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# NOT DESIGNED WITH US IN MIND: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES AND NEEDS OF ADULT LEARNERS AT A PUBLIC RESEARCH UNIVERSITY

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NOT DESIGNED WITH US IN MIND: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES AND  
NEEDS OF ADULT LEARNERS AT A PUBLIC RESEARCH UNIVERSITY

by

Stephanie N. Meyer

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of  
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NOT DESIGNED WITH US IN MIND: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES AND  
NEEDS OF ADULT LEARNERS AT A PUBLIC RESEARCH UNIVERSITY

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University of Nebraska, 2014

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Adult learners are a rapidly expanding student population, constituting more than 40 percent of college students today (Stokes, 2006). Research on adult learners has historically focused on their experiences within adult-centered institutions where they make up the majority student population. Although older students challenge the status quo of higher education, traditional institutions continue to dismiss their needs in the development of policies and practices. The structure of higher education is historically designed to serve youth and assumptions are often made about students that often overlook the needs, availability, and interests of adult learners. For many adult learners who prefer the perceived prestige of public research universities, they have no other option but to push forward despite the lack of institutional support. This study contributes to the limited research on adult learner experiences within public research institutions, and provides necessary insight into the subjective experiences of students with competing adult roles.

This qualitative phenomenological study examines the unique experiences and needs of eight adult learners at Great Plains University. Great Plains University is a four-year public research institution located in the Midwest region of the United States. Qualitative interviews were conducted utilizing a semi-structured, informal interview

protocol with eight undergraduate students who identified as 25 years of age or older, and were enrolled at least part-time in a degree-seeking program. The findings indicated that adult learners' outside systems of support and needs greatly influenced their overall perception of institutional climate. The researcher provides practical recommendations for serving older students at an institution predominantly attended by traditional-age undergraduates and offers recommendations for future research.

## **Dedication**

*For the many adult learners I have met along my journey whose stories inspired me to pursue a Master's degree in student affairs; I write every word in the hopes that your challenges and successes inspire others, and remind them that it is never too late.*

## **Acknowledgements**

To the eight participants who so willingly shared their stories with me, I thank you all from the bottom of my heart. Your success stories continue to bring me laughter and joy, and your challenges fuel my desire to be an advocate for adult learners. For all you have overcome and the sacrifices you have made, you each inspire me to never let anything stand in the way of my dreams. I wish you all the best as you relentlessly pursue your goals.

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## Table of Contents

Chapter 1—Introduction .....	1
Purpose Statement.....	3
Significance of Study .....	3
Research Questions.....	4
Research Design.....	4
Definition of Terms.....	5
Delimitations.....	6
Limitations .....	7
Conclusion .....	8
Chapter 2—Literature Review .....	9
A Brief History of Adult Education.....	9
Defining Adult Learners .....	16
Research Methodologies and Scope .....	19
Retention of Adult Learners.....	22
The Experiences and Needs of Adult Students in the Literature .....	24
Chapter 3—Methodology .....	32
Introduction.....	32
Researcher Paradigm .....	33
Research Approach.....	34
Participants.....	35
Research Site.....	37
Institutional Review Board Approval .....	38

Methods of Data Collection .....	39
Data Analysis .....	41
Researcher Reflexivity .....	43
Trustworthiness and Goodness of Research .....	44
Limitations .....	46
Chapter 4—Findings .....	49
Introduction .....	49
Introduction to Participants .....	50
Gina .....	51
George .....	52
Rebecca .....	53
Mary .....	54
Bob .....	55
Karen .....	56
James .....	57
Katherine .....	58
Overview of Themes .....	59
Theme I: How Adult Learners Experience Institutional Climate .....	60
Faculty Relationships .....	61
Peer Relationships .....	63
Campus Services .....	64
Advocacy Offices .....	68
Theme II: The Impact of Systems of Support .....	69

Financial Support .....	69
Family Support.....	71
Employer Support.....	72
Theme III: Common Needs of Adult Learners .....	73
Acknowledgment .....	74
Accommodations and Flexibility .....	75
Advocacy .....	77
Central Resource.....	78
Conclusion .....	80
Chapter 5—Discussion .....	81
Introduction.....	81
Summary of Findings.....	81
Summary of Themes.....	82
Connections to Literature.....	84
How Adult Learners Experience Institutional Climate.....	84
The Impact of Systems of Support on Adult Learner Experience .....	88
Common Needs of Adult Learners .....	90
Implications for Future Practice.....	92
Recommendations for Future Research .....	95
Conclusion .....	96
References .....	97
Appendices .....	103

## List of Tables

Table 1	Participant Demographic Information .....	36
Table 2	Participant Adult Roles and Prior College Experience.....	37
Table 3	Research Themes and Subthemes.....	60

## List of Appendices

Appendix A	Informed Consent Form .....	104
Appendix B	Recruitment Email .....	107
Appendix C	Semi-structured Interview Protocol .....	109

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are.*

– Benjamin Franklin

At colleges and universities across the United States, the concept of the “traditional” college student is changing rapidly. The common image of such a student is one who attends immediately following high school, enrolls full-time, lives on campus, and engages in social organizations and activities with their peers. However, “adult learners” (frequently and *incorrectly* referred to as “nontraditional students”) are challenging the status quo of higher education. Today, more than 40 percent of college students are 25 years of age or older, and this population continues to grow (Stokes, 2006). In recent years, the enrollment increase among older students has been greater than that of younger students, and the National Center for Education Statistics has predicted an additional 20 percent increase by 2020 (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

The Obama Administration has set aggressive goals for higher education that, if met, would place the United States at the forefront of an ever-increasing competitive global market (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). In order to achieve this goal, more than eight million adults will need to earn two or four-year degrees by 2020 (Gast, 2013). With adult learner enrollments growing by nearly double those of younger students, institutions that best serve this population are likely to benefit from the largest growth in the coming years (Kelly & Strawn, 2011). Adult-centered institutions, community

colleges and for-profit institutions are innovating U.S. higher education, focusing on the diverse needs of older students and reinventing classrooms and curriculums to increase access for adult learners (Stokes, 2006). These older students are not only increasing in lifespan, but they are livelier than previous generations (Fisher & Wolf, 2000).

However, many traditional institutions and research universities “deemphasize this new majority” and ignore them in the assessment of policies, services, and programs (Kasworm, Sandmann, & Sissel, 2009, p. 449). These colleges are focused on national standings, and are therefore competing in areas of research, admissions standards, and providing the optimal campus experience for younger students (Kasworm, 2010). Meanwhile, adult learners are discounted for being enrolled less than full-time and their lack of involvement in campus activities (Kasworm, Sandmann, & Sissel, 2009). Some institutions also perpetuate the negative assumption that adult learners are burdens, and avoid investment in specialized services that they believe will not be worth the return (Richardson & King, 1998).

History is littered with examples of industries that, at their peril, failed to respond to – or even see – changes in purchaser behavior. When it comes to the adult learner community – those 92 million Americans – our institutions of higher education face similar risks of having their market share substantially reduced and their services increasingly characterized by obsolescence. (Stokes, 2006, p. 6)

Adult learners are no longer non-traditional, but makeup the majority of enrollments, attending colleges for many reasons, including job advancement, increased skills, and greater security during periods of economic recession (Kelly & Strawn, 2011). A historical lack of research of adult learner needs and experiences, particularly within research institutions where they are in the margin, only contributes to their invisibility.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences and needs of nontraditional-age undergraduate students, otherwise referred to as “adult learners”, at a public research institution predominantly attended by traditional-age undergraduates. Numerous studies published from the 1980s and beyond have examined the barriers, learning styles, and motivations of adult learners. However, these studies were conducted primarily at institutions that were adult-centered where older students were more likely to have similar age peer support groups and institutional structures that supported their complex life roles. The researcher will explore whether those findings still apply to the unique needs and experiences of adult learners in a public research university where they makeup a small proportion of the undergraduate population.

**Significance of Study**

Statistics show that the population of adult learners in higher education is much larger than many educators and administrators realize, and this population will continue to experience growth in the coming decades. Yet, historically youth-centered institutions tend to perpetuate traditions, disregarding older students’ experiences and circumstances in policy formation and student services. How does this continued focus on younger students affect adult learners today? Qualitative research that investigates the subjective experiences of these older students is extremely limited – the majority of which has focused on adult learners within the context of adult-centered colleges and universities. This study will contribute to the growing body of qualitative literature on adult learners, as well as provide a much-needed look into the current state of adult education from the

context of a public research institution through the experiences of the adult learners themselves.

### **Research Questions**

In order to uncover the individual experiences and distinct needs of this often overlooked and underserved population, the following research questions were established:

- What are the experiences of adult undergraduate students at an institution predominantly attended by “traditional” age students?
  - a. How do adult undergraduate students experience the academic climate of the institution?
  - b. How do adult undergraduate students experience the social climate of the institution?
  - c. How do their systems of support impact their overall experience?
- What are the needs of adult undergraduate students at an institution predominantly attended by “traditional” age students?

This study was formulated in the hopes of giving adult learners today an opportunity to share their stories, and for student affairs practitioners to glean feedback and potential best practices on how to serve this increasingly diverse population of students on campus.

### **Research Design**

This study was conducted using a constructivist paradigm and a phenomenological methodology, examining the subjective experiences of this particular group of students at a public research university in the Midwest. This methodology was selected to recognize the wide array of life events, experiences, and circumstances of

students labeled as “adult learners”. Semi-structured interviews provided rich, meaningful data collection and greater opportunities for authentic relationships with the participants.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms are used throughout this report to describe the current status of adult learners in higher education. Providing precise definitions of such terms is important to understanding previous literature, as well as the research findings.

*Adult Learners:* For the purpose of this research, adult learners were defined as students at least 25 years of age enrolled at least part-time in an undergraduate program at Great Plains University. This term is also generalized to describe students who do not enroll immediately following high school, and who are likely balancing adult roles such as domestic partnerships, children and full-time work while in college. Referred to simultaneously as “adult students,” “older students” and “nontraditional students”.

*Advocacy Office(s):* The researcher used this term to refer to offices at the institution that are typically responsible for advocating on behalf of students with special needs. In the case of this study, these offices served students with disabilities and military veterans.

*Marginalization/Marginalized:* To be placed in a powerless or unimportant position within a group or society (Merriam-Webster, 2014).

*Mattering:* The beliefs people have, whether right or wrong, that they matter to someone else (Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989).

*Part-time:* For the purpose of this research, participants were considered part-time students if they were enrolled in at least one undergraduate course at the institution. At

Great Plains University during the time of this study, any undergraduate enrolled in less than 12 credit hours was considered a part-time student.

*Special Status:* The researcher used this term to refer to salient, intersecting identities the participants had which may or may not have granted them added resources at the institution. These identities included ability, military status, parental status, and status as a first generation student.

### **Delimitations**

The researcher set several boundaries for this study that served as delimitations of the research. Age and status of enrollment were the only criteria used to determine participant eligibility. The researcher did not include any additional criteria that may have given participants more shared life experiences and needs, such as parental, marital, ability, or veteran status. This choice in methodology and research design was intended to demonstrate the diverse experiences, perceptions and support structures that exist for students often lumped together under the blanket term “nontraditional”. Study volunteers were contacted and scheduled on a first-response basis to provide equal opportunity for any eligible student to participate. This research did not utilize survey tools to gather data because this method is positivistic and does not allow for authentic dialogue and participant storytelling. Due to the qualitative research design, there was not sufficient time available to interview 40 additional volunteers. An additional delimitation was that all eight study participants were students at the same public research university in the Midwest.

