965 created college programs and services addressing workforce development for older Americans (Fishman, 2010). *Adult Learning in Focus: National and State-by-State Data* (Ewell, Kelly, & Klein-Collins, 2008), sponsored by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, found that “More than 30 percent of the adult population are untouched by postsecondary education and in 35 states, more than 60 percent of the population does not have an associate’s degree or higher” (p. 6). During 2010, the percentage of Americans between the ages of 25 to 64 who earned a 2-year or 4-year degree was 38.3% (Lumina Foundation, 2012).
Simultaneously, President Obama allocated funding through the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act to support community colleges by recognizing their important role in supporting the adult learner and their educational success. Arne Duncan (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education [OVAE], 2012), U.S. Secretary of Education, asserted that, “We must dramatically increase overall rates of educational attainment to ensure the success of individuals in the workplace and safeguard our country’s prosperity in the global economy. To do this, adult learners must enter and succeed in postsecondary education” (p. vii).

Statement of the Problem

The problem under investigation in this study was one of missed opportunities. Public postsecondary institutions are losing revenue by not tapping into the older adult student market. A recent report released by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL, 2010), Tapping Mature Talent: Policies for a 21st Century Workforce, found that “older workers are less likely to engage in training at community colleges than younger workers, and that they enroll at lower rates in credential or degree-granting programs at public two- and four-year colleges” (p. 108). Cruce and Hillman (2012) have noted that postsecondary institutions have yet to respond to this most current demographic change due to the lack of empirical information on the educational preferences of older adult learners.

According to Cross (1981), adult students who are 25 years and older face three kinds of barriers before enrolling in postsecondary education: situational, dispositional, and institutional. Situational barriers for this age group most often deal with lack of knowledge about the campus resources and services, as well as personal mobility, health
problems, and responsibilities for family caregiving. Dispositional barriers are often perceived as beliefs regarding their ability to be successful, as well as their feelings of a sense of belonging while attending college. Strayhorn’s (2008) Theory on Belonging maintains that a student’s sense of belonging is “based on an individual’s psychological needs and that satisfaction of such needs affects behaviors and perceptions” (p. 4). Deutsch and Schmertz (2010) found that having a community of academic and social support while attending college provided reentry women a sense of belonging or connectedness, not only within their classrooms but also influenced their understandings of the social climate of the institution.

Institutional barriers often manifest themselves through inflexible class schedules, campus accessibility, and intricate enrollment and financial aid procedures. Research by Pusser and colleagues (2007) suggests, “The institutional response to the needs of older adult learners are neither generally systematic nor empirically based or fail to address the diversity in identities, characteristic and needs” (p. 7). As a result, adults are often institutionally invisible, marginalized, and taken for granted or systematically ignored by the field of higher education (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001). Postsecondary institutions continue to develop and implement practices and policies that target an extremely broad adult student population. By not being aware of the specific support and resource needs of the older adult learner within our postsecondary institutions, institutions may be limiting or decreasing their level of success.

Purpose of the Study

Public institutions continue to develop and implement programs that target an extremely broad adult student population. Research by Bragg (2011) contends that,
although substantial attention has been paid to the development of transition programs including career pathway programs for youth at the community college, much less thought has been paid to the services and resources that will support the older adult learner’s college experience. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how adult learners who are 50 years of age and older perceive their college experience at a community college. Understanding the college experience of older adult learners can provide insight into how institutions can better recruit and support these students.

Research Question

The primary research question that guided this study was: What is the college experience of the older adult learner who is 50 years or older at a community college? Additionally, a second question was explored: How can institutional support and resources be created or enhanced at the community college to promote a more positive experience for the older adult student?

Significance of the Study

This study addressed research gaps in the educational literature on adult students 50 years old and older and their college experience as it relates to their success. The work is important because it has provided community colleges with awareness and understanding of the specific needs and challenges of older adult learners, and in turn offered suggestions for the types of support and resources that may be needed during their college experience. According to Schlossberg (1989) and Schaefer (2010), older adult students have distinct support needs that may influence their ability to cope with their transition into college. Degree completion can be hindered by the impact of these unmet
support needs upon the older adult student’s college experience and pathway towards college completion.

The rationale for this dissertation centered on the lack of empirical knowledge on adult students who are 50 years and older and their college experience. There are few published studies that focus exclusively on the experiences of older adult learners enrolled in a community college which advocates development and implementation of strategic college policies and practices that support the older adult student (Compton, Cox, & Laanan-Santos, 2006).

A survey on lifelong learning, conducted by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP, 2000), found:

Some older adults have educational preferences that align with the course content and learning environments of postsecondary institutions; yet over-half of these potential students have reported that they never considered enrolling in a postsecondary institution to satisfy their educational demand. (p. 4)

Thus, the primary objective for this study was to increase the knowledge on how older adult students navigate their college experience and also to discover the marketing strategies and practices that will attract the older adult student to attend while providing community colleges with an ongoing stream of revenue.

Finally, this study has provided community colleges with valuable insight into the importance of addressing the needs of older adult students by advocating educational policies and practices that will sustain and increase the older adult learner’s success at the institutions. It is hoped that colleges may work harder to support older adult students as they connect and navigate their college experience towards their educational goals.
Guiding Frameworks

Although a review of the literature did not produce any theories specific to the college experiences of older adult learners, several theories were utilized to guide this research. Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering’s (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering explained marginality and mattering as a “sense of not fitting in” (p. 9), which can heighten students’ feelings of uneasiness and depression and create unhealthy levels of self-consciousness for the student. Schlossberg and colleagues’ theory (1989) indicated that student success is influenced by a sense of mattering or belonging and offers a construct to explore this further with this population. Schlossberg’s Theory of Transition defines transitions as “a process over time that includes phases of assimilation and continuous appraisal as people move in, through and out of it” (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 2006, p. 55). Additional research by Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) suggests, “The process of these life transitions fosters learning and development and that a transition can be said to occur even if an event or non-event results in changed assumptions about oneself” (p. 111).

Another influential theory, Strayhorn’s (2008) Theory of Belonging, drew on Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, suggesting that “belongingness” (Strayhorn, 2008, p. 30) is essential to one’s individual growth as a person and existence within a community. Strayhorn’s model suggested that a student’s feelings associated with belonging with regard to one’s peers in and outside of the classroom at the institution is a crucial part to the college experience. Strayhorn’s (2012) recent book titled College Students’ Sense of Belonging provided an operational definition that suggested, “The absence of belonging is marginalization, isolation, or alienation from others” (p. 17).
Methodology and Data Gathering Method

A phenomenological framework was used due to its exploratory lens that provided the flexibility for discovery and a better understanding of the older adult’s college experience. The methodology employed individual interviews with 20 older adult participants. The individual interviews included questions about their community college experience and the meanings they made from this experience. The interviews included questions regarding institutional and environmental factors that facilitated a sense of belonging and the impact of support. The analysis of the data collected was intended to inform institutions and practitioners as they serve older adult learners and develop polices and services that address the needs of the older adult learner enrolled in community colleges.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

There were some methodological limitations with this study, which have to do with the sample size and the selection of participants. This study was restricted to adult learners who are 50 years and older and are enrolled either full or part time in a California community college. The researcher limited the sample to older adult learners from at least two community colleges when there are over 100 community colleges in the state. Participants were selected that met the criteria established by the researcher and were the only individuals chosen to participate for this study. There may have been additional older adult learners who shared a different viewpoint than those who participated in this study. Additionally, the sample was not large enough to reflect an array of older adult learners’ college experiences. This is a qualitative study of experiences; the findings cannot be
generalized with the idea that all older adult learners have had the same college experience.

Finally, the researcher was the principle instrument used in this study to collect, interpret, and analyze the experiences and viewpoints. As an older adult learner, the ability to relate to the participants through common experiences may influence the interpretation of the answers. In Chapter 3, the role of the researcher will be further explained.

**Definition of Terms**

Listed below are definitions of terms used throughout this dissertation. NOTE: For the purpose of this study, the terms “Older adult learner” and “Adult student” will be used interchangeably.

*Adult Learner:* Individual who attends a community college and is identified by one or more of the following characteristics: 25 years of age and older, single/married, financial independence, full-time/part-time employment, delayed enrollment, reentry to college, family and employment obligations.

*Dispositional Barrier:* Inability to be successful, feelings of insecurity while attending college.

*Institutional Barrier:* Inflexible class schedules, campus accessibility, and intricate enrollment and financial aid procedures.

*Intergenerational Knowledge:* Pertaining to knowledge of individuals in different generations or age categories.

*Nontraditional Student:* Individuals 25 years of age and older, are employed, have family responsibilities, may be a single parent, and are financially independent.
Older Adult Learner/Older Adult Student: Individual who is 50 years or older, who attends a community college and is identified by at least one or more of the following characteristics: single/married, financial independence, full- or part-time employment, reentry to college, and extended family obligations.

Situational Barrier: Lack of knowledge about campus resources and services, personal mobility, health, and family caregiving.

Organization of the Study

The arrangement for this dissertation follows a common design for scholarly literature. First, a review of the literature (Chapter 2) includes: (a) shifting demographics in postsecondary education; (b) theoretical frameworks applied to make meaning for this research; (c) adult learners in postsecondary education; (d) barriers and challenges for the adult learner; and (e) older adult learners in community college.

Chapter 3 presents the research design and methodology that guided the study. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, and finally, Chapter 5 offers a discussion of the findings, recommendations, and implications for policy and practice, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2—LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a review of the published literature and research regarding the experiences of older adult learners in postsecondary institutions. The following five areas of research are discussed in this literature review: (a) shifting demographics in postsecondary education; (b) theoretical frameworks applied to make meaning for this research; (c) adult learners in postsecondary education; (d) barriers and challenges for the adult learner; (e) older adult learners in community colleges. This study intended to examine the college experiences of an adult student population that is 50 years and older. Few empirical studies have examined this older adult learner specifically in community colleges.

Shifting Demographics in Postsecondary Education

“The aging of the population and the retirement of the baby-boom generation are considered by many to be among the most transformative demographic changes ever experienced in this country” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, p. 87). This demographic phenomenon, discussed in the research by Cruce and Hillman (2012) sometimes referred to as the “Silver Tsunami,” is unstoppable, as 78 million older adults born between the years of 1946-1964 become eligible for retirement over the next 20 years. The *Digest of Education Statistics 2012* (Snyder & Dillow, 2013) reported that 132,836 older adult learners are attending public 4-year institutions. Understanding this demographic shift is important because an increasing proportion of older Americans continue to impact postsecondary education. Research by Anderson (2003) and Creighton and Hudson (2002) has noted that, over the last 30 years, the number of adult students has increased steadily by 144%, whereas the number of students under age 25
increased by only 45%. This increase in adult learners can be found at degree-granting institutions where the enrollment of adult learners grew 375% between 1970 and 2005 and is projected to grow another 8.4% by 2017 (Snyder & Dillow, 2013).

Additionally, this increase in adult learners has had an impact on the workforce and economic development in the twenty-first century. Research by Freedman (2005) has found that baby boomers desire to continue working beyond the customary retirement age and that many will require upgraded skills and training to stay competitive in the workforce. An earlier study, *Growing Older in America, The Health and Retirement Study*, endorsed by the National Institute on Aging (NIA, 2015), found that there is an increase in the level of educational attainment in successive generational cohorts of older adults in the United States. Many of these older adult learners are returning to college to complete their degrees after an extended absence from formal education. Many older students who are enrolled in higher education seek not only a college degree but also new skills and training that will provide them an opportunity to be more competitive and marketable within a global workforce.

The research indicates that the twenty-first century workforce will require more individuals with postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2007). With the current emphasis placed on increasing the number of college-educated adult learners, there continues to be a need to better understand who adult learners are, why they have come to college, and what resources and strategies can assist them along the pathway to graduation (Hadfield, 2003; Kazis et al., 2007; Sandler, 2000). Research by Ritt (2008) has suggested that, in order to accomplish economic prosperity as a nation, we must adapt and respond to the changing
We must dramatically increase overall rates of educational attainment to ensure the success of individuals in the workplace and safeguard our country’s prosperity in the global economy. To do this, adult learners across America must enter and succeed in postsecondary education in ever greater numbers. (p. vii)

Theoretical Frameworks

Understanding the shared meanings of the older adult learner’s college experiences may be partially explained by referencing the theoretical frameworks which have been instrumental in understanding how adults perceive their college experience. Although a search of the literature did not produce any theories specific to the college experiences of older adult learners in a community college, several theories were utilized to act as a framework for this research study. In this section, the following theories are described: (a) Schlossberg’s theory of marginality and mattering; (b) Schlossberg’s theory of transition; and (c) Strayhorn’s theory on belonging.

Schlossberg’s (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering explains marginality as a “sense of not fitting in” which can heighten students’ feelings of uneasiness and depression and can create unhealthy levels of self-consciousness for the college student. Additionally, Schlossberg suggests eight functions for student support professionals to utilize when providing services to adult community college students. These eight functions include: specialized services adapted for adult needs; information about opportunities to develop skills related to adult development; transitions and the college experience; advocacy for adult students; a clearinghouse for campus service and
resources; referrals to adult student resources; referrals to adult student support groups; and networking, mentoring, and counseling. This theory directs its information to student support professionals and their efforts in providing traditional and nontraditional students services and resources to support their transition and their feelings of belonging at the institution.

Schlossberg’s Theory of Transition defines transitions as “a process over time that includes phases of assimilation and continuous appraisal as people move in, through and out of it” (Schlossberg et al., 2006, p. 55). Schlossberg’s (2011) research on understanding the challenge of change and the transition model and its application states, “Everyone experiences transitions, whether they are events or nonevents, anticipated or unanticipated and that these transitions alter our lives, our roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions” (p. 159).

Schlossberg and colleagues (2006) identified four major factors that influence a person’s ability to cope with transition. These factors (situation, self, support, and strategies) are known as the 4 S’s. The first S is the role of perception (assessing the situation), which is important during the 4 S’s assessment phase. The individual’s view of what is happening affects their account of their assets and liabilities. The second S is self. The areas included in self are personal and demographic characteristics and the psychological resources. The third S is support. The type of social support a person feels is important to consider. The fourth S highlights strategies which are divided into three categories: those that modify the situation; those that control the meaning of the problem; and those that aid in managing the stress. Schlossberg and colleagues’ theory has been applied as a conceptual framework that continues to assist educators and student service
professionals with a better understanding and model that may better serve college
students in transition.

Strayhorn’s (2008) Theory on Belonging draws on Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of
Needs theory that suggests that “belongingness” is essential to one’s individual growth
as a person and existence within a community. Strayhorn defines a student’s sense of
belonging as a “basic human need, a fundamental motive to drive human behavior, as
well as a discussion of its importance in certain contexts and among certain populations,
its relatedness to mattering, its relationship with social identities, its association with
positive outcomes” (p. 7). This theoretical framework suggests that a student’s feelings
associated with belonging with regard to one’s peers in and outside of the classroom at
the institution is a crucial part of the college experience.

