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Bridging the Gap: A Phenomenological Study of Interpersonal Relationships to Foster Campus Community Among Nontraditional College Students

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College of Education

Doctorate of Education Program

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Bridging the Gap: A Phenomenological Study of Interpersonal Relationships to Foster Campus
Community Among Nontraditional College Students

Ashvindar K. Singh

Concordia University – Portland

College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Teacher Leadership

Barbara Weschke, Ph.D, Faculty Chair Dissertation Committee

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Concordia University – Portland

2017

Abstract

This purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate if the interpersonal relationships among nontraditional college students with each other, faculty, and staff play a role in fostering a sense of campus community at a private career and technical education junior college.

Furthermore, the connection between a sense of campus community and students feeling a sense of belonging, increase their self-esteem, and achieving self-actualization as Maslow defined it was explored. In addition, the students reporting feeling a sense of community at a private career and technical education junior college and its relationship to motivating students to attend classes and complete their programs was examined. The participants of the study were nontraditional college students. The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews.

Interpretive phenomenological analysis was used to analyze the data. The data revealed four themes: (a) emotional safety; (b) inclusion and acceptance; (c) someone who cares; and (d) personal growth. Each of the themes related to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), the framework on which this study is based. The findings of this study indicated interpersonal relationships do play a role in fostering a sense of campus community. In addition, a sense of campus community did increase students feeling a sense of belonging, increase their self-esteem, and encouraged them to work towards achieving self-actualization. Lastly, students reported feeling a sense of community did motivate them to attend classes and complete their programs.

Keywords: nontraditional student, interpersonal relationships, motivation, campus community, sense of belonging, persistence, attendance, retention, self-esteem, self-actualization

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Autar and Indar K. Singh. There are no words to adequately describe how much your love and support mean to me. Thank you both for giving me a strong foundation in life. As I reflect back, I am consumed by memories of motivation, encouragement, and support. Dad you are and always have been my hero. You came to this country with so little yet, never faltered in providing every opportunity for your family. You showed me that nothing worth having is achieved easily. You always stressed the value of higher education; and the importance of hard work, honesty, and integrity. I have worked so hard to make your dream come true. As I worked through the challenges of the doctoral program, imagining your joy at the end of this journey gave me the strength to keep going. Mom, you have invested so much time and energy in me. You were my first and greatest teacher in life. All that I am today is thanks to you. Your intelligence, strength, and determination have paved the way for my success. Thank you for instilling in me the courage to fight for what I believe and the perseverance to see it through. Mom and Dad, today and forever, I share my every success with you. This accomplishment is every bit yours, as is it mine.

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The completion of this dissertation would not have been possible without the support, guidance, and encouragement of several important people. I offer my sincerest heartfelt thanks to my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Barbara Weschke. As I worked through the various phases of the dissertation process, Dr. Weschke provided me with endless insights and advice. I could not have asked for a more supportive and considerate chairperson. In addition, I will be forever grateful for the assistance and feedback I received from my committee members, Dr. Dennette Foy and Dr. Cristie McClendon. I express my eternal gratitude for the time and energy each of you invested in my journey.

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As I complete this journey, I wish my Grandmother could be here to share this final graduation with me. My accomplishments were always such a source of pride for you. I just wish, I could have shared more of them with you.

Finally, I am so grateful to my student participants. I could not have done this without you. I was deeply honored to hear your experiences and learn from them. You are an inspiration to me and your words will forever be a part of me. As I move forward in my career, my own leadership will be enhanced by the lessons learned from each of you.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The types of students attending universities and colleges in the United States have diversified over time, moving from a small selective, semi-standardized group of privileged individuals to a more diverse group of nontraditional students coming from various phases of life. Nontraditional students are not the typical 18-year-old high-school graduates going straight to college. These are adult students who may decide to return to school after the traditional college age of 18-24 (The National Center of Education Statistics, 2017). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2015) predicted higher education enrollment from 2007–2018 and suggested that the number of students over the age of 25 will remain stable or increase during the current decade.

Along with the growing nontraditional student population, the types of schools and programs available to students have evolved. With career and technical education, also known as vocational education, or workforce preparation, workforce development has become more prominent with the growing change in the job-market. Career and technical education is an educational strategy for providing students with the academic, technical, and employability skills and knowledge to pursue postsecondary training or higher education and enter a career field (Association for Career and Technical Education, 2010; National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium, 2010). Career and technical education institutions are facing pressure to increase student enrollment, attendance, and graduation while struggling with rising education costs, changing student demographics, and increased government scrutiny (Hamilton, 2010; Fain, 2013; Meacham, 2013; Smith, 2014; The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2013). With the pressures that career and technical institutions are facing, it is

more important than ever to increase attendance, retain students, increase graduations rates, and be prepared to understand the changing student demographic.

Nontraditional students are a significant part of this changing student demographic (The National Center of Education Statistics, 2017). A distinguishing characteristic of a nontraditional student is the likelihood that they are managing several life roles while attending school, including being an employee, parent, spouse or partner, family caregiver, or maintaining social obligations as a community member (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). These roles can be an assets or obstacles. The multiple roles these students are managing often present challenges, leading to lower attendance and sometimes retention issues for the student (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Munro, 2011 & Ramos, 2011). For most nontraditional students, enrolling in college is an intentional life choice, not taken on a whim (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). College faculty and staff can guide these students by helping them clarify their educational goals, understand their academic purpose, and develop their student identity. Making a commitment to the educational goal is important. However, finding ways to keep the students motivated, while they learn to balance life roles, is most crucial. It is important for educators to understand the challenges these students face and what factors can motivate them to succeed. Gilardi & Guglielmetti (2011) suggested students' perception of the institutional environment can potentially facilitate and support learning and persistence. Students can be engaged by staff and faculty by creating a sense of belonging on campus. As the students start feeling a sense of belonging they may start to feel a sense of campus community which will further increase a sense of belonging and increase their self-esteem. Ultimately, students feeling a sense of community may be more motivated to attend classes and complete their programs.

Background

In the early 19th century, people's demand for higher education and ambitions for earning degrees was lower than the 20th century (Thelin, 2012). In the early 1940s, only about 4% of people attended college (Anderberg, 2014, para.1). However, student interest in earning a postsecondary degree has become increasingly important in the last few decades of the 20th century (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2012; Thelin, 2012). Researchers projected that 85% of new jobs created will require some post-secondary education; a high-school diploma will not be adequate in the ever most competitive job market (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2012, p. 65). Historically, student retention and graduation rates are widely recognized as a way to measure the success of an educational institution. According to the United States Department of Education (2014), graduation rates are based on first-time enrolled students earning their degrees within 150% of the anticipated time of degree or program completion. In 2014, full-time student retention rates were 59% for two-year institutions, 62 % for private for-profit colleges, 52%-96% based on admissions selectivity at four-year colleges (United States Department of Education, 2014, p.1). With the increased demand for individuals with higher education (Johnson & Sengupta, 2009; Yelland, 2011) the importance of college graduation rates has become more important than ever.

Statement of the Problem

Employers in the United States will need more than 30 million workers with some college education by 2018; however, only 23 million are predicted to graduate (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2010). There is an increased demand for individuals with higher education (Johnson & Sengupta, 2009; Yelland, 2011). Although, in the past students had a greater focus in the pursuit of a bachelor's degree, it is predicted that 14,000,000 jobs will be filled by people with an

associate's degree or certificate from a career and technical education program by 2018 (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2010). Research has suggested that 65% of new jobs will require some post-secondary education because one cannot compete in the competitive job market with only a high school diploma (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2013, p.3). Increasing college graduation rates has become a challenge with the nontraditional student demographic and the obligations and financial pressures they often face. Therefore, it is crucial that educators identify the factors that may impact student graduation rates in nontraditional students.

There has been research conducted on factors that may impact student retention in traditional students (Astin, 1993; Berry & Sackett, 2009; Tinto, 1993). Researchers have attempted to expand this research by including retention in nontraditional students (Hackett, 2011; Vinson, Nixon & Walsh, 2010). Researchers continue to add to the growing body of literature surrounding student attendance and retention. Some studies have been conducted on the effects of students' interpersonal relationships on academic outcomes (Martin & Dowson, 2009; Lambert, Rocconi, Ribera, Miller, & Dong, 2012; Roorda et al 2011; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005; Vinson et al., 2010). However, few of these studies have examined how the interpersonal relationships among nontraditional college students and peers, students and faculty, and students and staff can motivate them to attend classes and complete their programs (Jesnek, 2012; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008). This research gap may present a limitation in private career and technical colleges' ability to respond to the needs of the increasingly diverse nontraditional student demographic, which is a crucial component in increasing a sense of campus community.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual model on which this study was based is Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943). Post-secondary education has shifted its emphasis from the educational needs of students selected from a large group of students to the educational needs of more diverse, smaller groups of students (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). Taking this into account, it is imperative for educational institutions to be better equipped with the knowledge to understand the needs and challenges such students face. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, including physiological needs, safety needs, belonging and love needs, esteem needs, and the need for self-actualization, suggested that satisfying the needs lower in the hierarchy are crucial for the attainment of higher-order needs. Therefore, institutions of learning need to be staffed with individuals who are sufficiently trained to aid the students in attaining their needs because these individuals are critical in the effort retain students in college (Tinto, 2012).

For students, acquiring knowledge can be related to the basic safety needs. This relationship describes a link between the conative (having to do with striving, desire, and volition) and cognitive (having to do with knowing, perceiving, developing, and functioning) hierarchies (Maslow, 1970). The cognitive needs of each student can be addressed on an individual basis. The student would need to make an intentional choice and become responsible for his or her learning. Such a shift would aid the students in transitioning from passive to active learning. Active learning will occur when the student is released from concern about safety and finds that a sense of belonging is more pleasant than satisfying safety needs (Maslow, 1970).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) may aid students in achieving their full potential by attaining the self-esteem and confidence to believe in themselves. Furthermore, it may prepare the faculty to better understand and engage the students. In addition, Maslow's Hierarchy of

Needs (1943) may help improve interpersonal relationships among students, peers, faculty, and staff through a strong sense of campus community.

Purpose of the Study

This purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate if the interpersonal relationships among nontraditional college students with each other, faculty, and staff play a role in fostering a sense of campus community at a private career and technical education junior college. Furthermore, the connection between a sense of campus community and students feeling a sense of belonging, increase in their self-esteem, and achieving self-actualization as Maslow defined it was explored. In addition, the researcher explored if students reported feeling a sense of community at a private career and technical education junior college can motivate students to attend classes and complete their programs.

Research Questions

Creswell (2007) asserted, in a qualitative study, the researcher needs to state research questions instead of hypotheses or objectives. Moustakas (1994) further suggested that research questions should not be leading and do not try to find, predict, or determine some causal relationship. Five such research questions guided this study in a clear and purposeful manner. The research questions are as follows:

- R1: What role does having interpersonal relationships play among nontraditional college students with each other, faculty, and staff in fostering a sense of campus community?
- R2: How can a sense of campus community help students feel a sense of belonging?
- R3: How can a sense of campus community lead to students feeling their esteem needs are being met?

R4: How can a sense of campus community help students work to achieve self-actualization?

R5: How do students report their interpersonal relationships with each other, faculty, and staff motivate them to attend classes and complete their programs?

Rationale and Relevance

For the purpose of this study, Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs provided a unique perspective and rationale on motivating both traditional and nontraditional college students. Maslow's approach provided a rationale for implementing a retention program in which the entire campus plays a key role in motivation and retention. The interpersonal relationships among students with each other, faculty, and staff address the safety needs of students and engage their sense of purpose which in turn tends to strengthen persistence. Furthermore, an institution that aims to retain as many of its students as possible should provide support services that are essential to the higher-order needs of students. Faculty members play a significant role in increasing retention rates (Tinto, 2012). Although faculty members and staff members cannot be expected be students' therapists, they should attempt to know and try to understand what is latent within each student. Wade, Tavis, Garry (2010) defined latent knowledge as knowledge that may be present but not apparent, visible, or actualized. Such knowledge can also be unconscious or undeveloped; however, has the potential to be developed (Wade, Tavis, Garry, 2010). Students may often have knowledge and ability that may not be visible; however, that does not mean it does not exist. Faculty and staff can support students in attaining the higher-order needs, such as self-esteem and self-actualization, which may aid students in displaying what is latent within them.

Significance of the Study

A strong sense of campus community is an important component of a successful college (Strange, 2010; Summers & Svinicki, 2007). This study focused on the factors that can influence student motivation and feeling a sense of campus community. The types of campuses that encompass the higher education system in America have changed over time, leading to more diversified campuses and students (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2012). This study sought to address a gap in literature for private career and technical colleges. Specifically, this study will add to the literature by having examined how interpersonal relationships among nontraditional college students with each other, faculty, and staff play a role in fostering a sense of campus community at a private career and technical education junior college. Furthermore, I trust this study's results may be added to the field in relation to the connection between a sense of campus community and students feeling a sense of belonging increasing their self-esteem, and the steps a student can take towards achieving self-actualization as Maslow (1943) defined it. Insight gained from this study may support the need for professional-development trainings for current and future staff and faculty, which may better enable them to create a greater sense of campus community. Future new-hire orientation and training for staff and faculty may be revised to incorporate this study's results.

Definition of Terms

Several key terms were used throughout this study. Many of these definitions were essential to former researchers who have studied similar phenomena. It is imperative that readers understand these terms and concepts as they relate to this study. The following is a list of key terms and concepts that are central to this study.

Diverse. This term is defined as a group of people or things that are different from each other, including people of different ages, gender, social, cultural, economic, ethnic, or religious groups (Hammond, Cheney & Pearsey, 2015).

Interpersonal relationships. This term is defined as a social association, connection, or affiliation between two or more people (Husain, 2012).

Nontraditional student. This term defines a student as a one who may include one or more of the following seven characteristics: entry to college delayed by at least one year following high school; having dependents; being a single parent; being employed full time; being financially independent; attending part time; and not having a high school diploma (The National Center of Education Statistics, 2017).

Persistence. This term is defined as an action or desire by a student to start and complete a college degree (Seidman, 2005).

Retention. This term is defined as the ability of an institution to retain a student from admission to graduation (Seidman, 2005).

Self-actualization. This term is defined as a concept that occurs when one maximizes his or her potential, doing the best he or she are capable of doing. The concept further represents growth of an individual toward fulfillment of the highest needs (Maslow, 1943).

Sense of community. This term is defined as a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Assumptions

In this study, the researcher assumed that all participants would be truthful in answering the interview questions and describing their experiences. Phenomenological research relies

heavily on self-reporting methods of data collection (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, the integrity of the study depended on the integrity of the participants. Furthermore, the researcher assumed that nontraditional students have different life experiences, therefore, prioritizing college differently than traditional students. The differences could include age, family obligations, time away from schooling, employment status, financial obligations, and a variety of stressors resulting from the students being nontraditional learners.

Delimitations

In this study, the target population (nontraditional students at a private career and technical junior college) established the limitations of the study. This population was not representative of the broader college student population. This study sought to understand the phenomenon described above in this specific context. In addition, the participants for this study only included students at one specific institution, at one specific time.

Limitations

This study was limited in two ways. First, the population consisted of 12 nontraditional students at one school, who completed their program at one given time. Therefore, the generalizability of the results was limited. Second, interviews were the primary means of collecting information. Although, this was an inherent limitation to data collection, this study focused on a phenomenon studied from the participants' perspective. The facts are presented only through the students' responses, and it is through these lived experiences that educators can gain a better understanding of how intrapersonal relationships on campus may motivate students.

Organization of the Study

In chapter 1, the purpose of the study and its relevance to student motivation has been described. Key terms that were relevant to the study are defined, the conceptual framework in

this study is recognized and described, the problem is identified, and the significance of the study is established. In chapter 2, the review of the literature provides an overview of the interpersonal relationships among students and peers, students and faculty, and students and staff. The literature also explores the connection between interpersonal relationships and students feeling a sense of community that can lead to students' motivation, attendance, and persistence. Chapter 3 describes a phenomenological study design and the methodological considerations for the study. In addition, strategies used for collecting and analyzing the data are described. The analysis of data is presented in Chapter 4. Lastly, a discussion of the findings and the implications of those findings on future research and practice are presented in Chapter 5.

Summary

This chapter has provided the foundation from which future chapters will further establish the role interpersonal relationships among nontraditional college students with each other, faculty, and staff play in fostering a sense of campus community at a private career and technical education junior college. In addition, an overview of the key concepts surrounding nontraditional college students at a private career and technical college was provided. With the diverse population seeking higher education, the need for students to feel a greater sense of campus community was recognized. Furthermore, the research questions on which this study is based were presented. Additionally, Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) was described as the conceptual framework on which this study was based. The possible benefits associated with studying this evolving phenomenon were described as possible interest to other educators. Any limitations and shortcomings of the study were also discussed in chapter one. Lastly, chapter one concludes with a description of how the remainder of this dissertation will be organized.

Chapter 2

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to investigate if the interpersonal relationships among nontraditional college students with each other, faculty, and staff played a role in fostering a sense of campus community at a private career and technical education junior college. In addition, I explored if a greater sense of campus community can lead to students feeling a sense of belonging, increase their self-esteem, and help them work towards achieving self-actualization as Maslow (1943) defined it. I further explored if students reported feeling a sense of community at a private career and technical education junior college can motivate them to attend classes and complete their programs. The review of the literature provides an overview of the interpersonal relationships among students and peers, students and faculty, and students and staff. Furthermore, the literature identified a connection between interpersonal relationships and students feeling a sense of community that can lead to students' academic outcomes, attendance and retention. However, a deficit in scholarly literature connecting these topics was identified.

