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A Study to Determine Barriers That Impact Adult Learner Academic Success

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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

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Abstract

Adult learners often encounter obstacles that impede their academic progress and either withdraw from a course or drop out of college. There has been significant research conducted on effectively instructing and motivating adult learners. However, not enough research has been conducted to help adult learners sustain their motivation when barriers arise impacting their academic success. The goal of this study was to identify barriers that impact adult learners' academic success. The study examined the viewpoints of undergraduate adult learners at an American higher education institution to determine situational, institutional and dispositional barriers encountered impacting their academic success. The research theoretical framework was based on andragogy theory, along with social learning and sociocultural theories. A qualitative embedded case study research design was chosen because it allowed the investigator to use a triangulation process consisting of a survey, semistructured interview, and two focus groups. The data were collected employing a triangulation method from a total of 33 participants who completed the survey. A random sample of 10 participants who were selected from the initial 33 participants, participated in both the semistructured interviews and focus groups. Qualitative analysis was conducted employing an open and axial coding process for both semistructured interviews and focus groups, to capture themes and patterns from responses provided by participants. The findings of the study indicated that adult learners have academically been impacted by situational barriers, institutional and dispositional barriers.

Keywords: adult learner, barrier to learning, dispositional barriers, institutional barriers, motivation to learn, situational barriers.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to God, my two awesome children, cousins, friends, and mentors. My VILLAGE, all my grandmothers, aunts and uncles who helped raise me on 99th and St. Clair! I absolutely know without everyone's support and prayers I could have not achieved this goal. Also, I dedicate this to single parents everywhere who defer their goals because of family, career, and health issues. It is never too late to accomplish your goals!

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Chapter 1: Introduction

When an adult learner enrolls in a higher education course or program, they are motivated to accomplish an educational goal that will benefit them personally and/or professionally. Occasionally during adult learners' academic pursuits, they may encounter numerous barriers impacting their academic success. According to Falasca (2011), these obstacles—whether they are situational barriers (lack of time, job and family responsibilities), institutional barriers (admissions and financial aid issues), or dispositional barriers (low motivation and low self-esteem)—attempt to impede adult learners' academic goals. Hence, it is essential for American higher education institutions to establish and implement teaching strategies and while managing the resources to combat adult learners' barriers to increase retention rates.

The primary issue an instructor must deal with is figuring out how to assist an adult learner when they are experiencing challenges impacting their academic performance (Saar et al., 2014). To combat barriers impacting adult learners' academic success, higher education leaders should modify their instructional practices to cater to adult learners' diverse needs. According to Spivey (2016), many educators and administrators lack confidence in applying tools and learning material themselves which has made it more difficult for higher education institutions to combat the rapid rise of retention and attrition rates. For example, Wlodkowski et al. (2017) reports that intensive courses became rewarding and powerful learning experiences when the instructor showed enthusiasm and proficiency, when the curriculum was structured, and when the learning environment was engaging and comfortable. Having a positive learning environment that motivates and stimulates an adult learner will enhance their reasons for enrolling and decrease the barriers impeding their academic success (Falasca, 2011).

Problem Statement

Despite a significance surge in adult learner enrollment over the past 10 years, there has been a remarkable increase in annual attrition rates due to the impact barriers have on their academic success (Goto et al., 2009). The barriers that adult learners encounter stifle their academic progress, causing them to either withdraw from a course or drop out of college. Furthermore, these challenges affect an adult learner's motivation, self-esteem, finances, time management, and nonacademic responsibilities. Several researchers agreed, it is vital for American higher education institutions to develop teaching strategies and implement processes that will provide adult learners the motivation to not only enroll but achieve their academic goals even while coping with challenges (Brophy, 2010; Sogunro, 2015; Wong, 2018).

Nature of the Study

A qualitative embedded case study research design was chosen because it allows the investigator to use various procedures to conduct research and collect data. A case study method evokes critical thinking, analysis and application (Tripathy, 2008). The case study permits a triangulation method to be employed of a survey, semistructured interview, and focus group to collect data. The study was based on a combination of Knowles (1984) andragogy theory—that adults are motivated learners—and on Bandura (1997) and Vygotsky (1978) social learning and sociocultural theories. The focal point of the study was to examine the views of adult learners at an American higher education institution to determine barriers that arise that may impact their academic success. The target population will derive from a random sample of 33 adult learners attending a state community college in midwestern United States. The sample amount was suitable for qualitative studies to reach data saturation (Francis et al., 2010). Exceptional care was provided to ensure all adult learners confidentiality and privacy was re not compromised.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

The qualitative study was led by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the experienced situational barriers that adult learners enrolled in higher

education institutions have encountered?

RQ2: What are the experienced institutional barriers that adult learners enrolled in higher

education institutions have encountered?

RQ3: What are the experienced dispositional barriers that adult learners enrolled in

higher education institutions have encountered?

Research Objectives

There are four primary objectives of this qualitative case study: (a) to collect data to show experienced barriers of adult learners, (b) to identify barriers that impact adult learners' academic success, (c) to analyze factors that cause barriers impeding adult learners' academic success, and (d) to develop teaching methods and strategies to combat adult learners' challenges.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative single embedded case study is to determine the barriers adult learners encounter during their educational pursuit that have an impact on their academic success. Thirty-three adult learners participated in a triangulation method composed of a survey, semistructured interview, and focus groups, which were all conducted on the college campus and some by cell phone. A random sample of 10 participants was taken from the 33 participants to partake in semistructured interviews by cell phone. The triangulation method employed tactics which permitted the collection of data to analyze adult learners' perceptions of challenges encountered during their educational pursuit. A random sample of 10 adult learners will participate in a corresponding semistructured interview by cell phone and in one of the two focus

groups (two groups of five participants). This qualitative case study employed observation strategies consisting of documentation and recordings to gather data from surveys, semistructured interviews and focus groups.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this qualitative case study is based on Knowles (1984) andragogy theory, Bandura's (1978) social learning, and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. The five assumptions of Knowles (1984) andragogy theory as it relates to adult learners are: self-concept; adult learner experience; readiness to learn; orientation to learning; and motivated to learn. These underlying assumptions from Knowles (1984) claim that if teaching instructions and strategies are developed to meet adult learners' diverse learning needs then they will sustain the motivation to learn when encountering challenges. Furthermore, both social learning and sociocultural theories assume when adult learners are encountering challenges, if instructors provide a diverse learning environment which is socially interactive and engaging, adult learners will sustain the motivation to learn.

Unlike traditional students, adult learners bring a very different set of skills, knowledge, and expectations to their educational environment that instructors should tap into making the course more rewarding (Ross-Gordon, 2011). According to Lee et al. (2008), teachers are the leaders in their classrooms, and they are tasked with creating a learning environment for the adult learner that will spark their interest and motivate them to learn even when challenges occur. If there is no buy-in to what is being taught in the course an adult learner will not be engaged in the learning process. This study can also help higher education institutions create supportive learning environments for adult learners by incorporating these theories and research and by developing programs and supportive services (Blair, 2010).

Definition of Terms

Adult learner. Adult learners' are students 25 years of age and older, who bring to postsecondary education a wealth of work experience, possibly chronic health issues, and non-educational responsibilities such as being married, having dependents and full-time employment (Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Barrier to learning. These are challenges adults encounter that make it difficult for them to advance their lives through education (Goto et al., 2009).

Dispositional barriers. Dispositional barriers are psychological issues that cause low motivation, low self-esteem, embarrassment and fear of failure in adult students (Falasca, 2011).

Institutional barriers. Institutional barriers are institutional practices that affect adult's ability to academically succeed (Saar et al., 2014).

Motivation to learn. Adults are motivated to learn under pressure if they see acquiring new knowledge will bring value to their life (Knowles, 1984).

Situational barriers. Situational barriers are issues that affect an adult's life circumstances (Deggs, 2011).

Assumptions

Based upon the theoretical framework selected and research topics employed in this qualitative study, the following assumptions about the study are identified: (a) all adult learners were truthful in their answers to the survey, semistructured interview, and focus group questions; (b) Knowles (1984) andragogy theory provides a theoretical basis for understanding how their internal motivation will help adult learners to combat barriers that impact their academic goals; and (c) Bandura (1978) and Vygotsky's (1978) social learning and sociocultural theories provide theoretical foundation for understanding when faced with challenges adult learners will persist

and achieve their academic goals, in a socially interactive and engaging diverse learning environment.

Limitations

There may be some limitations to this qualitative case study. The population is limited to adult learners at only one higher education institution where the student body consists of both traditional and nontraditional students. Participants may find it challenging to align their experiences with the preselected options in the survey. Additionally, self-reports can be a limitation to obtain information from participants during the study. A participant may downplay or exaggerate their experiences with respect to financial issues or family responsibilities while participating in a group environment.

Scope and Delimitations

There are two obvious delimitations of the study. First the study is delimited to adults who are 25 years of age and older. This group of nontraditional students (adult learners) were chosen because the study goal is to determine barriers that impact adult learners' academic success. Secondly, this study is delimited to triangulation method of surveys, semistructured interviews, focus groups, observations and documentations. By the researcher applying more than one method in this qualitative case study could result in a conflict in data (Yazan, 2015). However, employing this triangulation method is effective in obtaining vital information about the topic and add credibility to the findings.

Significance of the Study

There is a need to understand what barriers impact adult learners' academic success, not only to decrease dropout rates but also for higher education institutions to be financially sustainable. The study is significant because it addresses the perceptions of adult learners and the

barriers they encounter in higher education. These barriers can impede their academic success and how it impacts their motivation to persevere and accomplish their academic goals. Furthermore, this qualitative research will expand on information regarding barriers experienced by adult learners impacting their academic success that already exists. Additionally, this qualitative research may offer valid insight to adult learners, educators, and higher education administrators for the purpose of creating strategies and implementing best practices in order to combat barriers impacting adult learners' academic achievement.

Given the social and economic forces that have led to adult learners increased participation in higher education, enrollment will likely continue to grow annually due to the frequent changes in technology and shifting job responsibilities (Ross-Gordon, 2011). This qualitative research discusses barriers that adult learners encounter and the benefits of higher education institutions developing and implementing effective strategies to combat these challenges. Ritt (2008) claims, if the goal of American higher education institutions is for adult learners to experience academic success, then this would be beneficial personally and financially for the adult learner. Additionally, an adult learner academic success can provide social, political, and economic benefits to society (Ritt 2008).

Summary and Transition

In the 21st century, it may seem obvious to American higher education institutions that the best way to motivate adult learners is simply to enhance their reasons for enrolling and decrease the barriers. However, if it were that simple American higher education institutions would not annually have low completion rates for adult learners (New, 2014). While it is hard to control what outside obligations adult learners may have, higher education institutions can provide flexible course schedules, implement teaching strategies, and demonstrate supportive

services to make it less of a burden to obligations that already exist (Taylor et al., 2013). The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore barriers that impact adult learners' academic success.

Chapter 2, the literature review, provides information on adult motivation to learn, andragogy, social learning theory, sociocultural theory, various barriers of learning, as well as synthesizing and critiquing related studies. Chapter 3 will explore the methodological premise of the study on the topics of research methods and design, target population, sampling method, instrumentation, data collection and data analysis procedures, limitations of research design, validation, and ethical issues. Chapter 4's goal will be to provide conclusions or findings of the study and offer a thorough account for the source of the data. Lastly, Chapter 5, will summarize integral research employed to support this study, it will pinpoint the study's common themes, and will conclude with providing suggestions for higher education institutions to create strategies to combat barriers impeding adult learners' academic success.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction to the Literature Review

Adult learners represent approximately 38.2% of the postsecondary population in the United States, with a 13% significant growth over the past five years in enrollment, yet student diversity is often neglected (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Although, there has been steady growth in adult learner enrollment, there has been a steady decline in completion rates of their degree programs by 33.7% at higher education institutions nation-wide (New, 2014). Contributing factors to the decline in completion rates at American higher education institutions, are an adult learners age and experienced barriers impeding academic achievement (Falasca, 2011). According to Chen (2017), adult learners are a culturally diverse group ranging in the age of 25 years and older. Unlike high school students (traditional) who enter college right after graduation, adult learners (nontraditional student) who are generally older, bringing more years and variety of work experience, health issues and responsibilities not related to work (Ross-Gordon, 2011). These non-related work responsibilities may include being married, having dependents, employed full-time, etc. (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Additionally, adult learners are innately and extrinsically motivated to learn when encountering challenges during their learning process (Knowles, 1984; Falasca, 2011). Hence, it is vital for American higher education institutions to tap into adult learners' wealth of knowledge and motivation to combat substantial history of low academic achievement and withdrawal rates (Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Adult learners possess many characteristics. According to Knowles (1984), adult learners are independent and more self-driven than traditional students because they bring a wealth of skills and life experiences. In comparison to traditional learners, when faced with life changing events such as health, divorce, and/or a need for financial gain, adult learners will readily seek out opportunities for advancement and rewards (Chao et al., 2007). Additionally, adult learners

will seek out knowledge to learn skills, so they can acquire the necessary tools to perform the job or trade (Knowles, 1984).

Adult learners have certain needs as learners that differ from the traditional student in many facets. Once they decide to further their education, adult learners endure many challenges such as financial, family, health, and employment issues that may be distinct from a traditional student (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Hence, the methods utilized to instruct adult learners should be modified, and higher education faculty and staff members' role is integral in making the course more welcoming to discuss and participate (Baharudin et al., 2017). Therefore, it is vital that leaders, administrators, faculty members, staff, professors, etc. incorporate learning materials and strategies that are appropriate for adult learners to utilize when encountering barriers that impede their academic goals.

Engaging adult learners in a variety of ways through lessons and activities in their learning environment can help prevent poor academic performance or withdraw from there course. According to Gagne (2017), when adult learners are permitted to be involved in their subject content this can be a positive distraction from barriers impacting their academic progress. For example, higher education institutions could modify their instructional practices by allowing adult learners to be more actively engaged in the lesson to deflect from barriers impacting their academic performance (Baharudin et al., 2017).

Adult learners must be afforded the opportunity to connect and personalize new knowledge in their courses with their prior personal and career experiences (Russell et al., 2013). It is important for a higher education institution to develop instructional strategies and activities that will spark adult learners' curiosity and creativity (Bryson, 2013). Additionally, adult learners should feel empowered to set their own academic goals because most of them have zeal to learn,

relate to their work, and excel despite obstacles (Bryson, 2013). Therefore, when adult learners are engaged in the learning process it helps them deflect from barriers impacting their academic progress.

Although, adult learners may enroll in the same courses or programs they may come with different experiences and expectations (Vella, 2002). Adult learners should be provided opportunities to analyze and expand their modes of learning (WVAdultED Instructor Handbook, 2017). According to Falasca (2011), the two main challenges that impede adult learners' academic success are external (aging, health issues, relationships, and employment) and internal (memorization, focus and mental stress) barriers. When adult learners are active participants in their learning process, they are in a better position to combat external or internal barriers that may arise (Vella, 2002).

The mind is distinctively created so even under pressure it can still attain and maintain information (Postle, 2016). For an adult to be able to effectively take on and retain new knowledge they must be provided the opportunity to do so (Russell et al., 2013). This study will discuss in-depth the following barriers that impact adult learners' academic success: situational, institutional, dispositional.

The Study Topic

According to Chen (2017), an adult learner can be defined as a student 25 years of age or older who did not graduate from high school or delayed their entry into higher education. Additionally, an adult learner maybe employed full or part-time; married; a single parent; and financially independent in the pursuit of a college degree or certification (Chen, 2017). Whether completing a course in a traditional classroom or online, adult learners are motivated to acquire a degree or certification for their career or personal goal. Adult learners are armed with various

resources and life experiences they can use to combat barriers impeding their academic success. According to Rothes et al. (2017), many adult learners are motivated by external rewards which shapes their behavior. Simply put, for an adult learner to persevere during challenges, their instructor must extrinsically motivate them by ensuring they are aware of the benefits of being actively involved in their learning process (Brigg, 2015).

There are three theorist Knowles, Bandura, and Vygotsky, who ascertain various perspectives about adult learners' educational outcomes when barriers arise during their learning process. Knowles' (1984) adult learning theory distinguished his premise of andragogy (teaching adults) from pedagogy (teaching children) by analyzing the development and implementation of teaching for adults who he claimed have a motivation to learn. Knowles' (1984) perspective advocated that during the most challenging times, adult learners are eager to learn what they need to know and do to effectively overcome their real-life situations. Instead of taking a behaviorist attitude Bandura (1977) concentrated more on the need for adults to set goals based on what they can accomplish when obstacles are impacting their academic success. Badura's (1977) social learning theory was fueled by his perspective that adult learners' motivation to achieve their goals varies because it is based off the experiences they encounter with others in their pursuit. Whereas, Vygotsky (1978) sociocultural theory on Zone Proximal Distance, is centered on the assertion adult learners acquire new knowledge from social interactions with their instructors and peers. Adult learners are motivated to learn (Knowles, 1984) so when barriers occur impacting their academic goals, they can rely on sociocultural framework for support (Vygotsky, 1978).

The Context

The evolving U.S. economy and employer demands have contributed significantly to adult learners' current enrollment growth at higher education institutions (Dellas & Sakellaris, 2003). Higher learning educators have scrutinized prior research and realized that to accommodate the increase in adult learner enrollment, instructional strategies need to be developed and applied. Silva and White (2013) concurred, "Motivated now by a desire to promote deeper learning among a wider range of students, educators and education policymakers have sought substantial changes in American education" (p. 5). For adult learners to excel academically when barriers arise, higher education institutions must truly understand what motivates them to learn (Chao et al., 2007). Hence, discovering what methods will improve instructional practices can possibly motivate adult learners to overcome barriers that may prevent them from achieving their academic goals.