## **Limitations**

This study featured a sample of eight adult learners from similar racial and academic backgrounds. The small participant sample may be viewed as a limitation, however, the purpose of this study was not to generalize or oversimplify the complex roles of older undergraduates. Instead, the intention was to highlight their diversity and provide a deeper understanding of their experiences within the context of a public research university in the Midwest. Furthermore, my positionality as the researcher may be viewed as a limitation. I have self-identified as someone who had a traditional, residential college experience and I can never fully understand the challenges that my participants continue to face in their pursuit of a college degree.

As a former employee of an adult-centered institution, I had a preconceived notion that older undergraduates would report negative experiences at a major research university. I triangulated the data, conducting multiple member checks in an effort to account for this bias influence in my findings and ensure that I accurately represented the views of the participants.

During the interview process, there is also a possibility that my participants chose to self-select stories and experiences based upon what they believed I wanted to hear. There is a natural tendency for all of us to want affirmation, and a limitation of the qualitative inquiry process is that my participants may have perceived verbal or nonverbal cues that affirmed or negated their responses. There is also a lack of racial diversity and gender balance in this study, with all eight participants identifying as White or Caucasian, and more than half identifying as women. Finally, time was a limitation in this study. This study was a graduation requirement for the researcher, and therefore

needed to be expedited and defended within one academic year. This limited the possibility of adding additional voices to the research, as well as studying participants who had recently enrolled at the institution over a longer period.

### **Conclusion**

Higher education in the United States has historically neglected adult learners, and created a false assumption that college is an elite, youth-centered endeavor. Older students often overcome a multitude of institutional and outside barriers on their pathway to degree attainment, leading to rich experiences both in and out of the classroom. The stories of these eight participants are no exception, with their wide-ranging adult roles, support systems, and needs. Their stories serve as inspiration for anyone questioning an older student's ability to enroll in college after years or even decades have passed. They also provide practitioners with valuable insight into the complex lives of adult learners at public research institutions.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### A Brief History of Adult Education

The rich history of adult learners in education is older than the United States itself, dating back to ancient times. After all, many of the oldest educators including Confucius, Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato taught adult learners (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2012). These teachers developed a very different approach to instruction than the one that later came to govern education in Europe and later, the colonial U.S. They believed learning to be a “process of mental inquiry, not passive reception of transmitted content” (p. 34). However, ‘the art and science of teaching children’, otherwise referred to as *pedagogy*, grew in popularity in many European countries and became the dominant instructional method in the Western world. The models of pedagogy later served as the foundation of all education systems in the U.S. (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2012, p. 35).

In early Colonial America, the purpose of adult education was predominately to fulfill “moral and religious goals”, educating future clergyman, until the Revolutionary War created the need for more knowledgeable leaders and citizens (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 79). Educators began to argue whether the available curriculums were encompassing enough of the “modern subjects”, which included the sciences, agriculture and history (Reuben, 1996, p. 23). Combined with the desire of many religious groups to build their own colleges for propaganda and distinction, this new philosophy led to a large growth of academic colleges within larger institutions and a widespread expansion

of course offerings (Thelin & Gasman, 2011). Years later, the Morrill Act of 1862 created land-grant universities and greatly expanded access to higher education for adult learners (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001). Following World War I, there was a growing interest in adult education and the distinctive qualities of adult learners in Europe and the United States (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2012). *Adult education* was adopted as the term of choice after three milestone events: “a British publication reviewing the status of adult education was published, the World Association for Adult Education was formed, and the Carnegie Corporation became actively involved in establishing the field of adult education” (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 9).

The establishment of the American Association for Adult Education in 1926 marked the founding of adult education as a field of interest in the United States (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2012). Subsequently, Lindeman (1926) became the first to introduce the teaching method of *andragogy* to North America, although the term did not become widely used for several decades (p. 39). Lindeman (1926) outlined six key assumptions about adult learners that differentiated them from their younger counterparts:

1. Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy;
2. Adults’ orientation to learning is life-centered;
3. Experience is the richest resource for adults’ learning;
4. Adults have a deep need to be self-directing;
5. Individual differences among people increase with age. . .adult education must make optimal provision for differences in style, time, place, and pace of learning. (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2012, p. 39)

Lindeman compared adult education to traditional systems of education, suggesting that younger students would benefit from similar principles of self-directed learning (p. 39).

Shortly following, Thorndike (1928) published *Adult Learning*, a log of his studies,

which proved that adult students were capable of learning, and increased understanding of the impact of aging on the learning process (p. 35). Beginning in 1934, professional handbooks have been issued every decade to reflect the growing attention and literature devoted to adult learners (Chen, Kim, Moon & Merriam, 2008, p. 5).

The end of World War II and the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known commonly as the G.I. Bill, marked an important time for adult education. As many veterans returned from war, they used benefits from the government to enroll in institutions of higher learning (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001). In the 1947 report *Higher Education for American Democracy*, President Truman and the Commission on Higher Education advocated for "education for all" (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 486). Members of Congress gave wide support, and the country experienced a dramatic growth in the number of community colleges across the country (p. 486). The community college sector was primarily responsible for the increase in enrollment among adult students through the mid- to late- 1960s (p. 486). The 1960s were also a time of innovation in higher education, and the "climate was supportive of alternative approaches to the ways in which education was provided and completed" (Stein, Glazer, & Wanstreet, 2010, p. 34). During this time, several adult educators built upon the previous work of psychologists to develop their own theories of adult learning (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2012, p. 1).

The theoretical concept of *andragogy* was reintroduced in the early 1970s by Malcolm Knowles, an experienced adult educator and former Executive Director of the Adult Education Association, and he went on to be known as the "Father of Andragogy" in the field of adult education (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 61). Knowles' piece *The*

*Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* (1973) forced practitioners to reexamine the complex experiences of adult learners (Booth & Schwartz, 2012, p. 43). He defined an adult educator as “one who has responsibility for helping adults to learn” (Knowles, 1980, p. 26), and he modified the definition of *andragogy* to be “any intentional and professionally guided activity that aims at a change in adult persons” (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2012, p. 58). After several modifications, the six principles of andragogy as they exist today are “(1) the learner’s need to know, (2) self-concept of the learner, (3) prior experience of the learner, (4) readiness to learn, (5) orientation to learning, and (6) motivation to learn” (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2012, p. 3). Andragogy was viewed as revolutionary, and has been widely accepted and criticized by fellow theorists (Merriam & Brockett, 2007). Knowles believed in the following about adult learners:

1. Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it;
2. Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, for their own lives;
3. Adults come into an educational activity with both a greater volume and a different quality of experience from that of youths;
4. Adults become ready to learn those things they need to know and be able to do in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations;
5. Adults are life-centered in their orientation to learning. Adults are motivated to learn to the extent that they perceive that learning will help them perform tasks or deal with problems that they confront in their life situations;
6. Adults are responsive to some external motivators, but the most potent motivators are internal pressures; (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2012, p. 62-67)

Pratt, et al. (1998) believed that the modified six principles of andragogy were established with two primary concepts in mind. “First, a conception of learners as self-directed and autonomous; and second, a conception of the role of the teacher as facilitator of learning rather than presenter of content” (Pratt et al., 1998, p. 12). Knowles

suggested that learners were each unique, and that andragogy was used best when it could be flexible to their learning and life needs (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2012, p. 3).

Throughout the 1970s, adult learners accounted for nearly half of the enrollment increase in colleges and universities in the United States (Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989, p. xi). However, the dominant research and theories of student development in college continued to exclude older students (Fairchild, 2003). Mezirow (1978) attempted to correct this inequity by developing the *transformational learning theory* (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000). Mezirow's theory focused on the "fundamental changes in the way individuals see themselves and the world in which they live" during times of growth and transition (p. 58). Cross published *Adults as Learners* (1981) to make practitioners aware of this growing segment of the student population (Sissel, Hansman & Kasworm, 2001). She urged researchers to investigate the "dispositional, situation, and institutional barriers" of adults in traditional and nontraditional college environments (p. 17). Consequently, much of the literature of the 1980s focused on the experience and involvement of adult learners, as well as instructional methods and programs developed for older students (Chen, et al., 2008, p. 7). By 1987, traditional-age college students made up less than half of all college students in the U.S. (Scheuer Senter & Senter, 1998, p. 270).

Schlossberg (1989) developed two student development theories that she applied to the experiences of adult learners in the late 1980s: *transition theory* and *marginality and mattering* (Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989). In her transition theory, Schlossberg described a transition as "an event or nonevent that alters one's roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions" (p. 15). Her theory articulated the process of

college enrollment for adults in three stages: “moving into the learning environment, moving through it, and preparing to leave, or moving on” (Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989, p. 15). Schlossberg believed that in order to understand the impact of a transition to college for adults, educators must assess the “type of transition (anticipated, unanticipated, or non-event), the context of the transition (relationship of person to transition, setting in which the transition occurs), and the impact of the transition on the individual’s life (on relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles)” (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995, p. 35). In Schlossberg’s theory of *marginality and mattering*, the concept of mattering referred to “the beliefs people have, whether right or wrong, that they matter to someone else, that they are the object of someone else’s attention, and that others care about them and appreciate them” (Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989, p. 21). Her connections to marginality and the adult experience were congruent with Knowles, who classified many college institutions as “Type II Agencies”, structured to assist the needs of traditional-age students and serving adults as a “secondary function” (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 106). Merriam and Brockett (2007) noted that the concept of marginality is important to the context and history of adult education, as many institutions’ “primary mission is something other than adult education” (p. 110).

Throughout the 1980s and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, adult student enrollment continued to increase until adult students accounted for nearly half of all undergraduate students in U.S. higher education (Kasworm, 2003a, p. 81). During this time, the economy went through two significant declines (in the late 1980s and again in 2008) and universities saw a surge in adult learners entering institutions of higher learning (Merriam

& Brockett, 2007). Enrollment trends reflected “the need for updated skills to compete in a knowledge-based economy”, as well as an ever-changing student population as a result of “immigration and higher retirement ages” (Gast, 2013, p. 18). Although past trends show that higher education institutions are capable of reacting to “societal forces”, they are frequently slow to change, “preferring to do business as usual rather than make adjustments” (Apps, 1988, p. 43). As a result, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a dramatic growth in proprietary institutions created to serve adult students, as well as virtual universities (Kasworm, Sandmann, & Sissel, 2009).

The emergence of the for-profit, virtual university primarily serving adult learners continues the evolution of offering opportunities for those learners who, because of geographic location, work and family commitments, or prior academic experience, could not attend or not be accepted at many of the established land-based universities...these institutions have provided greater opportunity for adult learners by responding to their needs for baccalaureate to graduate education. (Stein, Glazer & Wanstreet, 2010, p. 33)

For-profit colleges and virtual universities were structured to meet the demands of adult learners, providing flexible course schedules and a learner-centered experience, founded upon the principles of andragogy (Stein, Glazer & Wanstreet, 2010, p. 34). Public universities in the U.S. have begun to offer online and hybrid courses in order to increase scheduling options, as well as partner to provide massive open online courses (MOOCs) (Gast, 2013), while some have shifted from a liberal arts focus to providing more technical certification and degree programs (Bean & Metzner, 1985). These developments have widened the student demographic at many colleges, increasing opportunities for working adults in particular to pursue higher education (Kimmel, Gaylor, Grubbs & Hayes, 2012). However, public research institutions continue to show

“uneven interest” in adult learners and linger behind in their ability to recruit and retain adult students (Kasworm, 2010, p. 144).