Strayhorn’s (2012) conceptual model of belonging will be the primary guide
utilized for this research since there is no model existing that is specific to explaining the
older adult learner’s college experience as it relates to a sense of belonging (Strayhorn,
2012), as shown in Figure 1. Utilizing this model may also reveal similarities and/or
differences within the experiences of older adult learners at the community college that
may suggest that these similarities and/or differences are influential in determining their
perception of belonging at the community college.

Schlossberg and colleagues’ (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering and
Strayhorn’s (2008) Theory on Belonging emphasize that when a student feels
marginalized they often infer they do not matter, which, in turn, can influence their
college experience and affect a student’s sense of belonging. A recent study (Clark,
2012) investigated how a student’s sense of mattering and belonging influenced a
nontraditional student’s success at the community college. The purpose of this study was to explore “students’ self-perceptions regarding the factors that positively influenced persistence to degree attainment, as well as add insights to inform integrated academic and student services and practice supporting student success” (p. 512). Using Schlossberg and colleagues’ Theory of Marginality and Mattering, this researcher found that the connection to faculty, staff, and peers offered the extra encouragement to persist through the various personal, institutional, and financial barriers they confronted on their college pathway to completion. The study’s findings expanded the discussion on how student involvement and the connection to faculty, staff, and peers offers the nontraditional student at the community college the encouragement and support to persist and succeed. The research findings also suggested that nontraditional students who continued to persist and complete college “appreciated that they were not alone in their struggle, whether the struggle had to do with balancing family life, dealing with financial
hardship, feeling marginalized due to an aspect of identity, physical or hidden disabilities, or other struggle” (Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 514).

Previous research by Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007) has suggested that an increased sense of belonging is associated with positive academic, psychological, and persistence outcomes. This study had two research objectives. The first was to examine the role of sense of belonging in predicting college students’ intentions to persist. The second was to test the effects of an intervention designed to increase students’ sense of belonging.

First-year African American students ($N = 254$), and a random sample of 291 of their White peers, were invited to participate. Students were randomly assigned to a group that received an intervention to enhance students’ sense of belonging or to one of two control groups. Participants then completed a survey containing measures of financial difficulties, social and academic integration, peer and parental support, sense of belonging, institutional commitment, and intentions to persist at the beginning of their first semester and at the beginning and end of their second semester. Data were analyzed using hierarchical linear modeling. The findings from this study showed that students who (a) participated in groups and student peer interactions, (b) had interactions with faculty, and (c) received support from parents and other student groups at the beginning of the academic year, felt a greater sense of belonging; and that a sense of belonging significantly decreased over time during that same academic year. These researchers also found that, although the intervention influenced the student’s sense of belonging, statistically the effects of the intervention was small. The effects of this intervention
remain important because they demonstrated that a students’ sense of belonging over their first year of college can be influenced by relatively nominal and low cost resources.

A recent study conducted by Maramba and Museus (2012) examined how campus climate, ethnic group cohesion, and cross cultural interaction influenced Filipino American college students’ sense of belonging in college and found that climate, ethnic group cohesion, and cross-cultural interaction all directly influenced sense of belonging among Filipino American students. Four hundred questionnaires were distributed to 40% of the Filipino American student population on the participating campus. A total of 143 participants returned the survey. A survey instrument was utilized that consisted of questions regarding demographics, perceptions of campus climate, ethnic identity, group cohesion, cross cultural interaction, and sense of belonging. Data analysis utilized a quantitative methodology that included descriptive statistics, factoring, and structural equation modeling. The findings from this study suggested that “culture and race do play a substantial role in the experience of Filipino American college students and that ethnic group cohesion is important in fostering a sense of belonging for students of color in college” (Maramba & Museus, 2012, p. 513).

**Adult Learners in Postsecondary Education**

During the past 30 years, adult student enrollment in postsecondary education has significantly increased (Aslanian, 2001). “Older adults increasingly represent a larger population in postsecondary education, mostly due to the return of the baby boomer generation, who are currently between the ages of 50 and 60 years of age” (Palazesi & Bower, 2006, p. 45). According to the U.S. States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2005), 33% of adults ages 55-79 participate in
some kind of formal learning, such as credential programs and work related courses. Because future labor market demand is expected to favor workers with higher levels of education, the adult learner student population is increasingly significant in our postsecondary institution (Sommers & Franklin, 2012).

In 2008, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) in partnership with the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) provided a context of the challenges and obstacles that lie ahead for adult learners in postsecondary institutions. This partnership specified the following key challenges:

1. In the United States, more than 59 million adults, or 30% of the total adult population, are not attending postsecondary education.
2. More than three million U.S. adults have multiple barriers: have no high school diploma, speak little or no English, and do not earn a living wage.
3. The United States will be unable to reach a level of international competitiveness even if they could match the best state performance with traditional college-age students at each stage of the educational pipeline.

The report’s conclusion on the state of postsecondary education and its impact on society as a whole asserted:

Postsecondary education is an important asset for individuals, for employers, for our state economies, and for our nation’s future. However, the dominant metaphor of the traditional education pipeline largely ignores a major segment of the learners in our postsecondary education system today and provides little guidance for those outside the pipeline who may wish to enter. If we are to make real changes in our policies and our systems in order to reach the levels of
educational attainment necessary for our future, we must expand the metaphor, and the data and relevant information, to include all of our learners. Young and older, traditional or nontraditional—all learners should count. (CAEL, 2008, p. 74)

**Concepts of Adult Learning**

The importance of understanding older adult learner’s college experiences begins with understanding adult education history and the concepts of adult learning. According to Cyr (1999), from 1607 through the early 1900s, adult education in the United States was essentially voluntary, practical, task oriented, and reflective of events impacting society within the United States. Adult education within the United States functioned within a pedagogical framework until the early 1900s. This pedagogical framework refers to children and assumptions for educating children as the learner who is dependent (Forest & Peterson, 2006).

**Malcolm Knowles andragogy.** During the 1960s to the 1970s there was an increase of adult education programs based on andragogical concepts and theories (Cyr, 1999). Andragogy by Knowles (1968) was a new conceptual framework that distinguished adult learning from the way children learn. He defined the concept of andragogy as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (p. 5). In 1980, Knowles proposed a new perspective of adult learning to distinguish from the pedagogical philosophy that began in the 1900s. He theorized that if adults are involved and given the opportunity, adults will prefer to be active and self-directed participants within all phases of the learning process.
Knowles (1984) recognized four assumptions about the characteristics that describe the adult learner:

1. Has an independent self-concept and can direct his or her own self learning.
2. Has accumulated an abundance of life experiences that enrich the learning.
3. Is problem centered and interested in immediate application of knowledge.
4. Is motivated to learn by internal factors rather than external factors.

Knowles assumed that the process of applying andragogical assumptions, theory, and principles in adult learner programs required a climate favorable to adult learning, including: the creation of an organizational structure; the analysis of needs for learning; the development of learning objectives; the development of activities; the operation of activities; and the evaluation of the program (Knowles, 1980). From these andragogical assumptions and principles, Knowles developed a model for designing, implementing, and evaluating educational experiences with adults. According to Merriam (2001), andragogy contributes to the understanding of how adults learn, in what context, and their process of learning.

**Kolb’s theory of experiential learning and adults.** Similar to Knowles’ theory of andragogy, experiential learning is defined as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Theory provides a holistic model of the learning process and a model of adult development, both of which are consistent with what we know about how people learn, grow, and develop. Experiential learning assumes that learning is a process, not an outcome, and is best facilitated when students apply their own beliefs and ideas to a topic. Kolb conceptualized that learning from experience requires four different kinds
of abilities: an openness and willingness to involve oneself in new experiences; observational and reflective skills so these new experiences can be viewed from a variety of perspectives; analytical abilities so integrative ideas and concepts can be created; and decision making and problem-solving skills so these new ideas and concepts can be used in actual practice (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2006).

Kolb (1984) developed the Learning Style Inventory to assess individual learning styles. He identified four learning styles:

1. An individual with a diverging learning style has broad cultural interests and likes to gather information.
2. An individual with an assimilating learning style is less focused on people and more interested in ideas and abstract concepts.
3. An individual with a converging learning style prefers to deal with technical tasks and problems rather than with social issues and interpersonal issues. In formal learning, an individual with this style prefers to utilize new ideas, simulations, laboratory assignments, and practical applications.
4. An individual with an accommodating learning style prefers to work with others and enjoys carrying out plans and involving themselves in new experiences. An individual with this learning style relies more heavily on people for information than on their own technical analysis. In formal learning, individuals with an accommodating learning style prefer to work with others to get assignments done and to set goals.
Defining Adult Learners

The literature on the adult learner illustrates similarities and differences among the descriptions of who they are, what their needs are, and what types of support are beneficial to their success. The traditional portrayal of an adult learner characterizes the adult learner as a student 25 years of age and older who is enrolled in higher education (Sissel et al., 2001). Compton and colleagues (2006) have noted that adult learners are often described as nontraditional students, yet not all nontraditional students are adult students. They contend that there are additional characteristics of adult students that need to be recognized as a distinct group. Levin (2007) asserted the following opinion:

There is not a standard depiction of an adult learner in higher education and that it is the ambiguity in definitions associated with adult learners in higher education by specific student characteristics that are less than adequate because this context provides an incomplete representation of the unique and important facets of adults’ lives. (p. 17)

Prior research by Deutsch and Schmertz (2010) have noted that some postsecondary institutions have integrated a portrayal of an adult learner who is older than 24 years of age, who is employed full time, and may be a single parent; and in doing so, institutions identify all adult students who are older than 24 years of age as nontraditional. These researchers contend that “their study’s population of adult students, who were women and were older had different needs and had dissimilar life experiences than traditional age students; and that many of these needs posed particular constraints for women adult students” (p. 478).
Background Characteristics of an Adult Learner

The importance of understanding the adult learner’s college experiences begins with illustrating the background characteristics of the older adult learner. Prior research by Rendón (1994) relied on certain characteristics including: socioeconomic status and ethnicity; adult students who are 24 years and older; independent students; part time students; and students who have not graduated from high school. Laanan (2003) studied older adults who were enrolled in a public community or 2-year colleges in 1996 and 1997. The purpose of his study was to describe the background characteristics, choices, attitudes, and goals of older adults who were at least 55 years of age. The goal of this research was not to conduct a comparative analysis between older adult students and traditional age students but to conduct a within-group analysis of a group that continues to be misunderstood.

The research questions guiding this study were the following:

1. What are the background characteristic of older adults enrolled in selected public community colleges?

2. How did older adult students spend their time in the past year in terms of activities such as in-and-out of class engagement and extra-curricular involvement?

3. How do older adult students rate themselves compared to individuals their age with regard to their self-concept?

Laanan’s (2003) sample included 114 older adults attending 36 public 2-year colleges across the United States. A quantitative instrument known as The Student Information Form was utilized for this study, which contained information on college
students, demographic data, high school background, career plans, educational aspirations, current attitudes, beliefs and self-concept, and future activities. The findings from this study suggested that “they were less likely to indicate a bachelors or higher degree and more likely to indicate the associate degree or vocational certificate” (p. 772).

More recent research by Chen, Kim, Moon, and Merriam (2008) critiqued the empirical literature that was published between 1980 and 2006 on older adult learners by evaluating the various assumptions underlying the portrayal of older adults and their learning. These researchers found three general themes that emerged from the literature: older adults are portrayed as a homogenous group; older adults are seen as capable and motivated learners; and programmatic responses were driven by the life context of older adulthood. These researchers showed that practitioners and researchers need to pay more attention to the diversity found in the older adult population, which include examining the issues of race and ethnicity, education, income, and physical and cognitive impairments. Additionally, these researchers also noted that adult education programming for older adults seemed to be based on the motivation and momentum of the life context of older adulthood, and that greater access to time and specific interests in combination with the older adult developmental phase showed to have an influence on developing educational programs for older adult learners.

**Barriers and Challenges for the Adult Learner**

Adult learners are faced with challenges that impact their success in postsecondary education. The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2002), reports that an adult learner is more likely to leave postsecondary education without earning a degree.
Cross (1981) found that adult students often are challenged by three kinds of barriers before enrolling in postsecondary education (i.e., dispositional, situational, and institutional). Dispositional barriers explained by Cross are often perceived as the adult learner’s own thoughts regarding their ability to be successful, as well as their feeling of insecurity while attending college. Prior research by Chism, Chano, and Pruitt (1989) discussed how adult students returning to college often struggled with the psychological difficulties of self-consciousness and anxiety about performance, and that adult students may also perceive themselves as less confident in their ability to be successful while attending college. A recent report titled, *Not Too Late for School*, endorsed by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL, 2012) argued that “older adult learners may need additional education and training to deal with the multiple issues that surround their perception of their ability to complete college” (p. 2).

Strayhorn’s (2008) Theory on Belonging maintains that a student’s sense of belonging is “based on an individual’s psychological needs, satisfaction of such needs affects behaviors and perceptions, and characteristics of the social context influence how well these needs are met” (p. 4). For example, in their studies about returning female students age 24 years and older, Deutsch and Schmertz (2010) found that having a community of academic and social support provided the students with a sense of belonging within their classrooms. Further, having the support influences their understandings of the culture at the institution. For many of these women having academic and social communities were vital in supporting their pathway towards attaining their educational goals.
Situational barriers (Cross, 1981) for this age group most often deal with lack of knowledge about campus resources and services, personal mobility, health, and family caregiving. Adult learners tend to be full-time workers, part-time students, financially independent, have dependents, and have household responsibilities, and typically bring to the institutional setting a great deal of additional responsibilities (Choy, 2002; Kasworm, 2003; Kazis, 2007; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). Fairchild (2003) has stated:

Not only finances, but time and energy often create strain for the most dedicated adult student, and that household income, the number of dependents, and the financial aid received by the student are all variables that determine the persistence rate of adult students. (p. 12)

Research by Bowden and Merritt (1995) examined the adult learner’s needs and the resource demands including their multiple roles that necessitated access to advisors and college personnel at nontraditional hours. Compton and colleagues (2006) noted that prior research on examining and addressing the needs of nontraditional students and adult students were often similar. These researchers maintain by not considering specific adult learner characteristics, student service professionals are provided with an inaccurate portrayal of the specific needs of the older adult learner. Research by Chism and colleagues (1989) recommended that adult learners could benefit from resources and programs that would be specific to the adult learner by enhancing their various levels of knowledge and organizational skills.

Institutional barriers explained by Cross (1981) often manifest themselves through inflexible class schedules, campus inaccessibility, and complicated enrollment and
financial procedures. Fairchild (2003) compared “institutional barriers to aspects of the structure of educational organizations that may impede older students’ attainment and fail to meet their needs” (p. 13). Examples of these types of barriers may include inconvenient office hours and a lack of opportunities for adult learners to meet with a counselor or staff to discuss their educational or vocational goals, as well as the institutional resources and services that are in line with their student success and college completion.