Generally, adult learners willingly engage in learning experiences in their traditional, nontraditional or workplace settings. However, when academic and nonacademic issues have developed with the potential to impact adult learner academic success, some adult learners find it difficult to focus in their learning environments (Barharudin et al., 2017). Recent, studies have shown not being able to complete tasks; assignments timely; concentrate during classroom lectures; or effectively utilize technology resources are major reasons that impact adult learners' academic performance (Chen, 2015; Falasca, 2011). Additionally, marital or relationship issues, financial, transportation and health problems have been found to be barriers to adult learners' academic success (Barharudin et al., 2017). Therefore, any academic and nonacademic issues that interferes with the adult learners' role, can impact their academic performance.

Currently, there is some research available on how best to retain adult learners. However, there is limited information on what specifically motivates adult learners to overcome challenges that occur in higher education environment (Spivey, 2016). According to Lester (2012), adult learners have been intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to acquire new learning but allow barriers (learning deficiencies and self-assurance) to prevent them from completing higher education courses. Additionally, majority of adult learners' commute and do not live on campus like most traditional students. So, when adult learners have encountered challenges where they reside from their higher learning facility, those issues can impact their attendance and academic performance (Wright, 2012). Many factors, such as transportation issues; learning insecurities; being a parent; married; single; and working full-time, can lead to poor academic performance causing an adult learner to withdraw (Spivey, 2016).

The Problem Statement

Research has shown nontraditional students have lower persistence and completion rates in higher education than traditional students (Markle, 2015). So, there is a tremendous need in higher education to retain adult learners who tend to academically perform lower or withdraw from courses when barriers arise impacting their academic success. Despite some progress, higher education institutions have made unsuccessful attempts to implement methods and strategies to retain adult learners (Fowler & Boylan, 2010). In the 21st century, higher education institutions have failed to determine what motivates adult learners to continue to learn when barriers arise impacting their academic goals (Chao, 2009). Research has shown higher learning institutions have not effectively taken the necessary steps to better understand adult learners' personal and educational needs (Bruce-Sanford et al., 2015). Hence, adult learners' multiple roles

as parents, spouses, and employees have caused them to be absent from classes and completing their coursework online timely (Baharudin et al., 2013).

The Significance

The purpose of this study is to determine barriers that impact adult learners' academic success. The aim of this qualitative case study is to offer adult learners, educators, and higher education administrators' credible information to create strategies and implement best practices to combat barriers that impact adult learners' academic achievement. Awareness of barriers and studies of practices could lead the way for current and perspective adult learners to be more equipped to defeat obstacles. Hence, the literature review will enlighten the audience of those barriers adult learners have encountered by providing various teaching practices that are effective and explain strategies that were employed to combat these challenges.

The Organization

Creating a learning environment conducive to adult learners' needs will improve there academic achievement when barriers arise. Knowles' (1984) andragogical model of learning is utilized as a resource to bridge the gap between adult learners and higher education institutions. Knowles' (1984) Four Principles of Andragogy and its advantages have been highlighted in this literature review, for higher education institutions to consider creating and implementing strategies to combat barriers impacting adult learners' academic success. The literature review included synopses of why adults need to be active participants in their learning, how adults' life experiences can enhance their educational environment, adults' motivation to learn, and what factors enable adults to retain new knowledge (Knowles, 1984).

Theoretical Framework

      Historically, institutions of higher education have provided both academic and extra-curricular programs to facilitate students' retention and success (Bruce-Sanford et al., 2015). Most recently, higher education institutions have discovered there has been a great need to conduct research on how to improve teaching methods and practices geared towards adult learners (Baharudin et al., 2013). For adult learners' to academically succeed when barriers arise, higher education institutions must create classroom environments that are conducive to adult learners' diverse educational needs (Baharudin et al., 2013). According to Sogunro (2015), once teachers develop and employ effective methodologies they can motivate and sustain adult learners in the learning process even during the most challenging situations. To ensure academic success, educators must build and nurture relationships with adult learners and use relevant information to motivate them.

      This qualitative research will include a case study design that is descriptive and informative of the theoretical framework. This research benefited from a case study design because it was descriptive of adult learners and higher education institutions actions (Astalin, 2013). The case study design, unlike other methods, is a highly multipurpose research approach which provided a wealth of data and employed many methods of data collection (Astatlin, 2013). When the case study approach is applied effectively, it is useful for higher education research to develop theory, evaluate programs and develop strategies (Baxter et al., 2008).

      According to Chao (2013), higher education institutions have to: (a) create and apply teaching and learning strategies that will motivate adult learners to engage in their learning environment, (b) discover barriers prohibiting adult learners' academic success, and (c) ultimately help to decrease adult learners' retention rate. Cercone (2008) agreed, in order to

retain adult learners, it is integral for higher education institutions to incorporate support

strategies that will keep students engaged while reminding them about the future payoffs of their

goals. The following theorist Knowles, Bandura and Vygotsky have ascertained various

perspectives about adult learning.

Knowles' structure. Unlike pedagogy which is the creation and implementation of

instruction for children under 18 years old, Knowles (1984) named his theory andragogy based

on the creation and implementation of instruction for adults. Knowles believed that his theory on

adult learning provides a great foundation on the unique characteristics of adults as learners.

Knowles (1984) advocated that in educational environments adults must be instructed differently

than children and adolescents.

Knowles based his andragogical model of learning from his five perceived assumptions

(1984). His first assumption is *self-concept,* which he asserted adults must see a connection

between learning and their lives (Knowles, 1984). For example, if there is no value in learning to

an adult learner, the student will not be motivated to acquire new knowledge and skill. Knowles

second assumption is the *adult learner experience,* he stressed unlike children adult learners can

bring prior experiences to their learning environment (1984). For instance, as people age, they

acquire skills that can contribute to enhance their learning environment. Knowles third

assumption *readiness to learn,* he proclaimed adults bring an eagerness to learn (1984). For

example, adult learners initially bring a passion to acquire new information because it can lead to

a reward of a job promotion, certification, and postsecondary degree. Knowles fourth assumption

orientation to learning, asserted the educational and personal experiences an adult learner has

obtained from birth, can be used to enhance new subject content in their learning environment

(1984). For instance, while acquiring new knowledge an adult learners' brain has the capability

to be enriched by previous experiences and can compile and apply the new content. However, Knowles fifth assumption *motivated to learn*, advocated if adults see a purpose in acquiring hew knowledge, they will be eager to learn under pressure (1984). For example, when adult learners are aware that new knowledge will benefit them professionally or personally, they are intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to combat barriers that may impede their academic objectives.

In addition, to Knowles five assumptions of how adults learn, he developed four Principles of Andragogy (1984) to provide further credibility to his perspective on adult learners. Knowles first principle declared that adults need to be active participants in their instructional lessons and assessments (1984). Then in his second principle he ascertained that adults' positive and negative life experiences can enhance their educational environment (Knowles, 1984). Next, his third principle Knowles (1984) asserted under duress adults will remain intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to learn new content if they see an immediate benefit to their life. Lastly, in his final principle he noted adults must be problem solvers rather than being idle participants when learning new knowledge (Knowles, 1984).

There are several researchers that agreed with Knowles (1984) perspective about what motivates adults to learn even when barriers arise. Zemke et al. (1984) stressed new education experiences can impact adult learners' motivation. Adult learners are extrinsically motivated to combat any obstacles whether physical, mental or emotional (Rothes et al., 2014). Effective learning strategies and activities along with resources have to be employed for an adult learner to withstand barriers impacting their academic progress (Zemke & Zemke, 1984). Hence, Ross-Gordon (2011) concurred when managing stress in their lives, if provided efficient learning resources adult learners will be motivated to academically achieve their goals.

Bandura's structure. In comparison to Knowles' (1984) andragogy theory, Bandura (1978) based his social learning theory from research on how social interactions in educational environments promote more effective learning for adults and children. Mezirow (1981) agreed social interactions play a key role in adult learning. Additionally, Bandura (1978) social learning theory claimed that people acquire learning through watching others and imitating what they observe. Hence, the interaction amongst peers in their learning environment can be attributed to social learning that has occurred.

Bandura's (1978) social learning theory is based on four principles which he ascertained is necessary for effective learning to occur. Bandura's first principle *Observation* asserted people learn through observation. For example, an adult learner can acquire learning from listening to their instructor's lecture or watching their instructor or peer perform a skill. The second principle *Retention and Context* suggested that people internalize information in their memories and when encountering similar experience that information can be recollected (Bandura, 1978). For example, adult learners can experience an emotional connection from shared experiences when collaborating with their classmates. The third principle *Motivation and Reward* stated people learn when they are extrinsically motivated (Bandura, 1978). For instance, if an adult learner is rewarded with a Dean's List honor at the end of the semester for receiving high grades, that individual will be extrinsically motivated to academically perform well the next semester. Bandura's (1978) fourth Principle *State of Mind* claimed that internal and external reinforcement affects learning and behavior of a person. For instance, when an adult learner is rewarded for their academic efforts with an outstanding grade or high score on an exam, it increases their confidence and provides a sense of achievement.

Both Knowles (1984) and Bandura (1978) agreed that adult learners will learn when they are motivated and exceed their academic goals. Adult learners have external motivators (better jobs, promotions and higher salaries) and if they have received recognition for their academic efforts' they will repeat their academic performance when faced with barriers in their learning environment (Knowles, 1984). The social context of the adult learner must be considered by instructors when developing strategies to keep them engaged in their learning process (Bandura, 1978; Kidd, 2010). When applied effectively, Bandura's social learning principles can help adult learners overcome barriers impeding their academic success (Johnson, 2017; Kidd, 2010).

Vygotsky's structure. There have been numerous theorists who have provided research about adult motivation to learn, including in the social and biological sciences (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017). One theorist who has provided significant research is Vygotsky (1978) which he based his theory on an individual's cognitive development. In comparison to Bandura (1975) social learning theory, Vygotsky (1978) sociocultural theory can be attributed to the construction of new knowledge deriving from adult social interactions which he called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The Zone of Proximal Development is "the distance between the development levels as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving with assistance from their teacher or in collaboration with peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). For example, when students are in a learning environment that is conducive to their learning needs Zone of Proximal Development is evident.

Over the past 20 years in higher education, past theories have not wavered, adults still learn through cognitive recognition and active engagement in their learning process (Ermter & Newby, 2013). Vygotsky (1978) asserted when social interaction occurs it permits knowledge to be absorbed and constructed through collaboration. For example, Vygotsky premise was that

through student's social interactions with an educator they receive their most vital education and principles. Vygotsky's substantial research proclaimed social development plays an integral role during childhood cognitive period of learning and once the student becomes an adult learner their past learning experiences will be instilled in them to engage in their learning process.

Prior research has noted that learning theories have proven instruction acknowledges a student's ability to master new content. Wlordoski (2008) concurred with Vygotsky (1978) perspective, an instructor can effectively teach an adult learner when they build on students' social and economic backgrounds. Although, Vygotsky (1978) viewpoint that cognitive growth is attributed to social development, Knowles (1984) opposed that the following *four* circumstances of educating students are attributed to their evolution: (a) the learning environment must encourage an eagerness to learn; (b) the environment must promote learning; (c) the teacher must include students in formulating lessons and strategies; and (d) knowledge must be a collaborative effort from both teacher and student. Furthermore, Vygotsky (1978) perspective on the connection between learning and development differs from Knowles. Vygotsky contended learning precedes development, not the other way around (Wlodkowski, 2008). Historically, instructors have known when learners are motivated communication will flow, anxiety decreases, and creativity is evident (Wlodkowski, 2008). Simply put, Vygotsky (1978) theory is centered on development and learning between the teacher and student. If there is a cohesive relationship between the teacher and student (Zone of Proximal Development), when barriers arise that connection can endure obstacles that may impact adult learners' academic goals.

Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature

Adult learners are different than other students because their life experiences have shaped who they have become and how they process new learning content. Cercone (2008) asserted

adult learners have diverse learning needs and those factors must be considered in the development of their traditional or nontraditional learning environment. If instructors create lessons and apply teaching strategies that adult learners can connect to, this will promote a cohesive and productive educational environment. According to Knowles (1984), for an adult learner to be engaged in their learning process they must see a relevancy to their academic or career goals. This literature review explores barriers that can impact an adult learners' academic success. When designing instruction educators must consider how adult learners best learn when challenges arise in their learning environment. Past studies have revealed, a positive learning environment enables adult learners to effectively retain new content and academically perform well (Spivey, 2016). The qualitative case study is organized according to situational, institutional and dispositional barriers. This study could bring clarity to what specific barriers impact adult learners' academic goals and its findings may provide vital information that can improve adult learners' academic performance and completion rates.

Barriers adult learners encounter. Adults have acquired new knowledge in many environments, whether it is on the job navigating new systems, at home browsing the internet or when attending a course to obtain a degree (Merriam et al., 2014). According to the most current National Center for Education Statistics (2016), over 45 million American adults participated in educational undertakings. Recently, there has been some research on effective ways to improve teaching adults when barriers impact their academic success. Motivation is the key to adult learners' academic success, so educators must be invested in decreasing barriers that impact adult learners' enrollment (Brophy, 2010). However, when educators have not provided effective coping strategies for an adult learner to remain driven during their life-changing issue their motivation to excel will decrease (Sogunro, 2015).

Adult learners are motivated from a desire to improve their current life situation, whether it is personal (health, family) or work-related reward (Silliman et al., 2018; Sogunro, 2015). Adult learners are extrinsically motivated to enroll in postsecondary education when they see relevancy of how the academic undertaking can lead to financial reward. (Wlodkowski et al., 2017). Adult learners' life experiences define who they have grown to be and can enhance their learning environment (Knowles, 1984). Therefore, adult learners are affected by their academic and nonacademic responsibilities which impacts their motivation to academically succeed (Cercone, 2008).

Adult learners enter postsecondary education with various perceived barriers: being married, a parent, traveling far distances, full-time employment and mental or physical disability. Deggs (2011) proclaimed there are numerous researches that show how important it is to a higher education institutions' economic infrastructure to improve their academic programs and support services to meet the demands of adult learners. However, meeting the demands of adult learners can only be accomplished if higher education institutions have a full understanding of the barriers they encounter (Deggs, 2011).

There have been several studies conducted to determine barriers that impact adult learners from obtaining their academic goals. Deggs (2011) qualitative study looked at the three observed barriers of adult learners: intrapersonal, job-related and academic-related. The findings of the study showed barriers are always present, so adult learners must manage and work hard to combat issues as they arise (Deggs, 2011). Park and Choi (2009) study examined what barriers led to adult learners' high drop-out rates in both traditional and nontraditional adult learning environments. Their findings indicated adult learners are challenged with personal barriers (finances, school support, time-management) outside the classroom that are stumbling blocks in

achieving their academic goals (Park & Choi, 2009). However, when adult learners' have

encountered challenges impacting their academic success, they have been able to excel when

given the opportunity and support (Falasca, 2011). This qualitative case study will provide

information to consider if situational, institutional and dispositional barriers are impeding adult

learners' academic success.

      Situational Barriers. When adult learners enroll in postsecondary traditional courses or

programs, it can be challenging managing their educational and personal responsibilities. Adult

learners juggle many nonacademic responsibilities compared to traditional students and have

time constraints when being engaged in their learning environment (National Research Council,

2012). Many challenges, like situational barriers, can arise in adult learners' quest to obtain their

academic goals. A situational barrier can be defined as an issue that effect adult learners' life

circumstances (Deggs, 2011). After enrolling in a higher education program several situational

barriers such as time management and health issues have impacted adult learner academic

success (Stanford & Martin, 2009).

      Carnivale et al. (2010) reported that the 2009 National Center for Education Statistics,

recent U.S. economic market projections has indicated 63% of jobs will entail having a

bachelor's degree. By 2025, at least 106 million American adult learners will be enrolled in

higher education institutions to obtain a certification or degree for jobs (Sherman et al., 2015).

Hence, there will be a tremendous need for higher education institutions to make

accommodations in instructional practices for an adult learner regarding their non-educational

responsibilities. Chen (2017) concurred, to accommodate adult learners and to ensure their

academic success, higher education institutions must be very considerate of their various

nonacademic responsibilities. Time management and transportation have hindered adult learners'

academic goals contributing to the annual increase in American higher education institutions

attrition rates (Hart, 2012).

Adult learners' enrollment has increased significantly in postsecondary courses because

of their desire for a job promotion or new career (Chen, 2017). Giancola, Munz, and Trares

(2008) survey concluded that adult learners experience some apprehension returning to school

and fear lacking the skills, time, and knowledge necessary to succeed. Additionally, adult

learners have found it challenging to balance their work schedules, family, and other interests

with their class schedules leading some to withdraw or dropout (Chen, 2017). According to Ross-

Gordon (2011) qualitative study, a recurring factor stated by 68% of American higher education

institutions is the overwhelming need to offer flexible schedules to adult learners. Higher

education institutions cited economically they do not have the financial resources to hire more

faculty and staff; increase salaries; and change their pre-existing academic programs

infrastructure (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Deggs (2011) agreed, over the past 10 years, American

higher education institutions have struggled accommodating adult learners' diverse needs

because of its deep-rooted structure resulting in higher drop-out rates compared to traditional

students. Hence, due to the consistent annual increase in adult learner enrollment, swift action

needs to be taken by American higher education institutions to meet their diverse needs and to

sustain financially (Deggs, 2011).

Once the adult learner has enrolled, unexpected circumstances can arise impacting their

school schedules. Higher education institutions have been challenged with developing

instructional practices and programs to fit adult learners waning availability (Baharudin et al.,

2012). While it may be challenging to regulate nonacademic responsibilities of adult learners,

higher education institutions should be required to provide flexible course schedules to make it

less of a competition to obligations that already exist (Taylor & Hambdy, 2013). For example, the Circles Program at the University of Texas, has been known for providing vocational courses consisting in small sections so that adult learners can progress at their own pace and repeat the course if necessary (Hainline et al., 2010). Hence, adult learners can be accommodated by removing institutional barriers which will permit them to manage nonacademic responsibilities that do not interfere with their academic progress (Falasca, 2011; Hainline et al., 2010; Kidd, 2010).