### **Defining Adult Learners**

The literature continues to demonstrate the challenge of defining adult learners. Otherwise identified as “nontraditional, commuter, or reentry” by many institutions, several authors have written on the political nature of such titles, and how being defined as “non” based upon their path to enrollment classifies these students as “other” (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001, p. 19-20). The “average student” is no longer defined by age alone, further detracting from the validity of these titles (Rice, 2003). The majority of students fall outside the parameters of a traditional undergraduate, which is typically “eighteen to twenty-two years old, directly enrolled from high school, living on campus or in the Greek community, and enrolled full-time” (p. 53). If ‘traditional’ is used as a synonym for “common,” “conventional,” or “customary”, adult learners are traditional (Stokes, 2006, p. 1).

In recent years, predominant theorists such as Kasworm (2003a) have opted for broader definitions that leave room for the complex experiences and life situations that many adult learners bring to the collegiate environment (p. 82). Although the majority believe that attending college and being eighteen years of age or older classifies students as adults, research of older learners has shown divergent patterns of needs and experiences from students entering directly from high school (Kasworm, 2003b, p. 3). According to Knowles (1980), students should be referred to as adult learners when their individual perception is that of an adult with adult responsibilities and life circumstances. Merriam (1982) holds a similar classification, defining adult education as “a process

whereby persons whose major social roles are characteristics of adult status undertake systematic and sustained learning” (p. 9). Bean and Metzner (1985) agree that age is not a holistic category to be used to define nontraditional-age students. Instead, they provided a three-tiered definition of an adult learner: “(a) older than twenty-four years; (b) commuter; or (c) enrolled part-time” (p. 488). As they describe, a student who falls into one or more of these categories falls outside the traditional student category at most brick-and-mortar campuses (p. 488). However, as Merriam and Brockett (2007) articulate, “What about the teenage parent living on welfare? The married, full-time college student? The adults in prison or in a mental hospital?” (p. 5). From working professionals in career transition, lifelong learners pursuing knowledge, and working parents supporting families, to immigrants and veterans returning from war, adult learners do not always fit neatly together in a group (Hadfield, 2003, p. 18).

To use simplistic categorical definitions of adult learners negates life circumstances that may provide the student with adult status and responsibilities.

Scheuer Senter and Senter (1998) refute the effectiveness of age as a singular treatment in research on adult learners:

The usefulness of age as the sole criterion of non-traditional student status is limited if the goal is to fully understand the needs of students who, after all, do not leave their social roles and loyalties behind when they set foot on campus...differentiating between students who have assumed adult roles, subjectively identifying themselves as nontraditional, and those older students who have, on the other hand, more in common with traditional students. (Scheuer Senter & Senter, 1998, p. 279)

Lynch and Chickering (1984) offer a lengthy set of identifiers of adult learners, which includes “multiple demands and responsibilities in terms of time, energy, emotions, and roles”, “less patience with pure theory”, and “more concern for practical application”.

However, Lynch and Chickering note that selecting students for study based on this criterion list would be near impossible (p. 49). Ross-Gordon (2011) provides a more simplistic list, adding that by using such identifiers nearly two thirds of undergraduate students may qualify as adult learners.

- Entry to college delayed by at least one year following high school
- Having dependents
- Being a single parent
- Being employed full time
- Being financially independent
- Attending part time
- Not having a high school diploma (Ross-Gordon, 2011, p. 26)

Ross-Gordon's definition of an adult learner is closest to the definition currently set by the U.S. Department of Education to qualify students for independent financial aid status. Students are considered financially independent if they are at least 24 years of age, a veteran, married, or have dependents that they provide the majority of financial support (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Conversely, the National Center for Education Statistics offers an inconsistent definition of adult learners as "adults age 16 or older and not enrolled in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade or below" (Kimmel, et al., p. 20). Out of convenience, students have been identified as adult learners in research when they have been taking courses at "adult-oriented institutions", regardless of age, enrollment, parental or working status (Zacharakis, Steichen, Diaz de Sabates & Glass, 2011, p. 88). Nevertheless, mainstream theorists have chosen to use age as the sole criterion for participant recruitment.

The common age at which an individual reaches adulthood and takes on adult roles and obligations is still under contention today (Kasworm, 2003a). Researchers have selected arbitrary ages such as 35 (Askham, 2008), 30 (Kasworm, 2010) or 23 (Kuh &

Ardaiolo, 1979) with the implied notion that these ages imply maturity. However, for the purpose of simplicity and congruency with previous studies, the popular choice by researchers has been to define adult learners as any student 25 years of age or older (Apps, 1988; Gast, 2013; Kasworm, 2003a, 2010; Kasworm, Sandmann, & Sissel, 2009; Kimmel, et al., 2012; Lynch & Bishop-Clark, 1994, 1998; San Miguel Bauman, et al., 2004; Scheuer Senter & Senter, 1998). As stated in the literature, this definition is used with caution and the knowledge that adult learners should not be viewed as a homogeneous population (Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989). In particular, researchers are urged to consider the intersecting identities of adult students that further marginalize this group and impact their experience, including race, military status, ability, and class (Ross-Gordon, 2011, p. 29).

### **Research Methodologies and Scope**

Previous research conducted on adult learners has largely taken place within colleges and universities where there is a substantial population of older students, such as community colleges and adult learning centers (Lynch & Bishop-Clark, 1996). In addition, predominantly women were sampled in such studies until the mid-1980s (Kuh & Ardaiole, 1979). Quantitative methods have been the most prominent with studies seeking to compare barriers and support systems of adults (Kimmel, et al., 2012; Scheuer Senter & Senter, 1998; Lynch & Bishop-Clark, 1998; Askham, 2008). In a study conducted by Kimmel, et al. (2012), the researchers examined the impact of economic change on the income, employment, motivations and barriers of adult students, comparing a cohort of students from 2004-2005 to a cohort of students in 2010. Kuh and Ardaiole (1979) compared adult learners to traditional-age students utilizing an Adult

Learner Questionnaire and the Traditional-age Freshmen Survey. In a similar study, Lynch and Bishop-Clark (1994) surveyed students to investigate their experiences in mixed age classrooms, and later conducted a study to compare the experiences of adult learners in traditional versus nontraditional college environments (Lynch & Bishop-Clark, 1998). Askham (2008) focused further on varying educational environments, surveying students in purely distance classrooms. Positivistic methodologies were utilized almost exclusively in the research literature until the early 2000s.

Kasworm and colleagues contributed to the body of qualitative research on adult learners beginning with a study in 2003. Kasworm (2003a) investigated how adult undergraduates “negotiated their learning” through a constructivist lens with the understanding that adults’ engagement and the relationship they develop with the larger college environment is “socially and culturally mediated” (p. 82). Kasworm (2010) later conducted a similar study on adult meaning-making processes, utilizing a case study research design to explore participant experiences and interactions and how this related to their engagement in the classroom (p. 146). Zacharakis, et al. (2011) utilized focus groups of adult learners to discuss shared and unique experiences, exploring “everyday phenomena such as aging” and other regular factors influencing their educational journey (p. 85). Wilson and Hayes (2000) expressed the growing need for similar study methodologies when conducting research on adult learners.

Classic adult education attempts to inform practice, highly dependent on positivistic science...are at best limited... The applied knowledge (“knowing before doing”) prescriptions of positivistically defined professional practice do not well withstand the ambiguous, constantly shifting demands of actual practice in which conflicting values, perspectives, and expectations reveal no immediately or obviously right choice about what to do. (Wilson & Hayes, 2000, p. 15)

With the exception of a qualitative database analysis conducted by Chen, et al. (2008) investigating the portrayal of adult learners in academic journals over the course of three decades, researchers operating within a constructivist paradigm have utilized interviews and focus groups for inquiry. Zackarakis et al. (2011) explained that such methods are naturalistic, support personal storytelling and allow participants to be “unrestricted by A, B, C choices provided by the typical survey researcher” (p. 86).

In addition to greater qualitative inquiry, researchers have suggested continued examination of more diverse college environments and their relation to adult learner experiences. Kasworm (2003) conducted her large-scale qualitative inquiry process on 90 adult undergraduates at two private liberal arts colleges, two community colleges, and two public universities (p. 83). Zackarakis, et al. (2011) piloted their research at several adult-learning centers, an environment where older students were the dominant population. The research environments of the Lynch and Bishop-Clark (1994, 1998) and San Miguel Bauman, et al. (2004) studies were branch campuses of their respective institutions, both commuter and traditional student focused. A study conducted by Kimmel, et al. (2012) was focused on the experience of 530 respondents at five private institutions with one public university included in the sample. Kuh and Ardiolo (1979) and Scheuer Senter and Senter (1998) both focused research on major state universities, not specifying whether the university mission included research. Kasworm (2010) was one of the first to target such institutions, conducting research with 23 participants at two public research universities. The implications of Kasworm’s study noted the lack of data within this context, and the need for further research on the individually constructed realities and experiences of adult learners operating within this unique context (p. 146)

## **Retention of Adult Learners**

The experience of adult learners at any institution is closely tied to the institution's ability to retain adult students. More than ever, institutions are competing to recruit and retain older students, and are encouraged to increase "convenience, variety, low cost, service and amenities" in the process (Kimmel, et al., 2012, p. 31). The literature suggests that the ultimate challenge of retaining adult learners is keeping up with a diverse array of needs and expectations (Hadfield, 2003). In addition, adult learners may experience high levels of satisfaction at an institution and still choose to leave temporarily or permanently for reasons unrelated to the college (p. 19). Adult learners may leave college to "have a baby, change jobs, close on a house, care for an ailing or dying parent, get a divorce, get married, have bypass surgery, start a business, or simply catch their breath" (p. 19). The type and level of support an adult learner needs to be successful can vary greatly depending upon their circumstances, but having adequate support systems in place is crucial to adult student retention (Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989, p. 104).

Bean and Metzner (1985) created an attrition model for adult learners that provided four categories of variables that can lead to a student choosing to dropout of the institution. These variables were academic, background, psychological, and environmental in nature. Academic variables referred to services such as academic advising and course availability, as well as personal characteristics such as study habits and absenteeism (p. 529). Research conducted by Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering (1989) supported these variables, citing academic advising as the most important service area to adult student retention (p. 124).

When they move into the institution, they already feel behind. Academic advisers for adult learners need to understand the assessment of the prior learning process to help adult learners gain recognition for their college-level learning in work, service, or volunteer experiences. Many adult learners pursue further learning solely for pragmatic reasons and want to make sure that every course they take fits their educational goals. (Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989, p. 124)

According to Tinto (1975), students attending college directly from high school tend to seek opportunities that fit their academic and social needs. However, for many adult learners, their academic goals are of much greater significance (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

According to Bean and Metzner's (1985) model, background variables that can impact retention range from demographic criteria such as age, race, and gender to level of involvement with the institution, including residence and enrollment status (p. 493).

Adult learners are characterized by the "lessened intensity and duration of their interaction with primary agents of socialization (faculty, peers)" at higher education institutions (p. 488). They are more likely to be enrolled less than full-time, therefore greatly reducing the social aspects of college that younger students are likely to experience (Pascarella, 1980). However, increasing social opportunities for adult students can lead to mixed retention results because they may not perceive themselves to need additional social support outside of what they are receiving at home or in the workplace (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 489). Bean and Metzner (1985) cited utility, satisfaction, stress and goal commitment among the psychological variables most effecting adult student retention. According to their theory, if an older student believes that their enhanced degree is vital to employment, they are more likely to persist (p. 529). Congruently, Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering (1989) found available career services to be highly influential to the retention of adult students, however they noted that in studies, participants did not feel "entitled to get such help from their institution" (p. 168).