Prior research by Fairchild (2003) noted that often institutions are organized to support 18- to 22-year-old students and that by doing so the adult students’ needs often are not effectively being met. Frey (2007) recognized the importance of establishing educational pathways that would direct resources and services that ensure adult students’ learning. Some of Frey’s recommendations for postsecondary institutions included: restructuring traditional orientation sessions; designing web sites to address the unique concerns of adult learners; supplying peer mentors to assist first year adult students; and forming a task force to review issues related to the adult population at individual institutions. Additionally, research by Chaves (2006) has considered the involvement and retention of adult students in community colleges and found that “many of the theoretical constructs that address institutional and social support structures for traditional age students have crossover value” (p. 143). Chaves also noted that “adult students who are employed part-time and whose faculty and peer interaction is only in the classroom a radical restructuring of curriculum offered to adults is necessary” (p. 150). Additionally, this researcher suggested that it is essential that institutions offer and advocate adult oriented support services on campus.
Compton and colleagues (2006) emphasized that adult learners experience additional transitions and multiple pressures in postsecondary education. These researchers discussed some of the strategies and tools that can assist postsecondary institutions and their effectiveness with serving the adult learner. These authors referenced an adult learning framework and assessment tool developed by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL, 2005) that included eight principles of effective service, in which institutions are able to evaluate their effectiveness in serving adult learners. These eight principles of effectiveness for serving adult learners included: outreach; life and career planning; financing; assessment of learning outcomes; teaching and learning process; student support systems; technology; and strategic partnerships. These researchers contend, “Since there continues to be an increase in adult learners within postsecondary education, institutions must develop and modify their strategies and practices in serving the adult learner” (CAEL, 2005, p. 75).

Research by Deggs (2011) examined the meanings of these known barriers described by Cross (1981) as they are perceived by the adult learner. The purpose of Deggs’s research was to move beyond the identification and classification of Cross’ known barriers that an adult learner encounters related to their enrollment in an accelerated undergraduate degree program. Deggs found that even though academic institutions are more aware of the challenges that confront adult learners upon their enrollment, many colleges and universities are still being challenged to provide specific programs and services for adult learners. The findings from this study showed that there were additional types of barriers:
1. Intrapersonal barriers (e.g., time management, finances, family responsibilities, emotional challenges, and fear of failure).

2. Career and job related barriers (e.g., not meeting job expectations and experiencing lack of support from their employer).

3. Academic related barriers (e.g., not understanding and utilizing technology, lack of face-to-face interaction with faculty and peers, meeting expectations as a student, lack of instructor’ feedback, and coping with a learning disability).

Research by Burton, Golding, and Griffiths (2011) studied whether there are still existing barriers for adult learners within higher education. These researchers contend that these barriers do not disappear after the adult returns to higher education. Institutions may be knowledgeable about these known barriers; however, the perception of these barriers at the institutional level may not be the same as the perceptions of these barriers by the student.

**Older Adult Learners in Community Colleges**

Understanding the older adult learner is particularly important to community colleges because they enroll many more adults than 4-year institutions (Bragg, 2011). Community colleges serve 43% of all U.S. undergraduates, enrolling an estimated eight million credit-seeking students in 1,200 community colleges (AACC, 2010). Community colleges are popular with adult learners for many reasons: the relative low cost; the mission to serve less-academically prepared and lower-income students; their flexibility in scheduling where and when courses are offered; the occupational and technical skill focus with close ties to local employers. The recent literature on implementation of the applied baccalaureate degree at the community college may result in educational and
career opportunities for the adult learner beyond the community college to the bachelor’s level (Townsend, Bragg, & Ruud, 2009). For older adults, the community college can be a powerful place for additional education, skills, and training that provides adults with a pathway towards a twenty-first century career.

**Reasons for Enrollment**

Many older adult learners enter community college for reasons related to employment and a change in career; family motives may also trigger an adult individual to return to college (Aslanian, 2001). Palazesi and Bower (2006) found that many of the older adult students attend community colleges “for job-related training and skills, personal development, and to a lesser extent, for transfer courses and remediation in order to gain access to four-year institutions” (p. 45). Bailey and Mingle (2003) assert that older adult learners are in need of various educational opportunities that will provide adults learners with an opportunity for career advancement and or employment transformation.

Cruce and Hillman’s (2012) study on older adult learners and their decision to participate in formal learning found that, regardless of whether coursework is taken for personal interest or work related reasons, the older adult’s decision to participate in formal learning is a function of their educational attainment levels. This study’s findings showed that “age has a significant influence on taking courses for work related reasons but not personal interest and that the decision to participate in formal instruction is a function of employment status, but the direction of influence differs by the reasons for taking the course” (p. 608). Additionally, these findings revealed that whereas
participation in work-related courses does not differ by income, the decision to participate in formal learning for personal interest is influenced by household income.

**Prior Educational Experience**

Prior research by Clavner and Clavner (1992) found that a large percentage of adult students attending a community college who were 60 years or older had attained an undergraduate or advanced degree. Additional findings from Laanan’s (2003) study suggested that older adults are bringing with them prior college credit and experiences to the community college and that the degree aspirations of some older adults revealed that many of these individuals are enrolled in community college to pursue an associate degree.

**Motivation and Readiness to Learn**

A prominent theme within the research literature is that older adult learners have a greater sense of motivation and maturity while attending college (Schlossberg et al., 1989). Bradshaw, Hager, Knott, and Seay (2006) noted distinctive factors of older women between the ages of 40-50 and discovered a unique set of characteristics that are distinctive to the older reentry woman student. Some of these characteristics included change in motivation, acceptance, and study skills. In contrast, more recent research by Holyoke and Larson (2009) found that “baby boomers indicated a readiness to learn when the course curriculum contributed to their personal development, satisfaction, and were delivered in a traditional classroom setting” (p. 16).

Phipps, Prieto, and Ndinguri (2013) investigated how various factors of age, ability, and self-efficacy influence intentions to learn and learning among adult learners in adult education. It was interesting to note that these researchers did not define what is
meant by the phrase “older generation.” These researchers maintain that the “older generation” needs to be adequately motivated so that their desire and intent to learn would be a motivating force for them in order for them to invest their time and effort. Additionally, these researchers suggested that motivational strategies should be integrated into the learning process in order to achieve the best learning results, and that the instructional design should be suitable for the age of the group and their ability level in order to receive the most from the learning experience.

**Faculty and Student Interactions**

Scott and Lewis (2012) studied some of the assumptions and misconceptions regarding the nontraditional student who is older and attending an academic institution. The purpose of their study was to understand how a positive college environment influences and affects older adult students and their perception and understanding of their experiences and relationships among faculty, staff, and peers inside and outside of the college classroom. In that study, the research questions were:

1. Are there positive or negative implications for nontraditional students in learning environments?
2. How does the self-perception of a nontraditional student impact their academic achievement?

A pilot study was conducted using a sample of five nontraditional students who were 50 years and older that were enrolled at either a community college or a 4-year institution. Data were collected through the use of semi-structured audio-recorded interviews and classroom observations. The study’s findings showed that the nontraditional student-teacher interactions inside and outside of the classroom were
important to adult students and were positive. However, the findings also showed that
the relationships among nontraditional and traditional students within the classroom
revealed some differences. For example, some nontraditional students shared that they
were not as communicative to traditional students and that nontraditional students chose
to form peer relationships with other nontraditional students. These types of interactions
between traditional and nontraditional students could be considered by some as
unfriendly and nonwelcoming. The implications drawn from this study were directed to
educational practitioners and outlined the importance of developing curriculum and
classroom environments that encourage exploration and reflection, as well as a
collaborative learning between traditional and nontraditional students.

Financial Aid

Financial assistance is an important issue for the nontraditional student. Pusser
and colleagues (2007) found that financial support for adult learners needs to be
substantially improved at postsecondary institutions if educators expect to encourage
many nontraditional students to return to college. The researchers considered that
understanding the various aspects of specific programs, such as workforce education
programs administered by the Department of Veteran Affairs, Title IV financial aid
programs, and tuition tax programs will increase the adult learner’s understanding of
financial support. This study’s recommendations for postsecondary institutions included:

1. Professionals who participate in continuing higher education consider
developing and implementing strategies for gaining and increasing their
practices for receiving financial support on behalf of their institutions and
their adult learners.
2. Continuing higher education develop a better systematic approach to identifying nontraditional adult learners in financial aid reporting.

3. Administrators should advocate for refining the eligibility criteria and process for Federal Aid for independent students by encouraging collaborative discussions between administrators, admissions, and financial aid staff, who assist students in their financial aid application process.

4. Continuing education programs keep track of students who are receiving reimbursement.

5. To parallel students who are receiving reimbursements and their employers to collaborate on their learning and training to ensure that the adult student’s educational experiences are consistent to meeting the workforce needs of their employers.

**Summary**

Older adult learners represent an increasing number of the student population in postsecondary education. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2005), by 2030, 20% of the U.S. population will be aged 65 and older. A report by the American Council on Education (ACE, 2007), *Reinvesting in the Third Age: Older Adults and Higher Education*, sponsored by the MetLife Foundation, stated, “These numbers [of older adults] call for us to reframe our policies across many sectors, including workforce development, community service, and postsecondary education itself” (p. 2).

The literature about the older adult learner has been cited in Chapter 2 of this study that highlighted the following points: there has been an increase in the older adult learner population at community colleges; there has been a broadly used definition to
describe an adult learner based on age; and the older adult learner needs may not be
recognized or supported by our postsecondary institutions. Are older adult learners’
college experiences different than younger adult learners? Or can it be assumed that all
adult learners have the same college experiences? There are few published studies that
focus exclusively on the experiences of older adult learners enrolled in a community
college. Because older adult college students are more likely to have been out of school
for a while and often continue to work, serving these older adult students may require our
institutions to recognize and understand the older adult learners’ college experiences in
order for administrators, faculty, and staff to better understand and address the
educational/vocational challenges and successes of the older adult learner.

This research is important because it will provide community colleges with an
awareness and understanding of the specific needs and challenges of older adult learners
by recommending specific types of institutional services and resources that may support
the older adult learners’ educational pathway and enrich their college experience. In
Chapter 3 of this study, the research methodology is explained and has intended to
examine the college experience of older adult learners who are 50 years and older
enrolled in a community college.
CHAPTER 3—METHODOLOGY

Overview

This chapter illustrates the qualitative process applied to understanding the meaning of the college experiences of the older adult learner. First, the research design and methods of the research are explained. Second, a description of the research setting and context in which the data were collected is provided. Additionally, the recruitment and the selection processes used to identify the older adult learner participant used for this study are explained, followed by the procedures for data collection and analysis. Finally, the research processes applied to guarantee the trustworthiness of the data and a description of the researcher’s role are described.

Research Design and Methods

Qualitative research is a method for “exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups give to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). This research design includes emerging questions and methods, participant data collection and analysis inductively building from specific to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meanings of the data (Creswell, 2009). Given the exploratory nature of this study, qualitative methods were chosen to capture the college experiences of older adult learners at a postsecondary institution. Qualitative techniques, including one-on-one semi-structured interviews were used to gather rich data while broadening the lens of knowledge and understanding of the older adult learner’s college experience.

A social constructivist framework was utilized because its heuristic lens provided flexibility for discovery and a better understanding of the older adult college experience and its relationship to an older adult learner’s sense of belonging. “A social constructivist
philosophy is built on the thesis of ontological relativity, which holds that all tenable statements about existence depend on a worldview, and no worldview is uniquely determined by empirical or sense data about the world” (Patton, 2002, p. 97). Guba and Lincoln (1990) explain the social constructivist perspective as “being ontologically relativist, epistemologically subjective, and methodologically hermeneutic and dialectic” (p. 148). Other social constructivists, such as Crotty (1998), explain that it is this hold of assumptions that individuals seek an understanding of the world in which they live by constructing and attaching meaning to their lived experiences and how these assumptions are key to the epistemological considerations of utilizing this form of inquiry in understanding the meaning making activity of the individual mind. (pp. 54-55)

These concepts illustrate that meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting, and that humans engage with their worlds and make sense of it based on their historical and social perspectives.

For this study, the researcher chose a social constructivist epistemology for flexibility within the qualitative approach and was considered appropriate in the case of this dissertation. The major task as a constructivist investigator is to draw out the construction that the various actors in a setting hold and, so far as possible, bring them in conjunction with one another with whatever other information can be brought to bear on the issues involved.

(Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 142)
In other words, the researcher needed to extricate the information from the interviews utilizing a social constructivist lens in order to process and understand the older adult learners’ college experiences.

**Phenomenology as Qualitative Methodology**

Phenomenology describes how people portray things and experience them and how they experience what they experience (Patton, 2002). This specific framework “aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of our everyday experiences” (Van Manen, 1990, pp. 9-10). Understanding the lived experiences marks phenomenology as a philosophy and method, and the process includes studying a small number of participants through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). The older adult learner college experience is a type of phenomenon, one that will have meaning that is built and developed through the older adult learner’s individual and shared experiences.

Phenomenology as a methodology is process driven, meaning the focus is kept on the process and the richness presented by each interview. The researcher trusts that themes will emerge at the stage of cross analysis (Groenewald, 2004). A phenomenological approach was used “to focus on exploring how individuals make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). Creswell (1998) proposes a process when conducting phenomenological research. This process requires the researcher to:

(a) understand the philosophical perspectives behind the approach, especially the concept of studying how people experience a phenomenon; (b) develop questions that explore the meaning of that experience for individuals that asks them to describe their everyday lived
experience; (c) collect data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation; and (d) conduct the phenomenological data analysis.

Qualitative research methods was best suited for answering the research questions and understanding the older adult learners’ college experiences by analyzing the varied meanings of their experiences at a community college. For this research, utilizing a phenomenological approach was appropriate in order to describe the older adult learners’ college experiences at a community college and to create opportunity for their collective voices and stories to be revealed and shared.

**Participants**

An investigative approach for this phenomenological study required a purposeful sample of participants. Purposeful sampling emphasizes selecting information from rich cases and from which one can learn a considerable amount. Such sampling explains the answers to questions that were important to the purpose of the research (Patton, 2002). While there are various forms of purposeful sampling, the researcher has chosen to utilize what Patton called “homogeneous sampling . . . because it describes some particular subgroup in depth” (Patton, 2002, p. 235). By utilizing a homogeneous sample (i.e., the adult learner who is 50 years and older), the researcher had an opportunity to select participants who have similar characteristics. For this study, the researcher examined a specific subgroup of older adult students who are enrolled full-time or part-time in a California community college. Twenty adult learners who were 50 years or older and were attending full/part-time at a community college were selected to participate in this phenomenological study.
Recruitment Process

In addition to conceptualizing the writing process for a study, the researcher in a study must foresee ethical issues that may arise during this investigation (Creswell, 2009). Therefore, after receiving Institutional Review Board approval (see Appendix A) from San Diego State University, the researcher began the recruitment process. Institutional research deans and department chairs at three colleges were contacted, and the researcher requested that the individual colleges forward the researcher’s contact information and the recruitment flyer (see Appendix B) to their students.