When enrolling in a higher education institution, adult learners may have a set plan to manage work, school schedules, and family obligations. However, challenges such as current or unexpected health issues may arise in pursuit of their academic goals impeding their progress. Despite the American Disability Act (1981) that has mandated all disabled students be treated ethically, there are no higher education institution rules other than common courtesy, to enforce their staff show empathy to adult learners experiencing health challenges. The adult learner may encounter unexpected physical and mental problems that interfere with their motivation to complete their assignments, course or program (Goto et al., 2009). Adult learners' health issues compounded with their other nonacademic responsibilities and school assignments, may potentially impede their academic progress (Muller, 2008).

Beyond having personal goals, adult learners' must sustain efficient motivation to obtain their academic goals. Higher education institutions must be empathetic to adult learners' when they are trying to balance their health issues and academic responsibilities. When adult learners are feeling mentally, emotionally or physically challenged, studies have proven supportive relationships between instructors and adult learners prevent low academic performance (Williams et al., 2011). Supportive instructor-student relationships, effective classroom

management and successful social and emotional learning have contributed to an environment that ensures academic success (Jennings et al., 2009). If adult learners are provided effective coping strategies to combat challenges they can academically succeed (Por et al., 2011). Therefore, when an adult learner is trying to manage their academic responsibilities while experiencing health issues, their instructor could assist with providing supportive services to prevent low academic performance or course withdraw.

Institutional Barriers. Higher education institutions have struggled with providing appropriate programs and services for adult learners (Deggs, 2011). Not being aware of institutional barriers that have impacted adult learners, has led to higher learning institutions not effectively meeting their academic needs or providing adequate support services (Deggs, 2011). Institutional barriers have affected adult learners' capability to academically succeed (Saar et al., 2014). The most common institutional barriers found to be challenges for adult learners are admissions requirements and financial aid (Saar et al., 2014).

Compared to other countries, American higher education institutions have the rare ability to provide access for both traditional and nontraditional students while catering to all levels of academic achievement (Harris, 2013). Higher education institutions have made valuable decisions that impact adult learner enrollment and academically accommodate their diverse academic and culture needs (Chen, 2017). Adult learners' have been motivated by the desire for a job promotion or new career and will continue to seek out postsecondary education (Chen, 2017). Adult learners have found gaining admissions into a higher education institution is an accomplishment but obtaining academic success has been a challenge (Sogunro, 2015).

After obtaining acceptance, adult learners may need additional assistance with their higher education institution admissions and financial aid processes. According to Brown (2011),

higher education institutions that have modified program content and support services for employed adult learners with multiple responsibilities, have been very successful in meeting adult learners needs. Bawa (2016) agreed to improve retention rates, higher education institutions must provide adult learners support during enrollment and as they matriculate through their academic program. For example, higher education institutions have deterred challenges during the admissions process by offering adult learners' access to a mentoring program; tutoring before admissions testing; and in-depth financial aid counseling (Brown, 2011). Another example, which a higher education institution could implement like Charter Oak State College, is a prior learning assessment and tests to earn college credit for adult learners (Charter Oak State College, n.d.). During the 2017–2018 school year, Charter Oak State College had a 91% enrollment for adult learners; 77% graduation rate; and garnered a 100% employment rate within a 6-month time frame (Charter Oak State College, n.d.).

The current economic downturn has had a major impact on American higher education institution and their adult learners. The United States economic recession can be attributed to the limited public funding for higher education institutions; minimized financial aid resources for adult learners; and restraints on programs to improve retention (Hainline et al., 2010). Despite American higher education institutions struggling economy, it is still known for being the most expensive education infrastructure in the world (DeVito, 2009). Hence, adult learners have encountered financial roadblocks in their quest to obtain economic resources (government financial aid, plus loans, scholarships) to combat annual high tuition rates (DeVito, 2009).

According to Cubberly (2015), some postsecondary institutions have tried to eliminate financial barriers by offering free or reduced tuition to adult learners who meet low-income economic standards. Despondently, these efforts have been in vain for most adult learners

because their employment income has exceeded government financial aid assistance limits (Cubberly, 2015). DeVito (2009) asserted most adult learners: (a) take a noncredit course which does not qualify for financial-aid programs; (b) are graduate students who are not eligible for Federal Pell Grants; and (c) don't qualify for payment plan options because of income (DeVito, 2009). Numerous studies have found that finances are barriers that impede adult learners' academic goals, so higher education institutions must act swiftly to reassess their financial structure (Cubberly, 2015; DeVito, 2009; Kimmel et al., 2012).

Dispositional Barriers. When adult learners enroll in higher education institutions, they often encounter challenges that impede their academic success. Adult learners will experience greater satisfaction in learning environments in which they can adapt to and cope with when experiencing challenges. A challenge many adult learners struggle within higher education that impacts their academic success is dispositional barriers. According Falasca (2011) dispositional barriers are attributed to psychological issues that cause low motivation, low self-esteem, embarrassment and fear of failure. These dispositional barriers have derived from mental or emotional attitudes experienced by adult learners in their learning environment (Falasca, 2011).

Historically, higher education institutions have discovered when adult learners are motivated the learning process operates more smoothly because communication flows, anxiety declines, and creativity bloom (Wlodowksi, 2008). When higher education institutions have created and maintained safe and supportive learning environments, this has fostered an atmosphere that impedes low motivation in adult learners (Falasca, 2011). O'Neill et al. (2013) study explored research-based methods focused on supporting adult learner persistence. The study findings recommended these three theories (expectancy-value theory, goal theory and self-determination

theory) be combined to frame and describe the psychosocial demands on adult learners (O'Neill et al., 2013). According to National Research Council (2008), higher education institutions who have structured their learning environments with efficient instructional interactions, lessons and systems have encouraged adult learners to persist when encountering barriers. Wlodowski (2008) concurred, it is vital that higher education institutions employ teaching strategies and support to sustain adult learners' motivation in their course or program. Therefore, numerous researchers have suggested strategies so that adult learners can persist through obstacles impacting their academic success (Deggs, 2016).

According to Kasworm (2008), when adult learners' have made the decision to enroll in higher education it is a transformative commitment. The admissions process will need to be committed to accommodating adult learners' diverse learning needs (Deggs, 2011). Adult learners' notions about being a student again can be overwhelming as they reflect on their nonacademic responsibilities. Falasca (2011) concurred being anxious and concerned about not academically succeeding can cause adult learners to foster negative perceptions about achieving their academic goals. Giancola et al. (2008) study about adult learners' perceptions about returning to school concluded, "they experience their own apprehension as they return to school and worry that they do not have the skills, time, and information necessary to succeed" (p. 225). Once enrolled, adult learners will now have to find a way to balance their job, family obligations, hobbies and social life with attending classes weekly. Adult learners will have to consistently find a balance with managing their nonacademic responsibilities to be able to devote the necessary time to their academic obligations. Hence, higher education institutions will need to provide strategies that will appeal to the emotional challenges that are impeding adult learners' academic goals. Deggs (2011) proclaimed that American higher education institutions should create or modify existing

support systems (workshops) which appropriately address adult learners' emotional needs. Numerous studies have revealed, despite these barriers, adult learners can achieve their academic goals if they are aided and support (Falsca, 2011; Kasworm, 2008).

Methodological Issues

There have been many debates about the usefulness of qualitative research in education studies because the philosophies differ between qualitative and quantitative research. Once the research has concluded, the investigator must consider the real-life relevant questions, imminent findings, and the participants' role in the study (Marshall and Rossman, 2016). Studies about adult learners in postsecondary education can benefit from a qualitative research. For example, a qualitative study could be conducted on the experiences of adult learners in hybrid courses. Furthermore, there have been several studies concentrating on adult learners' viewpoints regarding their academic success employing qualitative research. For example, Vann's (2017) phenomenological study explored postsecondary instructors' empathetic strategies incorporated in their teaching decisions impact on adult learner academic performance. Schroeder and Terras's (2015) phenomenological study on distance learning also discovered if advising experiences improve adult learners' academic performance. Therefore, employing qualitative methodology in this study will possibly determine if survey, semistructured interviews and focus groups can help derive at issues impacting adult learners' academic success.

Progressively, programs that cater to adult learners' academic and nonacademic responsibilities have been developed and implemented by higher education institutions (Ross-Gordon, 2018). Several qualitative studies have shown that when barriers have risen in adult learners' educational environment, their diverse learning needs have caused higher education institutions to restructure their teaching strategies (Deggs, 2011; Devito, 2010; Falasca, 2011).

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Unlike traditional students, adult learners face unique problems in their learning environment **(**Kahl & Cropley, 1983). For example, adult learners have fears of lower academic performance compared to traditional students, capturing new information, and academically succeeding **(**Kahl & Cropley, 1983).

This qualitative methodology is groundbreaking, informative, and encouraging. The qualitative research can foster a platform for integrity and genuineness. The aim of this qualitative studies focus was to explore classroom instruction; practices; and academic resources which can motivate adult learners to combat barriers and academically excel (Devito, 2010). The basic modes of qualitative research employed (survey, semistructured interview, and focus group) supports theorists who have provided research about what motivates adult learners to persevere when encountering challenges. Quantitative research would have benefited this study also because it is logical and its quantitative researchers use consistency as a method of accuracy (Tighe et al., 2013).

The main idea of the study was to share theorists' perspectives about what barriers impede adult learners' academic achievement. Incorporating various theorist perspectives, phenomenological studies and basic modes of methodology can assist with further progress in adult learners' academic success when confronting challenges. Vann (2017) and Schroeder and Terras (2014) employed semistructured interviews in their phenomenological studies, which revealed to the researcher information that had not been foreseen about participants different viewpoints (Tighe et al., 2013). Seidman (2014) asserted that the interviewing method permits the researcher to provide detailed information given by the participants to clarify their experiences.

In comparison to employing quantitative research, a qualitative research in this study will only permit the collection of data to be conducted on a smaller scale of participants. When a quantitative methodology is employed, it will not only provide the opportunity to collect data on a much larger scale but with the same concept (Narushima et al., 2013). This qualitative study could have possibly been enhanced also by using a quantitative methodology. For example, quantitative research conducted by Chao (2013) study employed a methodology consisting of tables which described the concept of adult learners' motivational drive and visually the tables displayed the challenges they encountered in postsecondary education. Hence, employing a mixed methodology could have permitted data collection from any technique (qualitative and quantitative) available to researchers; interpretation is continual; and can provide more accurate results (Creswell, 2003).

The research encompasses everyday life occurrences impacting adult learners' academic goals. The study's aim was to identify and mitigate academic and nonacademic issues faced by adult learners (Schroeder & Terras, 2015). Adult learners' academic performance can be affected by challenges that occur in their workplace and learning environment. Adult learners have lacked the motivation, struggled with financial issues, and suffered from inadequate supportive services, which have led to low retention rates (Markle, 2015). The basic modes of methodology employed in this study (survey, semistructured interviews, and focus groups) will assist with cultivating relationships between adult learners and educators (Vann, 2017). The research explored instructional practices that have been attributed to developing teaching strategies and resources that minimize barriers impacting adult learners' academic success (Vann, 2017).

Presently frameworks and theories researched from Vann (2017), Schroeder and Terras (2015) and Chao (2013) are based on qualitative and quantitative methodologies employing

interviews, questionnaires and tables. Incorporating action research in this study was used to make meaningful contributions to research on postsecondary education (Tighe et al., 2013). Vann (2017) examined the data and provided clarification, while Schroeder and Terras (2015) made the data structured and informative. The thoroughness and resourceful content of data collected and visually displayed in Chao (2013) research links the three studies, as they connect to make more substantial findings for adult learners.

Synthesis of Research Findings

Much of the literature points out that if not addressed effectively by higher education institutions, many barriers will continue to impact adult learner academic progress (Falasca, 2011). When adult learners have enrolled in postsecondary courses, they may suffer from low self-assurance but desire a learning environment that is structured and rewarding (Ross-Gordon, 2017). Knowles (1984) proclaimed prior life experiences intrinsically and extrinsically motivate adults to learn and persist even when facing challenges. It is important that the instructional process is focused on enhancing adult learner motivation (Wlodkowski et al., 2017). Findings from Li et al.'s (2015) study revealed even though over the past 10 years technology has transformed teaching and learning by offering more diverse instructional practices, instructors have been slow to integrate this learning tool. Whether instructors are intimidated by the ever-changing systems and interfaces of technology, when used appropriately it can increase adult learners' participation and academic performance (Li et al., 2015).

Not only does the literature support when not addressed efficiently situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers may impact adult learner academic progress, some literature suggest that retention rates will significantly increase in higher education institutions (Fincher, 2010). Adult learners tend to be motivated to excel despite challenges, only if there is a

perceived connection to their personal or professional lives. Sogunro (2015) concurred, if an adult learner does not see a connection or significance in the subject content they will not academically perform well. Adult learners can find relevancy in their course if encouraged by their instructors to use prior life experiences which can enhance content and provide rewards. When adult learners are permitted to actively engage in their course, they are more motivated to academically succeed even when encountering barriers (Bowman and Plourde, 2012). According to Spivey (2016), higher education institutions' retention rates have improved, when adult learners have been integrated successfully into their learning environment. Bawa (2016) asserted it is vital for higher education institutions' economic infrastructure, to effectively address the steady increase in traditional and online course(s) withdraw rates for adult learners. Therefore, if higher education institutions are truly committed to modifying their instructional practices, a significant increase in retention rates will occur from adult learners' persistence to excel despite challenges (Spivey, 2016).

It is critical in the 21st century for instructors to use various teaching and learning strategies that motivate and foster high academic achievement for their adult learners. Sogunro (2015) stated, "A quality instruction embodies strong andragogical skills which include effective planning and organization, manifestation of currency of knowledge of content, use of modern technology, and instructor's embracing personality attributes" (p. 29). Palvia et al. (2018) reported technology can be integrated into postsecondary course as an instructional model which connects adult learners to their instructors and peers. Wlodkowski and Ginsberg's (2017) study suggested learning methods employed in an adult learner educational environment should stimulate their mind and motivate them to persist when barriers arise. Sogunro (2015) noted adult learners lead complex lives. Therefore, adult learners who have encountered barriers

impacting their academic performance would benefit immensely from instructors who show empathy and cater to their diverse learning needs (Songunro, 2015).

Personal and professional obligations can impact adult learners' academic success. Besides being a student, an adult learner has juggled multiple roles as a parent, spouse, employee and/or retiree (Chao, 2013; Lin, 2015). There is various challenges adult learners face when enrolled in higher education course or program. Spivey (2016) study involved participants' detailing narratives indicating a barrier was situational hardships (health, economic, and transportation) and a motivator was a job promotion. When facing academic and nonacademic issues adult learners have persisted to earn the highest grades, increase in pay, and recognition (Sogunro, 2015).

Academic and nonacademic responsibilities can hinder adult learners' academic success. However, with assistance from their higher education institutions, adult learners can overcome barriers impacting their academic success. Higher education institutions must be held accountable to address why adult learners are withdrawing at much higher rates than traditional students (Falasca, 2011). Vann's (2017) study findings reported when it is apparent the instructor is empathetic towards an adult learner by modifying their teaching practices this will lead to student academic success. Schroeder and Terras (2015) study discovered that productive adult learner advising experiences lead to an increase in higher education institutions' retention rate. Their findings also suggested when confronting challenges adult learners need instructional strategies that are versatile and engaging (Schroeder & Terras, 2015).

Critique of Previous Research

The research conducted in this chapter demonstrates adult learners' academic success can be fostered through an encouraging relationship with their higher education institution

(Schroeder & Terras, 2015). Knowles (1984) framework of andragogical model of learning was conceived on his five assumptions of how adults learn and if these needs are met, they will persist during adversities and achieve their academic goals. Effective instruction and supportive relationships between adult learners and faculty and staff is integral to their academic success. The various studies in this chapter have provided valid reasons for implementing effective instructional strategies while also nurturing relationships to encourage adult learners to sustain motivation when barriers arise during their academic journey.

The findings also reflect that overcoming barriers that derive during adult learners' academic pursuit is the key to increasing retention rates of higher education institutions. Research has revealed instructors lack confidence in applying tools and educational material themselves, so they fail to apply new practices and learning resources (Spivey, 2016). Currently, higher education relies heavily on technology for course design and functional tool practices. Several studies have shown that it is the instructor responsibility to integrate technology into the learning environment and if not done effectively it will impact adult learners' academic performance (Spivey, 2016; Tighe et al., 2013; Wlodkowski et al., 2017). Hence, there appears to be a connection between adult learners' academic success and higher education faculty and staff.

There is a wealth of research that supports that developing effective teaching strategies will ensure adult learners' academic success. However, there is minimal research suggesting teaching strategies that can help adult learners sustain motivation to academically achieve their goals when encountering barriers. Situational, institutional and dispositional barriers have had a profound impact on adult learners' academic success (Deggs, 2011). This research revealed studies that support Knowles (1989) andragogical theory, if knowledge is relevant the adult learner will be motivated to learn even under duress (Sogunro, 2015; Lin, 2016). However, there

are studies that shown even when academic and nonacademic issues have been efficiently addressed, these factors may still hinder an adult learners' academic success (Chao, 2013; Lin, 2015).

After reviewing evidence, it appears that implementing effective teaching strategies can motivate adult learners to overcome barriers, leading to academic success. Some literatures suggest if teaching strategies are implemented effectively, retention rates will significantly increase in higher education institutions. These numerous studies revealed here support the notion that when motivated adult learners will overcome barriers impacting their academic success which can ultimately improve higher education institution retention rates. Sogunro (2015) agreed sustaining motivation through adversities is the key to stimulating and keeping adult learners actively engaged in their learning process.