This may have been due in part to the convenience and availability of such services at the institution (Hadfield, 2003). According to Hadfield (2003), adult learners feel a sense of mattering when services are offered at varying times through the day and night, and when visible support structures such as childcare centers and organizations for adult learners are sponsored by the college (p. 17).

Research has shown that environmental variables, such as personal finances, family support, and employment hours appear to have the largest impact on the retention of adult students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Although institutions cannot control personal barriers and obstacles that student face, adult learners often hold institutions to high standards of performance (Hadfield, 2003). “ ‘Customer’ is exactly how adult learners think of themselves, and they hold our institutions of higher education accountable for providing paid-for results... When they do not find what they want at one school, they transfer to another” (p. 19). Adult learners expect to receive services that meet their unique needs, and successful retention strategies do well to address them with respect for the students’ competency and previous experience (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989, p. 111).

### **The Experiences and Needs of Adult Students in the Literature**

As a marginalized student population on many college campuses, adult learners are often hidden and ignored in regard to administrative policy and practice of support services (Sissel, Hansman & Kasworm, 2001). Traditional institutions tend to disregard their experiences and needs in favor of the needs of their younger target audience. “Colleges and universities often assume that they are interacting with youth in transition to adulthood...policies and procedures of these institutions are frequently condescending

to adult students” (p. 20). Those departments and administrators that are placed in a role to advocate usually lack the power and fiscal resources to establish support programs specifically for adult learners (p. 21). Therefore, older students often experience challenges in finding suitable support systems and establishing their identity as a validated voice in many collegiate environments (Kasworm, 2008, p. 32). The literature reflects the importance of providing support networks, with varying degrees of importance depending on whether they are academic or social in nature, in order to adequately serve adult learners.

When older students begin their higher education journey, the environmental and academic norms they need to adjust to are “at best unfamiliar and at worst intimidating” (Askham, 2008, p. 90). Technology has presented an added obstacle for many as they experience apprehension enrolling in online courses for the first time – often the only option that fits their schedule when evening courses are unavailable (Carrier, 2010). Research on adult learners cites the need for a more “schedule-friendly approach by faculty and administration” (Kimmel, et al., 2012, p. 20) with more than a third of students requesting greater course availability outside of the traditional 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. timeframe (Scheur Senter & Senter, 1998). Public land-grant institutions in particular have habitually disregarded these requests (Flint & Frey, 2003). It is not uncommon for adult learners to transfer from more adult-centered institutions to traditional campuses for greater degree availability, yet transfer credit, credit for previous experience, and financial aid policies often do not recognize the needs and knowledge of older students (Stokes, 2006). Hence, the relationships these learners develop with their instructors

have been repeatedly identified as the most essential and direct source of academic support (Zacharakis, et al., 2011).

Adult students tend to hold faculty to higher standards of performance than their younger counterparts (Kasworm, 2010). These learners expect their teachers to provide meaningful and relevant instruction that takes into account different learning styles, as well as their complex roles as adults and students concurrently (Apps, 1998). In a study conducted by Apps (1998), students cited the following desired faculty characteristics:

(1) More concerned about their students than about things and events, (2) know their subject matter, (3) can relate theory to practice and can relate their field to other fields, (4) are confident as instructors, (5) are open to a wide variety of teaching approaches, (6) share their whole person rather than segregating their instructional role from the rest of their lives, and (7) encourage course work that goes beyond course objectives. (Apps, 1988, p. 104)

Older students are more likely to seek relationships with supportive instructors who engage in the above practices, and past research has noted that these relationships tend to differ from those developed between faculty and traditional-age students (Lynch & Bishop-Clark, 1994; Kasworm, 2010).

Adult students who networked and established ties with faculty have reported higher satisfaction in their academic experience, feeling a needed sense of importance and validation for their experience (Zacharakis, et al., 2011; Kasworm, 2010). Studies suggest that adults also experience greater academic performance when faculty members are available at convenient times and their environment supports “quality relationships with school administration” (Kimmel, et al., 2012, p. 20). Instructors are therefore in a complex and critical role, responsible for providing material that meets the diverse needs of this student population, while acknowledging the common experiences and

perspectives they may have with these students (Booth & Schwartz, 2012). This balance of academic and personal support is important to recognize, and has been shown to be the most influential in student success.

Social support from traditional-age peers has been shown to be less important to student success, but has been cited as a distinct aspect of the adult learner experience. Although adult students often would rather be in a classroom with others that share their experience, studies have shown that both younger and older students valued mixed age classrooms (Lynch & Bishop-Clark, 1994, 1998). Participants went on to suggest “having students of diverse ages in their classes helped them to see different perspectives” (Lynch & Bishop-Clark, 1994, p. 8). Adult students have cited positive and negative perceptions of younger learners, observing and occasionally expressing irritation with traditional-age students who show lower levels of commitment to coursework (p. 10). Meanwhile, younger students perceived adults learners to be “more assertive in the classroom” and “less confident in their ability to succeed” (p. 8-9). Having already formed their “early identities”, adult learners may express less concern over establishing relationships with peers (Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989, p. 32). However, research has suggested the need for adults to connect with their similar-aged peers (Kasworm, 2010). Without institutional support, “adult students may never find a cohort of similar students with whom they can connect socially or emotionally” (Fairchild, 2003, p. 13). Literature suggests that adult learners can benefit greatly from the support of a cohort model, as the connections they make within the classroom tend to be the strongest peer relationships they form in college (Flint & Frey, 2003).

A staple of the traditional college student experience, campus involvement and the social aspects of college are not experienced by the majority of adult learners (Kuh & Ardaiole, 1979). Due to competing commitments at home and in the workplace, many older students have less interest and less time to devote to campus activities (Scheuer Senter & Senter, 1998). “Their estrangement from the community may result from competing commitments, from the distance between their residences and the campus, and from a perceived chilly campus climate for nontraditional students” (p. 277). Consequently, adult learners are often unable to attribute any of their success to peer support or campus involvement (Kasworm, 2003a). Although they are less likely to participate in student groups or attend events on campus, adult learners have expressed interest in student activities targeted specifically at older students (Gast, 2013).

Adult learners’ need for academic and social support structures is fluid, and often depends on the level of outside support they receive from family and employers. As stated previously, studies suggest that adult learners are balancing outside responsibilities in addition to those they carry as a student (Ross-Gordon, 2011).

Rather than being a life-encompassing, identity-building experience, such as the one we hope to provide for traditional-aged students, higher education for adults is one activity among many in which adults can participate to meet other specific needs, such as learning a new job-related skill or preparing for a new career altogether. (Fairchild, 2003, p. 12)

These roles can provide needed social support and opportunities for older students to connect theory from the classroom to relevant practice in the real world. However, these outside responsibilities can also test adult learners’ time management skills and take away from potential campus connections and experiences (p. 26). Partners were found to be the most impactful source of support within the home in a recent study conducted by

Askham (2008). Yet, many adult learners choose to enroll in institutions of higher learning following a “life crisis, such as divorce or separation, work issues, or some form of significant individual need, such as seeking a career with financial stability” (Kasworm, 2008, p. 28). Adults with children may experience feelings of selfishness and those with unsupportive employers may make sacrifices for more time at home (Fairchild, 2003). As a result, outside social support systems alone may be inadequate.

Despite numerous research studies indicating that adult learners are highly motivated, older students need to continually feel a sense of purpose and support in order to matriculate (Zackarakis, et al., 2011). They are motivated to persist by “personal accomplishment; finishing a degree started earlier, but not completed; role modeling for children, knowledge and skills in the area, and seeking a new career”, and tend to surpass countless barriers to remain enrolled in an undergraduate program (Kimmel et al., 2012, p. 21). For some, facing such challenges creates resistance to seeking help from the institution, assuming responsibility for succeeding regardless of conditions (Askham, 2008). However, studies have shown that adult learners tend to appreciate and benefit from available support services such as career counseling (San Miguel Bauman, et al., 2004), and additional academic assistance programs such as mentoring or study skill workshops (Zackarakis, et al., 2011). Adult educators have refuted claims that older learners require the reinvention of programs or entirely specialized services, which can be pricey to institutions, in order to be successful (Scheur Senter & Senter, 1998). Students surveyed have actually indicated less need for certain services, including “housing on campus, part-time work on campus, and orientation programs” (p. 276). Rather,

acknowledgement of and flexibility for their unique experiences and circumstances appears to be the most pertinent request for any college or university to consider.

The need to matter, to feel special, to feel respected, to feel noticed. Adult learners come to learning with commitment and eagerness, but for many reasons—no child care, an inflexible curriculum, inadequate counseling, lack of a meeting place for adult learners, no financial aid—they may drop out along the way. (Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989, p. 89)

The experiences and needs of adult learners in the literature reflect students whom are “both fragile and resilient”, facing sometimes-insurmountable barriers in order to make a change in their lives (Zacharakis, et al., 2011, p. 92). Through validation and consideration of their experiences, institutions can make small changes that have a large impact on the satisfaction and success of older students.

Adult learners typically select a college based on convenience of location, affordability, schedule flexibility and the availability of courses or program that meet their academic needs (Kasworm, 2003b). Studies show that increasing numbers of working adults are opting for online degree programs that offer greater work-life balance (Carrier, 2010). However, adult learners may choose to sacrifice one or more of these criteria for the “perceived greater prestige, higher-quality college degree, more challenging learning experiences, desired specialized degrees and perceived special life status” that a research university offers (Kasworm, 2010, p. 148). Research goes on to suggest that older students often prefer to attend a traditional, brick-and-mortar institution (Gast, 2013). First generation and first-time college students in particular may feel more confident in their ability to succeed with in-person instruction and assistance (Finger, Sun & Jamieson-Proctor, 2010). However, these students are also “more likely to suffer from

their minority group status” at research universities and similar campuses where there are less adult learners (Lynch & Bishop-Clark, 1998, p. 227).

Finding their place in a university community where the culture caters predominantly to the needs of younger students can be an added challenge for adult learners (Kasworm, 2010). Their perceived experiences within mixed-age classrooms (Lynch & Bishop-Clark, 1994), as well as their “needs, interests, and styles have been largely neglected” in recent studies of higher education (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001, p. 17). There remains a lack of research on their experiences within research institutions, though what exists suggests that these campus cultures have persisted in their tradition of serving youth and ignoring the needs of students with coexisting adult roles (Kasworm, 2003a; Kasworm, 2010). Chen, et al. (2008) also found that academic articles and journals over the past 25 years were lacking in their knowledge of older students, including their “diversity...and their developmental needs and interests” (p. 18). Scholar practitioners, therefore, have an obligation to research the experiences and needs of adult learners within adult- and youth-centered environments in order to better serve and advocate for them in the future (Stokes, 2006).

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### Introduction

Adult learners are a historically neglected population in higher education, ignored or marginalized for their often-competing roles as students, working adults, single parents, veterans, and more. Although the study and practice of adult education has been a focus for decades, the research is predominantly quantitative and focused on students attending adult-centered colleges and universities. This qualitative study is a rare examination of the subjective experiences of adult learners at a major research university predominantly attended by traditional-age undergraduates. How do adult learners make meaning of their experience as undergraduates in this setting? What do they need from the institution in order to be successful?