Selection of Participants

The following selection criteria were stipulated for participation in the study: (a) adult learners who are 50 years and older, and (b) currently enrolled full-time or part-time in a community college. This type of selection criteria guided the methodology for this study. As stated by Moustakas (1994), it is essential that “the research participant has experienced the phenomenon and is interested in understanding the nature and meaning of the phenomenon” (p. 107).

One hundred adult learners applied for the study and 20 participants were selected based on their availability to participate. The researcher reviewed each application to determine whether or not the respondent met the criteria. As the researcher received the respondent’s inquiry, she contacted them via email, and in some instances, by telephone, to confirm that the respondent met the study’s criteria and was available to be interviewed. The researcher selected 20 participants from three community colleges in southern California. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the three community
colleges. After 16 interviews, it appeared that saturation was reached. The researcher completed 20 interviews to ensure saturation.

**Maintaining Confidentiality**

Prior to initiating contact with prospective participants, the procedures that guided this research were approved by the San Diego State University Institutional Review Board (Appendix A). One of the many ethical considerations explained by Creswell (2009) discusses how a researcher needs to “protect the anonymity of individuals, roles, and incidents in a project” (p. 91). Complete confidentiality and privacy was promised to the participants both verbally and in writing. These interviews took place at an office on campus provided by the three individual community colleges where participants were enrolled. Additionally, the older adult learners were asked to sign the approved informed consent form (see Appendix C). The form explained the purpose, procedures, benefits, duration, confidentiality, incentives, right to ask questions, and participation in the study. During all interviews, older adult learners were informed of the responsibility of the researcher to protect the rights, safety, and welfare of the participants in the study. If a participant decided to not participate, he/she was free to withdraw consent and stop participation at any time. All participants were informed that their information would be kept confidential using assigned numeric codes and secured in a locked safe in the researcher’s office. After the dissertation has been completed and approved, all transcripts and recordings will be destroyed after 3 years by deleting all data and shredding all paperwork with regard to the study’s participants.
Data Collection

This study was situated in the phenomenological research tradition. In this section, the following components depicted the process of data collection: (a) instrument for data collection; (b) research questions; and (c) semi-structured participant interviewing.

Instrument for Data Collection

The instrument for data collection was in-depth semi-structured interview questions. This qualitative instrument was utilized in order to explore and understand how an older adult learner perceives their college experience. The goal was to identify common older adult college experiences that would lead to a better understanding of how institutional support and resources can be created or enhanced to promote a more positive experience for the older adult student. The interview questions are found in Appendix D.

Research Question

The primary research question that guided this study was: What is the community college experience of the adult learner who is 50 years or older? Additionally, a second question was explored: How can institutional support and resources be created or enhanced at the community college to promote a more positive experience for the older adult student?

Semi-Structured Participant Interviewing

In framing the interview protocol for the one-on-one interviews, the researcher designed a set of specific questions derived from a review of literature; these added focus and meaning to the research questions that formed the basis for the study. Each question allowed the participants the opportunity to explore and express their feelings about their
college experiences. This type of collection instrument was used when the researcher “wants to know what individuals experience and how they interpret the world” (Patton, 2002, p. 106). Collecting the information by a qualitative instrument allowed the researcher to draw meanings from specific responses in order to produce results that described and explained the phenomenon about which this study was designed.

Qualitative interviews were scheduled in advance with each participant who was informed that the session would last no more than 60 minutes. The researcher obtained a signed consent (Appendix C) from each of the participants and their permission to record the interview. These qualitative interviews consisted of open-ended questions that will “evoke a comprehensive account of the person’s experience of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). Participants were asked to construct meaning from their college experiences as an older adult learner enrolled in a community college and consider how these meanings have impacted the interviewee’s success. When necessary, the researcher utilized probing questions to increase the richness and depth of the participant’s responses (Patton, 2002).

**Field Testing**

The interview questions (see Appendix D) were tested with four older adult learners who met the criteria for participation to assure that the questions were clearly understood. Each participant had prior educational experiences, ranging from completing an undergraduate degree to receiving a master’s degree. A series of 14 open-ended questions were asked to ensure that the answers reflected the intention of the question. The four participants each provided feedback on the wording of the questions and
allowed the researcher to consider any revisions to the research instrument. These participant responses were not included in the data for the study.

**Data Analysis**

The process of data analysis involved making sense of the data collected (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). According to Merriam (1998), “collection and analysis should be a simultaneous process in qualitative research” (p. 155). Creswell (1998) writes that phenomenological data analysis proceeds through the methodology of reduction, the analysis of specific statements and themes, and a search for all possible meanings. Patton (2002) states:

When data collection has formally ended and it is time to begin the final analysis, the investigator has two primary sources to draw from in organizing the analysis: (a) the questions that were generated during the conceptual and design phases of the study; and (b) analytic insights and interpretations that emerged during data collection. (p. 437)

Once the data collection process was completed, all interviews that had been audio-recorded were downloaded from a digital voice recorder system and were then transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. After receiving the interview transcripts, the researcher began the process of reading the transcriptions and making initial notations in order to gain a general understanding of the meanings of the older adult learner’s community college experience. The researcher bracketed out her thoughts and assumptions into the margins of the transcripts. The researcher then revisited the comments that were written in the margins at the conclusion of each transcript to ensure that the data were analyzed according to the experiences of the participants. The
researcher used initial and axial coding as the primary coding strategies for data analysis. An initial coding tool using colored post-it notes was employed while reading and making notes to compare and contrast interview data.

The next phase of this analysis involved axial coding. Charmaz (2006) defines axial coding as: “Axial coding relates categories to subcategories, specifies the properties and dimensions of a category, and reassembles the data you have fractured during initial coding to give coherence to the emerging analysis” (p. 60). Axial coding assisted the researcher in sorting, synthesizing, and organizing the data. Next, various themes were assembled through identifying the patterns. This reassembling process was based on the relationships surrounding the axis of the category and occurs through a continuous process of reassembling the data in new ways (Charmaz, 2006). From this type of coding process, themes emerged. Once the researcher identified the themes, the researcher chose to use direct quotes and phrases within the data that were descriptive and captured the older adult learner’s feelings, views, and experiences. The final step in the analytic process consisted of making meaning of the data through descriptive text, interpretation, and analysis.

**Trustworthiness**

During this study, it was important to address the trustworthiness of the study through the use of triangulation. According to Lincoln and Guba (1986), trustworthiness is the overarching standard related to quality in the design of qualitative research. Creswell (1998) proposes seven different processes for producing quality and trustworthiness in research and recommends researchers to use at least two procedures.
These include: prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, bracketing, negative case analysis, audit trail, and reflectivity.

In order to ensure the quality and trustworthiness of this study’s analysis and findings, member checking and bracketing were used as part of this process. The researcher utilized the technique of member checking in which a fellow colleague was asked to review and provide feedback on my understanding of the interview data to ensure that it does reflect the views of the older adult learner’s college experience. Additionally, bracketing was used to ensure the integrity of the study. Creswell (1998) contends phenomenological research “sets aside all prejudgments, his or her experiences (a return to ‘natural science’) and relying on intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain a picture of the experience” (p. 52). During this study, the researcher addressed personal biases and assumptions about the experiences of the older adult learner enrolled at a community college by keeping a journal to express to write and reflect upon feelings and assumptions during the study. These were reviewed to ensure that the researcher’s interpretations of the data were trustworthy and portrayed the older adult learner’s responses.

**Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative research, Patton (2002) explains that the “researcher is the instrument” (p. 14) and that a qualitative study should include some information about the researcher with regard to experience, education or training, and their viewpoint that brings them to research a particular field of study. Additional questions dealing with the role of the researcher discussed by Patton (2002) explains “how the researcher obtained access to the population; what types of prior knowledge does the researcher bring to the
topic of study; and what personal connections does the researcher have to the individuals, program, or topic studied” (p. 566). It was important to recognize that my role as the researcher conducting data collection and analysis for this study and my identity as an older adult learner teaching at a community college may possibly impact my interpretation of the findings from this research. As stated by Moustakas (1995), “Being in the world of the other is a way of going wide open, entering in as if for the first time, hearing just what is, leaving out my own thoughts, feelings, theories, and biases” (pp. 82-83). Given the researcher’s role as the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis for this study, possible biases might present themselves. Therefore, it was important to continually employ a self-reflective strategy that required “a return to the self” in order to understand myself within the experience being investigated (Moustakas, 1994, p. 47). My research goal was to rely as much as possible on the participant’s views of the college experiences being studied.

**Limitations**

According to Patton (2002), when analyzing the research findings “it is important to reconsider how design constraints, such as utilizing a purposeful sample, may have affected the data available for analysis” (p. 563). Because purposeful sampling was used in this study, the researcher was not able to state that the sample was representative of the population (Creswell, 2003). Due to the exploratory nature of this research and the various time constraints, conducting a longitudinal study dealing with prolonged engagement of this adult learner population was not a viable option.
Summary

This researcher utilized qualitative methodology to describe the unique community college experiences of older adult learners. A phenomenological approach was used in order to provide a rich and detailed description of the older adult learner’s college experience. This provided the researcher an opportunity to fully explore and understand the perceived meanings and influence of the older adult learner’s college experience. Chapter 4 illustrates the detailed findings of this study.
CHAPTER 4—FINDINGS

Introduction

Phenomenology as a qualitative methodology is used to gain an understanding of people’s lived experiences (Patton, 2002). Interviewing individuals provides insight into their perspectives about a specific set of experiences and is a key tool to discovering the essence of the way in which they derived meaning from these events. One-on-one interviews were used to explore the college experience of 20 older adult learners enrolled in California community colleges. Each met the following criteria to qualify for the study: (a) adult learner who is 50 years of age or older; and (b) enrolled on a full- or part-time basis at a California community college. The two research questions that drove the phenomenological study were:

1. What is the community college experience of the adult learner who is 50 years or older?

2. How can institutional support and resources be created or enhanced at the community college to promote a more positive experience for the older adult student?

This chapter will begin with an introduction of the participants, followed by a presentation of the themes, which emerged from the data collected during the interviews. Rich description and narrative passages derived from the data are utilized to describe the themes and subthemes throughout this chapter. Pseudonyms were utilized throughout the chapter to protect the confidentially of students and others referenced in the study.
Participants

The researcher contacted deans at three community colleges who were asked to forward a recruitment flyer to their general student population. A total of 100 individuals from the general student population directly contacted the researcher by email. The first 20 participants who met the criteria were selected for the interviews.

Twenty interviews were scheduled during the months of November and December 2014. Each of the semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and was conducted individually with each participant at a designated location at their college. After 16 of the 20 people had been interviewed, saturation of the data appeared to have been reached. The researcher continued to interview all 20 participants to ensure that saturation had occurred.

Based on the comments shared, the participants were all very open to being interviewed and were excited to share their story and have someone listen. All of the participants gave their time willingly and appeared to be very enthusiastic to participate in the study. All of the participants were grateful in having their voices heard in order for institutions to recognize, understand, and serve their student needs. Overwhelmingly, every participant was interested in the researcher’s goals and the purpose of the study, hoping to contribute to increasing the institution’s knowledge and support on the importance of supporting the older adult student’s college experience.

The study’s participants included 15 women and 5 men, with most identifying themselves as Caucasian. They ranged in age from 50 to 74 years. There were two African American females and one Hispanic female who participated in this study. There
were 16 participants who attended part-time and 4 participants who attended full-time.

Table 1 identifies the general characteristics of participants in this study.

Table 1

*General Characteristics of Participants*

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**Participant Profiles**

This section provides an introduction of the participants as a way to gain an understanding of each person’s lived experience. Each short profile describes the student’s background and why he or she decided to enroll in or return to college. The
names and specific details of each older adult learner have been disguised to preserve confidentially.

Mr. A

Mr. A is a 74 year-old Caucasian male who appeared at the interview wearing a blue t-shirt, white shorts, and a pair of black and white tennis shoes. Mr. A previously attended a college located in Chicago. He received his undergraduate degree in his early twenties and had worked as a sales representative. When asked what made him decide to enroll in college, Mr. A replied, “I became bored with my retirement, so I decided to come back to college to pursue an interest in history and literature.” Mr. A is a returning student who is enrolled part-time and is working toward obtaining an associate degree in accounting.

Ms. B

Ms. B is a 50 year-old Caucasian female who was married, raised two children, and works as a legal secretary. When asked what made her decide to enroll in college Ms. B said, “After taking a class with both my daughter and son, I finally started to think about what I want after I retire. I would like to become an academic counselor.” Ms. B is a returning student, who is enrolled part-time and is planning to transfer to a 4-year institution to pursue a degree in counseling.

Mr. C

Mr. C is a 58 year-old Caucasian male who has worked as a fisherman and carpenter. He has previously attended college. When asked what made him decide to enroll in college, Mr. C said, “A couple of years ago, I messed up my shoulder. I found it harder to do my job as a carpenter, so I needed a new career.” Mr. C is a returning
student who attends part-time and is currently studying to be a drug and alcohol counselor.

Ms. D

Ms. D is a 50-year-old Caucasian female who has raised three children, been employed, and has suffered from an addiction for 35 years. When asked what made her decide to enroll in college, Ms. D said, “After I got clean and sober at 47, people kept telling me that I’d make a really good counselor. So that’s what brought me back to college.” Ms. D is a returning student who attends part-time and is working towards earning an Associate of Arts degree in Alcohol and Drug Studies.

Ms. E

Ms. E is a 60-year-old African American female who was married, divorced, raised a family, and had work responsibilities. When asked what made her decide to enroll in college, Mrs. E said:

I had a girlfriend who had been attending college. She shared with me that one of her professors allowed students to bring a friend to a special class session, so she asked me to if I would like to go with her. I decided then and there that I wanted to enroll in college.

Ms. E is a returning student who attends full-time and is enrolled in the Alcohol and Other Drug Studies Program and is planning to be a certified drug and alcohol counselor.

Mrs. F

Mrs. F is a 50-year-old Caucasian female who is currently married and has two children. Mrs. F shared:
I had always wanted to finish my degree. I had always kept that on the back burner until my kids went off to college. The determining factor to return to school was when I realized that going back to school would mean a lot more money for me.

Mrs. F is a returning student, enrolled part-time, and is currently employed full time. Mrs. F is pursuing a degree in business.