Chapter 2 Summary

American higher education institutions have failed to include adult learners in discussions to improve motivation and instructional practices in their learning environment. Adult learners are a culturally diverse group with unique requirements and when barriers arise during their academic pursuit their academic performance may be impacted. Knowles (1984) asserted higher education institutions are accountable for adult learners' academic success and must determine how adult learners learn best and what motivates them to perform well during challenges. Higher education institutions must also discover why adult learners seek learning and what will sustain their motivation to excel when encountering barriers. Once higher education institutions figure out why adult learners enroll and what sustains their motivation to learn, they can implement teaching strategies to combat situational, institutional and dispositional barriers impacting adult learners' academic success.

According to Sogunro (2015), the American educational system initially catered their teaching strategies toward children. However, recently higher education institutions' have become more invested in improving teaching strategies in adult learners' educational environment (Sogunro, 2015). This has paved the way to numerous researches being conducted on effectively instructing and motivating an adult learner, but not enough research has been offered on how best to sustain their motivation when barriers arise impacting their academic success. Hence, there is limited research available regarding motivating factors that can help adult learners conquer barriers impeding their academic success (Sogunro, 2015; Spivey, 2016).

This study intention is to explore what barriers impact adult learners' academic success. In the 21st century, there is a remarkable need in higher education to motivate and retain adult learners. Although, studies are accessible that describe barriers that impact adult learners' academic success, American higher education institutions will need to take the initiative successfully implement best practices to help adult learners cope when barriers are attempting to impact their academic progress.

The framework offered in the study will derive from organized data, with options that can be employed in postsecondary education (Allen & Zhang, 2015). Specifically, it was primarily based on Knowles (1984) andragogical model of learning from his five perceived assumptions of self-concept; adult learner experience; readiness to learn; orientation to learning; and motivation to learn. The study's review centers on research and methodological literature that will examine whether an adult learners' motivation to learn is significantly impacted when barriers arise during their academic pursuit.

Over the past decade, many discussions have occurred about the effectiveness of qualitative research in education studies because the philosophies vary between qualitative and

quantitative research. This study qualitative methodology examines issues related to teacher-adult learner interaction, possible intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, and barriers that deter academic success. This research reveals incorporating various theorist perspectives, phenomenological studies and basic modes of methodology can assist with further progress in adult learners' quest for academic success.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to determine barriers that impact adult learners'
academic success. The population of this study included 33 undergraduate adult learners
attending an American higher education institution. A thorough literature review was performed,
and evidence was reviewed and gathered to analyze adult learners' academic performance in
higher learning institutions. The research study discussed what barriers adult learners encounter
which impact their academic success. An array of educational databases such as Google Scholar,
Sage Publications, Scholarworks, Journal Storage, and Education Resource Information Center
were employed. In addition, specific keywords were utilized such as adult learner motivation,
adult learner, barriers to learning, dispositional barrier institutional barrier, motivation to learn,
and situational barrier.

Research Questions

The purpose of the qualitative case study determined barriers that impact adult learners'
academic success. The triangulation method of surveys, semistructured interviews, and focus
groups are employed to discover why adult learners academically succeed when encountering
barriers. The research was led by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the experienced situational barriers that adult learners enrolled in higher
education institutions have encountered?

RQ2: What are the experienced institutional barriers that adult learners enrolled in higher
education institutions have encountered?

RQ3: What are the experienced dispositional barriers that adult learners enrolled in
higher education institutins have encountered?

Purpose of the Study

According to Knowles (1984), adult learners learn best when they are motivated. Sogunro (2015) asserted when personal or educational barriers arise for adult learners, educators should implement motivating factors to sustain them throughout the learning process. The purpose of this study determined the barriers that impact adult learners' academic success. Falaska (2011) suggested removing barriers during the learning process permits adult learners to acquire and retain new content. As an adult learner, this researcher recognized adults have special needs and requirements as learners. Hence, the researcher is interested in discovering whether motivation can help deter barriers impacting adult learners' academic goals.

In this study, the researcher was committed to analyzing what motivates adult learners to overcome barriers that impacted their academic goals. The researcher was optimistic that higher education leaders, administrators, faculty member, staff, professors, etc. consider adult learners experiences when encountering barriers to improve their learning environment. Research findings also reflected the benefits of why educators must actively be involved in adult learners learning process.

Research Design

The research design chosen was a qualitative single embedded case study. This method allowed the researcher to use various procedures to conduct research and with collecting data. The methods of data collection consisted of the review of current literature in both brick-and-mortar libraries and web journal searches. The qualitative method sought to uncover my primary questions describing barriers that impact adult learners' academic success. Additionally, the utilization of secondary resources specific to meta-analysis and qualitative methods: written response surveys, semistructured interviews and focus groups, will give this research an

advantage. These secondary resources permitted the researcher to view and evaluate collected data of interactions from the resources and participants (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Therefore, the structure of the research design provided a complete and detailed description in answering my research questions. Yin (2009) asserted that case studies are a favored approach when the investigator has limited authority over attitudes and habits that arise and when the focal point impacts real-life events.

Research Population and Sampling Method

The population derived from a random sample of adult learners attending a state community college in midwestern United States. Exceptional care was provided to ensure all adult learners' confidentiality and privacy was not compromised. To further ensure ethical standards are conducted throughout the research process, identities were disguised. Additionally, instead of referring to a participant by their given name the researcher provided each participant with an assigned number to be referenced throughout written documents (semistructured interviews and focus groups).

The focal point of the study examined the views of adult learners at an American higher education institution where the average student is 27 years old. The sample size compromised of 33 adult learners that attended a diverse higher education institution with an estimated total of 2,200 students, who ranged from 18 to 75 years old. After the initial 33 participants completed the *Adult Learners Education Journey* survey using Qualtrics, a random sample of 10 adult learners were selected to participate in the corresponding semistructured interviews. Additionally, the same 10 participants participated in both focus groups (five participants per group).

The Student Services Department utilized the school's web page to notify adult learners about the upcoming study. In addition, the researcher posted fliers around the campus to boost adult learner participation. Each participant was given a written disclaimer that participation in the study was voluntary and if requested will receive a copy of their semistructured interview and focus group responses.

Instrumentation

A qualitative case study was conducted to determine if there are any experienced barriers impacting adult learners' academic success. The three types of instruments employed in this study were a survey (see Appendix A), semistructured interview (see Appendix B), and focus group (see Appendix C) by the researcher to gather and triangulate data. The research methods permitted the researcher to capture various aspects of the topic and support the validity of the study.

The first instrument utilized was the online *Adult Learners Education Journey Survey* developed by the researcher from the study's research questions. The 18-question survey was accessed through Qualtrics software program by participants using the researcher's two personal laptops and consisted of 10 Likert-scale and eight multiple-choice questions and statements. The multiple-choice questions on the survey are close-ended questions, which permitted the researcher to use the data to categorize respondents into specific groups (FluidSurveys, 2013). The survey was employed to provide a deeper understanding of the topic from the participants responses to questions posed about their experiences as adult learners.

After the survey was created, a pilot test of the survey was used to modify possible questions that do not make sense or are biased, collect data, and ensure reliability (Dikko, 2016). A pilot test of the survey was conducted using a sample size of 10 participants who attend the

higher education institution where the qualitative study was subsequently held. However, the researcher failed to consider in the initial development of the survey that the higher education institution overall student population consisted of both traditional (16–24-year-old students) and nontraditional students (25 years and older). So, when the pilot test of the survey was conducted and assessed by Qualtrics software program, results reflected a much lower response to Question 15, which asked participants their age. Qualtrics' report showed that four of the 10 participants did not answer Question 15. After examination of each individual survey, the researcher realized that for the study to yield reliable results, the survey had to be revised. Hence, the option (16–24) was an age range added to Question 15. After the survey was modified the researcher was able to conduct the survey and exclude the 10 participants from the pilot test and their findings. Once the 33 participants completed the survey, their data were gathered and analyzed using Qualtrics software program. Then the results were entered into Microsoft Excel spreadsheet where each participant's responses were labeled with a unique designated number instead of their name to protect their privacy.

A semistructured interview was selected as part of the triangulation process, to enrich the study's data by bringing more clarity of what specific factors were obstacles to adult learners achieving their academic goals. The semistructured interview questions were developed from the qualitative study research questions to gather information on the study's topic. Member checking tool was used at the end of the semistructured interview process to increase the validity and credibility of the participants' data results. For example, after the semistructured interview, the researcher played back each recording for the participant to verify their responses and provided the option to elaborate on what was previously stated. Birt et al. (2016) asserted that member checking is a qualitative tool employed to ensure credibility of the study.

The focus group method was employed to gain direct feedback from the participants and to observe their nonverbal responses which enhanced the data (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The researcher developed the same set of questions used in both focus groups to provide a more detailed understanding of the participants' experiences and to achieve full saturation of the data. The focus groups were conducted to assess the attitudes and perceptions of participants as it related to the research topic (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). After both focus groups were conducted, the researcher transcribed the recorded information verbatim to ensure validity of the participants' data. The researcher then used the focus groups data results to create an abridged transcript from the focus group recordings. An abridged transcript was more effective because it permitted the researcher to focus on the research questions and only notate the information that related to the topic (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009).

Data Collection

The researcher obtained permission from the Dean of Students at the higher education institution and received approval from Concordia University–Portland Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the research process. Once approved, the researcher met with the dean and discussed the purpose of the study in detail. The dean granted the researcher approval to contact students and use institutional facilities to conduct the study.

A month before the study began, the researcher created and distributed fliers throughout the campus to bring awareness to the study. Additionally, each participant received a $5 Visa gift card, as a token of appreciation. The flier provided a brief overview of the study, specifying participation is on voluntary bases. Two adjacent booths were setup by the researcher in the college Student Union for the participants to complete the survey using Qualtrics on the

researcher two personal laptops. Only 19 surveys were completed on the first day the research was conducted employing the Quatrics software system. So, the researcher returned to the Student Union on campus the next day successfully meeting the quota of 33 participants who completed survey.

Once the surveys were completed onsite by all participants, the researcher then took a random sample of 10 participants from the 33 respondents, to conduct a semistructured interview. Next, each participant was given a form which had their unique designated number on it, to provide their contact number along with selecting a date and time to complete their semistructured interview. Since the researcher obtained enough participants using the flier distribution, it was unnecessary to seek additional assistance from student advisors to obtain more participants.

To protect the confidentiality of the 33 participants who completed the survey, each participant was given a unique designated number. A random sample of 10 participants were taken from the initial 33 participants who completed the survey and was provided the option to conduct their semistructured interview either via cell phone or in person (on college campus). All 10 semistructured interviews were conducted via cell phone. The semistructured interview method provided a more in-depth response from the participant and increased the trustworthiness of the study (Jamshed, 2014).

All participants' semistructured interviews were recorded and transcribed. The participants' individual responses were then imported into Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. There was no time limit set for each semistructured interview. However, to adhere to the preselected time frame of each participant the researcher was successfully able to ask the three closed ended questions within a 10–15 minutes time period. Once each semistructured interview was

completed and transposed, to protect the participant's confidentiality the results were placed in assigned numbered envelope and sealed. Additionally, along with the sealed envelope documents, the responses that were imported into Microsoft Excel were saved on a flash drive and placed in a locked filed cabinet of the researcher's home office.

After the 33 participants completed the survey, a random sample of 10 participants were selected from the initial 33 participants to complete the semistructured interview. Next, the same 10 participants participated in both focus groups (five participants each). However, one participant had to be replaced because the individual dropped out the study after completing the semistructured interview and their data were immediately discarded. Each focus group session was conducted the same day in the Student Union on the college campus at a designated date and time. The focus group discussions were conducted with an estimated time of one hour, providing clarity into the experiences of adult learners regarding what motivated them in achieving their academic goals when encountering barriers. Furthermore, the focus group method created a collective space where participants interacted and offered additional information that was not provided previously during the telephone interview. This approach increased the quality and richness of the data (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2005; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

The researcher primary goal was to ensure full saturation of data were obtained by employing triangulation methods that would provide validity to the study. According to Denzin (2019), data saturation can be achieved from various methods employed to collect data. For example, during both semistructured interviews and focus groups the participants were asked to identify any barriers encountered while learning and what motivated them to succeed when barriers arise. Once the data were collected from the triangulation methods employed in the

study, the researcher realized a repetitiveness of the data which signified full saturation was obtained relating to the questions posed (Saunders et al., 2018).

Identification of Attributes

According to Hiligsmann (et al, 2013), identification and selection of appropriate attributes are very necessary to obtain concrete data in qualitative case study. The researcher employed surveys, semistructured interviews, and focus groups methods to identify attributes in the current study. The primary attributes defining the study are perceptions shared by participants of common challenges that have impacted their academic success. Terms indicated in the study were situational barriers, institutional barriers, and dispositional barriers which have been identified as obstacles participants encounter that impede their academic progress. The qualitative case study addressed the need for American higher education leaders, faculty and staff to develop and implement strategies to combat the situational barriers (lack of time, job and family responsibilities); institutional barriers (admissions and financial aid issues); or dispositional barriers (low motivation and low self-esteem) which impact the participants' academic success.

Data Analysis Procedures

According to Sutton and Austin (2015), data collection and analysis happens simultaneously in a qualitative study. The qualitative survey consisted of 10 Likert-scale statements and eight multiple-choice questions. Qualtrics software program was used to facilitate the survey. The Likert-scale was implemented in the survey as a psychological measurement to rate participant's experiences attending a higher education institution (Sullivan & Artino, 2013). The 10 Likert-scaled statements were designed specifically as an ordinal scale to rate the degree to which participants agree or disagree with each question on a 5-point scale as defined in the

following listing: (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Agree, (3) Neutral, (4) Disagree, and (5) Strongly Disagree. Furthermore, the multiple-choice section of the qualitative study was composed of eight closed-ended questions and was employed as a structured tool to bring more insight into the research topic (FluidSurveys, 2013). The close-ended questions were implemented as an easier way for participants to answer the survey questions. Once Qualtrics software program accumulated the participants' results, the researcher reported and analyzed how often participants selected the same responses. Overall, the outcome from the qualitative survey's data helped to determine the connection between the variables and adult learners' academic success.

To evaluate the transcribed data from both semistructured interviews and focus groups, open and axial coding were employed by the researcher. Alshenqeeti (2014) asserted, coding is a popular strategy used in qualitative methodologies because coding uncovers data relevant to the overall research question. In the initial stage of the coding process the researcher employed open coding to analyze and categorize the data. After reading through the data numerous times, the researcher began to identify different themes and relationships. Once open coding was completed, axial coding was applied to assemble the data accumulated in new formats from questions asked during the semistructured interviews and focus groups. The axial coding process permitted the researcher to identify relationships between the open codes capturing a more detailed understanding of factors that specifically affect adult learners. Hence, both open and axial coding processes, allowed the researcher to discover themes and patterns from participant's responses (Hatch, 2002).

Limitations of the Research Design

A qualitative case study research design was chosen based on the research questions, personal experiences and audience (Creswell, 2014). This method permitted the researcher to

employ a survey, semistructured interview, and focus group to obtain data on adult learners. However, with any study there are potential limitations that could occur from using a qualitative research design. A qualitative research design could cause the researcher to consume too much time gathering and analyzing data and if not done effectively could affect the validity or trustworthiness of the study. Another limitation that could be encountered is participants in the same setting being influenced to agree with their peer's responses and not divulge their true answer to the question(s) posed by the researcher. Furthermore, a limitation of the qualitative study could be from not including a specific question in the survey. All questions in the qualitative survey will need to be assessed to ensure they address specific issues so that the data collected will edify the study (Creswell, 2014).

Validation

In the 21st century, research principles often are overlooked, due to time and economic restraints (Loyal, 2016). According to Merriam (1998), the research trustworthiness can be weighed by the authenticity of its findings. The credibility of a qualitative case study is based on its validity and dependability of its findings (Patton, 2001). Therefore, it is pivotal to the research that validity is measured by its accuracy and dependability (Anney, 2014).

Credibility. This qualitative case study's triangulation process using a survey, semistructured interview, and focus group, ensured credibility of the study by employing specific questions to assess experienced barriers impacting adult learners' academic success. The survey was used as an instrument to obtain the correct elements that were necessary to measure questions composed of closed-ended questions (Ponto, 2015). Another technique employed to provide credibility to the study was member checking which ensured participant data findings were precise and reflective of their experiences (Birt et al., 2016). During both the

semistructured interviews and focus groups, the researcher used the member checking technique by restating and summarizing what the participant stated and followed-up with additional questions to ensure accuracy.

      Dependability. Dependability was imperative to validity because it ensured the research findings were accurate. Determining the dependability of this qualitative case study derived from employing practices of qualitative researchers whom recommendations supported the importance of a study being credible and trustworthy (Anney, 2014; Merriam, 1998). The researcher reexamined the data collection, data analysis, and the results of the research study, to ensure accuracy of the data collected supports the findings. Merten asserted, "Dependability audit can be conducted to attest to the quality and appropriateness of the inquiry process" (2015, p. 272).

Expected Findings

      The researcher expected data would show from this qualitative case study that participants have experienced challenges in pursuit of their certification and or degree(s). Participant's responses reflected that adult learners (non-traditional students) learn differently than traditional students but also face academic (dispositional) and nonacademic (situational and institutional) issues that their counterparts do not. An adult learners' internal and external motivation to learn when faced with challenges was also expected to help them persevere when encountering barriers (Knowles, 1984). Theories included within this study supported the data collected which revealed social interactions within an adult learners' learning environments between their peers, faculty and staff, helps them persist when encountering situational, institutional and dispositional barriers (Bandura, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978). These findings helped to reiterate the need for higher education administrators to invest the time and resources necessary for adult learners to cope when encountering academic and/or nonacademic barriers impacting their academic success.