Research methodologies are not standardized, sometimes needing to be flexible to the needs and unique characteristics of the research (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 5). However, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) describe qualitative methodologies as a point “where individual belief and action intersect with culture”, recognizing the impact of social forces on a person’s construction of reality and rejecting an absolute truth (p. 8). In order to understand the experiences of adult learners, one must recognize the unique context and circumstances of each individual. This qualitative study operated within a constructivist paradigm, utilizing a phenomenological approach and a semi-structured interview protocol to glean rich data on the diverse lives, perspectives and experiences of eight adult undergraduate students.

## Researcher Paradigm

The way in which this study was conducted is a direct reflection of the *constructivist* attitudes of the primary researcher. Constructivists believe that “reality is socially constructed” (Mertens, 2010, p. 16) and that each individual makes meaning of experiences within the context of their own environment. Constructivist research also emphasizes the relationship that forms between the researcher and participants, suggesting that this connection naturally becomes a part of research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Therefore, the research is also “a product of the values of researchers and cannot be independent of them” (Mertens, 2010, p. 16). Constructivism relies on the researcher’s ability to understand and identify the lens through which they see the world, and to consider any potential bias when analyzing the data.

Extremists operating within this paradigm may believe realities are so relative that no amount of research can be useful to inform practice (Maxwell, 2005). This way of thinking suggests that one’s experience and perspective can never be truly shared by another. While several researchers agree that “no theory can capture the full complexity” of a subject’s experience, they argue that studies, particularly in the social sciences, help us all to better understand “the physical, social, and cultural world in which we live” (p. vii). Constructivists believe that in order to understand experiences, we should study phenomena by listening to the voices of those directly impacted (Mertens, 2010). The constructivist paradigm “assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and respondent co-create understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures” (Denzin & Lincoln,

2000, p. 24). Consequently, the research approach to this study was formed out of a desire to recognize multiple realities and to allow for a naturalistic form of inquiry.

### **Research Approach**

This research was approached as a *phenomenological* study, intended to explore “individual’s perceptions and meaning of a phenomenon or experience” (Mertens, 2010, p. 235). As adult learners, each of the eight participants had a shared identity that may or may not have been a salient part of their undergraduate experience. To explore how each subject’s individual needs were impacted by this identity called for a qualitative methodology that explored the “everyday experiences” that makeup this phenomena (Crotty, 1998, p. 83). As Merriam (2009) articulates, “phenomenologists are not interested in modern science’s efforts to categorize, simplify, and reduce phenomena to abstract laws” (Merriam, 2009, p. 24). Instead, phenomenology is the direct investigation of how individuals make meaning of regular life occurrences (Maxwell, 2005). The purpose of this type of research may be to enhance current practice or improve understandings of a specific experience (Creswell, 2012, p. 81).

Researchers utilizing a phenomenological approach often reflect on their own experiences with the phenomena they are studying and attempt to “bracket” their own perspectives prior to conducting interviews (Merriam, 2009, p. 93). This activity is intended to raise consciousness of the researcher’s viewpoint, in order for them to set views aside and allow the participant voices to communicate directly (Creswell, 2012). This is an important practice to avoid biased questioning and prevent discrimination against participant perspectives.

The phenomenological method as understood by these researchers is geared towards collecting and analyzing data in ways that do not prejudice their subjective character. It puts in place a number of procedures to prevent, or at least minimize, the imposition of the researcher's presuppositions and constructions of the data.... To ensure that the subjective character of the experiences is not prejudiced, these researchers tend to gather data by way of unstructured interviews in which only open-ended questions, if any, are asked. (Crotty, 1998, p. 83)

Phenomenological studies are not intended to be generalizable to every situation, but instead focus on the core of an experience. This research often concludes with a summary of the “*essence* of the experience for individuals incorporating ‘what’ they have experienced and ‘how’ they have experienced it” (Creswell, 2012, p. 79). That essence is the true purpose of this approach and is how such studies deepen our understanding and inform our practice.

### **Participants**

The participant criterion for this study was broadly defined intentionally to highlight the diverse experiences of adult learners. To recruit participants, a recruitment letter was sent to approximately 1,000 students at the institution who fit the following demographic: 25 years of age or older, enrolled at least part-time in an undergraduate degree program. Purposeful random sampling was utilized to select eight participants from a candidate pool of 49 eligible volunteers. Purposeful random sampling is typically used in qualitative research when researchers choose to conduct thorough interviews with a limited number of individuals (Mertens, 2010, p. 323). Participants had an incentive to participate, which was a one in eight chance of winning a 50-dollar gift certificate to a local restaurant of their choice. In an effort to avoid a bias sample, candidates were selected on a first-response basis and no prior relationships existed with the researcher. Basic demographic information for each of the participants is listed in Table 1.

Table 1. *Participant Demographic Information*

<b>Interview</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Major</b>
1	Gina	28	Female	White	Junior	Biology
2	George	46	Male	White	Senior	Geology
3	Rebecca	32	Female	White	Freshman	English
4	Mary	46	Female	White	Sophomore	Horticulture
5	Bob	41	Male	White	Senior	Communication Studies
6	Karen	47	Female	White	Junior	Sociology
7	James	27	Male	White	Senior	Landscape Management
8	Katherine	50	Female	White	Sophomore	Art

The participants were given an opportunity during the interview to describe themselves, including their age, sex, race, and major. The participant's year in school was typically a grey area, and was dependent upon whether they chose to identify by years with transfer credit or years at their current institution. The participants varied in age from 27 to 50 years old, and all of them self-identified as White/Caucasian. There were an equal number of out-of-state and in-state students and none of them shared the same academic program.

When focusing on the experiences of adult learners, it is important to recall that age does not necessarily indicate similar adult roles and responsibilities. Several of the participants were married with children, while others identified as single. Half of the participants were working full-time while taking classes, while others were retired or had

taken time away from work to focus solely on their education. There were also participants who displayed strong ties to other identities in addition to adult learner, which included veterans, students with disabilities, first generation students and one single parent. All of them had been enrolled in college previously, but only three had previously earned a degree. Table 2 includes each participant's adult roles and statuses in more detail.

Table 2. *Participant Adult Roles and Prior College Experience*

Interview	Pseudonym	Marital Status	Parent (Yes/No)	Employed (FT/PT)	Previous Degree	Special Status
1	Gina	Married	No	FT	Yes	N/A
2	George	Married	No	No	No	Veteran
3	Rebecca	Engaged	Yes	No	No	Disabled; First Generation
4	Mary	Married	Yes	No	Yes	N/A
5	Bob	Single	Yes	FT	No	Veteran; Single Parent
6	Karen	Married	Yes	FT	No	First Generation
7	James	Single	No	FT	No	Disabled
8	Katherine	Married	Yes	PT	Yes	Veteran

### Research Site

This research took place at a public research university in the Midwestern part of the United States. Great Plains University, as it will be henceforth referred, is a

residential and research-intensive Predominantly White Institution (PWI). In Fall 2012, GPU reported a total enrollment of 24,207, comprised of 19,103 undergraduates, 4,559 graduate students, and 545 professional students. At the time of the study, the University Registrar's Office reported that a little over 1,000 of the 19,103 undergraduates could be classified as "adult learners" or undergraduate students at least 25 years of age (5.3%). During the 2013-2014 academic year, the overwhelming majority of undergraduates attending Great Plains University were considered "traditional students" between the ages of 18 and 23.

### **Institutional Review Board Approval**

Prior to the commencement of this study, the primary investigator completed Consortium for IRB Training Initiative in Human Subjects Protections (CITI) training, a tutorial that certified the researcher to conduct research on human subjects. The researcher then submitted the research questions, protocol, and all related materials to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. The initial request included only one follow-up recruitment message to be sent to respondents with the intent to schedule an interview. However, after a large influx of responses was received, a revised follow-up message was submitted. As this study only allowed for a limited number of participants, the new message gave non-participants the option to have their name and contact information maintained by the research advisor for up to one year for the purpose of future research on the same topic. In the original request, the report also stated that the researcher would conduct two separate interviews approximately four weeks apart – the first of which would discuss participant experiences and the second would revolve around their unique needs as adult learners. However, the researcher found separating

discussions of experiences and needs nearly impossible, as the two naturally flowed together. Instead, the researcher conducted one in-person interview with each participant and then followed up via e-mail three to four weeks later to ensure that participants had the appropriate time to process and add any additional stories or anecdotes at that time.

Research participants were given an informed consent form to review and sign before interviews were conducted, and all of them agreed to having their conversations audio recorded. To ensure participant confidentiality, personal information was collected and stored in a password-protected electronic database. Participants were also assigned pseudonyms, which were used throughout the transcription. Any materials that directly tied participants to their pseudonyms or mentioned additional identifiers, such as place of employment, were also stored in the password-protected database and such information was omitted from the transcription.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

Interviews were the primary method of data collection for this research, selected with the intent to provide readers with rich, meaningful stories told in the adult learner's own voice. A definition of a qualitative interview is provided by Denzin and Lincoln (2000):

The interview is a conversation—the art of asking questions and listening. It is not a neutral tool, for at least two people create the reality of the interview situation. In this situation, answers are given. Thus, the interview produces situated understandings grounded in specific interactional episodes. This method is influenced by the personal characteristics of the interviewer, including race, class, ethnicity, and gender. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 643)

Within an interview, the researcher and participant are both actively involved and their positions impact the research. Qualitative interviews are a process and can be a challenge to conduct using closed questions, which are typical of quantitative survey research

(Maxwell, 2005, p. 119). Qualitative methodology is “adaptable to the many mutually shaping influences and value patterns that may be encountered” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 40). In this case, interviews were semi-structured and allowed the researcher flexibility to inquire further about the most salient pieces of the participant’s experience. For phenomenological studies, participants must be given the space to discuss and analyze their own subjective experience, which demands that the researcher avoid interjections or false interpretations (Creswell, 2012, p. 173).

The positionality of the researcher is important to acknowledge in an interview setting and steps should be taken to avoid a power differential. For this reason, interviews were all conducted in convenient spaces for the participants, to ensure they would be as comfortable as possible. These locations included the campus library, campus union, a coffee house and a conference room at one of the participant’s workplaces. My positionality could have also been impacted by the dynamic of age. As Siedman (2012) articulates:

The relative ages of the participant and the interviewer may affect the type of relationship that develops between them. Some older participants may feel uncomfortable being interviewed by a young interviewer, especially if they feel that the interviewer places them in a subordinate role. Interviewing participants who are much younger or much older takes a special type of sensitivity on the part of the interviewer. He or she must know how to connect to children or seniors without patronizing them. (Seidman, 2012, p. 107)

I was keenly aware that I was decades younger than several of my subjects, and I made sure to avoid condescending language throughout the interview.