Review of the Literature

Humans are naturally social beings and can be shaped by their experiences with others in their lives (Prinz, 2012). Along the same lines, relationships that students develop with others can play an important role in their academic growth (Hallinan, 2008). Hallinan (2008) further stated, "learning is a process that involves cognitive and social psychological dimensions, and both processes should be considered if academic achievement is to be maximized" (p. 271). Positive, functional interpersonal relationships have been shown to enhance students' academic motivation, engagement, and achievement (Martin & Dowson, 2009). Furthermore, positive interpersonal relationships can allow effective communication and understanding among

students, faculty, and staff, aiding in fostering a more positive learning community and adjusting to college (Martin & Dowson, 2009; Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008). Ultimately, I hope faculty may gain a deeper understanding of how nontraditional-student interactions with others can assist these students with completing their degrees (Jesnek, 2012; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

Nontraditional students. Traditional and nontraditional students demonstrate different instructional preferences (Brookfield, 1986; Knowles, 1984; Levine & Dean, 2013). Many nontraditional learners may take nontraditional routes to education through work experience or vocational qualifications. These students tend to have families, jobs, and multiple roles as student, employee, parent, or caregiver. The National Center of Education Statistics (2017) defined a nontraditional student to include one or more of the following characteristics: entry to college delayed by at least one year following high school; having dependents; being a single parent; being employed full time; being financially independent; attending part time; and not having a high school diploma.

Nontraditional adult students can be distinguished from other college students because they are trying to balance other life roles while attending school. Students form relationships at school that can act as social support systems and may be able to help adult learners succeed in school. However, often, these multiple roles present challenges in students' allocation of time for both academic study and participation in campus-based organizations and activities (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Munro, 2011 & Ramos, 2011).

Higher education in the United States. Higher education in the United States is composed of a variety of institutions that provide education beyond the high school level. The National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (2014) reported that the major

sectors of American higher education are the following: private, nonprofit colleges and universities that operate independently in serving its unique mission as defined by its founders and its present leadership; public, or state colleges and universities funded to varying degrees by their state and administered most often through a state system of higher education; community colleges that are funded largely by their local and state jurisdiction, and offering career training, two-year associate's degree programs, proprietary; and for-profit schools that often specialize in career and job-related training and generate profits for their owners. With the growing and more diverse nontraditional student population, the types of schools have evolved with career and technical education becoming more prominent. Although, this sector has become more prominent, literature in this area is limited. Therefore, this study will focus on a private career and technical education institution.

Interpersonal relationships. Establishing strong interpersonal relationships should be an integral part of every college student's experience (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Kember, 1994; Lin & Huang, 2012; Tinto, 2012). Positive interpersonal relationships have been shown to enhance students' academic motivation, engagement, and achievement (Martin & Dowson, 2009). A student's college experience can be significantly impacted by his or her interaction with faculty and peers. Research has shown there is a significant and positive association between relationship quality and adjustment among nontraditional and/or first-time college students (Martin & Dowson, 2009; Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008). Of the different relationships that nontraditional students formed, those among students, faculty, and staff are most important in achieving academic success (Lin & Huang, 2012; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008). Additionally, opportunities offered by staff and faculty for peer interaction and community building are critical to easing the students' transition into the college

environment (Swenson, Nordstrom & Hiester, 2008). McGivney (2004) stated that many traditional or nontraditional students have some apprehension about beginning a new college endeavor or returning to school. For some, it may be the age at which they returned to school, time of last experience in an academic setting, or a negative experience when they were last enrolled or a college that causes the anxiety and apprehension. Helping these students feel there is a sense of community is one way to help them overcome their apprehension.

As these students begin to establish a sense of campus community and build connections with others on campus, they may understand they are not alone and there are others with similar backgrounds in the program. Tinto (1987) led research that was applied to nontraditional environments by other scholars, such as Ashar and Skenes (1993), and Kember (1994) that confirmed the importance of social integration in nontraditional settings. This research further revealed helping students make connections and personalized points of contact in the beginning stages of the college experience is an important part of retention. These important points of contact could be inclusive of conducting a new student orientation, meeting with advisors, and promoting a collaborative learning environment where students work together and are given opportunities to build relationships and help support one another. Although, nontraditional students are less focused on the social aspect of higher education than traditional students, they still want to feel that they belong and that they have a support network through the process (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Kember, 1994; Tinto, 2012; Zumbrunn, McKim, Buhs, & Hawley, 2014).

Student and peer relationships. A sense of belonging is important for first-year nontraditional college students (Lambert, Rocconi, Ribera, Miller, & Dong, 2012; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Ribera, Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005; Swenson, Nordstrom & Hiester, 2008).

In addition, Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) explored the relationship between academic outcomes and nontraditional students' retention. The results of the study indicated social integration, engagement, and meaningfulness of learning experiences can impact nontraditional students' retention. In addition, students' perception of the campus environment can potentially facilitate and support learning. Research has also suggested students reporting loneliness and helplessness, low sense of belonging, and lack of friendship also report that they feel emotional exhaustion, interpersonal alienation, and low sense of achievement (Lin & Huang, 2012; Tinto, 2012). These emotional difficulties can lead to students doubting whether they should continue with their studies or withdraw from school. Tinto (2012) asserted, it is important for a student see him or herself as belonging to at least one significant community and finding meaningful involvements that occur within that community. In addition, Tinto (2012) further emphasized nontraditional students might find such a connection in their academic community, which can give them the sense that they belong at the institution and encourage them to persist in their studies. Alarcon and Edwards (2013) also supported this theory when stating students who report more negative effects are more likely to withdraw from their studies.

Astin (1999) and Tinto (1993), both pioneers in education, suggested that college students who are engaged in an academic community are more likely to persist in college. As students become more involved in college life, they devote more time and energy to activities that enhance the overall college experience. Successful engagement with a social group impacts students' academic experience. For example, students who are strongly socially connected are more likely to remain in school and report satisfaction with their university. Researchers have noted membership in student organizations on campus can play an important role in encouraging retention and decreasing dropout rates (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1987, 2012).

Students and faculty relationships. The relationship between a teacher and student is one of the most powerful agents of student success. Research suggested teacher and student relationships are most important in early childhood education (Wu, Hughes & Kwok, 2010); however, some studies have found that teacher-student relationships are important in transition years; the years when students move from elementary to middle school, middle to high school, or high school to college (Cataldi & Kewall Ramani, 2009; Modi, 2015). Rendon (1994) asserted even the most vulnerable nontraditional students could be “transformed into powerful learners through in-and out-of-class academic and/or interpersonal validation from faculty” (p. 37). She further indicated that students were more likely to become integrated and persist when they experience active efforts to validate or support them from faculty and staff. In addition, Rendon (1994) stated when faculty and other members of the campus show concern and reinforce the idea that the student can be successful, she or he becomes a powerful learner. On the other hand, instructors who failed to create a warm and welcoming environment where the students feel a connection with them can cause hindrances in overall academic success (Jeffreys, 2007; Rendon, 1994; Tinto, 1993).

The effect of negative relationships or lack of connection with instructors can be damaging to students’ overall success (Jeffreys, 2007; Rendon, 1994; Tinto, 1993). Whereas, positive relationships with instructors can be particularly beneficial to college students (Rendon, 1994; Roorda, Koomen, & Split, 2011). Communication is a key factor in establishing a connection or positive relationship with students. How instructors communicate with their students impacts their students’ attitudes, motivation, and behaviors toward instruction (Faranda, 2015; McGlynn, 2008). By increasing communication, educators can lead to increased trust, increased respect, student achievement, and collaboration (Faranda, 2015).

Many students in their first year of college are often overwhelmed and looking to make a place for themselves in a completely new environment. Therefore, students who do not feel valued and cared about may feel disenfranchised and deprived of educational opportunities, leading to dropouts (Lambert, Rocconi, Ribera, Miller, & Dong, 2012). Whereas, those who form a bond with their instructors feel they are in a safe and nurturing environment, leading to positive effects such as student achievement, satisfaction, and persistence (Lambert, Rocconi, Ribera, Miller, & Dong, 2012; Wilson, Jones, Bocell, Crawford, Kim, Veilleuz, Floyd-Smith, Bates & Plett, 2013).

Student and staff relationships. A supportive campus environment for students is characterized by high-quality student relationships with not only peers and faculty but with staff and other administrative personnel (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & White, 2010). Opportunities offered by staff for peer interaction and community building are critical to easing students' process of adapting to the college setting (Martin & Dowson, 2009). The opportunities for community building should begin with the first contact a student has to establish a sense of a supportive environment from day one. Martin and Dowson (2009) suggested that a college environment has the power to impact the values of its students, through its effect on the nature and content of student interaction with staff, faculty and peers. In addition, positive student interactions with staff and administrative personnel are related to academic achievement, retention, grades, and psychological well-being (Wilson et al., 2015). However, if staff are not committed or have a negative attitude toward students it could negatively impact student engagement, leading to lower attendance and retention (Vinson et al., 2010). Therefore, a supportive campus environment may provide a friendly and accommodating platform for students and may aid faculty members in helping students achieve higher academic outcomes.

Sense of community. With the diverse range of students coming from different periods of life, building a greater sense of community is more important than ever.

According to Strange (2010) “colleges and universities must offer inclusive and secure environments for all students. Without a sense of belonging an institution’s attempt at other goals of learning are likely to fail. Thus, the first step is to assure that the physical, human aggregate, organization, and socially constructed components of various campus environments create such conditions and serve such purposes” (p. 19).

Such situations can be created by colleges first defining a sense of community and its importance to faculty and staff, establishing learning communities, providing service learning and campus involvement opportunities.

Sarason (1974) was one of the first to introduce the concept of a sense of community when he defined a psychological sense of community as one feeling or having a sense that one belongs in or is a part of a group. In addition, members feeling that although there may be conflict among members of the group, they must be resolved in a way that does not destroy the psychological sense of community. Furthermore, members having a sense that there is a network of relationships that helps decrease feelings of loneliness. McMillan and Chavis (1986) further strengthened the theory when they defined a sense of community as a feeling that members belong, members matter to each other, and have a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to each other. The four primary elements of this theory are membership, integration and fulfillment of needs, influence, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The theory was again revised and expanded by McMillan (1996) when he defined sense of community as a spirit of belonging together, trust in the authority structure, an awareness that mutual benefit can come from togetherness, and a spirit that comes

from shared experiences. Although the theory and definition of a sense of community have evolved over time, one element that they each had in common was that strong communities are those that offer opportunities for members to interact, bond, and feel a sense of belonging and togetherness.

A sense of belonging and togetherness may result from students participating in learning communities. Learning communities have been developing on college campuses due to evidence that participating in a learning community can have beneficial educational outcomes, including transition to college, grades, satisfaction with college, and increased persistence and graduation (Pike, Kuh & McCormick, 2008; Soria & Mitchell, 2015; Soria, Nobbe, & Fink, 2013). Pioneers in the field, Astin (1985) and Schroeder & Mable (1994) have defined a learning community as small groups of students that can be categorized by a common sense of purpose that can be used to build cohesiveness, a sense of group identity, and uniqueness that may inspire connection and the integration of diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences. Learning communities have been linked to increased student involvement and motivation, retention and degree completion, and enhanced intellectual development (Soria & Mitchell, 2015; Pike et al., 2008; Schroeder & Mable, 1994). As established, learning communities may aid students with their academic work, interaction with each other, and can help create a stronger sense of campus community.

Building a sense of community needs to be an integral part of the in-class experience. The classroom should be a place where students feel secure with each other and the instructor. As new students gather, they bring a wealth of new interests, abilities, and cultures to the environment. Initially, the educator can show acceptance of all students' backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints. In doing so, all students are able to understand they are welcome and how they may benefit from interacting with others. This will create a sense of community in

the classroom. Students who feel a sense of identity within a group are often well adjusted and the achievement gaps decrease while test scores may increase (Cole & Griffin, 2013; Frisby & Martin, 2010). One such example is a study that was conducted at large, 4-year university, in two sociology classes, consisting of 152 and 176 students. Walker, Bush, Sanchagrin & Holland, (2017) examined whether using stable-membership group work, which increased a sense of community, compared to traditional teaching/learning methods impacted academic achievement. The study indicated the stable-membership approach did result in higher test scores compared to the more traditional individual learning environment. Cooperative group learning did boost achievement through fostering better interpersonal relationships between students. Therefore, this study confirmed the link between a sense of community in a college classroom and student success.

Service learning is another opportunity for institutions to increase a sense of community on campus. Sigmon (2011) defined service learning as finding the balance between learning goals and service outcomes, including volunteerism, community service, internships, and field education. These types of community outreach opportunities allow the students to apply their learning in real-world situations. Several academic benefits have been linked to service learning such as: increase in grades, persistence, academic engagement, student satisfaction with their learning experience, better interaction with faculty, improved retention and degree completion, and improved critical thinking and writing skills (Novak, Markey & Allen, 2007; Simons & Cleary, 2006). Community service events should be a constant because they bring together and provide benefits for all members of a campus including, students, faculty, and administration (Chambers & Lavery, 2012; Colby, Bercaw, Clark, & Galiardi, 2009; Keen & Hall, 2009; Prentice, 2011). These key members of an institution will also become connected to the

community and each other by organizing such events. However, in recent studies, faculty have identified several deterrents in establishing a service learning program or project such as: lack of institutional support (Ford, 2011; Furco & Moely, 2012; Karasik, 2013), limited experience or lack of knowledge (Shek & Chan, 2013; Neeper & Dymond, 2012), lack of funding (Furco & Moely, 2012; Napoli, 2012; Neeper & Dymond, 2012), difficulty finding sites (Karasik, 2013; Neeper & Dymond, 2012; Shek & Chan, 2013), difficulty recruiting students (Furco & Moely, 2012; Karasik, 2013; Neeper & Dymond, 2012), and it is time consuming (Furco & Moely, 2012; Karasik, 2013; Neeper & Dymond, 2012; Shek & Chan, 2013). Therefore, campus leaders need to bring faculty together so that they can aid each other in these community outreach events because the incentives could outweigh the deterrents. In recent studies, several incentives have been identified for establishing a service learning program such as: academic benefits (Novak, Markey & Allen, 2007; Simons & Cleary, 2006), internal motivation for students (Ford, 2011), improved student outcomes (Karasik, 2013; Lambright & Alden, 2012), peer support groups (Furco & Moely, 2012), increased relevance of course material (Ford, 2011; Karasik, 2013; McMenamin, McGrath, & D'Eath, 2010), and informal peer mentoring (Lambright & Alden, 2012). Sanders (2006) suggested that the difficulties with encouraging school faculty to participate in community-related activities could be resolved by "reaching out beyond the faculty members for volunteers to help coordinate community partnerships" (p.9). Furthermore, it is crucial for leaders to communicate and interact with the community, staff, and students because without that understanding, educators work alone, not in partnership with other important people in students' lives.

A strong sense of community is not just important for students but for staff and faculty as well (McMenamin, McGrath, & D'Eath, 2010). Building a strong sense of community involves

members from all areas of the institution working together. A stronger sense of community may aid in enhancing commitment amongst members, increasing morale, and mutual support of stakeholders (Lieberman & Miller, 2011). Campus leaders need to create an environment that fosters top-performing educators. Zenger (2010) suggested that the one behavior that separates top-performing leaders from the rest is the ability to inspire and motivate workers to high performance. The ability to inspire and motivate workers is an important skill for a leader to have. It helps to create a happier and more connected environment. According to Hallowell (2011), connecting begins with the desire to find the spark in other people. Connection refers to the bond an individual feels with another person, group, place, or idea, or anything that stirs feelings of attachment, loyalty, excitement, inspiration, comfort, or a willingness to make sacrifices for the sake of the connection (Hallowell, 2011). As people become connected and happier in the workplace, it will lead to a more positive working environment for everyone. Happier coworkers lead to individuals becoming happier themselves. School leaders, such as a campus director, can play the role of a facilitator and make sure things are running smoothly while keeping the team connected. A professional learning community (PLC) is one way to connect college faculty.

A professional learning community is an opportunity to foster collaborative learning among colleagues within a particular work environment or field (Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Van Es, 2012). Members of a (PLC) may have specialized knowledge they can share in a collaborative environment to help others better serve students. Furthermore, they are able to create a community based on collaboration, commitment, respect, and mutual responsibility and support within a group. Without human collaboration and commitment, organizations are only wood, concrete, and paper (Schmuck, Bell, & Bell, 2012). All members of the organization

should form collaborations and be accountable for the quality of work in the organization. Collaborations such as these do not just happen; they have to be created intentionally at every level of a school or organization. Leaders need to review the parts of informal subsystems: norms, roles, structures, and procedures (Schmuck et al., 2012, p. 14). After the review, changes can slowly be implemented. Workplace relationships are unique relationships with important implications for the individuals in those relationships, and the organizations in which the relationships exist and develop. Specifically, Zenger (2010) stated that inspiring is simple—it comes from many elements working together.