Ethical Issues

      Conflict of interest assessment. The researcher was the main investigator conducting the study. The researcher role involved analyzing the adult learners' experienced barriers that impact their academic success. Once their experiences were analyzed, the researcher created plans to construct effective relationships between the adult learner and the higher learning institutions. All participants in this research study were provided confidentiality of their identity. As it relates to this study, there are no financial benefits gained from the participants or researcher. Participants were advised their participation was on a voluntary basis with the option to withdraw from the study at any given time. The researcher adhered to the main goal of simultaneously protecting the integrity of the research while capturing valid findings (Romain, 2015). Instead of any documents referring to a participant by their actual name, each participant was assigned a unique number so that they remained confidential. The higher education institution name was kept confidential.

      The researcher established a trusting relationship with each participant by making the study's purpose evident and ensuring each participant was aware of how their data results from the survey, interview, and focus group are used. All participants' responses were concealed on a flash drive with a password protected file by the researcher. After each semistructured interview and both focus groups were conducted, personal identifiers were removed from interview records. The researcher stored the completed surveys, semistructured interview transcripts, and focus group notes in a locked file cabinet, where all documents will remain there for two years before being destroyed. Kerasiduo asserted, "For participants to trust the process they will have to really trust that the research that was created and will be conducted in good faith towards them" (2017, p. 5).

Researcher Position. The main thing that had to be considered similar to the participants of the study was that the researcher currently was an adult learner. Once the participants discovered the researcher's position is of an adult learner, no one ever mentioned any concerns about their data findings potentially being skewed. During the fieldwork process the researcher established comfort level of trust with participants to assure their responses would be fairly assessed, enabling them to share their experiences of barriers impacting their academic goals. Additionally, the researcher observed and actively listened to adult learners' experiences without making input about previous learning experiences as an adult learner. During the research process the investigator remained focused on the completing tasks by sustaining academic standards, while publishing and critiquing knowledge (Romain, 2015).

Ethical issues in the study. The researcher's study conformed to all ethical principles rendered. Ethical standards were carried out to ensure the researcher actions served the purpose of research study (Resnik, 2015). Following the guidelines of ethical principles, the researcher provided credible information and validity in the research (Datt et al., 2015). The study's purpose and guidelines were explained beforehand to participants and full consent was obtained from each individual.

Each participant was provided a clear understanding of the research purpose, requirements and that their participation is on voluntary bases (Enago Academy, 2018). Each participant received protection of their privacy because instead of providing their name, the person was assigned a unique designated number attached to their records. Additionally, their records were stored in a locked filing cabinet with one assigned key that only the researcher will have access too. Resnik (2015) agreed, whether in relations of the storage of data, its analysis, or during the publication process data must be preserved privately.

A supportive relationship and trust were established between the researcher and the participant, to combat any ethical concerns that may impact the privacy, honesty and communication during the research (Sanjari et al., 2014). Fortunately, there were no hazards for the researcher to minimize during the research process (Datt et al., 2016). All correspondence between the researcher and respondents was done with honesty and transparency. Throughout the entire fieldwork process, the researcher was able to maintain ethical behavior (Enago Academy, 2018).

Chapter 3 Summary

A qualitative case study was employed that encompassed a survey, semistructured interview, and focus group as its research designs. To discover what barriers, impact adult learners' academic success, a qualitative approach was selected. Thirty-three adult learners were asked to partake in the study at a college in midwestern part of the United States. The researcher's field work involved data collection and data analysis of adult learner experiences captured from survey, semistructured interview, and focus group. The survey was completed by participants on campus in a designated area. After a random sample of 10 participants were chosen from initial 33 participants who completed the survey, the participants then participated in semistructured interview by cellphone, Focus groups included the same 10 participants (five participants each) randomly selected who participated in the survey and semistructured interview. Data examination employed a thematic analysis of the survey, semistructured interview, focus group observations and remarks which derived during the fieldwork process. Information gathered was coded and classified resulting from a theoretical background. The following chapter presented conclusions of the research study.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

Introduction

Over the past 10 years, research has shown that adult learners' attrition rate annually is steadily increasing. According to MacDonald (2018), adult learners have not been afforded the resources from their higher education institutions to help overcome barriers that impact their academic success. The purpose of this qualitative case study determined the barriers adult learners encounter during their academic pursuit that impact their academic success. The study addressed various barriers that have impacted adult learners' academic success at a higher education institution located in the midwestern part of the United States. Additionally, this study provided an analysis of adult learners' perceptions of the challenges they encounter during their academic pursuit. The study also examined various ways higher education institutions could identify and help deter situational, institutional and dispositional barriers adult learners encounter by developing and implementing effective strategies. The data collection employed a triangulation method from a total of 33 participants who completed the survey and a random sample of 10 participants was taken from the survey to participate in both the semistructured interviews and focus groups. The following three research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the experienced situational barriers that adult learners enrolled in higher education institutions have encountered?

RQ2: What are the experienced institutional barriers that adult learners enrolled in higher education institutions have encountered?

RQ3: What are the experienced dispositional barriers that adult learners enrolled in higher education institutions have encountered?

After obtaining approval from the IRB in December 2018, the researcher utilized Qualtrics to conduct the survey for 33 participants. Additionally, the researcher interviewed 10 participants which were a random sample of the 33 participants who completed the initial survey. During the next two weeks the researcher again used the same 10 participants to participate in two focus groups (five participants each). The researcher not only observed but moderated both focus groups, by using flash cards to pose five questions and allowing each participant to take turns responding and commenting on each other's responses. Each participant was given up to 15 minutes to respond verbally to each question.

The researcher conducted the study in multi-site locations on campus to collect data in the college Student Union (survey); off campus on the telephone and/or cellphone (semistructured interview); and in the Student Campus Center (focus groups). Data retrieved from the initial surveys 33 participants, permitted the researcher to randomly select the adult learners necessary for the research. Randomization was achieved from the 10 adult learners of the schools' nontraditional student population who participated in the survey. Next, the researcher generalized the results of the study to the larger population. The data collected supports prior research of challenges encountered by adult learners, as they pursue their academic pursuits. Research has shown since adult learners' enrollment is steadily increasing annually, higher learning institutions could benefit from using this data to decrease attrition-rates that are significantly rising (Petty 2014; Spivey 2016). According to Wyatt (2011), adult learners' multitude of commitments have served to create barriers to their academic success impacting attrition rates over the past five years. Administrators and instructors have to be committed to working with adult learners, as they deal with far different struggles to remain in school than traditional students.

The qualitative data collection methods employed to answer each research question is explained in the chapter. According to Sutton and Austin (2015), the data collected and analyzed from the sample size and techniques employed in this research are the outline of this study. So, for this qualitative case study, the researcher used a survey combining Epstein's Likert-scale, and multiple-choice questions. Next, the data were collected employing a triangulation method from a total of 33 participants who completed the survey. Ten participants were randomly chosen from the initial 33 survey participants to participate in both the semistructured interviews and focus groups. The results from both semistructured interviews and focus groups were gathered and examined to determine its significance to the study. Also, the data collected for this chapter, was summarized analyzing the current issue with describing barriers impacting adult learners' academic success. Some of the responses of the participants' semistructured interviews and focus groups are included in this chapter as a primary source of content. Participants' responses provided the audience with a better understanding of why the shift has substantially changed in higher education institutions. Nontraditional students (adult learners) unlike traditional students have juggled many competing responsibilities such as employment, greater family commitments and health issues (Baharudin, Murad, & Mat, 2013).

Description of the Sample

The participants in this qualitative case study conducted at an American higher education institution, derived from 33 participants who responded to the survey. A random sample of 10 participants from the initial 33 respondents who participated in the survey, continued in the triangulation process completing both the semistructured interview and focus group. However, due to transportation issues, Participant 3 was replaced with Participant 11 to participate in focus group 2. The higher education institution student demographics were comprised of 61% female,

30% male; 54% Caucasian, 29% African American, 6% Hispanic/Latino, and 11% other. The researcher's sample size reflected similar data consisting of 70% female, 30% male; 76% African American, 15% Caucasian, 3% Hispanic/Latino, and 6% other. The students' enrollment demographics at the higher education institution averaged an age of 27 years old, 68% attend part-time, and 97% is employed (full or part-time) is an accurate representation of an adult learner who is 25 years or older characteristics of this study (see Table 1).

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant	Gender	Nationalities	Age	Schedule	GPA	Employment
P1	Female	Black	25–30	Part-time	2.0–2.4	Employed
P2	Male	Black	25–34	Part-time	2.5–2.9	Employed
P4	Female	Black	35–44	Full-time	1.9–0.0	Employed
P5	Female	Black	35–44	Part-time	3.0–3.4	Employed
P6	Female	Hispanic	40–45	Full-time	3.0–3.4	Employed
P7	Male	Black	40–45	Part-time	2.5–2.9	Employed
P8	Female	Black	45–54	Part-time	2.0–2.4	Employed
P9	Female	Other	50–55	Full-time	1.9–0.0	Unemployed
P10	Female	Black	25–34	Part-time	3.0–3.4	Employed
P11	Female	Black	40-–45	Part-time	2.5–2.9	Employed

To add authenticity to the general demographic characteristics of the study, participants were asked on the survey if there have been any challenges encountered that impacted their academic success (see Table 2). From the survey responses it was found that the 12 of the 33 participants reported personal and family issues were the main challenges impacting their academic success. However, no participants reported learning materials being too difficult were challenges impacting their academic success.

Table 2

Adult Learner Barriers

Adult Learner	Percentages	Count
No challenges encountered	27%	9
Personal and family issues	36%	12
Insecurities with learning	12%	4
Financial Aid issues	24%	8
Learning Material too difficult	0%	0

On the survey participants were also requested to identify how their higher education institution could be more supportive (see Table 3). All participants reported their higher education institution should offer additional support to ensure academic success. Specifically, most of the participants (37%) reported their higher education institution could be supportive by offering more academic and nonacademic resources.

Table 3

Higher Education Institution

Institution	Percentages	Count
Satisfied with academic and nonacademic resources	37%	13
Offer more academic and student services	28%	10
Flexible schedules	20%	7
Affordable cost	9%	3
Sense of community in and outside of class	6%	2

All participants participated in the survey answering each question posed. Only one participant failed to complete the focus group interview. However, the participant was replaced in a timely manner (Participant 3 was replaced with Participant 11) and their viewpoint was similar to the studies' overall findings.

Research Methodology and Analysis

The qualitative methodology procedures employed for this case study included a triangulation process of a survey, semistructured interview, and focus group. During the

semistructured interviews and focus group processes of this qualitative study, each participant was provided additional time to define key terms relative to the study, specifically the operational definition of "adult learner." Additionally, participants were given the opportunity and encouraged to explain their answers in-depth. Each participant, even the participant that was replaced was individually assigned a unique number to ensure their identity was confidential.

At the beginning of the study participants were given a consent form to participate in the qualitative case study triangulation methods of a survey (Epstein Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions); semistructured interview; and focus group. The survey permitted the researcher to report directly on participant's thoughts and feelings (Price et al., 2015). The researcher took a random sample of 10 from the initial 33 survey respondents to participate in the semistructured interviews to obtain a more accurate representation of the participants. All semistructured interviews were conducted with index cards, efficiently recorded, and transcribed to capture participants' authentic data. So, once all semistructured interviews were transcribed, the data were imported into Qualtrics system to sort, rank and unearth participant's answers. Subsequently, using the same 10 randomly selected participants, the researcher conducted both focus groups consisting of two groups of five participants. During both focus groups the exact five questions were posed and each participant took turns verbally responding to each question. Comparable to the semistructured interviews, both focus groups were recorded, transcribed and uploaded into Qualtrics system. Chapter 4's data and results section will provide outcomes from the analysis of this triangulation process.

The researcher employed Hatch (2002) qualitative analysis open and axial coding process for both semistructured interviews and focus groups, to capture themes and patterns from responses provided by participants. Although, there are various ways to employ open coding,

Hatch's (2002) qualitative analyses method was employed by the researcher to analyze large data from each participants responses and axial coding was employed to locate similarities that exist. Next, to evaluate the transcribed data from the semistructured interviews and both focus groups, the researcher initially read through all transcripts while focusing on effectively employing both open and axial coding.

According to Creswell (2007), codes emerged from expected patterns, but surprisingly responses were unique and captivating. For example, the researcher's field notes from both semistructured interviews and focus groups were used to code how many times a word or phrase was stated by participants. Next, the researcher created a column beside each participant's response to represent the decoded one-word in capitalized letters. After coding the qualitative data, the data were analyzed into generative themes. Lastly, the data were discussed in depth with key concepts deriving from participant's data through identifying themes (Lichtman, 2012). Hence, the researcher evaluated the data and discussed how it illuminated and answered each research question.

Once the first analysis of semistructured interviews and both focus groups were coded another analysis was performed to identify patterns and emerging sub-themes relating to barriers experienced by adult learners. These various subthemes were captured by identifying parallel or dissonant patterns (Bradshaw et al., 2017). Next the researcher organized data by placing it into a table to create a visual and contextual interpretation of reported situational, institutional and dispositional barriers encountered by adult learner addressing the research questions. A well-designed chart, or matrix, can facilitate the coding and categorization process (Willig et al., 2017). After, the researcher organized the data specific quotes stated by participants were

implemented to provide validity to the study. Lastly, the researcher explained how the themes overlapped and linked the findings to the literature review.

Summary of findings

      Likert-scale and multiple-choice survey responses. Items were coded from the survey's Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions permitting participants to rate their overall experiences as adult learners with *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*. From the initial 33 participants who completed the survey, 11 agree and seven strongly agree they can manage their academics and nonacademic responsibilities. Ten participants reported being neutral; and five reported they strongly disagree because they could not effectively manage. Specifically, on the Likert-scale section of the survey, zero participants reported they strongly disagreed because they can manage nonacademic responsibilities while pursuing their academic goals. Although, participants reported on the Likert-scale section of the survey they can manage their nonacademic responsibilities, on the multiple-choice section participants stated some situational barriers do impact their academic success. Personal and family issues were noted by 12 of the 33 adult learners as being a situational barrier encountered. Eight adult learners also mentioned financial aid; four reported some insecurity with learning new subject content; nine adult learners reported no challenges have impacted their academic success; and zero adult learners reported learning material is too difficult to grasp.

      Timely financial assistance was reported as an institutional barrier for participants on the Likert-scale of the survey. Nine of the 33 participants noted that they disagree because financial assistance was not provided timely. However, zero participants strongly disagreed that financial assistance was provided timely. Also, 10 participants reported neutral; eight agree and six strongly agree financial aid assistance was provided timely. In the multiple-choice section of

their survey, eight of the 33 participants claimed financial aid issues were an experienced

institutional barrier impacting their academic success.

On both the Likert-scale and multiple-choice sections of the survey, data showed adult

learners have experienced dispositional barriers impacting their academic success. There was a

great range of response on the Likert Scale that 16 of the 33 participants agreed and 12 of the 33

participants strongly agreed that their higher education institution maintained a safe and

supportive learning environment. Additionally, zero of the 33 participants reported to disagree

and strongly disagree that they did not feel safe and supported in their learning environment. On

the multiple-choice section of the survey when asked what their higher education institution

could offer to ensure their academic success, 13 of the 33 participants reported they are satisfied

with their academic and supportive services their higher education institution offers. However,

10 of the 33 participants selected their higher education institution could provide academic

advisement and student services support to ensure academic success. Seven of the 33 participants

noted more flexible course schedules; three participants reported affordable cost; and two

participants reported establishing a sense of community in and outside the classroom.

Semistructured interview responses. Three central themes derived from semistructured

interviews: (a) family and friends consistently motivate adult learners to achieve their academic

goals, (b) financial issues were greater barriers for adult learners, and (c) many of the adult

learners did not feel instructional improvements were needed at higher education institutions.

Each of the three themes are explained in detail below.

As it relates to who consistently motivated and encouraged adult learners to achieve their

academic goals when encountering challenges, six participants reported their family and friends

did. Three of the 10 participants stated their best friends and one participant asserted faculty and

staff motivate them to academically achieve their goals. For example, Participant 4 reported, "My family and friends motivate me! As far as, they always remind me that it is possible to conquer obstacles even though it may be hard, but you can do it!" Correspondingly, Participant 8 claimed "I would say my family and friends they give me the most encouragement. So, I want them to see what it is to get a good education and prosper in life."

The triangulation methods employed by the study consisting of a survey, semistructured interview, and focus groups have shown a direct link between theme 1 and theme 2. When challenges arise during academic pursuit the support and encouragement adult learners received from others motivate them to succeed. Nonacademic issues were reported by participants impacting their academic goals. Specifically, five of the 10 participants noted financial issues have impacted their academic and nonacademic responsibilities. For example, Participant 5 stated "Financially, yes! I'm struggling to pay bills and I'm working part-time, so it has a lot to do with it. Since I'm working so hard it's impacting my focus." Three participants reported time-management impacting their academic progress. Participant 4 stated, "Currently, I'm finding it difficult balancing my full-time job, my schoolwork and caring for my sick parent. On top of that, balancing my personal issues and making time to complete my online assignments consumes me." However, two of the 10 participants claimed there were no nonacademic issues impacting their academics goals. The findings from the semistructured interviews are supported by the survey results that revealed, 12 of 33 participants reported personal and family issues as situational barriers impacting their academic course or program.

Like theme 1, theme 2 responses impact theme 3, adult learners' academic success. During the semistructured interviews adult learners were asked to provide feedback on how teaching and learning strategies can be improved. Seven 0f the 10 participants reported being satisfied

with instructional practices in their course or program, but three of those seven participants noted there could be some instructional improvements. For instance, Participant 11 stressed, "I would say more one-on-one time with my teacher or being able to setup appointments to talk with my teacher would help me so much with my coursework!" The three remaining of the 10 participants reported, recently becoming adult learners after reenrolling in higher education institution in over a decade and were unsure if their needed to be instructional improvements. For example, Participant 4 stated, "Hmm, I'm not sure yet because we are too early in the course. It's my first experience after being out of college over 10 years, taking a course as an adult learner."