Before the questioning began, I also attempted to build rapport with the participants and assured each of them of my intent to portray them authentically. I was deliberate about clarifying my interpretations during the interview as well, allowing the

participants to correct my analysis or redirect my questioning. I believe that my calming and supportive nature allowed my participants to be open about their experiences and built the foundation for an honest conversation about the needs of adult learners today.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher engaged in the process of open coding and inductive data analysis when examining the information collected from the eight adult learners at Great Plains University. Data analysis is “the process of making sense out of the data” and evaluating this content required a step-by-step process of merging a large amount of material into overarching themes (Merriam, 2009, p. 175). The process of categorizing and classifying data into smaller pieces, referred to as coding, can be conducted in several different ways. When researchers come to the data without previously established categories and allow themes to emerge naturally, this is referred to as open coding. Open coding is utilized for several approaches to qualitative research because researchers are often discouraged from “forcing the data to fit” outside themes (Charmaz, 2006, p. 49). Instead, Charmaz (2006) suggests the following:

- Remain open
- Stay close to the data
- Keep your codes simple and precise
- Construct short codes
- Preserve actions
- Compare data with data
- Move quickly through the data (p. 49)

These suggestions parallel the practice of phenomenological reduction, which is “the process of continually returning to the essence of the experience to derive the inner structure or meaning in and of itself” (Merriam, 2009, p. 26). During reduction, researchers also engage in horizontalization, which grants each portion of data the same influence in establishing themes.

Is it possible to abstract and label it? If so, it is a horizon of the experience. Expressions not meeting the above requirements are eliminated. Overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions are also eliminated or presented in more exact descriptive terms. The horizons that remain are the invariant constituents of the experience. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121)

Moustakas (1994) outlined a procedure for examining phenomenological data, which I found particularly useful. Essentially, this process consists of three steps: 1) bracketing of the researchers’ experiences, opinions, and viewpoints (otherwise referred to as epoche); 2) horizontalization and reduction of the data to define invariant themes; 3) researcher(s) ascertain the “essence” of the phenomenon (p. 120-121).

My data analysis process began after the first interview was conducted and continued until all interviews with participants were completed. Prior to and throughout this process, I reflected upon my position as the researcher, noting my experiences and attempting to identify and bracket my own opinions and biases. I also kept a personal log during the transcription process, which was conducted after the in-person interviews and follow-up were finished. Following the transcription process, I engaged in horizontalization and open coding, studying any “recurring regularities” in the data (Merriam, 2009, p. 175). After my first examination of the transcription, I reviewed them all a second time and coordinated emerging themes with particular colors. I then used

colored highlighters line-by-line on the transcription to “cluster the invariant constituents of the experience” into core concepts (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). Triangulating the data was an important part of this process to ensure goodness of research and researcher trustworthiness. After I developed my core concepts, I had a peer reviewer whom I trusted to be critical and thorough review the transcription and my subsequent findings. I then wrote up my findings report and submitted it to my participants to review. Conducting member checks was an important final piece of my analysis process, which once again allowed the adult learners the opportunity to challenge my interpretations of their needs and experiences.

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

To understand this research is partly to understand the positionality and lens of the researcher. I am a 26-year-old single, Caucasian female born and raised in the urban suburbs of Detroit, Michigan. My life experiences have made me open, adaptable and, above all, empathetic. Truthfully, I have faith that humans are basically good and that each individual is shaped greatly by their circumstances and the world around them. I would consider myself socially liberal, and many of my beliefs are both in congruence and in conflict with my Non-Denominational Christian upbringing. I believe that in order to improve our understanding of the world and to better serve as an ally to all students, we must think critically about our environment and the dynamics of power and privilege that are pervasive in our society. This aspect is what I value the most about those who have a passion for research, particularly that which is focused on marginalized student populations.

As an individual who has previously worked at a for-profit, adult-centered institution, I acknowledge that I came into this research with my own opinions of how Great Plains University currently serves adult learners. I am certain that my previous work experiences with adult students created some biases against GPU in my research, and I utilized member checks to ensure that my interpretations were an accurate representation of the participant's opinions and experiences. I know that my perspective as a "traditional" undergraduate student impacted my concept of an "exceptional academic experience" and I reflected throughout this research on the difference in my meaning-making process versus that of my participants. I also have a deep appreciation and respect for individuals that are balancing adult roles while pursuing their education, and I acknowledged this sentiment openly with my participants. The outside world has held fewer barriers for me than many of my subjects and I do not necessarily understand what those barriers are. However, I believe that my personal interactions with such individuals and institutions in the past have fueled my passion for adult learners, and helped me to establish authentic and meaningful dialogues with my participants.

### **Trustworthiness and Goodness of Research**

Qualitative researchers have the duty to consider trustworthiness and goodness of research when formulating and evaluating the methodology of any study. Analyzing how a researcher has established trust is focused primarily upon ethics. Brown and Strega (2005) had this to say about the importance of trustworthiness in qualitative research:

Assessing how well we did, how we know if our research is credible, actionable, and trustworthy, is important in anti-oppressive research... Anti-oppressive research is not so much concerned with the ability of our research instruments to "measure" accurately; rather, our concerns relate to whether we adhered to our research principles. (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 277)

The first important piece of establishing trustworthiness in phenomenological research is researcher reflexivity. As discussed previously, bracketing is a crucial part of the investigative process in order to understand “personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions” (Merriam, 2009, p. 25). Crotty (1998) further explains, “validity can be increasingly achieved as more comes to be learned about the author and the author’s world, and the interpreter’s own beliefs and values are given less play” (p. 95). In an attempt to explore and understand my own viewpoints, reactions and bias, I kept a journal throughout this experience. As Brown and Strega (2005) discuss, research focused on marginalized populations that truly challenges the status quo requires researchers to reflect on power dynamics and their privileged identities (p. 277). I believe that my transparency and consistent reflection prior to and during this process has contributed to my trustworthiness as a researcher.

As important as reflection is to establishing trust, the research structure and procedure also contributed to goodness of the research. For example, member outreach and recruitment through the Registrar’s Office helped to avoid a bias sample by providing students with varying ages, identities, academic majors and life experiences. By utilizing in-depth interviews, I was able to build a strong rapport with the participants, which helped me glean rich data and report findings in the participants’ own voices. To maintain that rapport, I also developed pseudonyms for participants and stored any audio files and materials that directly identified them in a password-protected database. Protecting participant anonymity and ensuring that their stories, particularly those that were negative, would not harmfully impact them was an important piece to gaining and maintaining trustworthiness.

During the data analysis process, Miles and Huberman (1994) also suggest that having “critical friends”, as well as members of the study, challenge conclusions and methods is equally critical to establishing goodness of research (p. 310). Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend that the peer reviewer be an individual who is “trustworthy, whose judgments can be accepted as valid, and who is a disinterested party” (p. 326). To this point, my peer reviewer was a male also enrolled in my Master’s program that had experience utilizing a similar qualitative methodology in his own research. This individual was an excellent critic and comfortable challenging my analysis while having no stake in the research results. After my peer checked my data, I conducted member checks, supplying my findings to all eight participants for review. Member checks are “a technique used in many qualitative research methods for establishing the trustworthiness of the findings” where participants are given the opportunity to challenge themes, analysis, context and findings of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). I believe that the critical feedback and review of my findings by my peer and participants established a high level of trustworthiness and further credibility for this study.

### **Limitations**

In this study, the participant pool was limited to a sampling of eight adult learners at only one public research university in the Midwest. Although my participants came with a breadth of different adult roles and life experiences, there was a lack of racial diversity with all of the participants identifying as White/Caucasian. The sample also had a gender imbalance with more than half of the participants identifying as women, and all of the participants had attended at least one other institution prior to GPU. Nevertheless, the impact of race, gender identity and previous enrollment at different types of

institutions on the adult learner experience were not focuses of this study. The number of participants in this study may be perceived as a limitation. However, the purpose of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and needs at this particular public research university. The purpose was not to identify findings that could be generalized to other populations at different types of institutions. Instead, readers should decide how these findings could be useful to them as they consider their own adult learner populations at their institutions. In addition, it was never my intention to generalize a population of students that is already oversimplified in much of the previous literature.

My viewpoint as the researcher may be viewed as a limitation when considering my previous experience at an adult-centered institution and my background as a "traditional-age" undergraduate. I must acknowledge that my own perceptions have impacted the research in some way and that I am an outside observer when examining the experiences of adult learners. I have also been open about my biases against Great Plains University and their treatment of adult learners is the hopes of bracketing this assumption in the findings. By conducting peer reviews, member follow-ups, and member checks, I attempted to triangulate the data. I believe this increased my credibility as a researcher and provided ample opportunity for others to challenge my interpretations and findings. During interviews, there is always a possibility that participants self-select responses based upon what they perceive will be noteworthy or satisfactory to the researcher. Although I attempted to support however my participants chose to interpret my questions, there is still a possibility that my verbal and nonverbal cues could have prompted different types of responses from them. Finally, time was a limitation in this study. This

study was a graduation requirement for the researcher, and therefore needed to be expedited and defended within one academic year. This limited the possibility of adding additional voices to the research, or conducting a longitudinal study of participant experiences at Great Plains University.

## Chapter 4

### Findings

#### Introduction

The purpose of this research was to gain a greater understanding of the experiences and needs of adult learners at a public research university where students 25 years of age and older makeup a small segment of the overall undergraduate student population. The researcher intentionally kept the participant criteria open in order to highlight the diverse stories and life experiences of those labeled as “adult learners”. In order to explore the students’ individual circumstances in depth, the researcher developed the following research questions:

- What are the experiences of adult undergraduate students at an institution predominantly attended by “traditional” age students?
  - a. How do adult undergraduate students experience the academic climate of the institution?
  - b. How do adult undergraduate students experience the social climate of the institution?
  - c. How do their systems of support impact their overall experience?
- What are the needs of adult undergraduate students at an institution predominantly attended by “traditional” age students?

The data gathered from eight adult learners at Great Plains University provided several themes related to adult undergraduate experiences. These themes offer insight into the various competing roles of older students, and provide examples of how their systems of

support impact how they experience the institutional climate at a public research university.

### **Introduction to Participants**

The eight participants in this study were all 25 years of age or older, enrolled at least part-time in an undergraduate program at GPU. Although the majority of the participants were interviewed in a closed study room in the campus library, a few requested to move the interviews to more convenient spaces for them, which included one participant's workplace, the campus union, and a local coffee house. All of the participants self-identified as White/Caucasian, and all had previous college education prior to their current iteration at the institution. When asked why they chose to attend Great Plains University, all of the students cited convenience of location as their primary reason. Nearly all of the participants also specified that they selected GPU, a flagship public research university, over other options they may have considered because of the prestige and accreditation they associated with that type of institution.

Although the participants ranged in age from 27 to 50 years old, they displayed several common character traits. First, the participants all appeared to be highly resourceful individuals, willing and capable to seek out services and opportunities without hesitation. Whether this was as a result of life experience or inherent confidence, this shared trait emerged in the interviews, as many of them specifically addressed their ability to meet their own needs. Similarly, the participants each articulated their capacity to serve as their own advocate. Several attributed this to life experience and maturity, seeming to share an understanding that self-advocacy is a skill developed as one adopts more adult roles.

Finally, all of the participants appeared to share a high level of academic commitment. These students each had a clear purpose for their time at the University, returning to school for career advancement, lifelong learning or as a final opportunity to pursue their true passion. This trend will appear in the subsequent themes, as each of the adult learners accredited much of their overall experience at Great Plains University to their academic goals and classroom experiences. However, before the primary themes found in this research are introduced, the researcher would like the participants to introduce themselves to the reader. Information related to the students' individual journeys and motivations is provided in the following eight subsections.