Attendance. Over time, many reasons have been identified for students' lack of attendance. Some of the factors affecting attendance include distance of students' residence from school (Davis, 2010; Johnson 2010), gender (Jordaan, 2009), past academic performance (Davis, 2010), number of hours a student works per week (Tessema, Ready, & Astani, 2014), and level of core motivation (Jordaan, 2009; Maslow, 1943). However, the impact an instructor may have on student attendance has limited literature to support it. According to Knestrict (2005) it has been demonstrated over time that if a student feels connected with his or her instructors, he or she wants to please them. Knestrict (2005) further stated, "It is not unreasonable to assume that we can teach a solid curriculum and at the same time treat students with dignity and care" (p. 786). Students value an instructor who can demonstrate that he or she cares about their success and well-being. In one study, Maskey (2011) surveyed a sample of 166 undergraduate students from the Nottingham University Business School, located in Nottingham, United Kingdom, about their faculty members' method of presentation, classroom management, professional skills, relationship to the students, and preparation and planning. Results indicated, the fewer absences the student had, the more favorably he or she rated the instructor (Maskey,

2011). Positive relationships between a student and an instructor can be beneficial for the students' academic success (Lambert, Rocconi, Ribera, Miller, & Dong, 2012; Roorda, Koomen, & Split, 2011).

Retention. Not only is attendance important, student retention is an equally important issue that colleges and universities are facing today. College drop-out rates are steadily increasing. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2015), nearly one-third of 1st-year college students who started college in 2012 did not return to a U.S. school the following year. Furthermore, another report stated that nearly two-thirds of students who did return to school after a gap in classes did not graduate (Foster, Lawther & Keenan, 2011). However, The American Association of Community Colleges (2015) released a report that suggested some older nontraditional students are returning to the workforce and not completing their degrees. Foster et al. (2011) also suggested that usually students have at least two reasons for withdrawing. These reasons include course-related issues, anxiety about coping, course not as expected, dissatisfaction with staff members, student lifestyle, financial, personal incidents/problems, personal/emotional, difficulties, homesickness, lower perceptions of teaching quality than their peers, and doubts about future goals and lack of support (Foster et al, 2011). On the other hand, Juskiewicz (2015) in the Trends in Community College Enrollment and Completion Data (2015) suggested that these findings could be a result of the improvements in the economy, therefore permitting older students to return to work. The report further revealed that during the height of the recession, enrollments at 2-year institutions increased by almost 22%. The upturn in the economy, however, has not been consistent across the industry and could be the cause for the fluctuations in enrolment trends. With one-third of college students dropping out of school each year, it is critical that a solution be found. Tinto (2012)

declared, higher education has increased in recent years, yet, student retention has not improved. Tinto (2012) further stated, the gap between high-income and low-income students in college completion remains (p. 118). Higher-income students do not face the same struggles with financial security that students coming from low-income households face. First and foremost, the students will want to make sure their physiological and safety needs are met (Maslow, 1943). Unfortunately, for some students these needs cause them to withdraw from college because it is the best option to achieve financial and emotional stability (Park et al., 2008–2009).

Any adult students who are new to college are also in a new environment, with new people, and new responsibilities. As a result, the first few months of college can lead to students feeling a loss of direction. Many are in such a structured environment for the first time and may struggle to maintain some sense of control. Other students may be coming directly from high school and need a more structured environment to feel secure and welcome. It is crucial for instructors to find that balance where all students feel safe, secure, and welcome without making them feel like they are not being treated like the adults they are. Therefore, there is a significant and positive association between relationship quality and adjustment among first-year college students who are in their emerging adulthood years (Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, M, 2008).

Conceptual Framework

This review examined literature as it related to nontraditional 1st-year college students at a for-profit private vocational junior college. In reviewing the issue of attendance and retention of this population, other issues examined were associated with overall academic success and adult learning. The relationship faculty have with adult students is different from that of a teacher with k-12 students (Cataldi & Kewalramani, 2009; Wu, Huges, & Kwok, 2010). Faculty for nontraditional students need to put more emphasis on daily interactions with them in efforts

to establish a connection that will promote student learning and engagement (Rendon, 1994; Roorda, Koomen, & Split, 2011). Although these connections are important for all students, it is more difficult to achieve with adult students. According to Knowles (1984), adult students are more engaged academically, interact less with their peers and faculty, have positive perceptions of teaching practices and interactions with others, and find their campus to be less supportive. Quality interactions with faculty contribute to students' development, satisfaction, and retention (Asikainen, Blomster, & Virtanen, 2017; Fan, 2012). The conceptual model in this study was built on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow (1943) stated that people are motivated to achieve certain needs. In his hierarchy of needs, he described needs that all human beings have in five categories, listed from lowest- order needs to highest-order needs. The first is physiological needs that relate to a person's basic survival. Safety needs are equally important as they relate to health, financial, physical and emotional security. Next, loving and belonging help a person establish social needs that can be seen as the need to belong. Esteem is the need that fulfils the desire to feel respected and maintain a sense of accomplishment or achievement. Lastly, self-actualization the highest order need that describes the need to achieve what one believes he or she is meant to achieve.

According to Maslow (1943), if the most basic physiological need is not met, none of the needs higher in the hierarchy can be met. Students who are preoccupied by physiological needs can may experience difficulty in giving learning and achievement the importance needed. This is because a student lacking in some areas of life would become motivated by the physiological needs over others. Maslow (1970) suggested a person who is lacking food, safety, love, and esteem would give food more priority than anything else. For example, if the student's

physiological needs have not been met, faculty, staff, and administration can come together as a support system and assist her or him to find appropriate resources that are available to students facing hardships. According to Colarusso (2015), it is not only hunger that is a problem; students who have to work to make ends meet, or worry constantly about where their next meals may be coming from, have more pressing needs than making sure they get to class or finish their assignments on time.

If students' physiological needs are met, faculty and peers can help them fulfill other needs, so they can better focus on learning. Faculty and peer relationships are important because it is through these a student fulfills the safety, belonging, and esteem needs (McLeod, 2014). Faculty who respect and understand students and their difficulties in succeeding can support them to achieve the higher needs, which may result in fewer students dropping out.

Adhering to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) helps students reach their full potential. This model will put student well-being ahead of other institutional goals and show a commitment to the education of all students. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) can aid in preparing the faculty to understand and engage the students more effectively to promote student learning and help improve interpersonal relationships among students, peers, faculty, and staff, leading to positive academic outcomes.

Review of Methodological Literature

Avila (2016) conducted a mixed-methods study to investigate the relationship between private career and technical college deans and student graduations rates. Furthermore, this study examined why or how the transformational leadership skills of the deans impacted student graduation rates. The qualitative portion of the study was conducted through interviews. Interviews provided the researcher with an understanding about which transformational

leadership skills could affect student graduation rates based on deans' perceptions of whether it impacted students or not. Qualitative data were collected after the quantitative phase to further explain the relationship between the variables based on the participants' point of view. The leadership skills and student graduation rates were measured using the Transformational Leadership Skills Inventory (TLSi) (Larick & White, 2012). The TLSi measured 10 elements of leadership. Avila (2016) used convenience samples for the quantitative portion of the study while snowball sampling was used for the qualitative component. Quantitative data were collected and provided a general picture, which then was refined or expanded upon through the collection of qualitative data (Creswell, 2008). Using the results, student graduation rate data, and interviews the research questions were addressed.

The results indicated character and integrity, personal and interpersonal skills, and team building can impact student graduation rates. Qualitative findings further indicated the interpersonal skills of deans helped in fostering better relationships with both faculty and students, resulting in higher student graduation rates. This study was, however, restricted by the sample consisting of deans at one private vocational junior college. The sample was limited to 13 academic deans of a private vocational junior college. Furthermore, the study relied heavily on self-reporting by the deans. Avila (2016) found significant discrepancies between the self- and observer ratings, indicating an overestimation of the leaders' self-reported capabilities.

Safford and Stinton (2016), conducted a study examining the challenges of distance education and vocational learning for nontraditional and low-socio-economic students who were new to college education. The researchers conducted surveys of students at a vocational college and then conducted interviews with them. Surveys were sent to 372 students by school email, and 163 responses were received. Safford and Stinton (2016), found that barriers to education

include where and when students attend college, support received, navigating distance- learning environments, knowing what is relevant to their learning, and lack of connections made with others in the learning environment. According to Safford and Stinton (2016), the research findings suggested practical changes to improve distance and vocational learning and by these means to improve student retention, progression, and completion. The surveys were low-cost, alleviated interviewer-evaluation apprehension, and participants were able to control the response rate/timeliness of responses. The study did, however, have some recognized disadvantages. There is a possibility that participants may have answered erroneously in the absence of an interviewer. Interviews, on the other hand, served as an alternative for confirming findings achieved through a survey, for they provided the researcher with access to information they were not able to evaluate by quantitative means such as insight and understanding of the phenomena being studied.

McCracken (2015) conducted a study to examine the extent to which age, course delivery, technical ability, and financial background determined retention at Saint Mary of the Woods College, in southern Indiana. The conceptual framework on which the study was based were the retention and attrition models of Tinto (1987) and Walleri (1981). The research regarding students' ability to use technology used a qualitative survey because it focused on students' perceptions of how technically experienced they were. Survey Monkey was used to collect qualitative data on technical ability from 69 students; however, the participation rate of the survey was only 39% (McCracken, 2015). In addition, quantitative data were used from the school databases to gather information on retention, age, course delivery, and financial background on students who graduated from 2003-2013. The findings indicated that age and financial standing were not significant predictors of student retention. The qualitative data

analysis indicated that students who had higher technical ability showed higher retention. These types of data were important because they assisted the college in determining if students have enough technical ability when enrolling in college. Only 5.8% of participants did not think that their technical skills would impact their ability to graduate on time (McCracken, 2015). Although, the participation rate of the survey was low, with only 69 responses, it provided information that filled in the gaps between the retention rates and available data.

Collings, Swanson, and Watkins (2014) conducted a matched longitudinal comparison between two universities, implementing a survey-based methodology. The purpose of the study was to bridge the gap among theory, practice, and evaluation by conducting a controlled evaluation of peer mentoring at universities in the United Kingdom. The researchers focused on how peer mentoring has an impact on students' levels of well-being, integration to the campus community, and retention. The population for the study consisted of 109 1st-year undergraduates from two different universities. The participants were asked to complete questionnaires at two different time points. The first questionnaire was completed during week one of school and the second questionnaire was completed 10 weeks later. Results were discussed in relation to Tinto's (1975) and (1993) theory of student retention. Students who received peer mentoring showed higher levels of integration to the campus community. According to Collings, Swanson, and Watkins (2014), the results showed four times as many non-peer mentored students had seriously considered dropping out, compared to the students who received peer mentoring. Although the results of the study answered the overall research questions, there was one limitation. The benefits for the new students were apparent; however, the effects were only measured for the students receiving mentoring but not the mentors.

Wyatt (2011) conducted a case study to determine what factors influenced educational persistence. The study focused on nontraditional students' perceptions of campus activities and further sought to explore how satisfaction, engagement, and motivations can influence continuing education. The main research question explored how a university can engage nontraditional students. Data were collected by conducting an online campus-climate survey that focused on students, faculty, campus environment, membership in student clubs/organizations, and the campus community. In addition, two focus groups and in-depth personal interviews were conducted. The researcher did not disclose the number of participants in the study. Participants in the focus groups and personal interview sessions discussed student engagement, personal college experiences, and what students expected and needed to be success in college (Wyatt, 2011). The findings of the study indicated that nontraditional students place a heavy emphasis on student engagement when deciding to continue enrollment. The study further concluded that nontraditional students lead busy lives and have multiple responsibilities; however, they do not want any special treatment and most importantly expect to be treated like adults.

Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) conducted an explorative quantitative study focused on analyzing the relationship between the university experience in the 1st-year of college and continued enrollment in the 2nd year. The study involved students at a northern Italian public university with a high presence of nontraditional students. The target population for the study was nontraditional students in a non-residential institutional context. These were students who commuted to school daily. The sample consisted of 228 students, of which 174 were enrolled at a university and 74 were dropouts (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). For the purpose of the study, Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) defined a nontraditional student as a student who is employed

part-time or more, and a dropout student was defined as a student who did not continue his or her education into the 2nd year of college. Furthermore, factors such as age, gender, cultural background, and high school grades were considered in relation to student retention. Data were collected by conducting telephone interviews that asked specific questions. The connection between the quality of life on campus during the first year of courses with continued enrollment into the 2nd year was analyzed. The study focused on the difference between the experiences of traditional students and nontraditional students and concluded that there is a higher possibility of students dropping out at the end of the 1st year if they are working. Age, gender, cultural background, and high school grades, were not as significant to student retention. The results indicated that nontraditional students' use of learning support services, higher levels of perceived social integration, and perceiving faculty and other students as social support to learning were less likely to drop out.

Synthesis of Research Findings

Interpersonal relationships should be an essential part of every college student's experience. Positive interpersonal relationships have been shown to enhance students' academic achievement (Astin 1999; Lambert, Rocconi, Ribera, Miller, & Dong, 2012; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Swenson, Nordstrom & Hiester, 2008; Ribera, Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Negative relationships or lack of connection can be damaging to the students' overall success (Alarcon and Edwards, 2013; Lin & Huang, 2012; Vinson et al., 2010). With the diverse range of students coming from different periods of life, building a greater learning community is more important than ever. It is important for educators to understand the backgrounds, languages, religions, cultures, histories, structures, races, social classes and other characteristics and goals of their students.

The principles advocated by Astin (1999); Knowles (1984); Tinto (1993); and Blackburn and Lawrence (1995) suggested that academic environments can encourage both the intellectual and social developmental needs of college students, leading to positive academic outcomes for them. Maslow (1943) stressed the importance of achieving self-actualization, the highest order need describes the need to achieve what one believes he or she is meant to achieve. This is a need that evolves as a person develops. The interpersonal relationships a person forms aids in achieving the lower order needs such as safety and belongingness, resulting in the higher order needs such as esteem and self-actualization being met. Tinto (1993, 1997) emphasized the value of the interpersonal relationships in university life, where students feel integrated in a campus community.

Critique of Previous Research

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017) there were 17 million undergraduates as of fall 2015, of whom 38% of those enrolled in higher education were nontraditional students. Enrollment for nontraditional students is projected to increase another 14% by 2026 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017, para. 8). Nontraditional learners are a growing population who have unique needs, desires, and challenges with higher education. A key characteristic distinguishing nontraditional students from traditional students is the possibility that they are balancing other life roles while attending school, including those of worker, spouse or partner, parent, caregiver, and community member. It is these multiple roles that present challenges in students' allocation of time for both academics and participation in campus-based activities.

The extent to which students feel supported, respected by, or connected to their learning environment has been researched in middle-school and high-school populations (Brew, Beatty,

& Watt, 2004; Juvonen, 2006, Nichols, 2006), but has been less closely examined in college student populations. The University Professional and Continuing Education Association (2012) suggested most higher education research focused on traditional college students and not the nontraditional students. For example, a study by the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (2012) revealed that 43% of responding institutions did not track retention for nontraditional students, and 77% did not know current degree completion rates for their nontraditional students. There was some research on the retention of minority students; yet, very limited research on the attendance and retention of nontraditional students exists. Therefore, with the growing population of nontraditional learners, it is important to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and needs of adult learners to support the population. The studies reviewed reveal existing gaps in research and the literature supports a need for more recent research focusing on the challenges faced by nontraditional students at a vocational junior college.

Summary

In conclusion, the review of the literature explored the interpersonal relationships among college students and peers, students and faculty, and students and staff. It further sought to identify the connection between interpersonal relationships and community building that may lead to students' higher academic outcomes. The literature described the characteristics of nontraditional adult learners and how they connect to peers and faculty on campus. Nontraditional students sometimes delay entry to college by at least one year following high school, for they may have dependents, are a single parent, may be employed full time, may be financially independent, attending part time, and/or may not hold a high school diploma. Furthermore, nontraditional learners are more engaged academically, interact less with their

peers and faculty, have positive perceptions of teaching practices and interactions with others, and find their campus to be less supportive. Research revealed supportive interpersonal relationships on campus can lead to a greater learning community. As a result, these students often have more positive attitudes toward school and lower dropout rates.

Chapter 3

Methodology

A phenomenological study based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), relying on interviews to answer the research questions was conducted. According to Giorgi (1997), a phenomenological approach is used when little is known about a phenomenon and the purpose of a study is to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspective of those directly involved in it. There was little known about the role interpersonal relationships play among nontraditional college students with each other, faculty, and staff in fostering a sense of campus community at our campus. Research has suggested a sense of belonging is vital and students who report loneliness and helplessness, low sense of belonging, and lack of friendships also report a low sense of achievement (Lin & Huang, 2012). Some studies have indicated that positive interpersonal relationships can provide a more positive learning community, resulting in students' positive academic outcomes (Martin & Dowson, 2009; Lambert, Rocconi, Ribera, Miller, & Dong, 2012; Roorda et al 2011; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). In addition, studies have also shown, lack of interpersonal relationships can lead to poor academic performance, lower attendance, and higher dropout rates (Fan, 2012; Vinson et al., 2010).

Research Questions

- R1: What role does having interpersonal relationships play among nontraditional college students with each other, faculty, and staff in fostering a sense of campus community?
- R2: How can a sense of campus community help students feel a sense of belonging?
- R3: How can a sense of campus community lead to students feeling their esteem needs are being met?

R4: How can a sense of campus community help students work to achieve self-actualization?

R5: How do students report their interpersonal relationships with each other, faculty, and staff motivate them to attend classes and complete their programs?