Focus group 1 responses. There were two focus groups conducted by the researcher (two groups of five participants each). The first focus group (FG 1) interviews resulted in five main themes: (a) experienced opportunities or achievements reported by adult learners were having flexible course schedules; (b) balancing nonacademic and academic responsibilities were reported barriers of adult learners; (c) to overcome barriers impacting academic success, adult learners rely on extrinsic motivation and their family; (d) learning in a blended classroom with traditional students is helpful to adult learners; and (e) adult learners feel having a relationship with faculty and staff is important to them achieving their academic goals. Each of the five themes is explained in detail below.

During focus group 1, four of the five participants reported that experienced opportunities as adult learners' in their course or program were flexible class schedules. However, one participant stated a smaller learning environment was an experienced opportunity in their course or program. For example, Participant 1 noted, "My school semester course schedules made it much easier for

me to plan my classes around my 10-hour work shift at the post office." Similarly, Participant 2 stated, "Working at the post office as well, my school courses were easy to schedule for my online classes." However, Participant 11 reported, "I felt the smaller classrooms were easier for me to learn. Since I'm older going back to school a smaller class size helped me concentrate more."

Theme 1 of the focus group 1 interviews connects with theme 2. Adult learners noted, being able to have school schedules that are flexible as an experienced opportunity when balancing nonacademic and academic responsibilities impacting their academic goals. Three of the five participants reported challenges balancing nonacademic and academic responsibilities are experienced barriers impacting their academic goal. For example, Participant 2 stated, "Going to school, working, and taking care of a sick parent are challenges I discovered." Participant 1 reported a similar response, "Trying to balance pregnancy, schoolwork, raising my four-year-old child, and working was difficult for me." One participant claimed being nervous was a barrier. Participant 11 stated, "The challenges I encountered were like they had and being nervous enrolling back in school. I wondered what my much younger peers would think" However, only 1 participant reported no experienced barriers.

When the participants were asked "Who motivates you to overcome barriers impacting your academic progress," they all agreed extrinsic motivation and their families. Three of the five participants reported having an extrinsic motivation to learn. For example, Participant 2 stated, "I want to better myself as a person and obtain my degree. I yearn for a better salary, education, and better life." Comparably, Participant 11 stated, "I want to further my career and obtaining degrees will allow me to do that. So, I feel going back to school will allow me to accomplish this goal to get where I want to be in life." However, two participants reported their

family motivates them to overcome barriers impacting their academic progress. Participant 8 stated, "It is important my children know that education never stops! They have watched me dropout of school a few times, due to personal and financial hardships. I'm definitely getting my degree!"

Theme 3 of the focus group 1 interview process similarly impacts theme 4. Although, responses varied the themes that resonated from focus group 1, was learning in blended courses compromised of traditional and nontraditional students was helpful in acquiring new learning. Two participants reported being in a class with traditional students was helpful. For example, Participant 1 stated, "I felt being in class with people older or younger than me, was helpful. They asked questions that I'm thinking that I want to ask but I thought would be stupid to everybody else." Participant 11 immediately concurred, "At first, I was nervous being in the classroom with much younger students. It has been easier because their mindset reflects the times and changes that is going on with society, which helps me out." However, one participant disagreed claiming traditional students in their learning environment are not as helpful because of their lack of focus. Participant 7 reported, "There is an obvious learning gap. The experience has been different interacting in a class with adult learners, because they are focused and have more life experiences to share than students who recently enter college from high school." Participant 9 shared a similar response to Participant 7, and claimed it was challenging interacting with traditional students in the learning environment but has learned to adapt." Finally, one participant who has only taken online classes is unsure if peers have been all adult learners and did not elaborate further.

Theme 5 connects to theme 4 because adult learners reported their academic success benefits from support from not only traditional students but faculty and staff. During the focus

group 1 interview, adult learners stressed that having a supportive relationship with faculty and staff was important to their academic success. After the researcher posed the question, all five participants expressed they rely greatly on support from their faculty and staff. Participant 7 who initially responded to the question first, provided the foundation for an in-depth discussion amongst the adult learners. For example, Participant 7 reported, "Oh absolutely!" Some of my past instructors, I keep in contact with them. Whenever, I need some input or whenever I am feeling stress, they have provided a shoulder to lean on and have been fantastic help for me." Participant 11 agreed with Participant 7 response and claimed, "Yes, I feel like it is important to have a relationship with your faculty and staff because they encourage you to strive to get your degree and have a better future." Additionally, Participant 1 basically summed up the adult learners' perspectives and stated, "I feel the same way everyone else feels. It is easier to talk to your teacher or staff when you have a relationship with them. They can help you with assignments and resources."

Focus group 2 responses. There were two focus groups conducted by the researcher (two groups of five participants each). The second focus group (FG 2) interviews resulted in five main themes: (a) encouragement is an experienced opportunity for adult learners in their course or program; (b) financial issues were reported barriers of adult learners; (c) when encountering barriers adult learners proclaimed extrinsic motivation and encouragement from others motivates them to academically succeed; (d) supportive interactions with traditional students have a significant impact on adult learners in their course or program; and (e) having a supportive relationship with faculty and staff is integral to their academic success. Each of the five themes is explained in detail below.

For focus group 2 interviews, there were similar themes shared with focus group 1 interviews, resulting in comparable themes for both. Correspondingly, during focus group 2 interviews some participants reported being encouraged by others as beneficial to their academic success, but some stated they have not experienced opportunities in their course or program. Three of the five participants claimed no experienced opportunities or rewards because they have recently enrolled as adult learners in their course or program. For example, Participant 4 reported, "I have yet to experience any opportunities or rewards in my courses, because I recently enrolled again in school after such long time." Likewise, Participant 6 stated, "I am newly enrolled as an older student, so I can't identify any opportunities or rewards in my courses yet." However, two participants mentioned feeling encouraged by faculty and staff. Participant 10 proclaimed, "My greatest motivation was from my professor many years ago, he inspired me to envision myself wearing a hood and a black robe with the stripes getting with my doctorate." Participant 9 elaborated after Participant 6 response and stated, "Although, I have not received any awards yet, I believe I would do well from a pat on the back or some words of encouragement from my professor when I submit great assignments."

Theme 2 of the focus group 2 interviews was impacted by theme 1, because financial issues were unanimously reported by adult learners as a barrier encountered in pursuit of their academic success. All five participants reported financial challenges and balancing nonacademic and academic responsibilities as experienced barriers encountered during their academic pursuit. Once Question 2 was posed, "Are there any challenges you have encountered pursuing your academic goals?" all participants shared comparable views. For example, Participant 7 noted, "Yes, I have financially! I have not been able to pay for all my classes and am currently struggling with ways to pay for it before they get dropped." Additionally, Participant 9, similarly

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stated what Participant 4 said, "My challenges also have been financial and maintaining a 40 plus hour work week. Being able to do my homework, work and balancing my family responsibilities have been overwhelming." Also, Participant 6 reported, "Yes, financial issues have made it hard for me to mentally get in the habit of reading and remaining focused mentally in my classes!"

There is a direct link from theme 3 and theme 2, when encountering barriers adult learners rely on an extrinsic motivation and encouragement from others. Three participants reported that extrinsic motivation pushes them to overcome barriers impacting their academic progress. For example, Participant 5 stated, "Obtaining my degree! The idea of getting a degree motivates me." Participant 10 agreed, "Probably, destiny and determination in obtaining my degree!" However, two participants proclaimed peer motivation encourages them to overcome barriers. For instance, Participant 6 reported, "Seeing other women and men in my age bracket or older, share all they been through. Great grandmothers, grandmothers, really encourage me more than ever to get my degree."

Again, as the previous themes of the focus group 2 interviews impacts each other, theme 3 affects theme 4 responses concerning adult learners experiences with traditional students. When Question 4 was posed, "How has your experience been as an adult learner in the course or program with other adults?" responses varied. Three of the five participants reported feeling supportive and encouraged. To that point, Participant 6 stated, "It makes me feel great and very encouraged. I'm getting up the ladder, so when I'm around people that's younger than me, I feel great that we can learn from each other" Two participants conveyed feeling weird but found it being a motivating experience interacting in course or program with traditional students. For example, Participant 4, "It makes me feel weird, but it also gives me the motivation to know I can still learn and be an example for my younger peers!"

In respect to theme 5, all participants conveyed having a supportive relationship with faculty and staff is important to their academic success. Participant 6 best summarized this theme and stated, "It is very important to have professional chemistry with faculty and staff because you should feel comfortable enough to tell them if you are considering dropping-out and they can offer support." Comparably Participant 12 reported, "Having a supportive relationship with my instructors makes it easier for me to go to them when I am experiencing academic and personal issues so that it does not impact my grades."

Regarding barriers encountered by respondents, adult learners reported situational, institutional and dispositional barriers impacting their academic success. The data revealed in the surveys, semistructured interviews and focus groups, there were situational barriers impacting adult learners' academic success. Adult learners reported balancing nonacademic responsibilities such as family, finances, caring for elderly parents and job duties have been challenges encountered during their academic pursuit. To this point, during focus group 1 Participant 2 stated, "So, I discovered those difficult challenges of balancing going to school, working and taking care of a sick parent."

The results indicated from the surveys, semistructured interviews and focus groups; financial issues have been institutional barrier adult learners encountered during their academic pursuit. For example, during focus group 2, Participant 10 reported, "I was paying for classes out-of-pocket, and I was in an accident, So, I was unable to receive monetary reward from school because I didn't qualify and that was my biggest struggle." Following that response, the researcher asked the participants in focus group 2, "In what way, could higher education institutions assist with financial issues?" Participant 12 immediately stated, "If I don't qualify for

full financial aid because of my work income or even past issues of academic probation, schools should provide financial resources to lower financial cost for adult learners!"

The findings discovered from the surveys, semistructured interviews and focus groups that dispositional barriers were challenges encountered during adult learners' academic pursuit. Specifically, during focus group interviews, adult learners reported mentally not being prepared for new learning content or lacking confidence in their learning environment. For example, Participant 11 stated, "I have been so nervous, that I chose not to participate in lessons because I could not concentrate from worrying what my peers thought." Similarly, some participants with academic issues admitted they have not shared their learning challenges with their family, faculty and staff because of feeling embarrassed.

Adult learner academic and nonacademic responsibilities. Collectively the survey, semistructured interviews and focus groups data results showed that balancing academic responsibilities along with nonacademic responsibilities have impacted adult learners' academic success. Participant's findings reflected that nonacademic responsibilities (situational barriers) they encounter the most are financial and time-management issues. Twenty of the 33 participants reported that financial issues and time-management impact their academic progress. Those results were not a surprise to the researcher, because it showed a consistency among adult learners who were employed and attending school. Participant 6 reported, "There have been many issues I have encountered since returning to college. I struggle financially being a single-parent of three children; working part-time; managing family challenges; and consistently arriving to class on time."

In the present study the data revealed adult learners have encountered institutional barriers. Eight of the 33 participants reported financial aid issues were a challenge they have

encountered. Additionally, 10 of the 33 participants stated lack of consistent academic advising and supportive services have also impacted their academic success.

The findings showed, learning challenges also did exist for adult learners because their learning needs differ from traditional students. Participant 12 stated, "I don't think I retained enough knowledge in my current course because I was trying to keep up the pace of my much younger peers. So, now I am worried that I will not pass my course." Similarly, Participant 11 reported, "I hate that I barely asked questions and received low grades on a lot of my assignments because of the fear of appearing less smart than my much younger classmates."

Adult Learner Motivation. Findings from this present study and prior research have shown that adult learners' academic and nonacademic responsibilities can affect their motivation to academically succeed. The results of the present study survey showed 15 of the 33 participants averaged a C or lower grade point average. Participant 8 acknowledged career advancement and a long-term educational goal to obtain her Bachelors' degree motivates her to learn when issues arise at home or work. Additionally, three of the five participants who participated in the focus group 1 interview reported when encountering barriers an extrinsic motivation to learn helps them to overcome challenges; and in focus group 2, two of the five participants noted having a self-motivation to learn helps them to overcome issues impacting their academic progress.

These findings were accurate in 2019, because they are supported by the results of the present study which revealed nine of the 10 participants who participated in the semistructured interview, asserted their family and friends consistently motivate and encourage them to achieve their academic goals. Additionally, 30 of the 33 participants noted on the survey they were employed, and three of the 33 participants reported being unemployed. These findings provided credence when Participant 11 acknowledged in this study her friends are employed and enrolled

in the same curriculum program. They are motivated by each other because they have been impacted by similar academic and nonacademic challenges.

Presentation of Data and Results

The triangulation method employed by this qualitative study was enriched by the 10 adult learners who were randomly selected from the 33 participants who initially completed the survey. All adult learners are currently enrolled attending courses either full or part-time. Additionally, the adult learners are enrolled in a course or program to earn a job promotion, career change, personal goal to earn a degree or certificate. Adult learners' unique experiences have provided credence to numerous articles included in this study and described the research questions posed.

As it relates to situational barriers, adult learners' data supports these nonacademic challenges have occurred as reported by the adult learner participants. On the survey 12 of the 33 adult learners indicated situational barriers such as personal and family issues impact their academic success. In their semistructured interviews eight of 10 participants stated that time-management and financial issues which are situational barriers have impacted their academic success. It should be noted, the other two adult learners who reported no experienced situational barriers are newly enrolled for the first time as adult learners. Whereas, in focus group 1, three of the five adult learners stated family and time-management issues; and in focus group 2, all five adult learners claimed family and balancing nonacademic and academic responsibilities impact their academic success.

The data has shown that institutional barriers were reported by adult learners. Financial aid issues were reported by 8 of the 33 participants on the survey, as institutional barriers impacting their academic success. Four of the 10 participants stated in the semistructured

interviews they were satisfied with their higher education institutional instructional practices. However, these findings have contrasted with four of the 10 participants who equally claimed during the semistructured interviews, institutional barriers such as the lack of instructional assistance that impact their academic success. Furthermore, in both focus group 1 and 2, all 10 participants noted having a supportive relationship with faculty and staff is important to their academic success. A supportive relationship must be established between the adult learner, faculty and staff, to combat institutional barriers impacting their academic success.

Data reported by adult learners indicated dispositional barriers have occurred. The survey results discovered that 4 of the 33 participants stated having some difficulties with learning new material as a dispositional barrier impacting their academic success. During the semistructured interviews nine of the 10 participants reported their family and friends motivate them when they are mentally struggling to comprehend new information in their course or program. However, it must be mentioned, that only one participant reported faculty and staff motivates them when they are experiencing low motivation, a dispositional barrier which impacts adult learners' academic success. Lastly, in focus group 1, two of the five participants stated nervousness and lack of focus; and in focus group 2, two of five adult learners claimed feeling weird and unfocused in a course compromised of traditional and nontraditional students.

During the coding process the researcher noted the experienced barriers of the participants and placed them into themes. The researcher realized full saturation was obtained when similar themes kept reappearing from the data gathered. Moreover, data revealed that situational, institutional and dispositional barriers do have some impact on adult learners' academic success.

Chapter 4 Summary

This qualitative case study revealed that adult learners are a culturally diverse group with unique needs. When barriers have occurred during an adult learners' academic pursuit their academic performance is impacted from juggling their academic and nonacademic responsibilities. According to Falasca (2011), when barriers arise for adult learners, higher education institutions are charged with developing teaching strategies to help motivate and remove barriers to learning for the overall success of the student and institution. The research results have shown figuring out how adult learners learn best and what motivates them to learn during challenges is significant to their academic success. Although, most adult learners who participated in the study reported being extrinsically motivated and encouraged by others to learn, some adult learners did report no experienced barriers impacting their academic success. However, it should be noted the participants who reported no experienced barriers, were recently enrolled in a course after decades of being out of high school.

Participants reported they sought learning because of job promotion, to inspire family and friends and for personal goals. Specifically, participants reported being inspired by their children and grandchildren; a job promotion or new career; and to improve their economic issues are major reasons to obtain their degree or certification. Lastly, participants noted it being a personal goal to return to school and receive a degree after having to defer their education due to health, family, relationships and financial issues.

In this study participants reported what sustains their motivation to learn when encountering academic and nonacademic challenges comes from an extrinsic motivation, family, peers, faculty and staff support. Participants explained having family support with balancing

non- academic and academic responsibilities helps alleviate challenges they encounter. Additionally, adult learners stated being in class with traditional students and students of similar age and life experiences has been beneficial in overcoming barriers impacting their academic goals. Also, having a bond and supportive relationship with faculty and staff was reported as having an integral role in their academic success. Therefore, these findings will be explored more in-depth in Chapter 5, to determine what progress, can be made in helping adult learners with challenges impacting their academic success.

Chapter 5: Data Analysis

Introduction

Adult learners are motivated to enroll in higher education institutions for various reasons unaware of the obstacles they may encounter impacting their academic success. Research has shown there are academic and nonacademic barriers impacting adult learners' academic success (Bettinger et al., 2013; Fincher, 2010; Lin, 2016; Stephens, 2010). According to Hart (2012), if higher education institutions want to improve adult learners' academic performance and decrease attrition rates, significant time must be spent researching current barriers and educating their staff and adult learners about these challenges and how to overcome them. The exploratory research conducted by Goncalves et al. (2010) revealed adult learners who may be balancing family or employment responsibilities along with their academic pursuits, have higher attrition rates than traditional students. It is vital that higher education institutions develop and implement effective strategies that can motivate and assist adult learners with alleviating or preventing barriers from impacting their academic goals. Despite these barriers, research has shown that adult learners can learn and succeed in their academic pursuits if they are provided the opportunity, assistance and support they need (Falasca, 2011).