**Gina.** This was Gina's first semester at GPU as a transfer student from a local community college. At age 28, Gina was studying to become a doctor and although she had earned a significant amount of credits previously, transferring to the institution was "always the plan". Gina described herself as a somewhat reclusive, but highly dedicated student, "I don't interact well in general. I tend to try to figure things out myself and keep to myself... cuz that's how I am." As a married student working full-time, Gina spoke of the frustration and surprise she felt as she transitioned into the institution and discovered that course offerings were not as flexible as she had experienced previously:

It is definitely a bit of culture shock from [a local community college]. Most of my classes there were taken online, you know, because it's much easier when you have a full-time job...or evenings. So, its been interesting and a bit of a challenge sometimes to actually come to class in the middle of the week during the day when I'm supposed to be at work. I realize that most of the students here probably aren't like me, but GPU doesn't seem terribly nontraditional student friendly in that regard. Like there are no – well there are some – but there are few night classes and even fewer online classes.

Gina's employer was supportive of her being in school, paying for her tuition and allowing her to fluctuate her work hours when needed. Although her course schedule was a particularly salient issue for her at the time of the interview, she remained reluctant to complain and focused on the pursuit of her goals, even if they would take her 10 years to accomplish, "There are probably a lot of people like me that just don't complain about it... It's either this or not go to school...I'm making the best choices I can with what I have to work with."

**George.** As a retired Army veteran, George joined the military immediately following high school and spent 22 years of his life serving his country. Now age 46, married with no children and unemployed, George came to GPU to get out of the house, "I didn't really feel like working and I had all these benefits... so I decided to use them. And seeing as I've got nothing better to do, and I haven't *completely* failed out of college, I keep going". George's seemingly casual attitude should not be taken as disinterest in his subject of study, which was geology, but more of a reflection of his college experience in relation to what he had already survived.

This is not the huge life-changing experience for me that it is for traditional students. I didn't choose to come to college to become an adult. I was an adult when I got here. I've been through some amazing experiences, I've been through some horrific experiences, and frankly the experiences I've had here haven't been that memorable.

He expressed great interest in his major classes, but simply wished to use his geology knowledge in an "amateur status" after graduation, versus actively seeking employment in his field of study.

As a retiree, George was grateful that he did not have to balance his courses with work or other commitments, and expressed empathy for those who do. "I have not

worked a day, an hour that I've been in school... THAT has been a blessing." George was interviewed during his final semester at GPU, and although he was an average student who had failed numerous classes, he was proud of his persistence, "I'm really good at picking myself back up and moving on. I've failed a bunch of classes, but I just take them again and prove I can pass them." Overall, George appeared to enjoy his college experience and was looking forward to returning to retirement after graduation.

**Rebecca.** At age 32, Rebecca came to GPU as a first generation college student hoping to explore her true passion: writing. Her interview was conducted during her first semester at Great Plains, but she had previously earned an Associate's degree at a local community college. Rebecca began taking college courses after working in insurance for 10 years after high school, and was thrilled to be making a career change:

I look at it financially, sure I've got \$50,000 in debt waiting already, but if I never have to research a claim on another life insurance policy and tell another widow that 'I'm sorry ma'am, we cannot pay you these funds'...as long as I never have to do that again...I might limp for the rest of my life, but I know that I have more value and more to offer the world than that.

Balancing her roles as a student, fiancé, and parent, Rebecca was not working during the time of the interview, nor did she have any intention to while she was in school.

However, she aired multiple challenges that she would have to overcome during her time at GPU, several of which were related to her identity as a student with disabilities.

Rebecca was diagnosed with two learning disabilities early in life, and was viewed by her family as "the one that couldn't learn". To her credit, she pushed forward and was determined to see her education through. As soon as she arrived to GPU, she was eager to take advantage of every opportunity, "I feel that I hit the ground running right off the bat at the beginning of the semester and I think it really paid off because I've

managed to meet some fantastic people to work with.” Unfortunately, just weeks before her interview, Rebecca was struck by a car and had experienced setbacks in her personal and academic endeavors due to her injuries. She was upset with the lack of accommodations available for students, but did not let this take away from her motivation to create change, “I’m very excited to get the opportunity to learn all of these things that I’ve always wondered...to actually do something with it that’s gonna impact other people.”

**Mary.** At age 46, Mary came to GPU with a previous degree and several years spent at similar institutions studying various areas from theater to radio broadcasting. She ultimately landed in sales and spent a good portion of the last decade in a position that she was not truly interested in. With three adult children and the support of her husband, Mary resigned from her job and returned to school to take a few classes in landscape design. She considers herself to be a lifelong learner and was taking courses to feed her appetite for learning, as well as to develop the skills to start her own business.

I want to be in business for myself, but another thing -- it’s something I do that everybody says I’m good at, which is why I went back to school because people said, ‘Well, you love to learn, you should go back to school and learn more about this.’...I really enjoyed doing it, and it was really all I thought about all the time.

Mary’s dedication and conscientious nature were apparent as she spoke with pride about her grades and how much she had already learned from her instructors, “I’ve really taken initiative from the very beginning with my professor...[to professor:] ‘This is why I’m here, this is what I want to learn, what do you suggest that I do and how should I prepare for next semester?’”

Mary did not plan to be enrolled as a degree-seeking student and often pushed back on courses that she felt were not relevant to why she came back to school. “I really couldn’t get anybody in the Admissions department to understand that I had a degree, and I just wanted to come back and take some classes... I just think there’s some confusion as to what the University’s about”. Despite this sentiment, Mary’s experience at the institution was incredibly positive, and her list of requests minimal. For Mary and her husband, having only one spouse working while the other was in school full-time was becoming a strain, and much of what was negatively salient for Mary related to financial support and the increased cost of education.

**Bob.** Bob, a single father, initially attended Great Plains two decades ago as a veteran fresh out of the Navy, and left school when he learned he was to be a parent, as he said, “about 20 minutes before they kicked me out”. He attempted to return about 10 years following after his divorce, but it was not until he returned for a third time four years ago that his goals and circumstance allowed him to persist.

When I came back [this time], it was after some reflection on my work goals...I was just dissatisfied in my job. My kids were older though, so I was able to pursue classes without having to worry about their care all the time... it just felt like the right time, and I wasn’t getting any younger.

As a 41-year-old working full-time, Bob felt fortunate that his work was able to be somewhat flexible while he was in school, but still cited course scheduling as a significant challenge, “For a person my age trying to go back to school...I found it very difficult, even with my flexibility, to find classes that could fit my work schedule.”

As a “gregarious guy”, Bob also felt the need to restrain his personality with younger peers to avoid appearing as if he was “trying too hard to be their friend or be the cool old guy on campus”. Bob was the only participant who focused on the lack of social

support for adult learners at GPU, “The things that are available for people my age... to build morale or to build common ground or identification were nonexistent...it’s almost entirely geared for young people...I would say that we’re a low priority segment of the student population.” In his last semester at the institution, Bob spoke positively about his experience because he ultimately accomplished what he set out to do: he graduated. However, to him the University felt more like something he was pursuing than a community he was a part of, “The University presence [as an adult learner] is a large part of your existence, but not larger than your job or your children...so for me, personally, the University never ever took up more than 50% of my life”.

**Karen.** As a 47-year-old, first generation student working full-time with two daughters in college, Karen felt as though pursuing her degree was a long time coming, “I think it was always in the back of my mind that I would go back to school, but it was more bucket list than it was a reality for a career.” Through hard work and people skills, Karen said she moved up the corporate ladder within her company, and an opportunity for a large promotion presented itself:

I was in the midst of some of that interviewing process and looking at our criteria for who we wanted to hire and their qualifications and thinking to myself, gosh I could do this. Why can’t I do this? ...I was fortunate that I was offered the job on the condition that I did get my degree. So there was my push from bucket list to reality...it was because of my career.

In a unique situation as a coach’s wife with daughters in two other four-year public colleges in the state, Karen enjoyed the opportunity to share challenges and tips for success. She described her family as supportive and understanding of her competing commitments, but still could not fully shake her own feelings of guilt, “I’ve had to get

past that – not feeling guilty as a mom, not feeling selfish because I’m picking to do my homework instead of going to something else.”

With her work fully supporting her financially, and taking one class at a time, Karen was driven academically to get A’s in all of her classes:

[A college degree] was always something that I knew I didn’t have, and so it has given me the confidence of being able to say that I’m working on my degree...working hard week by week, taking tests, and then getting that final grade and then knowing that, oh my gosh, I did that...my expectations are higher.

Karen felt incredibly positive about her college experience at GPU, and she expressed a sense of pride not only for her academic performance, but for the many challenges she was able to overcome in her pursuit of higher education.

**James.** As a transfer student who had spent nearly 10 years in college, 27-year-old James had been working at least one, if not two part-time jobs as a full-time student while he attempted to find the right career fit for him. Having received an Associate’s of Applied Science at a local community college and a Bachelor’s degree in Business from a nearby private non-profit college, James had challenges finding an area he was truly interested in, until a family member suggested landscape management. “Had I known there was a major for that out of high school, I probably would’ve done it, but I didn’t know...you know, you just keep going and sooner or later you figure out something.” As a student at Great Plains, James experienced a bit of isolation knowing that there was an age gap between him and his peers:

[Peers] don’t include you near as much just because they’re kinda like he’s older, he doesn’t understand...it’s tough to fit in. Especially when you’re kind of like on the brink between being – I feel old, but being older and even people older than me, I couldn’t imagine because they’re kinda like, ‘You know I’m older, I have family and stuff to worry about.’ Where me, I’m in the middle, so it’s difficult. You don’t want to be perceived as immature, but you also don’t want to be seen as a snob or something.

In addition, James had been diagnosed with both physical and learning disabilities, which he said further complicated his matriculation through various programs. He expressed a great deal of frustration at the lack of understanding that he had felt most of his life as a student with disabilities, “Instructors always say, ‘Oh, it’s just an excuse’. So [the disabilities office or advocate] is trying to get these instructors to realize no, there’s a reason why I’m having these accommodations.” He said he felt that if instructors had taken an interest, encouraged his potential, and acknowledged his different learning style early on, he “wouldn’t be 27, still going to college”. In his last semester at GPU, James’ biggest complaint was how the institution was “hiring researchers to be teachers”, and he wished for more instructors that truly sought to make a difference in student’s lives.

**Katherine.** As a 50-year-old veteran of the Air Force with three grown children, Katherine had a long and diverse career path prior to coming to Great Plains. With a Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in healthcare, she came to GPU to use her educational benefits and pursue her true passion: art. “I’ve always had a passion for art and I never gave myself permission to do it.” Katherine was a driven student who was thrilled to be in a quality program with faculty who challenged her. When she was recognized in a national juried art exhibition her first year, she was particularly gratified to receive unanimous support from peers and instructors:

I never got the feeling that anybody wasn’t really congratulatory. That at my age, it wasn’t like you’re taking away that from somebody else who’s an undergrad – you know, another undergrad who’s younger...I could see that there could have been some people upset that it was a nontraditional student that won that...but faculty were really supportive, my peers were really supportive. Everybody was really excited... I thought that was really positive.

Although she was welcomed and “one of the crowd” among her art peers, Katherine felt invisible and avoided by peers in non-major courses, “They sit next to you at the last resort, like, what’s this person who could be my mother doing in this class? Talking around you like you don’t exist...and if you do interject, it’s like you have three heads.” However, these types of experiences did not appear to bother her, as she expressed little interest in socializing, “All of us I think who are older have lives outside of here – which we neglect cuz we have to, so when there’s time to be away from school then I’m with my family.”