Ms. G

Ms. G is a 57-year-old Caucasian female who previously attended a community college and a 4-year institution. When asked what made her decide to enroll in college, Ms. G said:

From the very beginning I have always wanted a degree from a university. I wanted the experience. I wanted a diploma with my name on it. I have come back to college because I know that pursuing a degree would help me be a better person. I am hoping that having a degree will advance me in my job.

Ms. G is a returning student who is enrolled full-time and is working towards transferring to a 4-year institution. At the time of the interview, she shared that she had not declared a major.

Mr. H

Mr. H is a 50-year-old Caucasian male who previously attended college. When asked what made him decide to return to college, Mr. H said:

I hurt my back a little while ago, so I decided to go back to school to find something that I could do that would allow me to work and not cause more injury to my back. So I went back to college to get my degree in journalism.
Mr. H is a returning student, who attends college part-time and is working towards earning an associate degree.

Ms. Ilia

Ms. Ilia a 54-year-old African American female and has over the years enrolled in three community colleges. When asked what made her decide to return to college, Ms. Ilia said, “I just decided to go back and get my college education that I didn’t receive when I was growing up. I am coming back because I love to cook, so I’m going to get my certificate in culinary arts.” Ms. Ilia is attending college part-time and is working on completing and earning a certificate in culinary arts.

Mrs. J

Mrs. J is a 68-year-old Caucasian female who has been a military wife and has been employed. Mrs. J. has also earned an associate degree. When asked what made her decide to enroll in college, Mrs. J said, “In 2008, I retired and thought about what I was going to do with my life. Since I like going to college, I said I’ll go back part-time during the day.” Mrs. J is a returning student who has previously earned an associate’s degree and continues to enroll in college courses for personal interests.

Ms. K

Ms. K is a 50-year-old Caucasian female who was married, has raised two children, and taught school in Germany for 20 years. Ms. K had previously attended college in Germany and then decided to leave college to raise her children. When asked what made her decide to enroll in college, Ms. K said, “I have always wanted the opportunity to go back to school for many years.” Ms. K is a returning student who
attends part-time. She is planning to transfer to a university to pursue a teaching credential.

**Mrs. L**

Mrs. L is a 67-year-old Caucasian female who is a mother and grandmother, employed part-time, and previously attended college and earned an associate degree. When asked what made her decide to enroll in college, Mrs. L said, “I have been taking a college class off and on for many years. I just enjoy learning.” Mrs. L is a returning student, who attends part-time and continues to pursue personal interests.

**Mrs. M**

Mrs. M is a 55-year-old Caucasian female who graduated from high school and never attended college. Instead, she went to work for 10 years at an aerospace company. Mrs. M then was married and soon after her son was born decided to be at home to care for her family. When asked what made her decide to enroll in college, Mrs. M said, “I just decided that I knew we couldn’t make it on $8 an hour. So I decided I needed to go to college to get my degree. So that is why I came to college, to get a degree.” Mrs. M is a college student who attends college part-time, employed as a student worker, and who plans to pursue an associate degree.

**Mr. N**

Mr. N is a 62-year-old Caucasian male who previously attended college. After working for a company for 38 years, he was laid off. When asked what made him decide to enroll in college, Mr. N said, “I always wanted to come back here and finish, so I came back here 2 years ago.” Mr. N is a returning student, who attends full-time and is
working on earning an associate’s degree and is planning on transferring to a 4-year institution to pursue a bachelor’s degree in geography.

**Ms. O**

Ms. O is a 50-year-old Hispanic female who was a victim of domestic violence, and served 19 years in federal prison. When asked what made her decide to return to college, Ms. O said:

> When I got out of prison, which was only 3 1/2 years ago, I began applying for jobs here in California. I was having a really hard time. That’s when I decided I needed to do something. I came back to this college to take classes to help me get a job, not just put a degree up on the wall.

Ms. O has returned to college to earn a certificate and degree that will provide her the training and skills needed in obtaining a career.

**Mrs. P**

Mrs. P is a 62-year-old Caucasian female who is married with children, previously attended college, and has retired. When asked what made her decide to enroll in college, Mrs. P said, “I got the idea that before I retired in 2009 that I would enroll in college after I retired to get my degree in elementary education. So that is my goal.” Mrs. P is a returning student, who attends part-time and is pursuing an associate degree.

**Mrs. Q**

Mrs. Q is a 57-year-old Caucasian female who has previously attended college. Mrs. Q has been employed with the same company for over 20 years. When asked what made her decide to return to college, Mrs. Q said:
My employers are going a different route, which I would need more education to ensure that I kept my job. I know I needed to do this for myself to continue working. That is the reason I came back. That is my goal.

Mrs. Q is a returning student, who attends college part-time, and is working on updating her workforce skills.

**Ms. R**

Ms. R is a 50-year-old Caucasian female who has previously attended college. When asked what made her decide to return to college, Ms. R said, “I was laid up from having many surgeries, and I wanted to make the most of my time, so I thought I would go to college.” Ms. R is a returning student who attends college part-time to pursue personal interests.

**Ms. S**

Ms. S is a 63-year-old Caucasian female who has returned after a 30-year absence. When asked what made her decide to enroll in college, Ms. S shared, “It was a simple choice. My daughter and I wanted to take some classes, and we thought it would be fun and kind of interesting to take classes together.” Ms. S is a returning student who attends part-time and continues to enroll in courses with her daughter to pursue personal interests.

**Mr. T**

Mr. T is a 58-year-old Caucasian male who is a veteran, married, and has children. When asked what made him decide to enroll in college, Mr. T shared:

I remember the feelings I had when my son graduated from this college. While watching him graduate, I told my wife that I am going to go back to school. So, about a year and a half ago I decided to enroll in college.
Mr. T is a veteran student who attends full-time and is working towards earning an associate’s degree in applied sciences.

**Themes**

Once the data collection process was completed, all interviews were transcribed and reviewed. The transcription resulted in about 250 double-spaced pages of data. Field notes were read and reread while searching for the meaning of the ideas. The researcher also listened to the digital recordings to note inflections and emphases and to check on specific exchanges as necessary. Open coding, which is the process of naming or labeling phrases and words, was performed while exploring these data. A coding tool using colored post-it notes was employed while reading and making notes to compare and contrast interview data. There were 20 pages of codes identified. Memo writing was incorporated during this process to note common characteristics and ideas that were found during the interviews.

The next phase of this analysis involved axial coding. Axial coding assisted the researcher in sorting, synthesizing, and organizing the data. Next, various themes were assembled through identifying the patterns. This reassembling process was based on the relationships surrounding the axis of the category and occurs through a continuous process of reassembling the data in new ways (Charmaz, 2006). From this coding process, the researcher identified the themes and categories. Direct quotes and phrases were used to describe and capture the older adult learner’s feelings, views, and experiences. Interpretation of the emerging themes and subthemes enabled the researcher to draw meaning from the data. The major themes were: (a) Do I Fit in Here?; (b) Returning to College Is Not Easy; (c) Navigating the Institution; and (d) Interactions
with Faculty and Peers. Subthemes which support the major themes of this research are included to provide further insights.

**Theme 1: Do I Fit In?**

Overwhelmingly, participants felt a need to identify with another older adult learner and wished they would be recognized and accepted as a fellow student at the institution. Ms. Ilia stated, “As I looked at all the young kids that were here, it made you feel like what as I doing here with all these young kids?”

A majority of participants expressed that there were visible differences, such as age and appearance, that influenced their feelings of fitting in. Several of the participants shared that they initially felt out of place because most of the students at the college are younger. One of the participants stated, “The first day that I walked on campus, I remember thinking to myself, all these kids! I saw them as younger than my own children. Most of them looked like they were right out of high school.” Another participant shared that she had a friend who entered college and left after a week due to her fear of what younger students would say about her appearance. Ms. F explained, “I had a friend that was really uncomfortable because she was older and fat. She didn’t want kids to laugh at her. I think she just thinks that because they are so much younger.”

After entering/or returning to college, some of the participants talked about being anxious, stressed, scared, intimidated, uncomfortable, and overwhelmed. Mr. C shared, “It’s really intimidating to come on the first day of class. For me, it was intimidating to walk up to a big campus that I didn’t know anything about; it was kind of intimidating.” Ms. O expressed similar feelings:
Overwhelming to the say the least; I came to college because I had done 19 years of prison. My first week I got lost all over the campus, and I was afraid to ask for directions. To this day, I am still a little overwhelmed and intimidated with the abundance of young students.

Many of the participants felt that participating in classes with younger students who do not share similar life experiences has created a sense of doubt as to whether they even belong within the classroom. Ms. F shared the following sentiment regarding her first day attending classes with other younger students:

I feel like as soon as I walk into a classroom, they think, oh god, she’s old. There is a part of me that wishes that they would talk to me and not view me like I have something contagious: my age.

Other participants such as Ms. G described their feelings of not being accepted by fellow students within the classroom. One woman said, “I sometimes feel isolated because a lot of the students don’t talk to you because you are as old as their mom or grandmother. I think they tend to isolate themselves from me because I am older.” Ms. L shared her observation: “A lot of them will be embarrassed if they use the F word when they see grandma is sitting next to them.”

When asked, what are the major challenges you face as an older adult learner at this college? Ms. G responded, “Let me think for a second. I would think is fitting in the classroom.” Some participants have developed specific strategies to deal with these types of feelings of not fitting in. For them to be successful in obtaining their educational/vocational goals, they provided examples, such as modifying their attire on campus, utilizing websites that provide information on student evaluations of professors before
they register for courses, and enrolling in multiple colleges. Mr. A shared a strategy that he uses when he wants to be recognized and accepted as a student peer within the classroom environment. He said, “I wore shorts because teachers don’t wear shorts to class. And, that makes me a student right?” Ms. M used the internet to learn more information:

I look at the website, Rate My Professor, when deciding which course and professor I will choose. I just do everything I can to find out about them before I sign up for a class because I feel like I won’t then have a difficult time.

Instead of shopping for professors, Ms. R shopped for colleges:

I started going to one college. I started going there because the teachers were totally different; if you had a medical excuse, a valid one, they wanted to work with you, they really wanted you to succeed, they wanted you to pass the course, which was totally different than the other instructor I had at another college, so I decided to go to both colleges. I was going there and I was going here.

**Theme 2: Returning to College Is Not Easy**

This theme portrays some of the challenges experienced by the participants and the impact these challenges pose on their ability to fully engage in the pursuit of their educational/vocational and personal goals. There are three subthemes that support the larger theme: (a) cognitive and physical challenges; (b) balancing school, home, and work; and (c) facing financial hardship.

**Subtheme: Cognitive and physical challenges.** Many of the participants shared that they have cognitive and physical challenges that often interfere with their learning. One participant explained that her return to college was difficult due to a medical
condition. She needs to self-administer various medications throughout the day and, as a result, sometimes experiences lapses in memory. Ms. E shared that it frustrates her when she does not do well on an exam. She said, “I’ve done the work, I have done the homework, but I go into class to take the test, and I don’t recognize anything.” Ms. O described some of her cognitive challenges with learning:

First, I guess because of my age, it is harder now to learn than when I was in my twenties going to nursing school. It used to be that listening to the lecture and briefly reading the chapter was enough. Now I have to read and reread and record the lecture and do a lot more hours of work.

Ms. R shared that she requires accommodations that will address her specific learning needs within the classroom. Ms. R explained:

I have a learning disability. I learn from having visual examples. You show me something how to do it and let me do it in front of you. Then I can go and teach someone else. If you say you learn it like this using a book it doesn’t work for me. So that is a real problem for me.

Ms. E shared, “I am very nervous about next year because all of my classes will be in the evening; one because of the medication and my health, I don’t retain anything. I’m even worse in the evening than during the day.”

Some participants described some of the physical challenges in returning to college, such as dealing with their access to the classrooms and mobility around campus. Some of them felt frustrated when expressing their concerns to staff and faculty. Ms. R stated, “I think for me as an older adult, it’s a long distance to walk from class to class.
They used to have a shuttle that would take people who have disabilities from point A to point B.”

**Subtheme: Balancing school, home, and work.** Overwhelmingly, participants in this study described their daily effort with trying to manage their various roles, such as being a wife, mother, grandmother, caregiver, father, employee, and student. Participants shared that attending college and managing their role of being a college student can be difficult. Many of the participants are charged with different responsibilities and have to juggle multiple roles on a daily basis. Some of these older adult students still have the responsibilities of family and work. In some instances the responsibilities of family and work has produced difficulties with their management of time. Ms. L stated, “By the time you have grandkids and kids, and I still work part time, you have an awful lot on your plate; sometimes it becomes a little bit difficult to get the homework done.” Ms. P described her family responsibilities as a major challenge:

The major challenge for me particularly is making sure I have the study time I need because I am older and I’ve had an established life and I have 8 grandkids and 4 children and a husband that I’ve always been attentive to his needs.

The majority of the participants stated they value education and are determined to have a better life for themselves; however, the responsibilities of family, life, and work are sometimes difficult. Ms. O is a daughter, caregiver, employee, and student, and she depicted her daily life as follows:

I live with my mom. I take the bus every day. It takes me an hour by bus to get to this college. Recently, I have become my mother’s caretaker; she fell down and broke her hip, so I take care of her needs. I know exactly what time I need to
leave here to get to class on time and what time I am going to get home after classes.

Ms. O is challenged with trying to manage her responsibilities as a daughter, caregiver, and student, and it is evident it is not effortless.

**Subtheme: Facing financial hardship.** Many participants spoke openly about how the lack of money presented a major challenge to their completion of their educational goals. Other participants spoke about how the lack of money presented a major challenge to their completion of their educational goals and that they always were trying to obtain funding/resources in order to continue to pursue their educational/vocational goals. Some participants stressed financial hardship as a barrier that prevented them from having access to resources. Ms. K. stated, “I was too late for the financial aid deadline; it would have helped with the cost of books and the cost of living that was really difficult.” Ms. L explained:

I was using Cal Works but they’ve put a time limit on that; so now I have timed out. Now I’m using EOPS which is Extended Opportunities Program. I would like to see a few more scholarships for the older people.

Ms. O shared, “After serving 19 years in prison, I came to college. I was considered an out of state student, so I was only allowed to go to school part-time. I didn’t have the money to even buy a bus pass.” Mrs. D explained her feelings regarding the financial support that is needed in order for her to continue her pursuit of a degree:

If I decide to get my bachelors or master’s degree, the thing that would stop me from doing that would be money. I have to have at least 12 units to get full
funding, so when I went to a full-time job as opposed to a part-time job, I had to drop my units that I was carrying and lost funding.

The financial challenges experienced by some of the participants in this study influenced their ability to fully access and engage in college, thus making it harder for some of them to accomplish their educational goals.

**Theme 3: Navigating the Institution**

A pervasive theme was the utilization of student support services and programs and the importance of using them in order to succeed. Overwhelmingly, every participant agreed that utilizing student support services and resources at the college contributed to having a positive experience. Ms. P explained that by utilizing student programs, such as the reentry program at the college, created a positive college experience.