The purpose of this qualitative case study determined the barriers adult learners encounter during their academic pursuit that impact their academic success. The study described what specific barriers impact adult learners' academic success. Additionally, this study analyzed adult learners' perceptions of challenges encountered during their academic pursuit. The study also examined various ways higher education institutions could identify and help deter these barriers adult learners encounter by developing and implementing effective strategies. The data were collected employing a triangulation method from a total of 33 participants who completed the

survey. Ten participants were randomly sampled from the initial 33 participants who completed both the semistructured interviews and focus groups. The following research questions were employed to address the purpose of the study:

RQ1: What are the experienced situational barriers that adult learners enrolled in higher education institutions have encountered?

RQ2: What are the experienced institutional barriers that adult learners enrolled in higher education institutions have encountered?

RQ3: What are the experienced dispositional barriers that adult learners enrolled in higher education institutions have encountered?

This chapter summarizes the findings and explanations for the research questions that guided this dissertation, leading to suggestions for further extensive research on barriers of adult learners. Recommendations for additional research at postsecondary level are encouraged.

Summary of the Results

Research question 1. The first research question asked the following: what are the experienced situational barriers that adult learners enrolled in higher education institutions have encountered? The study findings support substantial research which revealed adult learners have encountered various situational barriers at moderate to high levels impacting their academic goals. The data from the surveys showed 12 of 33 participants reported personal and family issues impact their academic progress. These nonacademic challenges are compounded when adult learners must balance school schedules with their work schedules. Hence, the survey findings that reflect 24 of adult learners were employed full-time and seven of the 33 adult learners were employed part-time, aligns with adult learners reportedly finding it challenging balancing their schedules while managing academic and nonacademic issues.

Of the 10 participants who participated in the semistructured interviews, this research yielded findings that indicated adult learners have experienced high-level of situational barriers impacting their academic success. Data reflects that three of the 33 participants had a 1.9 or below grade point average. Hence, these adult learners' poor academic performance may be attributed to dispositional barriers impacting their academic progress.

During the semistructured interviews, some level of adult learners noted they needed more academic support from their instructor. The data revealed three of the 10 participants interviewed reported they encounter some difficulties mentally staying focused during their course or programs. Two of the 10 participants interviewed encountered dispositional barriers of not being allowed to participate or share experiences in their learning environment. The adult learners also noted a strong willingness to share life experiences can improve their focus and their prior knowledge can academically benefit their peers. Additionally, one of the 10 participants stated a lack of focus in their course due to nonacademic responsibilities (work, family, transportation, and finances) impacts their ability to concentrate on academic responsibilities.

The findings from focus group 1 support that adult learners in the study have experienced some degree of dispositional barriers impacting their academic success. Three of the five participants in focus group 1 stated there are learning challenges they encounter in their course or program interfering with their academic performance. This data supports adult learners who noted that adjusting and transitioning from family and work responsibilities, to sitting in a classroom remaining focused has been difficult for them. Another two of the five participants noted feeling nervous in class with students much younger has impacted their academic progress because of the assumption their mindset is different. Additionally, one of the five participants

stated traditional students lack focus which disrupts their concentration in their learning environment.

Focus group 2, findings showed a low degree of dispositional barriers impact on adult learners. This study findings reflect that one of five participants stated getting in the habit of reading and understanding their lessons has been mentally challenging. Another two of five participants reported being in a learning environment with traditional students has impacted their academic performance. Adult learners noted feeling weird and unfocused in their learning environment with much younger students impacts them academically. Nevertheless, one of five participants reported these thoughts are based on fear of asking stupid questions and being intimidated by traditional student youthful intelligence.

Discussion of Results

There was a total of 33 surveys completed, and from those 10 participants were randomly selected from the surveys to complete both the semistructured interviews and focus groups. Although, all the participants did complete both the survey and semistructured interviews, one participant due to transportation issues was replaced in a timely manner. Surprisingly, to the researcher participants had a strong willingness to share their personal experiences. The triangulation methods employed by the researcher were conducted on the midwestern higher education's campus and over the telephone in the researchers' home office. To protect participants' identities, each participant was assigned a unique number to combat the reported apprehension from participants discussing their nonacademic responsibilities or possible backlash from administration over unfavorable comments.

The purpose of the study was to determine the barriers adult learners encounter during their academic pursuit that may impact their academic success. Although, 30 of the 33

participants stated on the survey they have a 2.0 grade point average or higher, 20 of the 33 adult learners noted experiencing a barrier whether it is situational, institutional and/or dispositional impacting their academic progress. On the survey adult learners unanimously claimed nonacademic responsibilities and academic responsibilities have impacted their academic progress in their course or program. The results of this study's findings on barriers experienced by adult learners, correspond with several other studies, specifically Deggs (2011) who found barriers are always present, so adult learners must work hard to combat issues when they occur.

Based on semistructured interviews and focus groups, adult learners seemed motivated to achieve their academic goals, despite all the responsibilities (academic or nonacademic) they must manage daily. Data from the semistructured interviews revealed that nine of 10 participants reported that family and friends consistently motivate them to achieve their academic goals. It seems when adult learners' encounter stressors impacting their academic progress, they collectively rely on their spouse, parent, children and close friends for support. Aligning with that data, the focus group interviews results found that 3 of 10 participants reported their family motivates them to overcome barriers impacting academic progress. Participant 4 stated, "My family and friends motivate me! They always remind me that it is possible to always go through the next step, even though it may be hard, but it's nothing you can't do!" Nevertheless, the focus group data revealed five of 10 participants noted an extrinsic motivation to overcome challenges that try to impede their academic pursuit.

Data revealed also from focus groups' interviews, that two of five participants (focus group 1) and one of five participants (focus group 2), feel more encouraged in courses with only other adult learners. Participant 6 stated, "Seeing other women and men in my age or older, come in after all they have been through in life really encourages me." Additionally, many adult

learners experience various anxieties related to the classroom when they attend courses with traditional students (Erisman & Steele, 2012; Perna, 2016). Participant 4 stated, "It made me feel weird and unfocused being in the classroom with students my children and grandchildren ages." For example, life experiences can make adult learners less receptive to new learning content and they may tend to question their instructors or traditional students on their ideals. However, what the researcher found to be most shocking, was in spite of what numerous research claimed that adult learners prefer a learning environment with their own age group, two of five participants (focus group 1) and two of five participants (focus group 2) reported having positive learning experiences in courses with traditional learners. Participant 5 stated, "I enjoy being with the younger students and it's interesting to see their perspective on things and to give them some words of wisdom." Overall, these findings indicate there are various barriers whether situational, institutional or dispositional can impact on adult learners' academic success.

    Situational Barriers. The results of the study's findings strongly indicate that adult learners have been academically impacted by situational barriers. This revelation is stimulating because it brings credence to Chen (2017) claim that adult learners may withdraw or dropout when they find it challenging to balance their work schedules, family, and other interests with the course schedules offered. Adult learners have reported in the surveys, semistructured interviews and focus groups, various challenges such as caring for their children, sick parents, job responsibilities, time-management and transportation as factors deterring their academic progress. For example, during focus group interviews, an adult learner cried discussing issues with trying to remain in school; working full-time; raising children; full-time class schedule; and recently her very sick mother had to move in. Another adult learner stated it has been very difficult during this winter season, rising two hours earlier in the morning to get herself and her

children using daily public transportation to daycare, work, and school. On top of all that, when she returns home in the evening she has to cook, care for her children and then find time to focus on her classwork.

When asked on the survey what your higher education institution can offer to ensure you academically succeed, 10 of 33 participants stated academic advisement and support services. Another seven of the 33 participants reported on the survey, more flexible course schedules should be offered at their higher education institution. Moreover, the semistructured interviews data showed eight of 10 participants reported time-management and financial issues contribute to their lack of focus and participation in their courses. During both focus group interviews, a notable three of five participants (focus group 1) and all five participants (focus group 2), voiced that it is frustrating and can be overwhelming balancing personal issues while honoring their course obligations. After analyzing the data, the results were not a surprise, as the researcher recalled comments made by several participants when they were told initially about the purpose of this study. Overall, these adult learners stated they participated in the study hoping their response would be used for colleges to provide better resources for adult learners that are experiencing various situational barriers impacting their academic progress. Specifically, adult learners would like to see their college implement a support group for adult learners who are struggling with nonacademic issues to help prevent their grades from declining or possibly dropping out of school.

Institutional Barriers. The most noteworthy findings in this study and where majority of the adult learners agreed is that institutional barriers impact their academic success. The fact that eight of 33 participants reported on the survey that financial aid issues are challenges they encounter impacting their academic progress, higher education institutions should take note.

Another three of 33 participants stated on the survey to ensure they academically achieve their goals their higher education can make courses more affordable. Six of the 10 participants during their semistructured interviews, reported financial issues from rising cost of tuition and expenses associated with their courses impact their academic progress. Deggs (2011) suggest, not understanding or identifying institutional barriers that impact adult learners, has led to colleges not effectively meeting their academic needs or providing efficient support services. These adult learners stated honoring their school financial obligations while working to pay household expenses causes stress and lack of effort to complete their course assignments timely. For example, during a semistructured interview, an adult learner states, she must work a full-time job to support her family which makes it very difficult trying to study, since after work she is extremely tired.

During the focus groups' interviews, the researcher asked the participants to explain challenges' they have encountered which have impacted their academic progress. The data revealed that two of the five participants (focus group 1) and three of the five adult learners (focus group 2) noted financial issues associated with college costs impact their academic goals. When asked to elaborate, more than half of the participants stated they would like to be notified of various opportunities for financial assistance and academic resources available at their school, in the community and nation-wide. Saar et al. (2014) suggests annual tuition increase and educational expenses weigh heavily on adult learners already mounting household financial responsibilities. Another two of five participants (focus group 1) reported during the focus groups' interview, they had challenges finding resources to pay for additional childcare time outside of work hours. For example, two participants reported it will be very helpful if colleges provided free childcare to them during school and for additional time to study outside of class.

With all the research available on adult learners academic and nonacademic challenges significantly impacting higher education institutions attrition rates, this data supports numerous researches that institutional barriers exist.

Dispositional barriers. After analyzing the study's data, evidence does add credence to existing research that dispositional barriers impact adult learners' academic success. The findings from survey showed four of the 33 participants stated having some insecurity with learning new subject matter has impacted their academic progress. The researcher found that data to be most interesting, because none of the participants reported on the survey new learning material was too difficult to grasp. The data from the survey also revealed, only one of 33 participants stated faculty and staff does not care about their academic success. Three of the 33 participants noted being neutral in their response about their faculty and staff as it relates to their academic success. However, the data from the semistructured interviews show three of the 10 participants stated that teaching and learning strategies in their course or program should be improved. During the semistructured interview one participant explained partnerships between adult learners and higher education institutions need to be better so that adult learners can adapt and cope with attitudes and self-perceptions plaguing their academic progress. Deggs (2011) suggest that colleges should effectively modify existing support systems or create new ones that will cater to adult learners' emotional needs.

Data revealed from both focus groups' interviews, which all participants in both focus group 1 and 2 agreed, it is important to their academic success to have a relationship with their faculty and staff when encountering academic challenges. These findings strongly suggests' that when experiencing dispositional barriers adult learners rely on the support of their faculty and staff for resources and encouragement. For example, during focus groups' interviews adult

learners willingly shared their personal academic struggles amongst their peers. Adult learners mainly agreed having a supportive relationship with faculty and staff is additional encouragement they rely on when experiencing low-motivation or sense of embarrassment in not retaining learning content as quickly as their peers. Participant 6 stated, "Faculty and staff should encourage and help you. Also, possibly direct you to another source that can help you succeed, because that should be their main goal helping you thrive academically." Likewise, Participant 12 reported, "I agree with how everyone else feels. Its' easier to talk with your teacher or whoever when you have a relationship with them, and they can help you figure out things as far as assignments or questions you might have." If faculty and staff provide support and encouragement to adult learners, it is reasonable to assume that dispositional barriers would not impact adult learners' academic success.

Discussion of Results in Relation to Literature

The predominant findings from this study indicate from the triangulation methods employed that adult learners reported they have experienced challenges inside and outside their learning environments impacting their academic success (Cercone, 2008; Deggs, 2011; Falasca, 2011; Finn, 2011). There are social, economic, and academic issues; along with higher education institutional practices that may operate sometimes collectively, affecting adult learners' academic success (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). The data from Bahrudian et al. (2013) study reported that 100% of adult learners experience challenges within themselves followed by time, financial and families that impact their academic progress. The fact that findings from the present study strongly align with previous studies, adds credence that situational, institutional and dispositional barriers do exist affecting an adult learners' academic pursuit. Chen (2014) asserted, adult learners' primarily struggle with postsecondary education because it competes with their life

roles that come with being an adult. While seeking a degree or certification to advance their career may ultimately have a positive impact long-term, the commitment and effort needed in the short-term in adopting a student role conflicts with their family and work responsibilities (Chen, 2014).

The result of this study pertinent to barriers impacting adult learners suggest that higher education institutions have not created and implemented effective strategies, programs and resources to combat these various challenges impacting their academic success. Remarkably, on the survey, and during semistructured interviews and both focus groups, adult learners stated they have experienced academic and nonacademic issues impacting their academic progress. However, data findings from only the survey showed, nine of the 33 participants had not encountered any challenges impacting their academic progress.

Sherman et al. (2015) asserted, by 2025 adult learner enrollment will be around 106 million at American higher education institutions. Chen (2017) suggested, to accommodate adult learners who juggle both academic and nonacademic responsibilities, higher education institutions must modify their teaching practices to ensure academic success. The present study triangulation methods employed findings overall supported that situational barriers impact adult learners' academic success. The findings from the survey reflected that eight of 33 participants reported situational barriers were time-management, finances and nonacademic responsibilities; during semistructured interviews adult learners stated financial issues; and balancing academic and nonacademic responsibilities (focus group 1) and financial issues (focus group 2) were noted situational barriers impacting adult learners' academic progress. Forbus et al. (2011) study on adult learners and traditional students in terms of their time-management revealed that adult learners were less involved in various social events in college than traditional students. As a

result of coping with stressors related to time management issues, adult learners experienced differing levels of motivation, campus involvement, and participation in social activities than their traditional counterparts (Forbus et al., 2011).

In comparison to traditional students, adult learners in the study stated they were financially independent of parents and family. Despondently, when adult learners' employment income exceeds government financial aid standards, they must pay for their entire tuition or out-of-pocket expenses (Cubberly, 2015). Adult learners either drop-out or delay enrollment into a course or program in order to save and pay for their college costs (Kimmel et al., 2012). Regardless of the reasons, that higher education institutions continue to increase tuition and fees annually, higher costs mean fewer families can gain the education and training needed to benefit their communities (Devito, 2009; Mulhern, 2015). Additionally, that lowering costs can improve college access and completion for adult students (Dynarksi et al., 2013). These adult learners expressed that adding mounting college expenses on top of already balancing financial obligations related to household monthly bills, childcare, medications, transportation expenses, books, and technology makes it even more difficult to excel academically (Cubberly, 2015).

In this present study 12 of the 33 participants surveyed stated personal and family issues are situational barriers impacting their academic progress (Schumacher, 2015). Miller, Gault, and Thorman (2011, as cited in Schumacher, 2015) survey on student parents found 56% of single student parents and 68% of married student parents spend 30 hours per week or more caring for dependents. Adult learners in the present study agreed caring for their children, grandchildren, and sick parents significantly impact their academic obligations. Additionally, Miller, Gault, and Thorman (2011) survey reported 42% single student parents are likely or very likely due to their dependent care responsibilities to withdraw from their course or program. Adult learners are

vulnerable due to their lack of educational experiences and academic and nonacademic responsibilities (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007 as cited in Deggs, 2011). Adult learners during the focus groups voiced resources should already be established for them to effectively balance their caregiving responsibilities with schoolwork. Researchers have advocated too decrease annual attrition rates, higher education institutions should review their research to get a clearer perspective on the significant impact personal issues, work stressors and school obligations have on adult learners (Giancola et al., 2009).

Adult learners usually must work full-time to pay for tuition and other living expense, and they enroll in college to enhance their careers and improve their financial conditions which benefits their local economic infrastructure (Jehangir, 2010; Seay 2011). The following factors encompass adult learners: first-generation status (they are the first in their family to attend college), employed at least part time, and are single parents (Pusser et al. (2007). Also, Dumais et al. (2013) research analyzed the differences between first-generation and continuing-generation adult online learners. There survey revealed that first-generation adult online learners were likely to cite highly demanding work environments impede their ability to balance academic with nonacademic responsibilities (Dumais et al., 2013). Adult learners work settings, personal, and life experiences impact their academic performance (Blakely & Tomlin, 2008; Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009). These revelations coincide with this study's findings where 24 of 33 adult learners surveyed stated they are employed full-time and seven of 33 adult learners are employed part-time. Additionally, 13 of 33 participants reported attending school full-time and 15 of 33 participants reported having a 2.9 or below grade point average. During the study's interviews adult learners agreed managing all their nonacademic responsibilities while working a job and attending their course or program magnifies their obligations significantly. Moreover, the

adult learners in this study reported because they juggle work responsibilities with their course obligations it is necessary for faculty and staff to provide efficient resources to help them with family support and academic issues (Shannon, 2009).

The study findings from the triangulation methods of a survey, semistructured interview, and focus groups revealed that adult learners have encountered learning challenges in their course or program (Deggs, 2011; Falasca, 2011; O'Neil et al., 2013). Adult learners manifesting negative perceptions of anxiousness; the fear of not academically performing well; and age impacts their academic progress (Falasca, 2011). The adult learners mainly voiced that it has been mentally challenging being an older learner and having to sit still for long periods of time after being at work or dealing with family issues. Additionally, adult learners noted remaining focus on what their instructor is teaching; and feeling confident that they can obtain a high grade or pass the course have been experienced challenges (Goto et al., 2009). Linn (2016) agreed adult learners lack confidence in their academic abilities due to balancing numerous nonacademic responsibilities along with their academic commitments. The present study findings also discovered that two of 10 participants during the semistructured interviews found it difficult getting in the habit of reading and understanding new subject material. Wlodkowski et al. (2017) concurred, if learning tasks are way beyond adult learners' capabilities or past experiences, they will not effectively acquire new knowledge. To help reduce adult learners' burdens adult learners, higher education institutions can provide supportive services, modify teaching strategies, and include more flexible course schedules (Taylor et al., 2013).