Purpose and Design of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of nontraditional college students and how these experiences motivated them. The study explored the role interpersonal relationships among students and peers, students and faculty, and students and staff play in fostering a sense of campus community at a private career and technical junior college. In addition, how students reported such relationships motivate their attendance and persistence at a private career and technical junior college was explored. This research will add to the limited literature in this area in hopes of improving the campus culture on college campuses. The findings from this study may be used to educate faculty and staff on how to promote more community building that may lead to nontraditional students feeling a greater sense of community on their campus.

A phenomenological design was used to understand the experiences of individuals or groups who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2009) further described a phenomenological study as one that describes the essence of the experience. This approach is suitable because the best way to understand the challenges a nontraditional learner faces is to hear it directly from him or her through in-depth interviews. According to Merriam (2009), “phenomenological research is well suited for studying affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences” (p. 26). It is such intense human experiences and emotions that enabled me to understand the shared, common experiences among the participants and gain a

more complete understanding of the answers to the research questions. The findings derived from the study have resulted in the understanding of a phenomenon as seen through the eyes of those who have experienced it. Phenomenology is suitable for exploring a phenomenon and understanding events and individuals, not just revealing that an event happened (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Phenomenology is a research design that encompasses several different approaches.

For this study, a hermeneutic/transcendental approach was used. Hermeneutics focuses on the art and science of interpretation and meaning (Moustakas, 1994). The meanings derived may not be final but something that can change as a result of new insights and interpretation. Hermeneutic phenomenology is therefore the study of experience together with the collective, shared meanings of these experiences. I was able to listen to and analyze the students' experiences and what these experiences mean to them using, the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA was selected as the method of analysis due to the approach having a psychological focus, which can offer insights into how a person, in a given situation, makes sense of a phenomenon or experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This method is distinct from other approaches, because of its combination of the psychological and interpretative components. The psychological focus was ideal for this study because Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the conceptual framework on which this study was based has a psychological foundation. At this point, transcendental phenomenology had an important role because as Moustakas (1994) asserted, this approach allows researchers to disengage their biases from the research. In addition, the researcher may also interview support staff to gain additional perspectives into the nontraditional student experience. The purpose of the interviews and observations was to gather information related to the experiences of nontraditional students at a private career and technical

junior college and how those experiences may help create a greater sense of campus community and motivate students' attendance and persistence.

The final product of this phenomenological study is a rich description that presents a better understanding of the group's collective experiences of the phenomenon studied—the role interpersonal relationships among nontraditional college students with each other, faculty, and staff play in fostering a sense of campus community. It gives the understanding that there is an essence of a shared experience. The readers of the study should have a sense of understanding what it is like to have experienced that particular phenomenon. As a result, educators reading the study may be able to better understand the emotions and difficulties experienced by nontraditional students. Therefore, they may be able to better address the unique needs of nontraditional students.

Instrumentation

The primary instruments in this study were semi-structured interviews and the researcher. The researcher is considered an instrument because he or she becomes involved in the study, first as the questions for the interview are developed, and then again as he or she becomes immersed in the data for analysis (Creswell, 2008). Creswell (2008) suggested some elements that are important in an interview are (a) the preparation for the interview; (b) the constructing effective research questions; and (c) the actual implementation of the interview. Without the researcher's preparation, interviews will not provide maximum benefit to the research study. McNamara (2009) suggested eight principles that are important in the preparation stage of interviewing: (1) choose a setting with little distraction; (2) explain the purpose of the interview; (3) address terms of confidentiality; (4) explain the format of the interview; (5) indicate how long the interview usually takes; (6) tell them how to get in touch with you later if they want to; (7) ask them if they

have any questions before you both get started with the interview; and (8) don't count on your memory to recall their answers. Creswell (2008) and McNamara (2009) provided a fundamental basis that I, the researcher, used as a guideline for interview preparation and implementation.

The primary method of data collection was approximately a single 2-hour, in-person interview of each of the 12 participants, at a convenient location on campus. The interviews were semi-structured to allow for follow-up questions. McNamara (2009) made some recommendations for creating effective questions for interviews, which include: (a) wording should be open-ended; (b) questions should be as neutral as possible; (c) questions should be asked one at a time; (d) questions should be clearly worded; and (e) be cautious asking "why" questions. I used McNamara (2009) as a basis for structuring interview questions. All the interview questions were clear, neutral, and open-ended. Lastly, when preparing questions, the interviewer, needs to be aware of assumptions made when asking the questions (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Keeping these considerations at the forefront, 16 interview questions were developed. Interview questions focusing on non-traditional student experiences, interpersonal relationships on campus, affiliations, sense of belonging, student motivation, and self-esteem were developed after a thorough review of literature (Lin & Huang, 2012; Maslow, 1943; McMillan and Chavis, 1986; Tinto, 2012). These interview questions were field tested on two volunteers prior to the official interviews to check for clarity.

McNamara (2009) made some additional suggestions for the preparation and implementation stage of the interview, including: (a) verify the recorder is working; (b) ask one question at a time; (c) remain as neutral as possible; (d) be encouraging with occasional nods or acknowledgments; (e) be cautious about note taking so it does not appear that a particular response pleased you; (f) provide transitions between topics; and (g) and don't lose control of the

interview. These suggestions assisted me in providing an environment where the students may have felt more comfortable and confident in answering their questions. Each participant received a phone call, text, or e-mail, reminding him or her of the scheduled interview. The students were asked for at least a 2-hour time commitment to ensure that the interviews were completed in the first meeting and additional interviews were not necessary. With each of the participant's permission, the interviews were recorded to allow for transcribing at a later time so there were no delays during the interview.

Research Population and Sampling Method

Students were given a flyer to explain the purpose of the study and to request they complete a self-referral by acknowledging they meet the criteria for the study and were interested in participating (Appendix A). There was a tear-off sheet on the recruitment flyer by which the potential participants acknowledged they met the criteria of being a nontraditional student, were at least 18-years old, have either completed their program or were within three modules of completion, and were willing to participate in an interview that could last up to two hours (Appendix A). Upon approval from the IRB, I approached students in public areas at the research site to provide equitable chances for inclusion in the study population (Appendix B). This was conducted in the student break rooms or student lounges. I stopped recruitment when sample target was met. Although, I sought 10 volunteers for the study, I recruited 12 as a plan to deal with withdrawal or "loss-to-follow-up." The deadline to complete the acknowledgment was 2 weeks from the time it was provided to the student.

A purposive sampling method was used to select the 12 nontraditional students who met the required criteria for the study. Once the participant was selected, she/he signed an informed consent before the interviews took place (Appendix C). Creswell (2007) suggested a sample

size of at least 10 participants, which ensures the purposeful selection of the sample meets the criteria set forth by The National Center of Education Statistics (2017) for being a nontraditional student and having experienced the phenomena to be studied. A nontraditional student is one who may include one or more of the following seven characteristics: entry to college delayed by at least one year following high school; having dependents; being a single parent; being employed full time; being financially independent; attending part time; and not having a high school diploma (The National Center of Education Statistics, 2017).

Moustakas (1994) provided the following criteria for selecting research participants: the research participant has experienced the phenomenon; is interested in understanding its nature and meanings; is willing to participate in a lengthy interview; is willing to participate in a follow-up interview if needed; grants the investigator the right to record or videotape the interview; and grants the investigator the right to publish the data in a dissertation and other publications. Students who indicated a willingness to participate in the study on the questionnaire received a follow-up email, within 3 days, to schedule an interview if they were selected to participate in the study. For those who did not meet the criteria, an email response was provided thanking them for their time and informed them the study was bound by a narrow design and they did not match the demographic sought.

Data Collection

According to Creswell (2009), the four basic methods for collecting data are the following: observations, interviews, document analysis, and audio and visual analysis (Creswell, 2009). Upon approval from the campus director semi-structured interviews were used to gather data (Appendix D). Creswell (2008) stated interviews are considered the main method of collecting data in phenomenological research; therefore, it is the method of data collection that

was used in the study. An interview script was used to guide the data collection process (Appendix E).

Data Analysis Procedures

As the researcher, I analyzed the data. I transcribed the interviews, and used the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyze the data (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA must include the following steps: (a) determining what is unique to a participant and what is shared among the participants; (b) description of the experience which moves to an interpretation of the experience; (c) a commitment to understanding the participant's point of view; and (d) psychological focus on personal meaning within a particular context (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In efforts to complete the IPA, transcripts were reviewed and patterns identified themes in the participant responses to determine what was unique and what was shared among the group. The transcripts were coded to aid in the analysis of the data and to determine themes within the responses (Creswell, 2009). According to the IPA process, suggested by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), initial noting was conducted, including descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments (Smith et al., 2009).

Developing descriptive comments on the interview transcripts is the first stage of the analysis in IPA. These comments described the data in terms of key themes and phrases or any participants' emotional responses. The next step in the IPA process is evaluating how content and meaning were presented linguistically in the interview transcripts. This step allowed the researcher to understand the meaning behind the words of the participant by considering pauses, repetition, laughter, and pronoun and/or metaphor use (Smith et al., 2009). During the third, and final, stage of analysis, the researcher shifted to an interpretive level of analysis by making conceptual comments. In this final step, the key concepts and themes started to become more

apparent in the analysis of the data. The key themes would be reflected not only in the participants' words but also in the researcher's interpretations. The descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments played a key role in the analysis by supporting the development of the key themes.

Limitations of the Research Design

Qualitative research can be difficult to conduct and has limitations (Creswell, 2007). In this study, data collection included large amounts of notes and recordings that I, as the researcher, needed to sort, transcribe, and organize. Furthermore, limitations of this study restricted its generalizability. According to Van Manen (1990), phenomenological research can restrict the generalizability of a study given that the sample sizes are often small. The researcher cannot give assurance that the experiences of the sample are typical. Furthermore, the sample was limited to 12 nontraditional students at a private career and technical college; thus, the results will not be generalizable to greater populations. However, the results may be transferable. In addition, due to the nature of the data, it can be difficult to establish validity. It is difficult to verify that the researcher used bracketing, without which there can be interferences in the way the data are interpreted. Furthermore, participants may have had difficulties in expressing themselves or may not have expressed themselves honestly, which can also interfere with the way data were received. Validating the truthfulness of the interviews is not an option. I, the researcher, am employed with the institution and that may present a bias as some the participants may have been familiar with me. Lastly, the results of a qualitative study can be difficult to present in a manner that is usable by educators because it is difficult to understand the phenomenon studied from the participants' perspective. The facts are presented only through the

students' responses; and it is through these lived experiences that we can attempt to gain a better understanding of how intrapersonal relationships on campus may have motivated students.

Validation

According to Creswell (2009), validity is measured to determine the degree to which it measures the data collected for analysis. To ensure maximum validity of the interview method for data collection, the interview questions were carefully designed to address the research questions. Interview questions focusing on non-traditional student experiences, interpersonal relationships on campus, affiliations, sense of belonging, student motivation, and self-esteem were developed after a thorough review of literature (Lin & Huang, 2012; Maslow, 1943; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Tinto, 2012). The interview questions were field tested on two volunteers prior to the official interviews to check for clarity. The research questions sought to request in-depth information about the main research areas.

Credibility is a criterion that will aid the researcher in establishing that the results of the study are credible from the perspective of the participants in the research. Since it is the lived experiences of the participants who were studied, they were thought to be the best judges of credibility. According to Creswell (2009), credibility is achieved as the researcher analyzes the data by reflecting, sifting, exploring, judging its relevance and meaning, and developing themes and essences that accurately represent the phenomenon experienced or studied. Credibility also was established by sending participants their transcripts for member checking within 30 days of the interview. Each participant reviewed his or her transcript for accuracy.

Dependability emphasizes the need for the researcher to account for the context within which research occurs. I described any changes that occurred in the setting and if or how these changes affected the way I approached the study. Furthermore, I, achieved dependability by

maintaining authenticity when reporting the findings of the study. Authenticity was achieved by reporting each participant's experiences in a way that it maintains respect for the context of the data and presents all perspectives equally. Lastly, as suggested by Moustakas (1994), I set aside any biases, beliefs, habitual modes of thought, and judgments by using a process called bracketing. This process is a large part of epoche which allows us to see things in such a way that we see only what stands before our eyes.

Expected Findings

I expected to gain a deeper understanding of the role interpersonal relationships among nontraditional college students with each other, faculty, and staff play in fostering a sense of campus community at a private career and technical junior college. One of the main challenges nontraditional students face is the inability to integrate into their academic setting (Munro, 2011). I expected to identify common themes among the participants that would aid the faculty and staff in creating a greater sense of community on campus. Therefore, I believe a greater sense of campus community will motivate student attendance and persistence.

Ethical Issues

Ethical issues were given the utmost importance during the entire duration of the study. According to Creswell (2009), the researcher needs to anticipate any ethical issues that may arise during the research process. It was the responsibility of the researcher to protect her or his research participants by developing trust with them, promoting and maintaining the integrity of the research, safeguarding against misconduct that might reflect on their institutions, and cope with new challenging problems (Creswell, 2009). In efforts to gain the trust of the participants, they were given an informed consent form to sign, and establish their acceptance to participate in the study (Appendix C). Furthermore, the informed consent gave the participants the assurance

that they were given sufficient facts to determine if their participation in the study was safe and worthwhile. The participants were also aware that they could withdraw from the study at any point, without any repercussions. Both the researcher and the participants will keep a copy of the consent form for their records.

I protected the confidentiality of the participants by not using actual names that could be linked to the participants' identities; transcribing interviews in a private setting to ensure privacy and confidentiality; ensuring all electronic recording devices containing data obtained in the research is only accessible to the researcher; and the participants' identity was not on any written notes. The researcher also stored all collected data on a private external hard drive that is pass-code protected and locked in a cabinet when not being used by the researcher. Once the data was transcribed all audio recordings were deleted. Furthermore, once data are analyzed, all private information collected will be destroyed after a period of 3 years.

Conflict of Interest Assessment

There were no predicted conflicts of interests; financial or non-financial, indirect or direct that could impact the research. Furthermore, no conflict of interest related to human subjects' research is anticipated. I reduced the risk by not including any current or past students in the study.

Researcher's Position

Moustakas (1994) asserted one of the challenges a researcher faces in phenomenological research is to arrive at a topic and question that have both social meaning and personal significance. The social meaning of this study was to reveal possible difficulties experienced by nontraditional students. The study revealed both positive and negative interactions that can be useful in professional development for staff and faculty. The personal significance is that I have

been a nontraditional student. Therefore, I understand the struggles a nontraditional student can face. As an instructor, this can have a positive impact on my experiences with the students. However, on the other hand, my personal experiences can make it difficult to ensure pure bracketing. Without bracketing, data interpretation can be difficult. As a result, it can be difficult to identify or to prevent researcher induced bias.

There are several approaches to phenomenology available in qualitative research; however, due to the personal significance of the study to me, I used a transcendental approach to phenomenology. According to Moustakas (1994) transcendental phenomenology allows researchers to disengage their biases from the research. With this approach, I was able to remove myself from the research using epoche, thus limiting bias and remaining only a researcher or observer and listening to the participants (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). In phenomenological methodology, epoche is the first step in gaining understanding of things, issues, and ideas. However, the greatest challenge of the epoche is to be to have no position or stance and view the situation from the most vital aspects. Moustakas (1994) stated epoche is a way of perceiving life in its most essential forms: looking, noticing, becoming aware without passing a judgment on what we see, think, imagine or feel. As a result of this essence of the experience, we are able to gain a deeper level of understanding of the event or situation.

As the researcher, I had a fresh perspective as I heard the lived experiences of the subjects. My only assumption was that nontraditional students have different life experiences, thus, prioritizing college differently from traditional students. The differences could include family obligations, financial obligations, and a variety of stressors resulting from the students being nontraditional learners. The stressors could include role conflict among being a student, a parent, an employee, and other social relationships. Some employers may not accommodate the

demands of college students and expect employees to continue their job responsibilities regardless of school obligations. Furthermore, some employers may not be willing to accommodate school schedules. Therefore, nontraditional students may have jobs prior to entering college as a means of supporting their family and often prioritize their jobs over school to maintain their family's financial obligations.

Summary

This chapter presented a research design comprised of a phenomenological methodology, based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), to gain more insight into the experiences of nontraditional college students at a private career and technical college. A detailed research plan was presented. The research plan included the methods such as semi-structured interviews that were used to gain a deeper understanding of the role interpersonal relationships among nontraditional college students with each other, faculty, and staff play in fostering a sense of campus community at a private career and technical junior college. Furthermore, I explored how these experiences motivated student attendance and persistence. I am optimistic that the study will add to the limited literature in this area and can be used to educate faculty and staff on how to establish a greater sense of community on campus thus improving the campus culture and positively motivating students.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis and Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate if/how the interpersonal relationships among nontraditional college students with each other, faculty, and staff play a role in fostering a sense of campus community at a private career and technical education junior college. Additionally, the connections among a sense of campus community and students feeling a sense of belonging, increase in their self-esteem, and achieving self-actualization as Maslow defines it was explored. Lastly, I explored if students who report feeling a sense of community at a private career and technical education junior college were motivated to attend classes and complete their programs.