Everyone has been extremely helpful. This particular college has an adult reentry program, and there’s a young lady, I don’t know if she was assigned to me, but she has guided me through what classes I need to get to achieve my goal. She’s been supportive; they’ve had orientations for adult reentry, which has been most informative. It’s just been 100% positive experience being here. It’s just been wonderful.

Mr. M shared that when he returned to college he had also utilized the reentry program and their support services:

The reentry program was wonderful. I thought when I came back I would just have to figure things out on my own, but they got me in a good direction and helped me figure out a plan. I think the staff is very supportive.
Ms. Ilia described how she utilized and relied on the support from the tutoring center when she was having difficulty with her courses:

For Math 90 and Math 103, I went to the tutorial center four days a week. I’d go before class and come back after class. As a matter of fact, some of the tutors were calling me by my first name because I was in there every day. I knew all of the staff by name at the tutorial center. I can’t say enough about the tutorial center!

Ms. D explained how using the career and learning center on campus was helpful in serving her educational and health needs on campus. “I use the career center. I have used the writing lab and the learning center. The learning center up north also has health services. I use all of these services.”

Only a couple of the participants did not have information on the types of student support services offered at the college, or chose not to utilize student support services or programs at the college. Ms. O shared:

I think that there are a lot of resources for us at this college but it is not always out in the open. Only a few older adults at this college had no idea that they existed. Some of them learned about student services and resources from faculty within their classroom.

Ms. E explained that she is prescribed numerous medications and that she is finding they at times interfere with her learning:

I could have gone to the disabled resource center, but I didn’t think of that.

Maybe I thought that was only for severe handicaps. I was talking to my friend
the other day and she said you know “E” you have a disability, you should go to
the resource center.

Mr. H shared that even though he has a medical disability he chose not to utilize the
disabled student programs and services at the college. He stated, “I have two cracked
disks, so I do have a disability placard. I haven’t taken advantage of any services because
I don’t really know how to go about it.”

Theme 4: Interactions With Faculty and Peers Impacts the Experience

A prominent theme that emerged during the study was the impact that interactions
with faculty and peers had on the older adult student’s experience within the classroom.

Many of the participants shared that they had positive interactions with faculty. In
this study, only a few participants described negative interactions with faculty and peers.
There are three subthemes that support the larger theme: (a) interactions with faculty;
(b) context of classroom climate; and (c) interaction with peers within the classroom.

**Subtheme: Interactions with faculty.** A majority of the participants described
positive experiences with their professors. Ms. S shared, “My keyboarding teacher was
almost like I had her to myself. I always had so many questions. She would sit down
next to me, read the assignment, and we would find the answer together.” Mr. T
described his interactions with teachers in the classroom as positive and felt that he did
not have any problems with how faculty treated him as a student:

I’ve had no problems. The professors treat me just like any other student. There
is no favoritism. Being able to relate to the professors because they are my age is
easier to respond, so that makes me feel more comfortable.
Ms. R described her interactions with professors as “good relationships”: “I’ve had good relationships with my professors so much so that they have written me recommendations and some have even gone on to be mentors to see how I am doing and to keep me on track.”

However, there were some participants, such as Ms. H, who had a negative classroom experience with a professor. Ms. H describes having a “bad experience” with a professor who was teaching an online course:

She was not very friendly with students or me. She was rude with comments that she wrote back. I don’t think they really know the student’s age, the way she talked to you like you’re a kid, so maybe they need to look up the student’s age. I did not appreciate the online teacher, so I will never take another online class.

Ms. M described her feelings regarding a classroom experience in which she felt that the instructor was focusing only on the younger students:

Most students do not have a problem with me in the classroom. Teachers when addressing the class appear that they are addressing the younger generation rather than the older generation, and sometimes I get the feeling that I am wasting the younger generation’s money.

Mrs. F felt that she was not recognized nor encouraged by the faculty as a student within the classroom:

I found that when it was time where the instructor was encouraging us to speak up, I felt uncomfortable doing that. It felt like it wasn’t really my turn, and that he wasn’t really referring to me and that it was meant for everybody else but me.
Subtheme: Context of classroom climate. Classroom climate is “the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical environments in which our students learn” (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, & Lovett, 2010, p. 170). For many of these older adult participants, the classroom became the central stage for their learning, and for being a college student. Since the classroom is a social and emotional environment that can promote or hinder learning, a faculty’s response to a student’s negative behaviors may determine a positive or negative level of climate within the classroom. Some of the participants expressed their feelings on how some faculty address these negative behaviors by students within the classroom. Ms. F shared how disruptive behaviors by students in the classroom interfered with her learning, “I was in a couple classes with some really disruptive younger students. It made it impossible for me to concentrate, and if you looked around other people couldn’t focus on what they were doing.” Mr. A shared a conversation he had with a professor regarding students whom he considered disruptive to his learning:

I was a student at another college and I had problems. My problems were that the kids didn’t pay any attention to the teacher and were disruptive in class. They giggled and they laughed, and it was always in the back of the room. I talked to the teacher about it, and he said he knew of it; but nothing changed so I left.

Many of the participants shared that they are unique adult learners with varied life experiences that contribute to their college experience. “When you’re 60 and they are only 18 compared to the majority of students in my class, I find the fact that I am older I am much more disciplined stated, Mrs. D.” She also explained how older adult life experiences have better prepared them for their student role and the course expectations that are communicated to them by the professor within the classroom:
I think life experience, organization, some basic things like preplanning ahead.

Things you learn from life experience that you learn from common sense kind of things. You have to plan your time; you have to plan for emergencies; don’t wait until the last minute. One of the first lessons I learned coming back to college is to figure out what the professor wants and give it to them. You have to be here, you have to show up and be ready.

Ms. P stated:

I feel that because of the experience I bring to the class, I can feel comfortable in the classroom. I am taking this course because the professor likes to hear from the older students and see what they have experienced.

A majority of the participants felt that the some younger students in the classroom are immature and are at times disrespectful to the teacher within the classroom. Ms. G explained:

I look around now, and I don’t like how students treat their professors in class. To me, a lot of disrespect, which appalls me a lot of the time. I took an astronomy class just for fun and that’s where I was shocked [to] see how disrespectful some of the students were to the teacher.

Subtheme: Interactions with peers within the classroom. Ms. G described how peer to peer interactions within a classroom have influenced her experiences with other students. Ms. G said, “There have been a lot of classes where you don’t interact with them. They go about their own thing. They stay in their own groups.” Ms. Ilia described her first day classroom experience as cordial.
Everyone was cordial. No one went out of their way to introduce themselves or anything like that, but I did meet with a girl and I asked her if I missed a class if I could call her, and she said, oh yeah.

Ms. B described how some students respond to her asking questions in class. She stated, “I just asked a question, and the kids totally freaked out if you ask too many questions.”

When asked to describe some of your interactions with student peers in the classroom? Ms. J shared, “I interact with students in the classroom. Interaction with other students occurs for me more often in the tutorial center than in the actual classroom.” Ms. O explained how she felt with working with younger students within the classroom:

When an instructor wants us to work in groups, and I am dealing with students that are so young and don’t want to do the work. Sometimes it’s difficult or no one wants to pair up with me because of my age.

Ms. Ilia described the types of students she has seen over the years within various college classrooms.

When I was at another college, we were all there to learn, there was no monkeying around, and when the teacher said be back in 20 minutes, everyone would have a quick smoke and coffee to stay awake because they had to work, but they were all there to learn. And what I miss seeing in the classes at this college is that the kids are here to learn, but not with the intent or with the same enthusiasm to learn.

Summary

The participants in this study opened their individual lives and shared their educational journey and college experiences. They are older adult learners who are eager
to learn and succeed in completing their educational and career goals, regardless of any challenges that may arise. In this chapter, the researcher presented the qualitative data of the 20 older adult students from three California community colleges. The data were organized by emerging themes according to responses made by participants. As reported throughout this chapter, the themes and subthemes represent the experiences and meanings that the participants made of their overall experience in a California community college.

Overall, the students that participated in this study stated that they have had positive experiences at the community college. The older adult students who participated in this study are highly motivated to succeed in obtaining their educational/vocational goals. However, some of them experienced feelings of fear and failure.

The majority of students who felt they had the best supports from the institution and their family were the most successful. Additionally, they shared many commonalities and believed that education will lead to a new career and a better life. A few of the participants were impacted financially as a result of their life experiences, and the majority of participants believed education is the key to having a sustainable economic future.

In Chapter 5, the researcher will reflect on the lessons learned from what the participants shared about their community college experience. A discussion of the responses to the research questions will be addressed and comparison to prior research will be offered. This discussion is followed by implications for practice and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 5—DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

A report released by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL, 2013), *Tapping Mature Talent: Policies for a 21st Century Workforce*, found that “older workers are less likely to engage in training at community colleges than younger workers, and that they enroll at lower rates in credential or degree-granting programs at public two- and four-year colleges” (p. 108). For those who do enroll in postsecondary education, they find that postsecondary institutions have yet to respond adequately, at least partially due to the lack of empirical information on the educational preferences of older adult learners (Cruce & Hillman, 2012). According to Sissel and colleagues (2001), “The experiences of adult learners in higher education and their learning needs, interests, and styles have largely been neglected” (p. 17). The two-fold purpose of this study was to first, explore the community college experience of the adult learner who is 50 years of age and older and then, to translate these experiences into recommendations for administrators, faculty, and staff at these institutions so they may consider policies, practices, and resources to better support these students.

The findings from this study provided a shared insight into the meaning of the college experience among the participants. The older adult students in this study were highly motivated to succeed in their educational goals. Many of them expressed feelings of not fitting in at the community college because they were attending college with peers not similar in age and appearance. In addition, some of them perceived faculty and students within the classroom as being distant and not acknowledging them as a fellow student. The majority of the students agreed that institutional and family support were
important for their success, regardless of the barriers and challenges they were experiencing. Overwhelmingly, they believed enrolling/returning to college to pursue their education goals would lead to a twenty-first century career and a sustainable economic life for themselves and their family.

This phenomenological study provided insight into 20 older adult learners’ community college experiences, as they pursued certificates, degrees, or personal enrichment. Four themes emerged from the data analysis that are discussed in this chapter: (a) Do I Fit in Here? (b) Returning to College Is Not Easy, (c) Navigating the Institution, and (d) Interactions with Faculty and Peers Impacts the Experience. This chapter includes addressing the research questions, recommendations for practice, implications for administrators and/or institutions, recommendations for future research, a researcher’s reflection on lessons learned, and conclusion.

Addressing the Research Questions

The following research questions were under examination in this study:

- What is the community college experience of the adult learner who is 50 years or older?
- How can institutional support and resources be created or enhanced at the community college to promote a more positive experience for the older adult student?

The intent of the study was to discover and understand the college experience of older adult learners enrolled in California community college. The research questions informed the theoretical perspectives applied to guide this research. The theoretical perspectives for this study were Schlossberg’s (1989) Theory of Marginality and
Mattering, Schlossberg and colleagues’ (2006) Theory of Transition, and Strayhorn’s (2008) Model on Belonging, which assisted with interpreting the findings. Themes that were identified in Chapter 4 will be woven into the discussion to provide a sense of the depth and breadth of the older adult student’s community college experience.

**Research Question 1: What Is the Community College Experience of the Adult Learner Who Is 50 Years or Older?**

How did the participants of this study describe the phenomenon? Overall, the participants shared that they had a positive experience at the community college. All participants expressed that community colleges provide educational and vocational opportunities. While some of them appreciated personal enrichment courses, others were highly motivated and focused on learning and acquiring skills to either establish new careers or improve their workforce skills. Schafer (2010) found that older adult learners were motivated to attend college due to career goals. Many of the participants believed that the community college provided them with an educational opportunity to learn and obtain knowledge and skills that would support or enhance a career by providing them with a sense of economic stability which, in turn, would support a better life for themselves and their families. The students in this study were eager to learn and succeed in completing their educational and career goals.

Some of the participating students questioned their decision to return/enter college. Overwhelmingly, participants felt a need to identify with another older adult learner and wished they would be recognized and accepted as a fellow student at the institution. Some older adult learners felt that they did not fit in due to their age and physical appearance. Many of them were not able to identify and connect with other
older adult students on campus. As a result, they developed and utilized specific strategies, such as changing their code of attire or attending multiple colleges in order for them to feel that they did fit in. Schlossberg’s (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering provided a framework that supported the interpretation of the data and development of the first major theme, Do I Fit In Here? This theory was created to understand how a student’s feelings of fitting in provided them with a sense of mattering at the institution. Schlossberg’s theory indicated that if a student feels that they do not fit in, they may feel marginalized and believe they do not matter to the institution, which in turn influences their experience and their success. Schlossberg contends that feelings of fitting in keeps adult students engaged in their learning, and when institutions provide services and resources that are specific to the concerns of adult students, adult students feel they do matter. This theoretical framework helped to interpret the older adult students’ perceptions of fitting in as an integral part of a positive or negative college experience.

This feeling of fitting in at the institution influenced their overall perception of their college experience and was important to their success and completion of their educational goals. An older adult student’s feeling of not fitting in at the institution was characterized as stress, intimidation, and discomfort. Some older adult students developed strategies in order to fit in within the classroom, which influenced their motivation in whether or not they continued to pursue their educational goals at the institution.

Strayhorn’s (2008) Model on Belonging emphasizes that when a student feels unwelcome, they often infer they do not belong. Strayhorn designed this model based on
younger and minority student populations. In this study, the participants’ responses stressed that belonging was not as important as fitting in at the institution and that their perception of fitting in was characterized by what they viewed, heard, and experienced at the college. It became more apparent from analyzing and interpreting the participants’ responses that their perception of fitting in at the campus changed after their first day of attending college. Fitting in for the older adult student meant that they were able to identify physically and emotionally by connecting with others who had similar life experiences. Strayhorn’s conceptual model of belonging was useful with the interpretation and analysis of the older adult participants’ responses regarding their classroom experiences; however, it was not applicable when interpreting the older adult participants’ feelings on whether they fit in at the institution. For these older adult participants, a feeling of fitting in at the institution seemed different. For example, when we approach solving a puzzle, we presume all the pieces of the puzzle belong, but when we start placing the pieces we discover there is only one way they fit together. The older adult learners’ feeling of fitting in is one piece of the older adult student’s conceptual puzzle that is internalized and becomes a reality that fitting in at the institution is necessary in order for them to be successful. If the older adult student feels alienated or made to feel uncomfortable, no matter how much they believe that they belong, they still feel they do not fit in, which in turn creates for some older adult students’ feelings of stress, anxiety, and uneasiness.

The majority of students who felt they had the best supports from the institution and their family were the most successful. Schlossberg and colleagues’ (2006) Theory of Transition provided a model that supported the interpretation of the data and development
of the second major theme, *Returning to College Is Not Easy*. This theoretical model suggests that “everyone experiences transitions, and that transitions change our lives, roles, relationships, routines and assumptions” (Schlossberg et al., 2006, p. 159).