Chao (2009) suggested for adult learners to excel academically, colleges and universities must discover what motivates them to learn and act accordingly. Sogunro (2015; Silliman et al., 2018) expressed, adult learners are motivated to learn to improve their lives personally and

professionally which impacts economic growth of the society. Likewise, Spiveys (2016) study on motivating factors of adult learners found, individual investment was a motivator, but situational challenges such as family, job, and finances were obstacles. Previous research along with that study's findings coincide with the present study data, which found that adult learners have a strong motivation to learn when encountering barriers impacting their academic progress. Those findings are supported from the semistructured interviews where nine of 10 participants reported their family and friends motivate them to academically progress when encountering barriers. Furthermore, the focus groups' interview data revealed three of five participants had a extrinsic motivation to learn (focus group 1) and two of five participants reported also having and extrinsic motivation to learn when combating obstacles. Adult learners agreed the continued support from family and friends provides them the motivation they need when facing financial, work and course issues (Falasca, 2011). Additionally, adult learners indicated career advancement and personal goal of obtaining a degree, provides them the motivation to persevere when encountering challenges during their academic pursuit (Knowles, 1984). If there is no motivation, any distress that affects adult learners' role can cause them to underperform academically or withdraw from their course or program (Chen, 2015).

A partnership between higher education institutions and adult learners' is vital to adult learners' academic success (Brophy 2010; Deggs, 2011; Falasca, 2011; Williams et al., 2011). Like numerous research findings, the present study data revealed from surveys, semistructured interviews, and focus groups' that adult learners noted a bond with faculty and staff is beneficial to their academic success. Faculty and staff are charged with the responsibilities of providing effective instruction and advisement for adult learners. However, faculty and staff should build a supportive relationship and offer resources to adult learners when they are confronting

challenges to prevent them from declining grades or cutting short their academic goals. Williams et al. (2011) concurred, in order to immediately prevent stressors that can cause poor academic performance, faculty and staff must intervene so they can help identify and combat any mental, financial or academic challenges adult learners are encountering. However, when higher education institutions do not take the initiative to identify barriers impacting adult learners' academic success, they are unable to effectively meet adult learners' academic needs or provide adequate support services (Deggs, 2011).

During focus groups' interviews all five participants in both focus group 1 and focus group 2 noted that when feeling overwhelmed with family, school and work obligations the support and encouragement from faculty and staff provides extra push to continue in their academic pursuit. Specifically, three of five participants (focus group 1) and two of five participants (focus group2) interviewed stated they rely on communication from faculty and staff to provide resources to assist them academically and with issues they encounter with family, job, finances, and their mental health. However, when facing obstacles adult learners would like to see instructors show more empathy towards them by modifying due dates on assignments or possibly offer one-on-one time to re-explain directions. Therefore, it is critical that higher education institutions create and implement effective teaching strategies and resources that will provide adult learners the motivation they need to cope with challenges impacting their academic success (Brophy, 2010; Sogunro, 2015; Wong, 2018).

Limitations

The study acknowledged three key barriers impacting adult learners' academic success in American higher education institutions. The study incurred two main limitations related to its chosen population and literature. Since, the midwestern higher education institution student

enrollment is one of the highest in American postsecondary institutions for adult learners, the study may have benefited from a broader population's more cohesive data (Aquinis et al., 2013). However, after initial survey was conducted, by employing both semistructured interviews and focus groups (two groups of five participants) the researcher was effectively able to obtain a significant amount of data to answer the research questions posed. This triangulation method permitted the researcher to have more in-depth discussions with the 10 participants individually during both semistructured interviews and during both focus groups. Also, during the focus groups participants continuously elaborated on each other responses. Although, this led to unexpected amount of transcribing, the substantial data accumulated benefited the research greatly.

Literature was found to be a limitation for the researcher. After many exhausting searches using Google Scholar, online journal articles, and visiting public libraries, the research acquired appeared to be mostly outdated and there was very little current research with-in the past 5–10 years on the topic. It is a disadvantage for researchers when there is not an adequate amount of updated literature available on their topic (Grewal et al., 2017). However, this was an important opportunity for the researcher to identify these new gaps in the literature and to describe the need for further research that may possibly lead to new academic insights on the topic (Aquinis, Hermam, & Edwards, 2014).

Implications of the results for Practice, Policy and Theory

Incorporate an adult learner training seminar. To deter barriers impacting adult learners' academic success which in turn increases graduation rates and decreases attrition rates, it is vital for higher education institutions to transform their practices. To address these challenges, higher education institutions should begin with their faculty and staff. Zepke and

Leach (2010) contend, higher education institutions must ensure faculty and staff who play an important role in adult learners' academic success, work together to identify barriers that affect adult learners' motivation. Hence, higher education institutions can implement an adult learner training seminar to be held semi-annually. The adult learner training seminar will educate faculty and staff about the various situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers adult learners encounter. Additionally, the adult learner training seminar will provide strategies to identify specific challenges of adult learners; and offer approaches to motivate adult learners to learn despite these obstacles. Faculty and staff may have experienced similar barriers as adult learners and can provide support and effective resources to combat these challenges impacting adult learners' academic success.

Develop applications for adult learner support group policy. Research has shown that adult learners learn differently than traditional students and they have a higher enrollment rate at American higher education institutions. Also, research has revealed why adult learners are motivated to learn. So, for higher education institutions to remain financially sound, they will need to cater to adult learners' learning needs; provide encouragement; and effective resources when they are encountering challenges impacting their academic progress. Hence, to combat these barriers higher education institutions will need to create and implement collaborative adult learner support groups compromised of adult learners and faculty and staff.

The adult learner support group's goal will be to minimize barriers impacting adult learners' academic success. Also, the aim of the adult learner support group will be to prevent adult learners from withdrawing from their courses or dropping out of school. To accommodate adult learners' academic and nonacademic schedules, this support group will meet twice per semester. The adult learner support group meetings will be held online via video conference, or

in a private conference room on campus. The support and resources needed to combat these barriers can be given from the implementation of this adult learner support group. Candidates for the adult learner support group would be designated each semester by their instructors and academic advisors. For adult learners who academic performance has declined by at least 25% by midterm exams will be selected and requested to join the adult learner support group. Once adult learners have agreed to attend the adult learner support group, their faculty and staff will provide empathy and actively listen to adult learners' concerns offering encouragement and specific resources (counseling, tutoring, government referrals, etc.). Moreover, these adult learners support groups must be incorporated and conducted in all their courses and programs the entire school year. Continued research into this topic will be impactful to postsecondary education, potentially leading to significant increase in graduation rates and decrease in higher education institutions attrition rates.

   Academic and nonacademic barriers of adult learners. The adult learners in this study reported academic and nonacademic barriers they encounter during their academic pursuit. Majority of adult learners mentioned they juggle multiple barriers that are impacting their academic progress. Higher education institutions should utilize research on this topic to establish practices and apply policies that will assist to alleviate these obstacles impacting their adult learner population. When higher education institutions are aware adult learner academic performance is declining, they must refer to previous research relating to situational, institutional and dispositional barriers in order to strategize and implement best practices. Collaboratively faculty and staff can analysis adult learners learning environment to figure out how to combat challenges that affect adult learners' classwork; projects and assessment scores; participation in lessons; focus during lectures; and attendance. Moreover, faculty and staff must implement a

plan of action which will ensure these academic and nonacademic challenges will no longer impact the adult learners' academic pursuit. Higher education institutions will need to ensure their faculty and staff collaborate to identify barriers and apply strategies that may significantly alleviate challenges impacting adult learners' academic success and decrease their attrition rates.

Understanding the adult learner's motivation. The research studies and theorists explored in this study suggest that adult learners have a self-motivation and extrinsic motivation to learn before enrolling in postsecondary education (Knowles, 1984). Higher education institutions must invest resources and time to educate their faculty and staff to ensure they stimulate the adult learner to remain motivated when they are experiencing challenges. Both Bandura (1978) and Vygotsky (1978) social learning and sociocultural theories asserted, an adult learner academic performance will sustain the motivation to learn under duress, if instructors provide a diverse learning environment that is socially interactive and engaging. This study's findings provide credence to past studies that describe what motivates adult learners to add on academic responsibilities to their numerous nonacademic responsibilities. This study revealed that adult learner can be extrinsically motivated to learn because of a personal goal to achieve a job promotion, degree or certification. Additionally, an adult learner could be motivated to learn from the desire to be a role model to their family and friends. Furthermore, an adult learner may be motivated to learn from wanting to provide financial security for their family. Hence, when adult learners are coping with challenges, higher education institutions must create teaching strategies, resources, and implement best practices that will provide adult learners the motivation to achieve their academic goals (Brophy, 2010; Rothes et al., 2017; Ruberson et al., 2009).

Recommendations for Further Research

The goal of this present study was to determine barriers adult learners encounter during their educational pursuit that have an impact on their academic success. The study's results have identified specific barriers whether they are situational, institutional and/or dispositional that impact adult learners' academic success. The research has revealed why adult learners are motivated to learn when encountering barriers. Also, the research has shown when higher education institutions address adult learners' barriers, it can improve withdraw and attrition rates. Specifically, to combat adult learners' barriers, higher education institutions must: (a) incorporate an adult learner training seminar, (b) develop applications for adult learners' support group, (c) identify and address encountered academic and nonacademic barriers of adult learners, and (d) understand what motivates adult learners to learn.

The findings of this present study have led to further recommendations to include a larger, more ethnically diverse sample. Including an equal sample size of adult learners whom English is not their primary language can help higher education institutions create adequate teaching strategies and provide support to help adult learners combat their barriers. This study which is limited to the midwestern part of the United States could be expanded to ensure its findings legitimacy, by conducting research on the West, Southern, and/or Eastern regions. Upcoming research can expound on existing methodology by including adult learners, various higher education (2-year, 4-year, private, public) and their faculty and staff. Hence, a longitudinal study could track the five-year performance of adult learner training seminars to determine if teaching strategies and resources have improved adult learners' academic performance and higher education institutions withdraw and attrition rates.

Conclusion

This present qualitative case study findings reveal that there are barriers impacting adult learners' academic success. The responses have confirmed these barriers whether they are academic (dispositional) and/or nonacademic (situational and institutional) have affected the respondents in this study academic success. From their participation in the research process, respondents learned they were not alone in experiencing challenges that impacted their academic progress. Although, the respondents reported relying on family and friends for support when encountering challenges, they noted a more cohesive bond with faculty and staff would be very beneficial to their academic success. It is integral for higher education institutions to provide adult learners the motivation to persevere when encountering barriers impacting their academic goals (Wong, 2018). Specifically, if the faculty and staff at this research location aim is to adhere to their schools' mission statement, they must invest time and resources to understand why their adult learners learn differently than their traditional students.

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Appendix A: Adult Learner Journey Survey (Qualtrics)

Each question below asks about your experiences as an adult learner attending higher education institution. Select only one of the following options from the Likert-scale: Strongly Disagree (SD), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD).

1. The school faculty and staff care about my personal and academic success. ___

2. Adult learners are made to feel welcome in their classroom. ___

3. Classes are scheduled at a time suitable for my lifestyle. ___

4. I am able to share my life experiences within my coursework. ___

5. My course permits me to collaborate during the lesson. ___

6. Classroom resources (technology, textbooks, seating) are readily accessible. ___

7. I receive recognition timely by my instructor for my academic achievement in lessons and assignments. ___

8. I am able to manage my personal and education obligations. ___

9. Financial and academic assistance is provided timely. ___

10. Classroom resources (technology, textbooks, seating) are readily accessible. ___

Read the multiple-choice questions and select the most appropriate response.

11. What can your higher education institution offer to ensure you succeed academically?

    o Academic advisement and student support services.

    o More flexible course schedules.

    o I am satisfied with the academic and nonacademic resources my institution offers.

    o Establishing a sense of community in and out of the classroom.

12. Are their challenges you have encountered which impact your academic progress in your course/program?

- o Personal and family issues.

- o I have some insecurity with learning new subject matter.

- o Financial aid.

- o Learning material is too difficult to grasp.

Read the multiple-choice questions and select one answer that best refers to you:

13. Gender:

- o Male

- o Female

14. Nationality/Race:

- o African - American

- o Caucasian/White

- o American Indian

- o Hispanic

- o Other

15. Age:

- o 16–24yrs.

- o 25–34yrs.

- o 35–44yrs.

- o 45–54yrs.

- o 55yrs and older

16. Current Schedule:

   o Full-time

   o Part-time

17. Current Grade Point Average (GPA):

   o 3.5 or higher

   o 3.0 – 3.4

   o 2.5 - 2.9

   o 2.0 – 2.4

   o 1.9 or lower

18. Employment Status:

   o Full-time

   o Part-time

   o Unemployed

Appendix B: Semistructured Interview Questions

1. Who consistently motivates and encourages you to achieve your academic goals?

2. Are there any time management or financial issues that are currently impacting your academic

   goals? If so explain.

3. How can the teaching and learning strategies in your course or program be improved?

Appendix C: Focus Group 1 & Focus Group 2 Questions

1. What are the perceived opportunities or achievements as an adult learner you have experienced in the classroom/course?

2. Are there any challenges you have encountered pursuing your academic goal/s?

3. What motivates you to overcome barriers that impede academic progress?

4. How has your experience been as an adult learner (nontraditional student) in the classroom with other adults (traditional students)?

5. Is it important for your academic success to have a relationship with faculty and staff?

Appendix D: Consent Form

Concordia University–Portland Institutional Review Board
Approved: December 4, 2018; will Expire: December 4, 2019

Research Study Title: A Study to Determine Barriers That Impact Adults
                                      Learners Academic Success
Principal Investigator: JoAnn R. Saunders
Research Institution: Concordia University–Portland
Faculty Advisor: Mark Jimenez, Ed.D.

Purpose and what you will be doing:
The purpose of this survey is to discover if there are barriers that impact adult learner's academic success. We expect approximately 30 volunteers. Participants will be given a $5 gift card to participate in the study. We will begin enrollment on December 2018 and end enrollment in January 2019. To be in the study, you will complete a brief survey, and may be chosen to participate in a semistructured interview and focus group. Doing these things should take less than:

- Survey (2–3 minutes)
- Semistructured interview (5–7 minutes)
- Focus Group (30 minutes)

Risks:
There are no risks to participating in this study other than providing your information. However, we will protect your information. Any personal information you provide will be coded so it cannot be linked to you. Any name or identifying information you give will be kept securely via electronic encryption and locked inside the researchers' office. When we or any of our investigators look at the data, none of the data will have your name or identifying information. We will only use a secret code to analyze the data. We will not identify you in any publication or report. Interviews and focus groups will be audio recorded. Also, all recordings will be deleted immediately following transcription and member checking. Your information will be kept private at all times and then all study documents will be destroyed 3 years after we conclude this study.

Benefits:
Information you provide will help determine barriers that impede adult learners' academic success. You could benefit from this study from learning how to identify and manage challenges similar adult learners may encounter balancing their personal and educational responsibilities.

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 or neglect 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. 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, JoAnn Saunders at email: [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: JoAnn R. Saunders   email: [redacted]
c/o: Professor Dr. Mark Jimenez
Concordia University–Portland
2811 NE Holman Street
Portland, Oregon 97221

Appendix E: IRB Approval

DATE: December 4, 2018

TO: JoAnn Saunders, Masters
FROM: Concordia University–Portland IRB (CU IRB)

PROJECT TITLE: [1319243-1] A Study to Determine Barriers of Adult
                         Learners
REFERENCE #:   EDD-20180914-Jimenez-Saunders
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: December 4, 2018
EXPIRATION DATE: December 4, 2019
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. Attached is a stamped copy of the approved consent form. You must use this stamped consent form.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation. 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. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others (UPIRSOs) and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

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

This project has been determined to be a Minimal Risk project. Based on the risks, 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 December 4, 2019. 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 Amon Johnson at 503-280-8127 or amjohnson@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. December 4, 2018

Appendix F: Recruitment Flier

ADULT LEARNERS

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~**Recruitment**~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Participating in research is one of the most powerful things you can do to be part of higher education breakthroughs. The research that will be conducted on your campus will be centered on adult learners who are ages 25 years and older. The researcher is seeking volunteers who will remain confidential to participate in a dissertation study to determine barriers that impact adult learners' academic success. The findings from the research will be used to assist adult learners with identifying and managing barriers they may encounter due to their personal and educational responsibilities. Additionally, higher education institutions can use these findings to incorporate resources and practices to assist adult learners when challenges occur that may impede academic progress.

The study will be conducted on your campus in the ***Student Union*** on ***January 15, 2019***, from 4–9pm. This study will involve participation in an online survey (2–3 minutes), on another date a corresponding semistructured interview (5–7 minutes) via telephone/campus, and focus group (30 minutes) on campus.

Each participant will ***receive $5 gift card*** for participation in the research. Participants can withdraw from the research and their information will be removed.

Thank you for your Interest,

JoAnn R. Saunders, M.Ed. (Primary Investigator)

[redacted]

Appendix G: Statement of Original Work

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously- researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

Statement of academic integrity.

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

Explanations:

What does "fraudulent" mean?

"Fraudulent" work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one's own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate's final work without full and complete documentation.

What is "unauthorized" assistance?

"Unauthorized assistance" refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another's work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.

Statement of Original Work (Continued)

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 disser-
   tation.

2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the pro-
   duction 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.*

Digital Signature

JoAnn Renee Saunders

Name Typed

JoAnn Renee Saunders

Date

12/24/2019