I sought to answer the research questions through semi-structured interviews that aided me in gaining a deeper understanding of the role interpersonal relationships among nontraditional college students with each other, faculty, and staff play in fostering a sense of campus community at a private career and technical junior college. In addition, I obtained more insight into how these experiences motivate student attendance and persistence. The interviews provided rich, significant, and meaningful statements about the experiences the participants had in the pursuit of their education at a private career and technical education junior college. The interviews revealed both positive experiences and complexities experienced by these students. In this chapter, I will elaborate on these experiences by revealing key concepts and themes that became more apparent during the duration of the study.

Setting for Study

The study took place at a for-profit private junior college located in California. The college has an on-ground and online division. Furthermore, the college offers both certificate

programs and Associate of Science degrees, offering career training in several fields. The degree program takes 14 months to complete and consists of no more than two 5-week classes, which are referred to as modules.

The campus population consists of many students from single income households. A majority of the students are living below the poverty guidelines lines. More than half of them are currently unemployed and returned to school in hopes for looking more marketable in the workforce. There are a very small percentage of students that are coming directly out of high school.

Description of the Sample

The selection of participants was the first step in gathering the information needed for the study. A recruitment flyer was distributed in which the potential participants acknowledged they met the criteria of being a nontraditional student, were at least 18-years old, have either completed their program or were within three modules of completion, and were willing to participate in an interview that could last up to two hours. Purposive sampling was used to select 12 nontraditional students, from the self-selected pool of possible participants, at a private career and technical junior college in California. Creswell (2007) suggested a sample size of at least 10 participants was suitable for a phenomenological study. I recruited 12 participants to ensure that I have enough data and to have a plan in place for participants who might have terminated their participation before the study was complete or those who did not follow through on their appointments. All 12 participants did complete their interviews and were included in the study.

In recruiting participants, I wanted to ensure the sample was representative of the entire campus population. I attempted to recruit students from all three sessions and from all of the programs. I was able to recruit six morning students, two afternoon students, and four evening

students. The participants recruited from each session correlate with the census in each session because the college has the greatest number of students attending in the morning session and the least during the afternoon session. Of the participants, eight were female and four were male. This is also representative of the campus population, considering about 70% of the student population is female (Gardner, 2016).

In phenomenological research, a description of the participants is an important component. A detailed description of the participant helps the reader become more absorbed in the research, better understanding the lived experiences of the participants. The participants in this study were asked a series of questions in which they described themselves and their educational experiences. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants with the information they provided during the interview on the next page. All participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity and some identifying information may have been omitted for the purpose of confidentiality.

Table 1

Participant Summary

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Number of nontraditional characteristics that apply
Araceli	F	36	3
Celeste	F	39	2
Shelly	F	32	3
Lisa	F	24	4
Mary	F	22	2
Mandy	F	28	2
Ricky	M	44	5
Rose	F	22	4
Jerry	M	25	2
Brady	M	22	3
Ron	M	47	2
Grace	F	38	5

Research Methodology and Analysis

A phenomenological qualitative study, based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), was used to answer the research questions on which the study was based. The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of nontraditional college students and how these experiences motivated them to attend classes and complete their programs. The study further explored the role interpersonal relationships among students and peers, students and faculty, and

students and staff played in fostering a sense of campus community. Furthermore, how students reported these relationships motivated their attendance and persistence was explored.

A phenomenological design was suitable because understanding the experiences of a nontraditional learner is appropriate when heard directly from him or her through in-depth interviews. The individual interviews ranged in time from 22 minutes to 61 minutes. It was through these interviews that I examined the affective, emotional, and intense experiences the participants had during their program. These experiences and emotions gave me a more complete understanding of the answers to the research questions on which the study was based. Phenomenology is a research design that incorporates several different approaches. For this study, a hermeneutic/transcendental approach was used. Hermeneutics allowed me to focus on the interpretation and meaning of what the participant revealed. Not only was I able to understand the experiences the participants had, but also the meanings of these experiences.

I used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyze the data. During the analysis I focused on: (a) determining what is unique and what is shared among the participants; (b) description of the experience which moves to an interpretation of the experience; (c) a commitment to understanding the participant's point of view; and (d) psychological focus on personal meaning within a particular context (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In completing the IPA, I read the transcripts several times and sought any patterns or themes in the participant responses. As suggested by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), I conducted initial noting, including descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. The descriptive noting described the data in terms of key themes, phrases, and emotional responses. Initially, I created a table of meaningful statements derived from the participants' responses determining what is unique to a participant and what is shared among the participants as seen on the following page.

Table 2

Meaningful Statements Derived from Descriptive Noting

	Shelly	Celeste	Araceli	Lisa	Mary	Mandy	Ricky	Rose	Jerry	Brady	Ron	Grace
Interactions with students played a positive role in their education		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Sharing the journey with others		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Classmates are a support system		X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Participated in campus clubs	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X		X
Instructor's belief in them made them want to try harder		X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Understanding instructor was important to them		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Communication and consistency from instructors	X			X	X				X			
Negative experience with an instructor	X				X				X		X	X
Significant interactions with the campus director	X	X	X	X							X	
Negative experiences with a Dean	X	X	X	X	X			X				X
Admissions team was motivational		X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X		X
Front-desk staff provided a sense of comfort	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Career-services influenced self-esteem	X	X	X	X	X				X	X	X	X
Would I fit in	X	X		X	X	X	X		X		X	X
Interactions influenced self-esteem	X	X		X	X	X			X		X	X
Some interactions influenced sense of belonging	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Always felt welcome			X				X	X		X		
Interactions and affiliations improved their confidence		X		X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Interactions with faculty lowered self-esteem or self-confidence	X				X	X			X		X	
This degree is a stepping stone	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Achieved personal growth during their education	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Very little confidence in their success when they first began the program	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Considered dropping out	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Wanted to drop out due to negative experiences with an instructor	X				X						X	
Interpersonal relationships motivated student to persist	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Linguistic noting was more challenging. In completing the linguistic noting, I listened to the audio recordings of the interviews making notes on the interview transcripts. This step allowed me to identify the meanings behind statements by considering pauses, repetition, laughter, and/or any other significant occurrences. During the third, and final, stage of analysis, I shifted to an interpretive level of analysis by making conceptual comments. In this final step, the key concepts and themes started becoming more apparent. The key themes were a result of both the participants' words and the researcher's interpretations as seen in Table 3. The descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments played an important role in the analysis by supporting the development of the key themes.

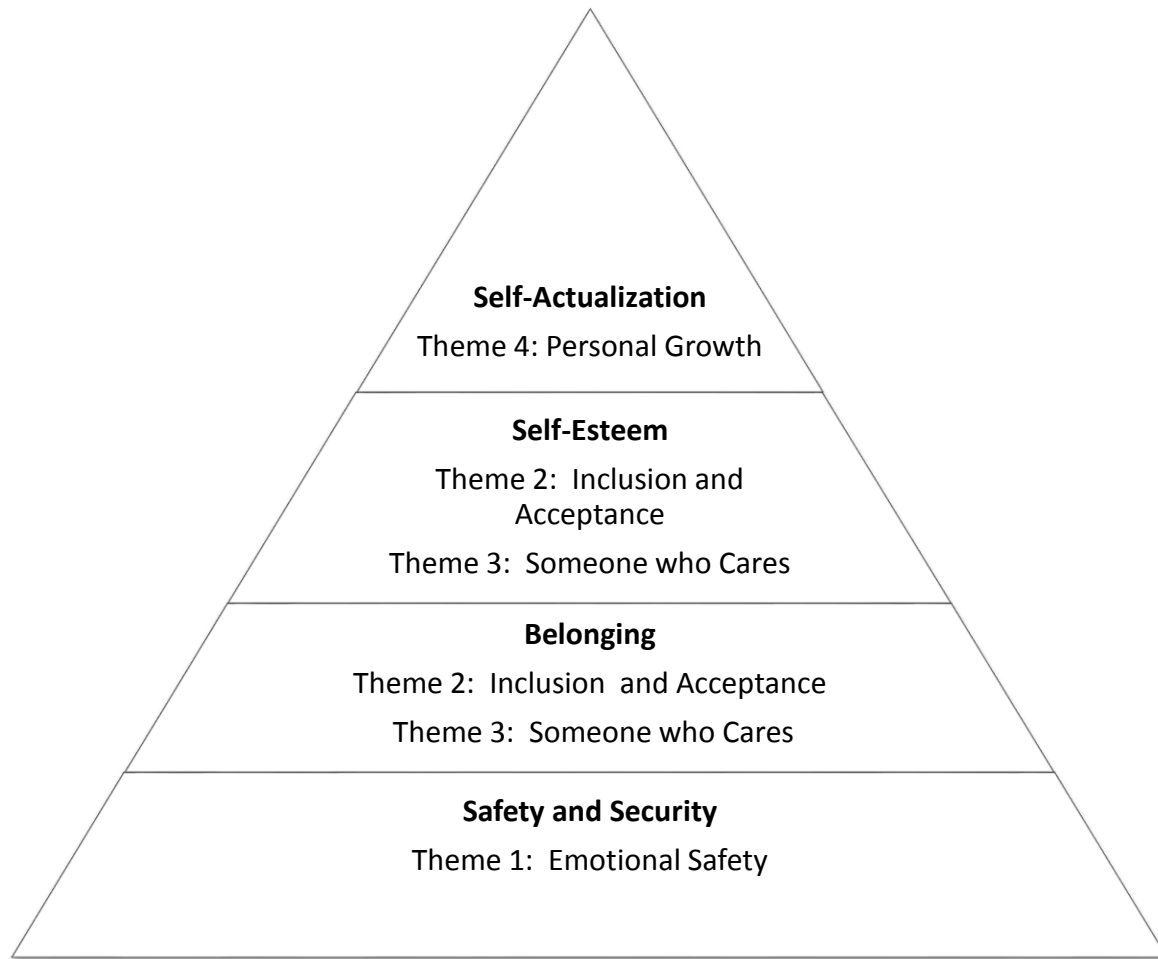
Table 3

Development of Themes

Emotional Safety	Inclusion and Acceptance	Someone Who Cares	Personal Growth
Communication and consistency from instructors	Interactions with students played a positive role in their education	Referred to other students as a support system	This degree is a stepping stone for future endeavors
Some interactions influenced self-esteem	Sharing the journey with other students	Instructor's belief in them made them want to try harder	Achieved personal growth during their education
Some interactions influenced sense of belonging	Participated in campus clubs or committees	Negative experience with an instructor	
Interactions and affiliations improved their confidence	Significant interactions with the campus director	Admissions team was motivational	
Very little confidence when they first began the program	Would I fit in	Negative experiences with a Dean	
Front-desk staff provided a sense of comfort	Always felt welcome	Dissatisfaction with the financial-aid team	
Career-services personnel influenced self-esteem	Considered dropping out	Understanding instructor was important to them	
Interactions with faculty lowered Esteem or confidence	Wanted to drop out as a result of negative experiences with an instructor	Interpersonal relationships motivated student to persist	

Summary of the Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of nontraditional college students and how these experiences motivated them. The data for this study came from 12 semi-structured interviews of nontraditional students. I listened to the audio recordings and read the interview transcripts several times, and conducted the initial noting by making descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments on the transcripts. Furthermore, I highlighted recurring statements, key concepts, and themes in different colors as they became apparent. The findings in this chapter are summarized by the themes identified through the analysis of the semi-structured interviews transcripts. The data revealed four themes. The themes include (a) emotional safety; (b) inclusion and acceptance; (c) someone who cares; and (d) personal growth. Each of the identified themes relates to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), the framework on which this study is based as seen on the Figure 1 Connecting the Themes.



Connecting the Themes

Figure 1. Each of the identified themes as they relate to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), the framework on which this study is based.

Theme 1: Emotional safety. The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (2017) defined emotional safety as a feeling achieved when one feels safe and able to express emotions, feelings of security; and confidence to take risks, feel challenged, and excited to try something new. During the interviews, 8 of 12 participants spoke about instances where one's emotional safety was impacted by their interpersonal relationships. It can be difficult for a student to focus on learning when he or she does not feel emotionally safe or

comfortable in the learning environment. Furthermore, lack of such emotional safety led to some participants feeling their esteem needs were not being met. Shelly shared one such experience.

This school is very different compared to other schools I have attended. Here classes are smaller, and they are very personal. I have had some very bad experiences here with instructors and students. It made it very difficult to continue my studies. I had to spend a lot of outside time studying, because I didn't get what I needed in the class room. It brought my self-esteem down a lot. It was also very hard to come to class when you are the one person who really wants to learn, and all the others are verbally attacking you, or treating you differently because you want to be a person who wants to study, while others want to joke around and slack off. I felt alienated. I was ready to quit and drop out. I could not handle the emotional stress. I just did not want to be here. I would have rather given up.

It was difficult for Shelly to share her situation. There were times that she had to take long pauses and a few times she became emotional and teary eyed. Another student shared a similar situation he had experienced. Jerry shared a negative experience he had that still aggravated him as he shared the story. He was very still until he began sharing this situation. However, as he described this situation, he began fidgeting with a pen he had nearby. Several times he was heard sighing.

Faculty sometimes have attitude, and it makes them hard to work with. I was doing a presentation one time and I was the last one to present. The instructor actually told me to hurry up several times. She looked bored and did not pay attention to my presentation at all. It really bothered me. I was much less confident during the presentation than I thought I would have been. I felt she had no interest and me as a student or a person. I

definitely did not feel like I belong there. How can she provide feedback if she didn't even listen? The feedback did not even have to be positive. Even negative feedback makes you feel like they care because they want you to improve. It would motivate me to try harder.

It is difficult for students to feel emotional safety if they are sensing negativity in their classroom as was shared by Shelly and Jerry. It is reiterated one more time by Ron as he shared, "Conflict between teachers impacted our learning in class. That healthy competition turned unhealthy. We got cheated. There was a disconnect. I felt like a victim of their issues. My grades had slipped, and I feel it was a result of this disconnect."

The experiences shared by participants were not all negative. There were also some positive emotions and experiences shared. Mandy, said being in campus clubs helped her stand out and talk to more people. They helped her meet more people and interact with them. She was able to leave her comfort zone and become more confident. "I can actually go up to someone and start a conversation which is something I could not do when I started school here." She struggled when she first started because she was home schooled and struggled with all of the new people. "I had a lot of trouble fitting in. I couldn't make my place in the group, and that often bothered me."

Many students needed a sense of emotional security in the beginning. Several students reported feeling lost during the beginning of their program. Mary said, "On my first day I was so scared. I sat in the front and did not know anybody. I felt so lost. At the end of the day, my instructor told me I was one of the best students." She described that the comment at the end of the first day gave her a sense of feeling safe and helped her return the next day. Mary went on to share another situation in which the first contact team at the front desk provided her with a

sense of security. She was experiencing some medical problems, and the first contact helped her cope with it. She said, “I was falling apart and just broke down in the lobby.” They were a comforting presence for her, which lead to a special connection. Mary shared, not only did the first contact team motivate her to go back to class; they provided her with a strong sense of emotional safety.

Some students sought emotional security once they had begun their education here, while others enrolled in hopes of finding emotional security. Celeste was one such student. She had to push herself to be independent. She did not want to need to rely on anybody. “I worked in real-estate and lost my job when the market crashed. I felt lost.” She felt a career in the medical field would always be high in demand. “It makes me feel secure knowing this.” She further said, “Life provided me with many barriers in my education. I really struggled with my divorce. It led to a lot of frustration. School helps me cope with the negativity.” Lastly, Grace shared a similar experience. She returned to school after 20 years, was self-employed, and working full-time. Her concerns and anxieties were resulting in her having constant panic attacks while at school. She said, “I put so much into school, and my family is often a barrier. Having a different schedule is a barrier. I missed things, and it is not a good feeling. I hated missing games.” She stated that although she was physically comfortable, “emotionally she was a mess.” Her panic attacks made it a struggle to even interact with others.

Theme 2: Inclusion and acceptance. Human beings have a need for inclusion and social acceptance. There is a natural need to feel a part of something. Inclusion demonstrates acceptance and promotes a sense of belonging for all. Every participant interviewed shared situations and emotions where either being accepted or included increased his or her sense of campus community and resulted in a greater sense of belonging or negatively impacted their

educational experience because they did not feel a sense of belonging. Celeste shared such an experience:

I think all my instructors were all very warm and welcoming. They did not condemn me or make me feel like an outcast in front of the class for not having completed an assignment. Just the instructors having that understanding made it easier to attend class without the assignment.

On the other hand, Shelly shared that she felt like the odd one out for wanting to learn. She did not fit in with any one in some of her program classes and it made it difficult for her to attend school. She stated,

I had a situation with an instructor where she appeared to not want to be an instructor. She wanted to be a “hommie” or fit in with the popular students more than teach. Class seemed like more of a gossip session. She made the class environment very negative. I did not feel I belong with them.

Similar situations were shared by some of the other students as well. Mary expressed that these experiences motivated her to not attend classes. She felt, instructors had an impact on her wanting to attend classes. Comments from instructors such as: I cannot do anything for you, that was a stupid question, or why would you even ask me that caused unnecessary embarrassment and awkwardness for this student. She shared another experience of an instructor sitting at her desk and interacting with some students, yet, ignoring others. She stated, “It was really frustrating. I did not feel like I belonged in that class because I could not go to her with questions. Things like this made me hate the class. I always wanted to ditch.” Lastly, Grace expressed that there were cliques that were difficult to join. She said she enjoyed her classmates, yet, sometimes she had to fight to belong. However, once she was able to become a part of the

clique, there was a family like feeling. She said, “I could turn to them on and off campus for rides, texting for homework help, or anything that I needed.” She expressed that they helped her be successful and complete her program.