Schlossberg and colleagues identified four major factors that influence a person’s ability to cope with transition. These factors, situation, self, support, and strategies, are known as the 4 S’s. The first S is the role of perception (i.e., assessing the situation), which is important in the beginning phase. The individual’s view of what is happening affects their account of their assets and liabilities. The second S is self. The areas included in self are personal and demographic characteristics and the psychological resources. The third S is support, that is the type of social support a person feels is important to consider. The fourth S highlights strategies, which are divided into three categories: those that modify the situation; those that control the meaning of the problem; and those that aid in managing the stress. Schlossberg and colleagues’ theoretical model was relevant in interpreting the data on how older adult students felt about their return to college.

For most of the participants, returning to college was not easy and often challenging. The coexistence of family responsibilities, commitments to work, and being a college student created challenges and barriers for the older adult student. Many of the participants were charged with different obligations and had to juggle multiple roles on a daily basis. In some instances, the responsibilities of family and work produced difficulties with their management of time and their role of being a college student.

For many of the older adult students, the financial challenges acted as barriers to their learning and in some instances influenced their perception of whether they mattered at the institution. According to Pusser and colleagues (2007), financial support is
important for the nontraditional student and their return to college. Further financial support for nontraditional students needs to be substantially improved if educators expect to encourage these students to return to college. Many of the study’s participants expressed that a lack of financial resources presented a major challenge to their completion of their educational goals. Some participants stressed the importance of designating financial aid and resources, such as an older adult student scholarship or fee waiver to provide a funding source for their educational and living expenses while attending college. The financial challenges experienced by some of the participants influenced their ability to fully access and engage in college, thus making it harder for some of them to have a positive college experience.

Strayhorn’s (2008) Model on Belonging provided a framework that supported the interpretation of the data and development of the fourth major theme, *Interactions With Faculty and Peers Impacts the Experience*. For many of these older adult students, the classroom became the central stage for their learning, and for being a college student. Many of the adult students shared that they had positive interactions with faculty. There were only a few adult students who had a negative classroom experience with a professor or peer that interfered with their learning and engagement with others inside and outside of the classroom. Some of the adult students shared that they felt they did not fit in within the classroom environment and experienced feelings of stress, anxiety, and fear of failure. Strayhorn’s Model on Belonging suggests that a student’s feelings associated with belonging with regard to one’s peers in and outside of the classroom at the institution is a crucial part of the college experience. Some adult students described how positive or negative peer-to-peer interactions within a classroom have influenced their
classroom student relationships and college experience. According to Scott and Lewis (2012), the classroom environment does influence the relationships among faculty, staff, and peers inside and outside of the college classroom. These researchers contend that some interactions between traditional and nontraditional students could be considered unfriendly and nonwelcoming and that educational practitioners need to develop curriculum for the classroom that encourages collaborative learning between traditional and nontraditional students. This explanation supports this study’s findings on the positive and negative influences of the faculty and peer interactions within the classroom environment upon the older adult student and supports Strayhorn’s Model on Belonging that suggests that a student’s feelings of belonging with the classroom environment impacts not only student’s interactions and learning but also influences a student’s view of a positive or negative college experience.

**Research Question 2: How Can Institutional Support and Resources Be Created or Enhanced at the Community College to Promote a More Positive Experience for the Older Adult Student?**

With the current emphasis placed on increasing the number of college-educated adult learners, there continues to be a need to better understand who adult learners are, why they have come to college, and what resources and strategies can assist them along the pathway to graduation (Hadfield, 2003; Kazis et al., 2007; Sandler, 2000). Schlossberg and colleagues’ (2006) Theory of Transition points to student service professionals in focusing their efforts in providing adult students’ services and resources to support the entry/return to college. This theoretical framework of transition includes specific functions that student support and resource personnel at the institution should
utilize when addressing, providing, and modifying services to older adult community college students. These specific functions include dedicating services and resources to the adult student and their educational needs in order to offer them avenues of support for managing the demand of their multiple roles, responsibilities, and challenges of being a college student.

Schlossberg and colleagues’ (2006) Theory of Transition provided a framework that supported the interpretation of the data and development of the third major theme, *Navigating the Institution*. Being able to learn how to *navigate the institution* for many of the participants was at times difficult. Many of the participants shared that they had cognitive and physical challenges that often interfered with their learning. Most of these participants shared that they frequently visited the learning centers on campus to have access to writing and math tutors who assisted them in their coursework. Chen and colleagues (2008) noted that practitioners and researchers needed to pay more attention to the diversity found in the older adult population, which includes examining the issues of race and ethnicity, education, income, and physical and cognitive impairments.

Schlossberg’s (1989) Theory on Marginality and Mattering looks to institutions and asks the question: are institutional practices and resources geared to making adult learners feel like they matter? And in doing so, how can student services and their faculty and staff be influential in supporting the older adult learner’s perception of mattering at the institution?

Burton and colleagues (2011) studied whether there are still barriers for adult learners within higher education. These researchers contend that institutions may be knowledgeable about these known barriers; however, the perception of these barriers at
the institutional level may not be the same as the perceptions of these barriers by the student. For many of the older adult students, the financial challenges acted as barriers to their learning and, in some instances, influenced their perception of whether they mattered at the institution. Some participants stressed the importance of designating financial aid and resources, such as an older adult student scholarships or fee waivers that would provide a funding source to support their educational and living expenses while attending college. The financial challenges experienced by some of the participants influenced their ability to fully access and engage in college, thus making it harder for some of them to be successful in pursuing their educational goals.

Many of the participants in this study suggested that institutions have a designated individual such as an Adult Student Ombudsmen who would be accessible at varied hours on campus, and provide information that would address their questions and concerns regarding locating and accessing specific services and resources on campus. Research by Bowden and Merritt (1995) examined the adult learner’s needs and the resource demands that necessitated access to advisors and college personnel at nontraditional hours. Most of the participants suggested that having a designated area on campus, such as an adult learning/reentry center, would provide them an opportunity to have access to resources and services and provide them an opportunity to interact with faculty, staff, and fellow adult students.

Frey (2007) recognized the importance of establishing educational pathways that would direct resources and services specifically to ensure adult students’ learning. Some examples of these educational pathways include using phrases that older adult students can relate to (i.e., Never Too Late to Learn [N2LTL] or Plus 50 Program). These
programs would assist in supporting a community college’s mission and values by offering knowledge and training that are easily accessible for the older adult student at the institution. Older adult students who choose to participate in these programs have the opportunity to supplement what they learn in the classroom by accessing services and resources to earn credit and or vocational skills to prepare them for twenty-first century careers (San Jacinto College, 2015a, 2015b).

**Recommendations for Practice**

Recommendations on how to support the older adult student’s community college experience have been generated from this study. The missed opportunities and decrease in revenue at postsecondary institutions is partly due to the lack of information and understanding of the educational, cognitive, physical, and financial needs of the older adult students by institutions. The following recommendations are offered to institutions, faculty, and staff to support the older adult student’s success and completion of their goals.

**Recommendation 1: An Institutional Landscape of an Inclusive Student Culture**

The older adult student needs to feel that they fit in and are considered part of the student landscape at the institution. A recommendation for community colleges and their administrators is to advocate for and include visual images of older adult students on all college websites, brochures, and other college materials. Currently, most community colleges materials only feature students who are in their late teens or early 20s. By including visual images of older adult students on their college website, college brochures, orientation, and other marketing materials, they are acknowledging the importance of having older adult students’ knowledge and experience as an integral part
of the undergraduate’s learning experience. Demonstrating intergenerational interaction as a valued component of the community college experience would go a long way in attracting older students to the campus.

**Recommendation 2: Older Adult Student’s Financial Aid Programs/Scholarships/Resources**

Several participants spoke about how the lack of money presented a major challenge to their completion of their educational goals and that they always were trying to obtain funding/resources in order to continue to pursue their educational/vocational goals. Some adult students were barely able to afford their tuition and textbooks and shared that without financial aid and college resources they would find it harder to continue to pursue their educational goals.

As a recommendation, individual colleges should consider offering designated scholarships, fee waivers, and subsidized funding opportunities that would be specific to the educational needs of the older adult student. Additionally, having educational funding seminars in the evening or monthly designed specifically for older adult students may be helpful in their understanding of the funding options and the steps in obtaining financial aid.

**Recommendation 3: Older Adult Student Ombudsmen and Mentoring Program**

Burton and colleagues (2011) studied the obstacles to the older adult’s learning process and found that having initial contact with other older adult students in the early stages of their learning process seemed to ease some of the fears about the older adult’s decision to return to college. Many of the participants suggested having a designated individual such as an Adult Student Ombudsmen at a reentry center on campus.
individual would provide information on locating and accessing specific services and resources that would support the college experience and their educational/vocational goals.

Student support services might consider offering an older adult student mentoring program that would provide a pathway of support to feature mentoring, networking, and adult student fellowship. Adult student mentors would include second year older adult students who had previously participated in the program and are using the mentoring experience as part of their service learning at the community college. The goals of this mentoring program would be to welcome and support the newly enrolled or returning older adult student, as well as provide an opportunity for them to meet and build peer relationships with other older adult students and faculty in order to feel welcomed.

**Recommendation 4: Older Adult Learner Recruitment and Retention Campaign**

The educational and environmental benefits for community colleges being considered an older adult friendly institution might include enhancing support services and resources for the older adult learner returning or entering college. Institutions might consider offering a series of targeted workshops to focus on the issues identified by the newly enrolled/returning older adult student. This might include a series of mini-workshops on skill building, handling stress, time management, financial resources, and sustainable careers.

For example, a N2LTL Campaign, as described earlier, would assist in supporting a community college’s mission and values by offering knowledge and training that are easily accessible for the older adult student at the institution. Additionally, this campaign would offer support services and flexibility to help the older adult student reach their
goals from choosing a course of study and scheduling classes to applying for financial aid. Never Too Late to Learn can help older adult students change career or strengthen their current skills or develop new ones. Never Too Late to Learn can supplement what older adult students learn in the classroom by connecting them with services and resources to make it equitable and accessible for older adult learners to earn credit and/or vocational and technical skills to prepare them for 21st century careers. The goals of the N2LTL Program include:

- To connect and support older adult learning opportunities with student success and completion.
- To improve and enhance future employment opportunities.
- To develop practical application and increase understanding of the educational/vocational careers and training required for the twenty-first century.

The objectives of the N2LTL Program include:

- Learn techniques to plan, communicate, and enhance important educational, career, and employment training and skills.
- Network with other older adult students, faculty, staff, and community members.
- Become an advocate for the older adult student community.

Financing an adult learner program might be challenging due to budgetary concerns; however, an institution considered as adult friendly may increase additional support and revenue through specialized grants and endowments from various older adult community organizations.
Implications for Administrators and/or Institutions

As the U.S. population continues to age over the next several decades, the older population will become more racially and ethnically diverse. Projecting the size and structure, in terms of age, sex, race, and origin, of the older population is important to public and private interests, both educationally and economically. While higher education has seen a dramatic shift in student demographics, neither the policymakers nor the institutions themselves appear to fully recognize that the twenty-first century’s typical adult learner is no longer an 18- to 24-year-old student (Sissel et al., 2001).

Understanding this demographic shift is important because an increasing proportion of older Americans continue to access postsecondary education. Community college leaders, faculty, and staff need to recognize that the older adult student needs are becoming more critical with older adult learners returning to college. In order to maximize the opportunities for growth by adult students who are older, who are degree seeking, or are interested in career, technical, and extended education programs realized community colleges need additional support. Community college leaders need to advocate the importance for serving the older adult learner and implement services, financial resources, and programs that will support the older adult student’s success and completion of their goals at the institution.

California community colleges might consider offering an extension of varied services to provide the older adult learner educational and vocational opportunities to increase their knowledge, by providing these students with the most current twenty-first century workforce training and skills. A N2LTL campaign and Plus 50 Program can supplement what older adult students learn in the classroom by connecting them with
services and resources that will make it equitable and accessible for older adult learners to earn credit and/or vocational and technical skills that will prepare them for twenty-first century careers. Additionally, the N2LTL Program is consistent with California community college’s mission and vision to strengthen programs and services in order to support our students’ educational and vocational goals. Finally, there are many benefits for community colleges being considered an older adult friendly institution. These benefits might include: increasing campus diversity, providing financial and volunteer resources, and developing additional workforce community partnerships.

**A Brief Narrative**

A brief narrative describing a meaningful and positive college experience has been included in this section. This is meant to provide the reader a depiction of what a positive older adult’s community college experience might look like when the recommendations and implications for practice discovered by this study are being applied.

*Sue was always hoping someday that she would return to college. One day she took a giant “leap of faith” and decided to apply and enroll in a community college in order to complete an associate’s degree in psychology and possibly transfer to a 4-year institution. Sue can remember that very moment when she received a welcoming letter from the institution that included an invitation to the Never Too Late to Learn Orientation sponsored by student support services and resources at the institution. Sue attended the Never Too Late Orientation and was welcomed by an adult specialist who addressed her by name and acted as Sue’s adult student mentor during the 1-day orientation. At the orientation, Sue received information about the various services and*
resources at the college. She had participated in one-on-one counseling, attended various seminars that were specifically designed to address the adult learner’s concerns about entering/returning to college, and participated in various financial and scholarship workshops that were specific to the educational and financial needs of the older adult student.

By the time the first day of the semester arrived, Sue was excited about her educational journey she was about to embark on at the institution. During the 2 years that Sue attended the community college, she had developed a network of institutional support and services that assisted her in obtaining her educational goals. Her participation in an adult student support group, which included weekly individual tutoring and monthly counseling workshops, addressed some of the adult student challenges with managing the multiple roles and difficulties in returning to college.