Some of the students expressed that being included and accepted gave them a sense of belonging and being wanted. Araceli stated, “All my instructors were good. I had a great time. I felt like I belonged in class. I liked being given responsibilities. I liked being able to give input on the business program. It made me feel welcome and important.” Whereas Araceli was feeling good about herself, Lisa began questioning her decision to join the program. She was the only female in her program at the time and struggled to fit in. She said a few months into the program she felt like she should have selected a program “more fit for a girl.” After a few modules, her program instructor was able to help her in making a place for herself. She said,

He made me feel like I belong in the industry. He made me believe in myself. If he didn’t care to tell me these things, I would have dropped out a long time ago. His belief led to my believing in myself and continuing. It made me want to be more successful. Jerry shared a similar experience. He said he has a medical problem that has prevented him from getting a job so far. He wants a job that would provide him with financial security, a place of his own, a place where he can raise a family eventually. He said, “With my medical problems, the family type of feeling on campus has really given me the confidence to continue.” He also said, “When I first got here my problem was very apparent, and I felt very uneasy, but everybody made themselves available and welcomed me with open arms.” He shared that he was frustrated and self-conscious in the beginning. “I was scared to step out and face my insecurities because my problem was visible.” He felt like people could see it and would judge him. However, nobody judged him. He spoke about how much it means to him when a certain instructor

answers his texts. “She makes me feel like I belong and she cares. I can ask questions about a class she is not even teaching, and she still helps me. She tells us to call or text, and that makes a difference. I know she has my back.”

Theme 3: Someone who cares. Someone who cares about students is essential for improving their perception of the campus community. Caring can be described as displaying kindness and concern for others. Interpersonal relationships can be formed when someone cares and such relationships were important to the participants. Eight students discussed a caring member of the campus team or another student that affected their education in some way. They expressed feeling that if someone cared about them they, feel respected and it led to them having greater self-confidence. Celeste shared one such positive experience:

I wanted to continue trying because I belong somewhere and someone cares. One instructor was always there for me. She kept me going when I didn't think I could. It made me believe her. It was really hard to go back to school at my age. Her positive words and motivation really helped me succeed.

Sometimes hearing that someone cares about one’s success reminds a student of his or her goals. Rickey felt one instructor always made him feel like he was doing the right thing It reinforced the need for him to continue his education. Another student, Brady said, “Their faith in me really matters. If they think I can do it—I can.” Students shared similar stories about various members of the campus team. Araceli shared,

Career Services impacted my self-esteem greatly. She helped with my resume and helped me go from a very small resume to a full page. I never realized what I was capable of until I saw it on paper. I always felt welcome, like she really cared. She prepared me for my career by making me realize what I was capable of.

Araceli also mentioned that some instructors are great mentors. She said, “They helped my confidence grow when they notice what I do and congratulate me.” Being acknowledged for what she worked is something that made her feel good. “It feels like my hard work is rewarded.” Araceli said. One instructor gave her the confidence to get through a class she struggled with. She said, “I know you can do it. She had confidence in me, and it meant a lot.”

Students did not want to disappoint those that cared. Lisa shared,

The Director was the reason why I really feel I pushed through. I always felt like I was connected to her. I looked at her as a mentor. She told me she believed in me and if I really wanted to do it, I could. When I thought about not coming to class or dropping out, I thought of her. People who believed in me, I could not let them down. I wanted to show them I could do it and make them proud. They really made me believe in myself, and it got me through the program.

Several students mentioned the front desk staff and what a difference they made in their lives. Jerry shared that they always smile and are cheerful. “They know me by name, and that makes me feel important. I am not just a paying student but a part of this family.” Another student said that their smile is the first thing he sometimes sees after a really bad day. Ricky further added, “It is like walking in the door at home.” Celeste shared,

When I was on leave, she would ask when I was coming back. It felt like she really cares about me. She noticed I was gone and cared about my returning. It made me feel like I belong on campus and that impacted my completing school.

When asked a similar question Lisa said,

The front desk staff knew who I was by name and that was nice. It made me feel like I belong at the school. That feeling of belonging made me want to continue on because it

would disappoint others if I didn't. I care what others think. It makes or breaks me.

Others knowing me on campus really pushed me to want to graduate.

The admission team was another area about which students shared many positive experiences. The admissions team is the first point of contact for the students. Many expressed that talking to their admissions advisor was like talking to a friend. Rickey said, "He didn't seem like a sales person. He followed up and knows my name even now. He cares about my progress. It makes me want to do even better. He cares beyond just enrolling me." Jerry remembered his admissions advisor as his mentor. He said, "He is always positive, and I want to be like him. In my darkest days, I have thought back to what he would do. I would not want to disappoint him. He was my motivation to be here." The admission team as being a constant presence in the students' lives was important to them. It made them feel valued as more than another enrollment. Although each student had one assigned admissions advisor, the other members of the team were available to assist them as needed. Mary shared that they always spoke to her about things going on in her life and school. Mary said,

Just knowing they were proud of us made me really motivated. He was a constant presence throughout my time here. It really motivated me to try harder because I knew he would ask how my grades were next time he saw me and I did not want to disappoint. He provided me with a real sense of belonging, boosted my self-confidence, and made my self-esteem increase as a result.

Although many students made positive references to caring individuals, there were several negative references, too. Many students expressed difficulties in approaching one of the campus deans. Araceli expressed that although the dean answered all of her questions, sometimes when she had issues she wasn't sure if she could go to her. She stated, "My

interactions weren't too bad. She is less intimidating than what others think." When students think someone is intimidating it is difficult for them to approach the individual. Shelly expressed something similar. Shelly said, "The dean was actually kind of rough to approach. She seems a bit unapproachable at times. I was very intimidated and had trouble vocalizing myself. She does not really make me feel welcome." Other students also expressed a negative attitude from this individual. Celeste said, "The dean was always negative. I would have to delay my completion, but she was not willing to help me find a solution where I was able to complete my program instead of taking a leave of absence." The students are dependent on the deans, and some felt that their education could have been impacted because of this individual. Lisa expressed her feeling by saying,

The dean was very snarky. I really avoided having to go see her. To me, it did not feel like she cared much. Anytime I needed her to fill out my child care forms she would just lag on them or forget them. She would tell me to come back the next day and then would take the day off. She could have affected my educational journey by not filling out my forms because, without childcare, I would not be able to attend school. She didn't care whether I came to school or finished.

Mary had some concerns and issues in her final few weeks of school and required the dean's immediate assistance. She said,

The dean never really made me feel welcome. She always made negative remarks. Her negativity led to me procrastinating in things I needed to do. It really made me less confident in myself. She did not see the importance and urgency in doing certain things. I did not feel like I should go see her. She asked me one day why I want everything so fast. Well, that is why I am here.

Araceli shared that she wanted to help a classmate who was having problems and lived far away. “The dean was giving her attitude about it,” Araceli said. She asked Araceli to go to the dean’s office with her. Araceli further said,

I know a lot of students who have trouble going to the Dean. Maybe she could have less of an attitude, and that would make students more comfortable to go to her. Some students are not motivated just because of this aspect of going to her.

All the evening students interviewed expressed their dissatisfaction with availability of staff in the evening session. They felt as if though they were not cared about just because they attend in the evening. Rose said, “Career services need more flexible hours. I feel so unsatisfied because I would be done with my CSS100 if they were available when I needed. It is so frustrating. They don’t have a time for me.” CSS100 is a course designed to assist students with the skills needed to enter a professional environment and networking in their field of study. In order to graduate from the college, all students must complete the CSS100 course. Failing to do so can result in delays in graduation or externship. It is important to the students that campus staff be available on campus during all sessions. A different student, Ricky said, “I have never seen the campus director, and I have been here over a year. In the evening, we are a bit of an afterthought. We work just as hard as others. It would be nice if the director or dean saw us working hard.” Ron shared a similar sentiment when he said, “I have no idea who the director is. It would have been nice to meet them. You know, if they had an I’m going to take care of you guys kind of approach.”

All of the students expressed that some caring students have been a strong source of support for them. As friends, they motivated each other to come to class and provided a strong sense of encouragement and support. Lisa shared, “I would get one call from each one if I

missed a day. They always reached out and made me feel like I belong in class.” Celeste expressed her relationships with other students also played an important role in her completing the program. Celeste said, “A student reassured me that I was doing the right thing and we could share the journey together.” Jerry shared that other students are like his family and make him feel like he belongs in class with them. They help if he missed a day, reach out when he is not there, helped if the instructor is unavailable, and go over homework that he may have missed. Jerry said, “It means so much because they care if I succeed.” On the other hand, Rose shared how disenfranchised she felt when she became separated from her cohort. She said,

I was a part of a group and then got separated. It was hard. I was very nervous. They were my support system. They made me want to come back every day. My succeeding was important to them. They helped me become a part of something bigger and better.

Feelings, such as what Rose and the others were experiencing, were consistent among the other students. Knowing someone cares about them boosted their confidence and self-esteem.

Theme 4: Personal Growth

I found personal growth occurred with all 12 of these college students as they took their courses and began gaining much beyond just the academic benefits the college has to offer. Through their courses, guidance of staff/faculty, and support of fellow students they developed attitudes and skills that helped them gain confidence, better understand themselves and the world around them, and work well with others. Each student interviewed expressed that they have seen themselves change and grow during the duration of their programs. Such personal growth has helped students work towards achieving self-actualization.

When students were asked about their feelings of self-fulfillment and accomplishment, Celeste said,

My confidence has grown a lot. I can talk to others more easily. I am more open to this because I have higher self-esteem. I have reached my goals, but this is an ongoing journey. I have a way to go. I want to go beyond this program and accomplish my bachelor's and maybe even my master's.

Araceli had similar feelings. She said,

From day one to now, I have seen my confidence and self-esteem grow a lot. I didn't think I was going to make it, but I did. It is a really rewarding feeling to have finished. Meeting everybody through this journey helped a lot too. I wasn't alone. We did it together.

Shelly shared a similar sentiment as she shared,

As I am nearing the end of the program, I see tremendous changes in myself. I had nothing when I started, but today I have so much. I have an education, I have my state and national license, and I have my dream job. My education here has given me that opportunity. I am still working towards my long terms goals, but I feel self-fulfilled.

Lisa said the connections she made really helped her feel like she belonged and had a place on campus which gave her more self-confidence. She said,

I had to be successful. Now that I have finished it makes me feel really good knowing I accomplished something. I have reached my goals and have accomplished what I wanted but there is so much more I want to do.

Mary felt that her education was more of a transformational journey. She said,

I feel I have grown into a different person now. I was so shy when I started. I now have so much more confidence. My experiences with being in clubs or being a peer mentor

helped me get to know so many more people. My self-esteem has grown a lot. I have reached my goals for now, but it is an ongoing journey.

Brady had a similar transformational experience. He expressed, “This school is a stepping stone. It made me feel so different about myself. We have all changed so much. I am a different and more confident version of myself. I am ready to conquer the world.” Jerry and Rose both expressed feeling like a different person. Their experiences made them want to do better. Each small success made them more determined to finish and succeed. However, although they both felt fulfilled, for now, they would like to move on and accomplish more. Mandy felt, “If you finish you will succeed in life and have a world of opportunities. Faculty gave me this vision to work towards, and I have just about made it. It is the best feeling.”

Presentation of the Data and Results

As the results and data of this phenomenological study are presented, the initial research questions upon which this study was based will be answered. Creswell (2003) suggested, in a qualitative study, the researcher needs to state research questions. Five such research questions guided this study. In answering these research questions, a sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This definition is important in answering research questions 1-4. Furthermore, interpersonal relationships are social associations, connections, or affiliations between two or more people (Husain, 2012). This definition is important in answering both research questions 1 and 5.

Research question 1. The first research question asked what role does having interpersonal relationships play among nontraditional college students with each other, faculty,

and staff in fostering a sense of campus community. During the interviews, participants reported several ways in which their interpersonal relationships with each other, faculty, and staff play a role in fostering a sense of community. Having a feeling that someone cares has helped the participants feel a sense of emotional safety.

Interpersonal relationships among students. All participants reported that their relationships with other students played an important role in their education. Eleven of the 12 students said that these interactions and associations played a positive role in their education. These students shared, knowing that another student was going through similar situations reassured them that they were doing the right thing by returning to school and could share the journey together. One student shared, “We are all graduating together and have grown to be a family.” This sense of family and togetherness provided a strong sense of belonging for these students. In addition, 10 of the students referred to other students as a support system. As a support system, they were available to help with homework, tutor, provide notes, and even provide transportation to school if necessary. One student shared that the students played a negative role in her education. She felt almost every student she met on campus was very negative. She said, “It felt like high school all over again. If you did not get along with one student, then none of them would talk to you. The students did not make me feel like I belong; instead, they made me feel I made the wrong choice in being here.”

Additionally, participants were asked about their affiliations on campus and 9 of 12 students interviewed participated in campus clubs or committees. They described the clubs as places that made them feel welcome, helped them meet new people, make connections, helped their confidence and self-esteem grow, and gave them an opportunity to help other people. Seven of the students referred to members of the clubs “like a family.” They could lean on each

other in times of need. Furthermore, these students turned to members of the clubs for guidance and support. Eight of the students said they established close friendships with some of these students. One student said, “We, the students, are a unit and team. We rely on each other. We keep each other on our toes.” Of the three students who did not participate in clubs, two of them said that they were not aware of what the requirements were to participate in campus clubs. Two of these students wanted to participate in more clubs and committees, but with family commitments and school, there was no time. Both said, if there were a way to participate more in campus activities during school time, they would want to be more involved.

Interpersonal relationships among students and faculty. In reporting their feelings about the role faculty members played in their education, students shared mixed feelings. Eight of the students shared that their instructors were all very warm and welcoming. These students said that their relationships with the faculty member provided them with a sense of belonging, increased self-esteem, and increased confidence. Ten of the 12 students said that their instructor’s belief in them made them want to try harder. They felt as if failure was not an option because they would disappoint someone who has so much faith in them. Nine of 12 students said an understanding instructor was important to them. An instructor may not be able to help the student or give an extension on an assignment; however, the students expressed that just understanding that life happens outside of school sometimes gave them the drive to try harder. One student shared, “What an instructor thinks about me can either make or break me.” In addition, communication and consistency were mentioned by four of the students. It is important for the instructors to be clear in their communications and provide consistent rules to all members of the class. On the other hand, 5 of 12 students interviewed reported having a negative experience with an instructor.

Interpersonal relationships among students and staff. From day one of class to graduation, students meet many staff members who can have a positive or negative impact on them. For example, the campus director is a person of authority to the students. The campus director's acknowledgment is important to them. Five of 12 students reported having significant interactions with the campus director. These students all shared these experiences as being positive and motivational. According to these students, the campus director had a genuine desire to help which provided a sense of belonging to the students. Five students also reported not ever meeting the campus director. Four of the 5 students who reported this stated they would like to meet the campus director. It would have made them feel more comfortable in going to the campus director if there was a need.

When the participants were asked to describe any interpersonal interactions with the deans, 7 of 12 students reported having negative experiences. There are three individuals on this campus who are deans. However, these negative experiences were all in dealing with the same individual. These negative experiences provided the students with lower self-esteem and lower self-confidence. The students expressed frustration in not getting child care forms, leave of absence requests, and scheduling changes completed in a timely manner. In addition, they said they felt as though their concerns and needs were not getting the attention and/or priority they deserved. Furthermore, the evening students expressed that the dean is usually not available to address their concerns because, by the time they had a break in their schedules, the dean had left for the day. Three students expressed that this made them feel as though they were not as important as students from the other sessions. Students from all three sessions participated in this study. Six morning students, two afternoon students, and four evening students participated in the study. Seven students shared that they did not feel a sense of belonging and expressed that

they avoided going to this individual. Administration not being represented consistently during the evening sessions did influence students.

The admissions team provided a strong sense of support for the students. Nine of the 12 students said their interaction beyond the admissions process was motivating, supporting, and encouraging. A student said “he cares about my progress and it makes me want to do even better.” Students expressed it meant something to them that their admission advisor interacted with them beyond the actual admission. They felt accountable to their admission advisor because they believed in them enough to enroll them. A different student shared “He was a constant presence throughout my time here. It really motivated me to try harder because I knew he would ask how my grades were next time he saw me and I did not want to disappoint. He provided me with a real sense of belonging.” The admissions team was the first group of people with whom these students interacted, so keeping in contact with them made them feel like a part of their family, which increased their sense of belonging.

Several students expressed dissatisfaction with the financial-aid team. Nine of the 12 students said they had negative experiences in this department. The greatest concern was a lack of communication and consistency. Students said that members of this department had an “attitude, were snarky, and never stayed very long.” One student said, “Instead of helping me, they were badgering me.” Furthermore, students expressed that their lack of communication could cause them to lose their financial aid, which is crucial for them to continue their education. Students expressed lack of availability and missed appointments made it difficult to communicate with the financial aid team. Another student said, “I got really upset and walked away. It led to me not wanting to go there in the future. Unfortunately, I did need the financial aid to continue my education.”

All 12 students reported the front-desk staff provided a sense of comfort. It is a place where someone is always available. Every student said the front desk staff knowing his or her name was important. It made them feel members of a big family where they were acknowledged when they arrived and missed if they were gone. All the students shared similar feelings about the student center/library staff. The librarian and tutors provided guidance and support as needed. It was also a place where students felt they could come together on their own time and work together. The recurring sentiment was that someone was always at both the front desk and student center/library.