After Sue had completed her educational goals at the community college, she decided to apply to a 4-year institution and was accepted. As an undergraduate older adult student, Sue recalled a time when she was having difficulty managing her family obligations, work, and role as a college student. She described an experience that was pivotal in her decision to continue to pursue her educational goals. It was a Thursday afternoon, her sociology class had just ended, and a professor, Professor Sander, noticed that she had not been participating as usual in class. Professor Sander asked if she wanted to grab a cup of coffee or tea just to chat in her office. Sue was surprised that someone took the time to notice her and recognize that she was troubled. At that moment, Sue realized that she had made a connection with someone who felt that she mattered and who cared enough to offer her some time just to listen to her concerns.
Sue proceeded to the professor’s office where she shared her educational and personal challenges. Professor Sander shared with Sue some of the various student services and programs that were offered at the institution. One of the programs was an adult learner mentoring program in which older adult students could ask faculty to act as mentors by sponsoring them as a teaching assistant. Professor Sander offered and agreed to serve as Sue’s official mentor and sponsor. Sue participated in this mentoring program as an older adult college student which provided her not only support from additional faculty but also an opportunity to network and gain access to other adult learner groups at the institution. The encouragement and institutional support from the faculty and staff within student services navigated and supported her pathway toward completion. At the end of 2 years, Sue had completed her education goals and had earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology. During the summer, she decided to enter a faculty internship program that provided her access to faculty mentors from various institutions that provided the interns with teaching methodology and strategies for the college classroom. Sue was able to select a faculty mentor from her discipline and was provided an opportunity to act as a teaching assistant for one semester. After the semester ended, she was recommended by her faculty mentor for a teaching position at the community college. Today, Sue continues to teach at a local community college where she acts as an older adult student mentor; and continues to advocate institutional and community support to implement and facilitate workshops and seminars for older adult learners who decide to enter/return to college to complete their educational and vocational goals.
Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this study undoubtedly indicate that some changes need to be made in the way that community colleges recognize and address older adult students and their needs and challenges in entering/returning to college. This study was limited with regard to race/ethnicity and gender, so a more representative sample might be considered for future studies. A recommendation for future research involves adding a longitudinal component to the current study (i.e., a follow-up with the 20 participants in this study when they complete their college experience). Future research might include using quantitative methodologies to examine factors such as number of courses, enrolling in credit versus noncredit courses, and time to completion and the impact these might have on the older adult student’s experiences and satisfaction. Given the demographics, it may be more attractive to community colleges to consider broadening the definition of older adult student learners to including those who are 35 years of age and older.

Future research needs to be done to find out why some older adult learners do not choose to attend community colleges and what factors are most relevant in deciding whether or not to attend a community college. Another recommendation might include using a mixed methods approach to examine the older adult learner’s decision and choice to attend online-only institutions.

It is important to further investigate current policies and practices in order to identify how postsecondary institutions can modify, enhance, and implement successful adult learner strategies for curriculum, resources, and services. Additional research might explore the educational experiences of older adult learners who participate in a college completion program at a postsecondary institution. Finally, future studies might develop
a theoretical model that is specific to this population, integrating aspects of the three theoretical frameworks from this study to more specifically understand and support the older adult’s learning experience at the institution.

A Researcher’s Reflection on Lessons Learned

Many participants in this study agreed that utilizing student support services and programs at the college contributed to having a positive experience. Overwhelmingly, every participant was hoping to contribute to increasing the institution’s knowledge on the importance of supporting the older adult student’s college experience. The participants were eager to share their viewpoints and their ideas on how institutional support could enhance future services, resources, and programs that may attract and support the educational, vocational and workforce needs of the twenty-first century older adult student at the community college. Additionally, these older adult students knew what made their return to college difficult and had suggestions on the ways that faculty might enhance the adult learning experiences within their classrooms.

All of the adult students were grateful in having their voices heard in order for institutions to recognize, understand, and support the older adult student’s pathway to success and completion. So, how do we as educators continue to provide the knowledge to our adult learners within our various disciplines and also provide the practical applications, strategies, and tools within a comfortable and supportive institutional environment that will encourage active adult learner participation and successful learning for all of our adult students? Schlossberg’s (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering suggests:
As we listen to students and plan activities with them, we need to hear the common underlying concerns: will they fit in, will they matter. The creation of environments that clearly indicate to all students that they matter will urge them to greater involvement. (p. 14)

**Conclusion**

As the country continues to experience an increase in older adult learners entering or returning to colleges, institutions will need to refocus on customizing enrollment strategies to attract and retain older adult learners. By concentrating institutional marketing efforts on broadening diversification and by highlighting on the educational and cultural aspects of the institution in response to developing an older adult student culture can be effective in serving the educational and employment needs of the twenty-first century older adult learner. Thus, an additional strategy for postsecondary institutions will be to develop and implement specific programs and practices that will attract all types of adult learners.

As the adult population ages, there will be continued growth in the older adult learner market of those who are interested in enrolling or returning to college for advancing their educational goals and careers. This represents an enormous opportunity for California community colleges to consider implementing completion campaigns and strategies such as a N2LTL campaign and Earn More Than a Degree strategy, which support the student’s pathway to completion and success. California community colleges need to offer specific older adult learner strategies and support services such as an adult learner ombudsman, customized adult student orientations, and tailored advising and counseling if institutions want to attract and retain the older adult student. In order
for the older adult student to feel they fit in, they need to feel comfortable and welcomed within the learning environment; they need to believe that they matter to the institution by being recognized as an integral part of the institutional student landscape.

Supporting an institutional adult and lifelong learning culture can broaden and reaffirm the institution’s mission, values, and vision by serving the educational and societal needs of all students. Advocating the value of intergenerational learning at the institution by providing educational opportunities for older and younger student interaction can provide mutual benefits for all students at the institution. Developing and implementing a lifelong learning model within an institutional framework may provide the pathway for all adult students to access services and resources that will support their student success. With the current emphasis placed on increasing the number of college educated adult learners, there continues to be a need to better understand who older adult learners are, why they have come to college, and what institutional services, resources, and learning strategies can assist them along their pathway to completion and success.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

Graduate and Research Affairs
Division of Research Affairs
San Diego State University
5200 Campanile Drive
San Diego CA 92182-1953
Phone: 619-594-5938
Fax: 619-594-4189

SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

Expedit ed Approval
Reg: 45 CFR 46.110(5)(7) – minimal risk
Submit Report of Progress by: August 1, 2015

September 24, 2014

Student Researcher: Mrs. Marion Spaid-Ross
Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Caren Sax
Department: Administration, Rehabilitation and Post-Secondary Education
Contract/grant number: N/A
vIRB Number: 1827097

Re: A Phenomenological Study of the Older Adult Learner’s College Experiences at a Community College

Dear Mrs. Spaid-Ross

The above referenced protocol was reviewed and approved as expedited in accordance with SDSU’s Assurance and federal requirements pertaining to human subjects protections within the Code of Federal Regulations (45 CFR 46). This approval applies to the conditions and procedures described in your protocol. Please notify the IRB office if your status as an SDSU-affiliated changes while conducting this research study (you are no longer an SDSU faculty member, staff member or student). This approval expires September 1, 2015.

- Please submit a Report of Progress by August 1, 2015.
- The following approved consent form(s) have been uploaded to your protocol file within the vIRB system, within the Supporting Documents section:
  - Spaid-Ross_1827097_ICF_09-24-14_Approved_09-24-14

Graduate Students: This notification may be used as documentation to register in Thesis 799A. Attach a hard copy of this notice to your Appointment of Thesis/Project Committee form prior to submitting the completed form to Graduate and Research Affairs - Student Services Division. For questions related to this correspondence, please contact the IRB office ((619) 594-6622 or e-mail irb@mail.sdsu.edu).

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Ramona Pérez
Chair, Institutional Review Board
Important information for ALL expedited and Full Committee studies:

Report of Progress:

Please note your expiration date. To request continued recruitment, data collection and/or data analyses, a Report of Progress must be submitted prior to the expiration date of your study. A lapse in approval requires that all research with human subjects be suspended until approval is obtained and may result in a temporary hold on funds, if your study is funded. The investigator will be out of compliance with federal regulation and university policy if human subjects continue to be involved in this project without a valid IRB approval.

The approved consent form has been uploaded to your protocol file within the vIRB system, within the Supporting Documents. This document bears the SDSU IRB's stamp of approval. Print a copy of this stamped form to use when documenting informed consent from research participants. Changes may not be made to the consent document without prior review and approval of the IRB. You are required to keep signed copies of the consent document for three years after your project has been completed or terminated.

To submit a request to extend IRB approval:

- log in to your WebPortal account and access the protocol
- On the protocol Main Page, click on "Progress Reports"
- under Protocol Maintenance and enter a report
- Once you have filled in your responses on the report form, click "submit".
- You should receive an automated email verifying IRB receipt of your Report of Progress.

REQUIREMENT! Within the description box of the Report of Progress form, indicate which, if any, consent form(s) you are requesting to renew. Refer to the Consent Form Development section of the protocol and provide the IRB with the specific file names and date(s) of upload of the consent document(s) you are requesting to renew.

Modifications:

If any changes to your study are planned, you must submit a modification request and receive IRB approval prior to the implementation of study changes. To submit a modification request, please follow the necessary steps below.

Modification steps:

- Access the protocol via the Webportal
  [https://sunsidp.sdsu.edu/pls/webapp/web_menu_login/]
- Protocol main page click on “Modifications” to enter a report
- Once the report has been fill out completely, click “submit”
- Make sure to email the IRB (irb@mail.sdsu.edu) notifying them that a modification has been submitted.
Requirements:

- To document your modification in detail, access your currently approved protocol in the "Full Document Viewer."
- Copy and paste the document into Word and use "track changes" to document revisions to your protocol.
- Save the file (Name_Modification_Date) and upload it to your protocol file.
- When approved by the IRB, this document will be the current version of your approved protocol.

Please note the following:

a) For studies requiring consent translation: The SDSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) does not verify the accuracy of the translated document. IRB approval of this document for use in subject recruitment is based on your assurance that the translated document reflects the content of the IRB approved English version of the document.

b) If recruitment will take place through an outside agency or organization, confirm with that institution that you have permission to conduct the study prior to initiation of any study activities.

c) Approval is contingent upon the completion of the SDSU Human Subjects tutorial (found at: [http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~gra/login.php](http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~gra/login.php)) by all members of the research team. This certification must be renewed every 2 years.

d) The SDSU IRB requires investigators to report any problems that arise during the course of an IRB approved research study. Serious adverse events or unanticipated problems that are life-threatening or have resulted in serious injury or death must be reported to the IRB immediately whenever possible or within at least 48 hours from the onset of the incident. All other problems must be reported to the SDSU IRB within 5 days. To complete and submit an adverse event report, go to the Protocol Main Menu, click on “Adverse Events” under “Protocol Maintenance” and follow the instructions. For more information and consultation, contact the IRB office directly via Email at: IRB@mail.sdsu.edu or telephone: 619-594-6622, Monday through Friday from 8:00AM to 4:00PM.
Recruitment Flyer to Participate in a Study

Title of Project: A Phenomenology Study of the Older Adult Learner’s College Experience at a Community College

Principal Investigator: Marian Spaid-Ross
1140 W Mission Rd
San Marcos, CA 92069
(760) 744-1150
Mross2@palomar.edu

1. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to explore how older adult learners 50–years of age and older navigate their college experience at a community college. Individuals participating in this study will be interviewed about their experiences.

2. Procedures to be followed/Location: You will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview that will last duration of sixty minutes. The interview will take place at an office on the college campus or other convenient location if necessary. The semi-structured interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriber.

3. Eligibility: You must be 50 years of age or older, enrolled part-time/full-time in a community college.

4. Duration: It will take about one hour to complete the interview.

5. Incentives to Participate: If you decide to participate in this study, you will receive a small token of appreciation for your time.

If you meet the eligibility criteria, and if you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me via email at the address above.

Thank you.

Marian Spaid-Ross
APPENDIX C

Participant's Consent Form

Participant Consent Form
San Diego State University
Informed Consent Form for:
Administration, Rehabilitation, and Post-Secondary Education
San Diego State University

Title of Project: A Phenomenology Study of the Older Adult Learner’s College Experience at a Community College

Principal Investigator: Marian Spaid-Ross
1140 W Mission Rd
San Marcos, CA 92069
(760) 744-1150
Mross2@palomar.edu

Advisor: Dr. Caren Sax
Professor and Chair
Administration, Rehabilitation, and Postsecondary Education Leadership Educational Doctorate Program
5500 Campanile Dr.
San Diego, CA 92182-1190
619 594 7183
csax@mail.sdsu.edu

1. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to explore how older adult learners 50 years of age and older navigate their college experience at a community college. Individuals participating in this study will be interviewed about their experiences.

2. Procedures to be followed/Location: You will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. The interview will take place at an office on the college campus or other convenient location if necessary. The semi-structured interviews, will take an hour, and will be audio recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriber.

3. What is Experimental in This Study: None of the procedures used in this study are experimental in nature. The only experimental aspect of this study is the gathering of information for the purpose of analysis.
4. **Discomforts and Risks:** Minimal risks are anticipated during the study. There are no risks in participating in this study beyond those experienced in everyday life. At any time if you choose to not continue with the interview the interview will be stopped immediately.

5. **Benefits of the Study:** You may learn and understand more about yourself by participating in this study. You may also realize that other older adult learners’ have had similar experiences as you have. This information might assist the older adult learners in getting accustomed to college life by understanding the college experiences of other older adult learners. The findings from this study may impact program planning, classroom environments, teaching strategies, and student services by providing an awareness of the older adult learners’ needs at the community college.

6. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. Confidentiality will be maintained to the extent allowed by law. The data will be stored and secured at the researcher’s home office. The data will be stored in a locked file cabinet, and the recordings will be stored on the researcher’s password protected computer file. Only the researcher will have access to the recordings. Participants will not be able to review the tape prior to any publication. In an event of a publication resulting from this research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

7. **Incentive to Participate:** If you decide to participate in this study you will receive a ten dollar visa gift card.

8. **Questions About the Study:** If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the Division of Research Affairs at San Diego State University (telephone: 619-594-6622; email: irb@mail.sdsu.edu).

9. **Voluntary Nature of Participation:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your choice whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with your college or San Diego State University. If you decide to not participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and stop your participation at any time.

10. **Questions About the Study:** If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact Marian Spaid-Ross 858-248-3581

11. **If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the Division of Research Affairs at San Diego State University (telephone: 619-594-6622; email: irb@mail.sdsu.edu).**

12. **Consent to Participate:** The San Diego State University Institutional Review Board has approved this consent form, as signified by the Board’s stamp. The consent form must be reviewed annually and expires on the date indicated on the stamp.
Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this document and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You have been given a copy of this consent form. You have been told that by signing this consent form you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

Name of Participant (please print)

____________________________________
Signature of Participant

____________________________________
Signature of Investigator

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APPENDIX D

Interview Questions

Interview Questions Older Adult Learners

1. Please tell me what made you decide to enroll in college.
   a. Follow up question: Is this the first time you enrolled in college?

2. Please describe your experience of your first day at this college.

3. Please explain to me your overall experience as an older adult learner enrolled at this college.

4. What was your primary reason for choosing to attend this college?

5. What do you like most about this college? Why?

6. What do you like least about this college? Why?

7. What are the major challenges you face as an older adult learner at this college?

8. What do you find easy as an older adult learner at this college?

9. What kind of support services are in place to help adult learners?
   a. How often do you use them?
   b. What have you found most helpful about these support services?
   c. What other types of support services are needed at this college?

10. How does the college respond to older adult students’ academic and social needs?

11. Please describe your interactions with your professors.

12. Please describe your interactions with peers at this college.

13. Is there any additional information or insights you wish to share about your experiences as an older adult learner at this college?