Lastly, the career-services personnel were a positive influence for 9 of 12 students' endeavors. One student reported having no interaction, and two students reported having a negative experience. Overall students expressed career services prepared them for their career. The two members of this department were described as helpful, willing to help with anything, and welcoming. The students all reported feelings of confidence and higher self-esteem when working with these two individuals. Working with this department and preparing resumes and interview preparation helped students better understand their full potential. Seeing someone else so confident in them made them equally confident. One student shared,

If she had not prepped me for my interviews, I would not have gotten where I am now.

She helped me prep, prime, and polish my resume. She made my resume look like I could work anywhere. She spent hours preparing me for interviews. She taught me how to be confident.

The two students who expressed negative experiences stated these were primarily due to lack of availability. The evening students expressed that if these personnel were available more often in the evening, they would be more likely to seek guidance.

Research question 2. The second research question asked, “can a sense of campus community help students feel a sense of belonging?” All 12 students shared experiences they had with various members of the campus staff and faculty that resulted in them having a sense of belonging or a feeling that they matter to one another. Some of the recurring concerns as students reflected on their first few months at the school were if they would make friends, would they fit in, would the instructors like them, would they be smart enough, and in many cases, would they make it and graduate? These concerns revealed their basic need for emotional safety, caring and supportive relationships, and a sense of belonging. The terms, “belong” or “belonging,” were mentioned a total of 51 times throughout the interviews. In addition, the term “welcome” was mentioned 36 times during the interviews. It was apparent that having a sense of belonging and being included or accepted does matter to the students. In research question one, the role intrapersonal relationships students have with each other, faculty, and staff play in fostering a sense of campus community was explored. Although one student did express she did not have relationships that played a positive role, she did go on to share that she had a special connection with the staff at the front desk and the librarian who gave her a sense of belonging. They were always available, even if only to listen. Furthermore, all nine students who were involved in campus clubs and committees expressed that these interactions with one another helped them network and build connections, which led to a greater sense of belonging. As reported by the students, and shared in research question one, each person with whom the students interacted had the potential to help build a sense of campus community, which in turn helped increase their sense of belonging.

Research question 3. The third research question asked, “Can a sense of campus community lead to students feeling their esteem needs are being met?” Maslow (1970) referred

to esteem needs as the need to feel good about oneself and earning the respect of others in order to feel satisfied, self-confident, and valuable. Students feeling a sense of emotional safety was connected them feeling their esteem needs are being met. There was a total of 34 instances where students reported their self-esteem was improved due to the sense of campus community they felt. Furthermore, the students reported 74 times that their interactions and affiliations improved their confidence. For example, a student shared that before her interactions with club members, she was very timid, withdrawn, and reserved; however, after interacting with these students, she had enough confidence to start a conversation with a person she had never met. A different student shared, “My instructors have helped my confidence grow a lot. I can talk to others more easily. I am more open to this because I have higher self-esteem.”

There were seven different incidences students shared that resulted in their having lower self-esteem or self-confidence. Maslow (1970) further stated if esteem needs are not met, it can lead to a person feeling inferior, weak, helpless, and worthless. Jerry shared an experience that related to this theory. Jerry shared that he was giving a presentation and the instructor told him to hurry up several times. He said she looked bored and did not pay attention to the presentation. He felt she had no interest in him as a student or a person. A different student shared that she asked a career advisor for assistance, but she demeaned her by saying she should have started a long time ago. Mandy said, “It lowered my confidence because I always do my work, but I needed help.”

Research question 4. The fourth research question asks, “can a sense of campus community help students work to achieve self-actualization?” Maslow (1943) describes self-actualization as occurring when one maximizes his or her potential, doing the best that they are capable of doing. The concept further represents growth of an individual towards self-

fulfillment. Ten of the 12 students interviewed expressed that although they are either a graduate or close to graduating they do not feel that have reached their full potential. The program they have completed is a stepping stone for future endeavors. Although a sense of community did not necessarily help these students in achieving self-actualization, it gave them the confidence and self-esteem to believe they can achieve something more. Celeste shared,

I didn't think I was going to make it. But my instructors and friends helped me get through it. My confidence has grown a lot. I can talk to others more easily. I am open to trying new things because I have higher self-esteem. I have reached my goals for now, but it is an ongoing journey. I have a ways to go.

Eleven of the students expressed that they had very little confidence in their success when they first began the program, however, near the end, ten of them feel this is only the beginning. They have the confidence to go on in their education. Self-actualization is an ongoing journey. One does not ever actually fully achieve self-actualization. However, each student did express that they achieved personal growth during their education. As Shelly shared, "I see tremendous changes in myself. I had nothing when I started, but today I have so much. My education here has given me that opportunity." Although she is still working towards her long terms goals, she is content. She said, "I feel self-fulfilled. I am happy. I am where I want to be."

Research question 5. The fifth research question asks, "How do students report their interpersonal relationships with each other, faculty, and staff motivate them to attend classes and complete their programs? Eleven of the 12 students interviewed reported that considered dropping out and not completing their programs. Each of the 11 students described one or more significant caring individuals that motivated them to persist and continue attending class. It is

through such interpersonal relationships that students felt emotional safety and a sense of belonging.

Interpersonal relationships among students. Several students said, “We motivate each other to finish our studies.” Ten students reported that other students motivated them to come to class or continue their education. For example, Lisa said, “I had a few friends that impacted my ability to continue. They would call me if I missed a day. I would get one from each one. It made me feel like I should not be missing and I should be there. They always reached out and made me feel like I belong with them in class.” Several students said that phone calls such as this were important to them. It made them feel like someone cares that they are not in class. However, just as these positive experiences can motivate a student to attend classes, negative experiences can have the opposite effect. Mary explained that when she was struggling in class, because of her relationship with the instructor, she did not feel like she belonged, which resulted in her motivating others to “ditch” class with her. A different student, Shelly, shared that some students did not make her feel like she belongs instead they made her feel like she wanted to leave class and dropout. Even as adult students they have a natural desire for social engagement and affiliation. In addition, Amanda shared there was one student in particular who made her feel uncomfortable in class, and as a result, there were times she did not want to be there. Amanda said, “She made me feel unmotivated. I did not want to be there. I felt awkward because they were talking and whispering behind my back. If it was not for my best friend in class, I would not have come.” She stressed, as friends, they push each other to come to class. They there for one another. They provide a strong sense of encouragement and support for one another.

Interpersonal relationships among students and faculty. Three of the 12 students interviewed expressed that they wanted to drop out and not continue their education as a result of negative experiences with an instructor. Grace said, “There were a few times I wanted to drop out of a class or stop going because I did not feel like the instructor was helping. Instructors really have a big impact on us wanting to attend class.” This student expressed that sometimes class just seemed like a waste of time. Two students expressed that they felt their instructors had favorites and spent more time being a friend to those favorites than being an instructor to them. Shelly shared, “I felt alienated. She made it very hard for me and at one point, I was ready to quit and drop out because of her. I could not handle the emotional stress. I just did not want to be here. I would have rather given up.’

Instructors also have the potential to be a positive influence in a student’s education. Three of the 12 students interviewed also expressed that they wanted to drop out and not continue their education but persisted due to an instructor. Mary shared, “In my first week of school an instructor prevented me from dropping out. From then on, I remembered her words and was always motivated. She had faith in me, and I would not disappoint her.” Feeling valued and important seemed to be important to students. As expressed by Mandy, “Instructors have made me feel welcome by offering help and guidance. They give me the feeling that they want to see me succeed. Their reaching out if I miss any days have made a big difference. They actually care if I’m not there and want to help me succeed by calling, e-mailing, or texting.” One of the most recurring phrases students mentioned was somebody cares. Ricky expressed that he considered dropping out a few times. He felt like he couldn’t do it. Academically he was struggling, and this made him lose confidence in himself. He said if it were not for the guidance and support of his instructor/program director he would have probably dropped out.

Interpersonal relationships among students and staff. There were members of the staff the students reported motivated them to attend classes or continue their education. The campus director was motivational to five of the twelve students. One student shared, the director was the reason why I really feel I pushed through. I always felt like I was connected to her. She would always give me positive talks. She told me she believed in me and if I really wanted to do it, I could. When I thought about not coming to class or dropping out, I thought of her.” The other four students shared similar experiences. There were no students that expressed any interactions with the campus director that lead to them wanting to drop out or not come to classes. There were, however, some students that expressed that interactions with a dean lead to them wanting to not continue their education. Celeste shared, “She was not helpful in regard to what I wanted to do. She didn’t understand the time urgency in me getting things completed in a timely manner.” Two other students stressed similar concerns. For a nontraditional student, time is usually one of the biggest barriers. It is important to the students that the dean is available and gives their concerns and problems the priority they feel it deserves. On the other hand, two students did share that the dean reached out and offered recourses when they were struggling.

Other staff members on campus also motivated students’ attendance and persistence. The staff at the front desk and the admissions team were most motivational to the students in regards to attendance and persistence. All twelve students had positive comments to say about the front desk personnel. However, three students reported that they might have dropped out if it were not for the front desk personnel. Shelly shared, “Yes, I wanted to drop out because of a situation I had with an instructor. I felt betrayed. A member of the front desk talked to me and motivated me to continue to try. She said not to let them win. She convinced me I should not feel like I do not belong because I didn’t fit in with a group. She convinced me I should not feel like a

monster.” Nine of the 12 students described their interactions beyond the admissions team as motivational, supporting, and encouraging. One student said that her admissions advisor was such a presence in her education that she always tried to attend classes and do well because he is watching and she did not want to disappoint him.

Although the career services department, financial aid department, and the student center and library staff were important to the students, they were not reported as motivating students’ attendance and persistence. They were an important resource and provided support. The financial aid department was described as having the potential to impact a student’s ability to continue his or her education for financial reasons but not necessarily motivate attendance or persistence.

Summary

In this chapter, the research findings of this study were presented. I was able to listen to, observe, and analyze the students’ experiences and what these experiences meant to them using the interpretative phenomenological analysis. The data revealed four themes. The themes include (a) emotional safety; (b) inclusion and acceptance; (c) someone who cares; and (d) personal growth. Each of the identified themes related to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943), the framework on which this study is based. In addition, chapter four provided a rich description that presents a better understanding of the phenomenon studied—the role interpersonal relationships among nontraditional college students with each other, faculty, and staff play in fostering a sense of campus community. Furthermore, how students reported a sense of campus community influenced their esteem needs and ability to work towards achieving self-actualization was shared. Lastly, how students reported these relationships motivated their attendance and persistence was presented.

Chapter 5

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the experiences of nontraditional college students and how these experiences motivated them to attend classes and complete their programs. The study explored the role interpersonal relationships among students and peers, students and faculty, and students and staff played in fostering a sense of campus community. Additionally, the connections among a sense of campus community and students feeling a sense of belonging, increase in their self-esteem, and achieving self-actualization as Maslow defined it was explored. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), provided the framework used to answer the research questions on which the study was based. This chapter presents the results of this study; a discussion of the results in relation to the literature; limitations of the study; implications of the results for practice, policy, and theory; and recommendations for further research.

Summary of the Results

A purposeful sample of 12 nontraditional students participated in this phenomenological study. Through semi-structured interviews, the participants provided a deeper understanding of how their experiences motivated them throughout their education. The following research questions guided this study:

R1: What role does having interpersonal relationships play among nontraditional college students with each other, faculty, and staff in fostering a sense of campus community?

R2: How can a sense of campus community help students feel a sense of belonging?

R3: How can a sense of campus community lead to students feeling their esteem needs are being met?

R4: How can a sense of campus community help students work to achieve self-actualization?

R5: How do students report their interpersonal relationships with each other, faculty, and staff motivate them to attend classes and complete their programs?

The results of this study revealed that the participants' interpersonal relationships with other students, faculty, and staff played an important role in their education. The negative experiences led to the students having difficulty in seeking assistance, lower self-confidence, and less motivation to attend classes. Whereas, students shared that positive interactions motivated them to overcome any obstacles and attend classes and complete their programs. The connections these students made with other students, faculty, and staff provided them with a greater sense of campus community, thus providing them with a sense of belonging and a strong support system. It was apparent that having a sense of belonging mattered to the students. Every participant expressed interpersonal relationships with someone on campus led to a connection that gave them a sense of belonging. Each person with whom the students interacted had the potential to increase their sense of belonging. The participants expressed knowing they mattered to one another and were working towards the same goals gave them assurance that their needs will be met by working together.

The results further revealed a sense of campus community can affect a student's esteem needs. The students reported their self-esteem and confidence improved due to the sense of campus community they felt on campus. On the other hand, some of the participants shared incidences that resulted in their having lower self-esteem or self-confidence. These experiences

led to students feeling inferior, helpless, and worthless. A sense of campus community did not necessarily help the students in achieving self-actualization; however, it did give them the confidence and self-esteem to believe they can achieve something more. Most of the participants expressed having very little confidence when they first began the program; however, near the end of their program, they had the confidence to continue their education. One does not fully achieve self-actualization. Self-actualization is an ongoing journey of personal growth.

Discussion of the Results

The objective of this study was to explore the experiences of nontraditional college students, and how such experiences motivated them to attend classes and complete their programs. Attendance and retention have been topics of discussion for several years at the campus the study was conducted. In one such discussion, a member of the leadership team suggested that students cannot learn from someone they do not like. This statement resonated with me and I began my initial research. Research suggested there is a significant and positive association between relationship quality and adjustment among nontraditional and/or first-time college students (Martin & Dowson, 2009; Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008). In addition, Martin and Dowson (2009) stated positive, functional interpersonal relationships have been shown to enhance students' academic motivation, engagement, and achievement. Therefore, I sought to examine the role interpersonal relationships among students and peers, students and faculty, and students and staff played in fostering a sense of campus community. A strong sense of campus community is an important element of a successful college (Summers & Svinicki, 2007; Strange, 2010). In his theory of a sense of community, McMillan (1996) suggested a spirit of belonging together, trust in the authority structure, an awareness that mutual benefit can come from togetherness, and a spirit that comes from shared experiences can be beneficial for students

and members of an organization. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs provided a rationale for implementing a retention program in which the entire campus plays a key role in motivation and retention. This study identified interpersonal relationships among students with each other, faculty, and staff did address the safety needs of students and engage their sense of purpose which in turn did strengthen persistence.

For this study, I conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with nontraditional students. I summarized the findings from the interviews by themes I identified through the analysis of the interviews transcripts. In analyzing the transcripts, if a significant point was mentioned by two or more of the participant's one or more times, I grouped these statements into themes as suggested by Moustakas (1994). The data revealed four themes. The themes included (a) emotional safety; (b) inclusion and acceptance; (c) someone who cares; and (d) personal growth. Each of these themes relates to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943).

Emotional safety is important because it can be difficult for a student to focus on learning when he or she does not feel emotionally safe or comfortable in the learning environment. A majority of the participants expressed it can be difficult to feel emotional safety if there is negativity in the classroom. Students should not have to hesitate in asking a question or feel they are any less important than other students in the class. In order to help satisfy safety, belongingness, and esteem needs, a student will want to feel cared about. As expressed by the participants of this study, they seek such fulfillment from instructors, school personnel, and other students. As educators, we must ensure that our students know they are valued as individuals. We must seize every opportunity to let learners know that their efforts are valuable and appreciated. This reinforcement will aid in a student's development of a favorable self-image

and improve their confidence and self-esteem. Furthermore, it is important for faculty to promote a learning environment of inclusivity.

Inclusion and acceptance are important. Students naturally seek inclusion and social acceptance. They have a natural need to feel a part of something. In this study, being accepted and included motivated the participants in both positive and negative ways. Some students expressed that being included and accepted gave them a sense of belonging which, motivated them to put more effort into their academics, attend classes daily, and complete their programs. On the other hand, some participant also expressed that negative experiences not only motivated them to give up and not attend classes, but they also encouraged others to not attend classes. Involvement in clubs and committees was mentioned as having positive effects on all participants that participated. Not only did participation in campus clubs and committees create a sense of belonging and togetherness, it also provided participants with a group of caring individuals to whom they could turn in their times of struggles.

Someone who cares was essential for student success as described by the participants of this study. Several students expressed that caring members of the campus team or another student led to them feeling respected and improving their self-confidence. Furthermore, these individuals provided a strong source of support for them. However, several students expressed difficulties in approaching faculty members and even a particular dean. These struggles directly influence a student's sense of emotional security and belongingness. As such, students feeling that nobody cares can lead to lower self-esteem and hinder personal growth.

Personal growth was and continues to be an ongoing journey for the participants of this study. As students began taking their courses, developed attitudes and skills that helped them gain confidence, learned to better understand the world around them, and work well with others

they grew both professionally and personally. Each of the participants in this study expressed she/he has grown and changed during the duration of their programs. However, as Maslow (1943) asserted, self-actualization is an ongoing journey that increases with accomplishments and personal growth.

Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature

For the purpose of this study, a sense of community was defined as a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The findings of this study found students' strong sense of campus community can be achieved through positive interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal relationships are defined as social associations, connections, or affiliations between two or more people (Husain, 2012). The results of this study revealed that the participants' interpersonal relationships with other students, faculty, and staff could influence their sense of campus community, thus affecting student's attendance, retention, and academic achievement. Research supports these finding in stating positive interpersonal relationships have been shown to enhance students' academic achievement (Lambert, Rocconi, Ribera, Miller, & Dong, 2012; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Swenson, Nordstrom & Hiester, 2008). Additionally, research has further found negative relationships or lack of connection can be damaging to the students' overall success (Alarcon and Edwards, 2013; Lin and Huang, 2012; Vinson et al., 2010). Furthermore, the research further revealed a sense of campus community can affect a student's esteem needs. Maslow (1970) defined esteem needs as the need to feel good about oneself and earning the respect of others in order to feel satisfied, self-confident, and valuable. The interpersonal relationships the students formed supported them in achieving the lower order needs such as safety and belongingness,

resulting in the higher order needs such as esteem and self-actualization being met. In relation, Maslow (1943, 1970) stated lower order must be satisfied before higher-order needs can be achieved. Students who achieve lower order needs such as safety, belongingness, and esteem needs; will likely achieve a feeling of self-actualization or begin the journey towards personal growth (Maslow, 1943).

Limitations

In this study, the sample consisted of 12 nontraditional students, at one college, at one particular time. This population was not representative of the broader college student population. In addition, the participants for this study only included students at one specific institution, at one specific time. Therefore, the generalizability of the results was limited to the setting in which the study was conducted, however, allows for transferability of the findings. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were the primary means of collecting information in this qualitative study. The facts are presented only through the students' responses, and it is only through these experiences, I attempted to gain a better understanding of how intrapersonal relationships on campus motivated students to attend classes and complete their programs.

Implication of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory

The findings of this study have important implications for college stakeholders. The results found that a student's sense of belonging can be achieved by building strong interpersonal relationships with other students, faculty, and staff. Such interpersonal relationships resulted in students feeling a sense of campus community, thus affecting student's self-esteem, attendance, retention, and academic achievement. Based on the findings of this study, the college stakeholders should consider improving learning support services, institutional culture and support, and socialization opportunities in order to foster a sense of belonging.

Learning support services. Both traditional and nontraditional students benefit from faculty and staff support. The college has some services in place; however, some of these services are not available to the evening students. The stakeholders should evaluate the hours of operations for departments that offer ongoing support to students. For example, the career services department should be available to all three sessions, during their breaks. Some participants of the study expressed lack of availability and accessibility were a hindrance in their success. Furthermore, the dean of student services serves in a dual capacity, as the dean of students and academic advisor. A majority of participants expressed frustration due to delays in requests being completed, missed appointments, and lack of availability. One dean of students/academic advisor for the entire student population, places a heavy burden on one individual. The college should consider separating the role of dean of students and academic advisor. Building and fostering a relationship with an academic advisor may serve as a method of early intervention for students who serve as a retention risk. Furthermore, initial advisement may help students clarify their goals and solidify their academic purpose, thus, encouraging persistence (Baker and Griffin, 2010). Lastly, the college could assign faculty mentors (Baker and Griffin, 2010), establish study groups, and strengthen the peer mentor program (Furco & Moely, 2012; Lambright & Alden, 2012). Collings, Swanson, and Watkins (2014), asserted non-peer mentored students consider dropping out more often compared to students who receive peer mentoring. All of these suggestions could potentially increase a sense of belonging for nontraditional students.

Institutional culture. It can be challenging to find ways to connect with students and foster a sense of belonging that will help students persist over the course of their academic career. Buglione (2012) stated the classroom could be the only connection for nontraditional

students, giving them the sense that they belong as a result of academic competence. Therefore, it is important that faculty create a classroom environment of inclusivity and assist nontraditional students in seeing purpose and meaning in class. Tinto (2012) stated retention requires that a student see him or herself as belonging to at least one significant community and find meaning in the involvements that occur within that community. Several participants shared experiences in class that warrants additional classroom observations and possible professional development training. The college may find that establishing a professional learning community for the staff and faculty could be beneficial. A professional learning community could provide a collaborative learning environment among colleagues (Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Van Es, 2012). Members of a (PLC) may have knowledge they can share to help others better serve students.

Socialization opportunities. Students have a tendency to seek others with whom they identify. Campus organizations provide opportunities for nontraditional students to socialize and develop a sense of belonging within campus population. Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) indicated that networking opportunities, community events, and campus organizations can help students develop their own student identity. Such engagement plays a crucial role in retention through a stronger sense of integration for nontraditional students (Tinto, 2012). Implementing a service learning program could provide the college with an opportunity to increase a sense of community on campus. Sigmon (2011) defined service learning as finding the balance between learning goals and service outcomes, including volunteerism, community service, internships, and field education. A service learning program could allow the students to apply their learning in real-world situations. Academic benefits such as increase in grades, persistence, academic engagement, student satisfaction with their learning experience, better interaction with faculty,

improved retention and degree completion, have been linked to service learning (Novak, Markey & Allen, 2007; Furco & Moely, 2012; Karasik, 2013). Furthermore, the sense of belonging students develop aid them in making a connection with peer support groups (Furco & Moely, 2012; Lambright & Alden, 2012). A service learning program will provide countless benefits to students (Furco & Moely, 2012; Lambright & Alden, 2012; Karasik, 2013; Novak, Markey & Allen, 2007).

Recommendations for Further Research

For this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the connection between a sense of campus community and students feeling a sense of belonging, increasing their self-esteem, and achieving self-actualization as Maslow (1943) defined it. In the future, a longitudinal study could explain what happens to students' sense of belonging over the course of their college career. It would aid stakeholders in determining when intervention is most critical. Additionally, a study could be conducted to determine the impact of implementing a service learning program. Furthermore, a strong sense of community is not just important for students but for staff and faculty as well (McMenamin, McGrath, & D'Eath, 2010). A similar study could be conducted determine if faculty and staff feel a sense of community in the workplace. Building a strong sense of community involves members from all areas of the institution working together. Without faculty and staff feeling a sense of community, it can be difficult to create a happy and connected environment.

Conclusion

The purpose of conducting this phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of nontraditional college students at a private career and technical education junior college and how these experiences motivated them to attend classes and complete their programs. The data

revealed four themes including (a) emotional safety; (b) inclusion and acceptance; (c) someone who cares; and (d) personal growth. The identified themes were connected to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), the framework on which this study was based. The findings of this study indicated interpersonal relationships among students and peers, students and faculty, and students and staff played a role in fostering a sense of campus community. Additionally, a sense of campus community did increase students feeling a sense of belonging, increase their self-esteem, and encouraged them to work towards achieving self-actualization as Maslow defined it. Lastly, students reported feeling a sense of community did motivate them to attend classes and complete their programs.

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Are You a Nontraditional Student??

Do any of the following apply to you?

- *Entry to college delayed by at least one year following high school*
- *Have dependents*
- *Are a single parent*
- *Employed full time*
- *Are financially independent*
- *Attending part time*
- *Do not have high school diploma or have GED?*

****If Yes, You May Be Eligible to Participate in an important Research Study ****

This Study is Being Conducted by: Ashvindar Singh

For More Information please contact Ashvindar Singh @

or

****YOU MUST BE AT LEAST 18 YEARS OLD TO BE**

ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE**

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of nontraditional college students and how these experiences motivate them.

Benefits Include: adding to the limited literature in this area and improving the campus culture, student attendance, and retention.

Self-Referral and Acknowledgment

(detach and return to the researcher within one week of receipt)

I _____ verify that I am at least 18 years old, have either completed my program or am within 3 modules of completion, one or more of the above mentioned criteria for being a nontraditional student applies to me, and I am willing to participate in an interview that could last up to two hours.

****Please provide the best time and method for contacting you****

email address:

Phone Number:

Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter



DATE: October 25, 2016

TO: Ashvindar Singh
FROM: Concordia University - Portland IRB (CU IRB)

PROJECT TITLE: [957337-1] Bridging the Gap: A Phenomenological Study of Interpersonal Relationships Amongst NonTraditional Students

REFERENCE #: EDD-20160921-Weschke-Singh

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED APPROVAL DATE: October 24, 2016

EXPIRATION DATE: October 24, 2017

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Concordia University - Portland IRB (CU IRB) has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulations.

You are responsible for contacting and following the procedures and policies of Concordia University and any other institution where you conduct research.

Attached is a stamped copy of the approved consent form. You must use this stamped consent form. Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document. Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. The form needed to request a revision is called a Modification Request Form, which is available at www.cu-portland.edu/IRB/Forms.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others (UPIRSOs) and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please email the CU IRB Director directly, at obbranch@cu-portland.edu, if you have an unanticipated problem or other such urgent question or report.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

This project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of October 25, 2017.

You must submit a close-out report at the expiration of your project or upon completion of your project. The Close-out Report Form is available at www.cu-portland.edu/IRB/Forms.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Dr. OraLee Branch at 503-493-6390 or irb@cu-portland.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Concordia University - Portland IRB (CU IRB)'s records. October 25, 2017.

Appendix C: Informed Consent Document

CONSENT FORM

Research Study Title: Bridging the Gap: A Phenomenological Study of Interpersonal Relationships Amongst Nontraditional Students

Principal Investigator: Ashvindar K. Singh

Research Institution: Concordia University – Portland

Faculty Advisor: Barbara Weschke

Purpose and what you will be doing:

This purpose of this research study will be to investigate if the interpersonal relationships among nontraditional college students with each other, faculty, and staff play a role in fostering a sense of campus community at a private career and technical education junior college. In addition, I, the researcher seek to explore if a sense of campus community can help students feel a sense of belonging, increase in their self-esteem, and help them achieve self-actualization. I will further explore if students report feeling a sense of community at a private career and technical education junior college can motivate students to attend classes and complete their programs. We expect approximately 10 volunteers. No one will be paid to be in the study. We will begin enrollment on October 24, 2016 and end enrollment on November 4, 2016. To be in the study, you will need to answer questions about your experiences as a nontraditional college student. I will conduct semi-structured interviews on campus that should take approximately two hours of your time.

Risks:

There are no risks to participating in this study other than providing your information. However, we will protect your information. I, the researcher will protect the confidentiality of the participants by not using actual names that could be linked to the participants' identities; transcribing interviews in a private setting to ensure privacy and confidentiality; ensuring all electronic recording devices containing data obtained in the research are only accessible to me; and the participants' identity will not be on any written notes. The researcher will also store all collected data on a private external hard drive that will be locked and pass-code protected. This will be kept in a locked storage cabinet when it is not in use by the researcher. Once the data are transcribed and analyzed any and all

private information collected will be destroyed after a period of 3 years. Any audio recordings will be deleted after transcription. We will not identify you in any publication or report. Any personally identifying information will be kept confidential at all times and all study documents will be destroyed 3 years after we conclude this study.

Benefits:

Information you provide will help improve the campus culture and possibly student attendance and retention. The findings from this study may be used to educate faculty and staff on how to promote more community building that may lead to nontraditional students feeling a greater sense of community on their campus. You may not have any personal benefits by participating in this study.

Confidentiality:

This information will not be distributed to any other agency and will be kept private and confidential. The only exception to this is if you tell us abuse, neglect, and/or faculty or staff misconduct that makes us seriously concerned for your immediate health and safety.

Right to Withdraw:

Your participation is greatly appreciated, but we acknowledge that the questions we are asking are personal in nature. You are free at any point to choose not to engage with or stop the study. Furthermore, you may contact me to withdraw your data. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. This study is not required and there is no penalty for not participating. If at any time you experience a negative emotion from answering the questions, we will stop asking you questions.

Contact Information:

You will receive a copy of this consent form. If you have questions you can talk to or write the principal investigator, [REDACTED] If you want to talk with a participant advocate other than the investigator, you can write or call the director of our institutional review board, Dr. OraLee Branch (email obranch@cu-portland.edu or call 503-493-6390).

Your Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I asked questions if I had them, and my questions were answered. I volunteer my consent for this study.

Participant Name

Date

Participant Signature

Date

Investigator Name

Date

Investigator Signature

Date



Investigator: Ashvindar Singh; email: [REDACTED]
c/o: Professor Barbara Weschke;
Concordia University – Portland
2811 NE Holman Street
Portland, Oregon 97221

Appendix D: Facility Approval Letter

Permission to Conduct Study

October 13, 2016

[REDACTED]
Campus Director, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear [REDACTED],

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study at [REDACTED]. This purpose of this research study will be to investigate if the interpersonal relationships among nontraditional college students with each other, faculty, and staff play a role in fostering a sense of campus community at a private career and technical education junior college. In addition, I, the researcher seek to explore if a sense of campus community can help students feel a sense of belonging, increase in their self-esteem, and help them achieve self-actualization. I will further explore if students report feeling a sense of community at a private career and technical education junior college can motivate students to attend classes and complete their programs.

If approval is granted, I will approach students with a flyer to explain the purpose of the study and to request the students complete a self-referral by acknowledging that they meet the criteria for the study and are interested in participating. There will be a tear-off sheet on the recruitment flyer by which the potential participant can acknowledge that they meet the criteria of being a nontraditional student. Interested students, who volunteer to participate, will be given a consent form to be signed and returned to me. The findings of the study will be coded and individual results of this study will remain absolutely confidential. No costs will be incurred by either the school or the individual participants.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated.

If you agree, kindly sign below

Sincerely,

Ashvindar K. Singh, Doctoral Candidate

Approved by:

[REDACTED]

September 20, 2017

Appendix E: Interview Script

One-on-one Interview Protocol

Interview Date: _____ Interview Time: _____

Name of Interviewee: _____ Location: _____

Read: *Hello. Thank you for being willing to meet with me today to participate in this interview regarding your experiences as a nontraditional college student. I am currently completing my doctorate of Education in Teacher Leadership at Concordia University. I am interviewing nontraditional college students. The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences of nontraditional college students and how these experiences motivate them. The study will explore the role interpersonal relationships among students and peers, students and faculty, and students and staff play in fostering a sense of campus community at a private career and technical junior college. In addition, how students report such relationships motivate attendance and persistence at a private career and technical junior college will be explored. This research will add to the limited literature in this area in hopes of improving the campus culture, student attendance, and retention. The findings from this study may be used to educate faculty and staff on how to promote more community building that may lead to nontraditional students feeling a greater sense of community on their campus. The purpose of the interview is to learn about your experiences as a student and what motivates you. Please know that your participation is completely voluntary and will add depth to the study. The interview will take approximately 1-2 hours. I may ask follow-up questions if additional clarification is needed. If at any time you become uncomfortable or would prefer to not respond to an item, please let me know immediately. You may stop the interview at any time and/or decline to answer any question. The interview is confidential and your anonymity will be preserved. I would like your permission*

to record this interview in order to access it at a later time for transcription. Do I have your permission to conduct the interview? May I record it?

Distribute consent form and collect signed form.

Here is a copy of the questions I will be asking. I have provided it as a reference for you. As I mentioned, I may ask follow-up questions for clarification if needed.

Are there any questions that you have for me before we begin?

Okay, let's begin (Begin recording).

Background Questions:

1. Please state your full name and age.
2. Please state your program of study
3. Please state if you have already graduated or how many modules you have remaining.
4. Can you confirm which characteristics of being a nontraditional student apply to you?

Interview Questions

1. Please describe your overall academic experiences as a college student and how you feel your confidence or self-esteem may have been impacted as a result?
2. Tell me about any experiences you may have had as a member or participant of any clubs, committees, or campus activities, and how you felt participating in them or if it had any effect on your confidence and self-esteem.
3. Describe any interpersonal interactions you may have had with your campus director, deans, and/or program managers and if they resulted in a sense of belonging and/or how they may have affected your ability to continue your educational journey.

4. Describe your experiences with your faculty members and if they resulted in a sense of belonging and/or how they may have affected your ability to continue your educational journey.
5. Describe how you felt about any interpersonal interactions with the staff at the front desk and if they resulted in a sense of belonging and/or how they may have affected your ability to continue your educational journey.
6. Describe how you felt about any interpersonal interactions with the financial aid team and how you felt about these interactions and/or how they may have affected your ability to continue your educational journey.
7. Describe how you felt about any interpersonal interactions with staff at the career services and how they impacted your self-esteem and/or how they prepared you for your career.
8. Describe how you felt about any interpersonal interactions with the admissions team and if you felt like you belong on campus as a result of such interactions.
9. Describe how you felt about your experiences/interactions at the student center/library and if they resulted in a sense of belonging and/or how they may have affected your ability to continue your educational journey.
10. Describe how you how you feel about your interpersonal interactions and/or experiences with other students and if they resulted in a sense of belonging and/or how they may have affected your ability to continue your educational journey.
11. Please explain what specific factors you believe have contributed to your motivation to persist in your studies?

12. Are there aspects of your life that present barriers in your efforts to persist in your studies and how do you feel about such barriers?
13. Describe how you feel about the overall campus environment and are there specific things that a college could do to create a more welcoming campus community or improve a student's educational experience?
14. Did you ever consider leaving and not completing your degree? If so, could you explain what you felt and what motivated you to persist in your studies?
15. Do you have any mentoring relationships with faculty or staff members on campus that influenced your self-esteem and/or self-confidence and may have resulted in your persistence to complete a class or the program? If so, can you provide some examples?
16. Do you have anything else to add?

Thank you for your time and attention today! I really appreciate your being willing to participate in this interview for my dissertation research.

Appendix F: Statement of Original Work

Statement of Original Work

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University-Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.
2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association.

S

A. K. Singh

Digital Signature

Ashvindar K. Singh

Name (Typed)

October 26, 2017

Date