### **Overview of Themes**

From this research, three central themes emerged as participants shared their individual motivations, challenges, and salient experiences at Great Plains University. The first two themes were (I) how adult learners experience institutional climate and (II) the impact of systems of support on adult learner experience, which both helped to shed light on the grand tour research question of how adult learners experience higher education at an institution predominately attended by younger students. The third theme that emerged was (III) common needs of adult learners, addressing the second overarching research question related to the unique needs of this population. The themes and subthemes are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. *Research Themes and Subthemes*

<b><i>Theme I: How Adult Learners Experience Institutional Climate</i></b>
<p><b>Factors Attributed to Overall Climate:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Faculty Relationships</li> <li>• Peer Relationships</li> <li>• Campus Services</li> <li>• Advocacy Offices</li> </ul>
<b><i>Theme II: The Impact of Systems of Support on Adult Learner Experience</i></b>
<p><b>Elements of Support:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial</li> <li>• Family</li> <li>• Employer</li> </ul>
<b><i>Theme III: Common Needs of Adult Learners</i></b>
<p><b>Needs Expressed:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledgment</li> <li>• Accommodations and Flexibility</li> <li>• Advocacy</li> <li>• Central Resource</li> </ul>

**Theme I: How adult learners experience institutional climate.** The first major theme that emerged from the data was directly tied to the research question of how adult learners experience a public research university where the dominant student population is students straight out of high school. As the participants reflected on memorable experiences, positive or negative, as well as their interactions with faculty, staff, and students at the institution, the data suggested that several factors contribute to how adult learners perceive the overall institutional climate. The factors that appeared to contribute to the perception of institutional climate for adult learners in this study were: *faculty*

*relationships, peer relationships, campus services and advocacy offices.* Each one of these factors is supported in more detail in the subsections below.

***Faculty relationships.*** When invited to discuss a memorable interaction at the institution, nearly all of the participants first spoke of experiences and interactions with faculty. For this group of adult learners, their classroom interactions were at the core of their overall experience, and faculty were at the center of those classroom exchanges. For Katherine, Mary, and Rebecca in particular, their faculty mentors were the source of a great deal of satisfaction for them in terms of their college choice.

I mean, I've just had wonderful experiences with the teachers so far. I feel like we have really quality, challenging professors... I think they see me as talented and with potential...they support the idea that I could still have a career at my age.  
– Katherine

I probably would have gone [to a nearby college] because of the prices being less expensive, but they're in [another town] for this program, and as it turns out I'm so glad that I didn't because – just because my professor, I can't even believe it – ... he's just taught me so much. I mean the more that I learn, the more he crams in there! – Mary

[A memorable interaction] was the seminar where [a famous Native American writer] spoke, and I...ran into [my professor] and her meeting my step daughter, and interacting with her, you know she's just like, "You need to listen to your mom, she knows what's going on, you know, you need to pay attention to her..." It had nothing really to do with school or anything. I think that whole interaction was really something that just said I'm in the right spot. – Rebecca

For Rebecca, her purpose for discussing faculty at length seemed to focus on her opinion that they were the gatekeepers of knowledge. She explained, "I know that for me personally, my big questions, they're the only ones who are gonna be able to at least point me in the directions to find them." In contrast, Bob spoke of his varied interactions with faculty that seemed dependent on the instructor's own comfort level with adult learners and their life experience.

The graduate assistant instructor or faculty or the summer intern teaching a course [on history from my lifetime] I would know if they knew what they were talking about, and I think that intimidated them a little bit...the more accredited professors I felt treated me like equals... a couple of them would refer to stuff in the pop culture realm that is of the same generation, so some of my professors were the same generation as I or maybe slightly older and so, you know, they would talk to me about it in class, amongst the classmates but directed at me, to help facilitate the conversation. You know, I never had a problem with that, but you know, they would say, "Hey, Bob, tell us about the day Reagan got shot!"  
 – Bob

Although most of the participants expressed comfort and even gratefulness for their faculty relationships, James had a differing opinion. As a student with disabilities, he believed that instructors were researchers first and did not take a true interest in students. He made statements such as, "I don't want to say all of them, but not really any of them... really care what happens with the students outside the classroom, which is unfortunate." None of the other participants appeared to share this opinion of faculty, and as an important note, James felt this sentiment applied to most college professors and was not just a unique challenge to GPU.

On the contrary, Karen spoke of faculty in terms of their consistency in treating each student the same with some room for flexibility.

I've never felt like any of them... have given me any sort of a break because of my situation. I think that they've been very fair, which I expect that. I don't expect to be treated any differently, but with that being said there have been a very few times where I have had some instance of life getting in the way and they were very understanding. – Karen

Regardless of their relationship with faculty, each participant expressed comfort in approaching faculty with questions, concerns, or to take initiative on classroom work. The level of satisfaction participants exhibited toward their faculty appeared to be somewhat reflective of their overall experience and perception of campus climate.

*Peer relationships.* A large piece of the adult learner experience for these students was also how they interacted with their peers. Although none seemed to desire close relationships with younger students, how they felt they were perceived, particularly as the only older student in the classroom, was a shared experience among them, and certainly appeared to have an impact on their overall experience. For example, Katherine spoke about her mixed experience with peers who were familiar and unfamiliar with her:

I think the bigger classroom, I just don't think they really perceive me. I think you're pretty invisible... [With familiar peers] I feel like I'm one of them...in some ways. But, then on the other hand, they – sometimes they talk to me a lot more about things that are things I think they might talk to their mom about, which is ok, I don't mind being surrogate once in a while. – Katherine

Karen and Mary also felt as though students viewed them as old enough to be their mothers, and expressed positive sentiments toward the majority of their peer interactions. George shared the sentiment of feeling unseen by most students, but spoke of the esteem that he believed his major peers had for him as an older student and a veteran:

I'm probably invisible to everybody except for my Geology peers...They have a lot of respect for me because of my age, because of my background, they love my stories. And you know it's just -- I've always gotten along really well with the vast majority of my Geology peers. – George

For most of the participants, they were keenly aware of the generational difference between themselves and their peers. However, for Gina and James who were still in their mid-to-late twenties, they felt their age was less apparent and that their status as an adult learner was more of a hidden identity.

There's a bit of an age gap obviously between us so – it was probably more my perceptions that were maybe the most prominent... than theirs. Because I remember when I was that age... I don't feel like I was treated any differently, I don't even know if they knew how old I was. – Gina

Like Gina, many of the participants had made observations of the current generation of students, which they found amusing when compared to their behavior and priorities as older adults. Bob spoke quite a bit about how there were very little opportunities for older students to find similar-age peers because activities were predominantly geared toward 18 to 22 year olds. He described the active social lives of many of his younger peers, noting the following observation:

I would say that the idea of what a stressor is to somebody who is 18-22 is much different than my idea of a stressor to somebody my age simply because of the obligations involved. One girl... she did not get invited on the party bus to one of the away football games, and it was a crushing, crushing blow to her, I don't think... her survival was in question for quite sometime. Whereas, you know, I was worried about if I was going to be able to provide transportation for my daughter from school. So I felt pretty bad about "Brandy", that's not her real name, but I could have offered her an alternative and she could pick my kid up from school and we'd both be happy and we'd both have something to do, but you know, it's stuff like that, the problems that the younger, the normal college age generation had were much more, I don't know how to say it, easily solved or, I don't know, less intense than they made them out to be. Overreaction abounds. – Bob

As adult learners navigated the campus environment at GPU, they consistently emphasized that interactions with peers were starkly different between large classes and smaller, more specialized courses. Overall, the participants did not appear to need greater support from younger peers, but were conscious that the priorities, experiences and needs of traditional-age undergraduates were more of a central focus of the institution.

***Campus services.*** For the eight adult learners at Great Plains University, their interactions with campus services varied greatly depending upon their needs and backgrounds. The most common non-advocacy services that students cited interactions with were Admissions, Orientation, and Academic Advising. For several of the participants, the short-lived interactions they had with these offices appeared to reaffirm their status as an underserved population. Mary spoke about a frustrating experience she

had as she moved through the admissions process and felt unsupported in her desire to be a lifelong learner:

I really couldn't get anybody in the Admissions department to understand that I *had* a degree, and I just wanted to come back and take some classes! And I think the reason for that now is -- somehow they're awarded financially on...students that *graduate* from the university. And since I'd already had a degree, I think that's why I got that from the Admissions department because it was like well you're not a student that's degree-seeking... they deal with a ton of different students and they're not able to -- there's evidently not enough older students for them to be able to switch back and forth. I know they're working with a format, and it would have been nice if that format included, "This is how you work with an older student, these are some of the things that they need." - Mary

Coming to school as an older student with previous degrees, Katherine also said that her transition into GPU was not the smoothest, "When I first started exploring the path, they didn't really know what to do with me...the whole Admissions process was pretty frustrating...I mean, I know it's strange to get two Bachelor's maybe... but it shouldn't have been that much run around." Participants with previous credits and nontraditional degree tracks seemed to have more negative interactions during their transition into GPU. This sentiment was revisited when the participants shared their experiences with academic advising.

Several of the adult learners had previous credits, so they noted minimal experiences or interactions with Orientation and First Year Experience staff. However, those who attended or considered attending were more than willing to share their stories and opinions. George went through a traditional orientation session, and although he was mixed into the parents group at one point, he found the experience amusing. However, Mary and Katherine were relieved to have the orientation requirement waived.

Even though you're 46 years old and you have a degree, they insist that you should come in and have an orientation fun time with snacks and a whole tour of

the main campus... I couldn't think of anything to do with orientation that I – that – that could've helped me learn. – Mary

I was kind of glad I didn't have to go through an orientation... Well, maybe nontraditional [session], that'd be fine. You know, you could just have somebody talk in general about what things are available and maybe that starts the discussion. For nontraditional students, I think it cannot be a lecture. It just can't be. Coffee hour. – Katherine

The adult learners seemed to view Orientation at GPU as a required activity that was youth-centered, and their stories reinforced their desire for events that gave greater consideration to their needs and conflicting commitments.

The final campus service that the adult learners mentioned frequently when discussing their experience at the institution was Academic Advising. These interactions were highly polarized, with some reflecting the student's most negative interaction at the institution and others the most positive. Regardless, and similar to faculty interactions, the participants appeared to seek out advisors as resources and allies during their time as undergraduates. Bob believed finding a helpful and supportive academic advisor was the most essential piece to his success at GPU:

If I had to say the best, most positive experience out of the entire deal, was finding a good advisor. In particular, my advisor is not even an advisor in my department. And so I just happened to ask this person a question in the general advising center, and I got referred to another advisor and that person was like amazing, amazing. And I don't know if it's because they took an interest in my situation? I want to assume that they are that way for everybody because I don't know if I could have completed it in the time I did without that person's help. It was probably the most critical thing for me. - Bob

Karen had similar feelings toward her academic advisor, expressing gratitude for the advisor's ability to support her as an individual with specific needs and circumstances.

This last summer I had gone in and met with an advisor for Sociology and explaining my situation and, for lack of a better word, I think she just got it that I was sort of on the fast track to get done...and she got that right away, she was a

little bit younger than me, and was a working mom and totally understood that, and so she was very helpful. – Karen

As positive as Karen and Bob's interactions were with their academic advisors, Rebecca, James, and Gina each voiced irritation with their advising experiences.

At [my previous community college], my academic advisor was great. You know, he would do anything for me, you know, if I needed any kind of help he was always there. I don't feel that I have that here with [my advisor]. She's very short, very... She kind of has the attitude, "Well, you should know this already!" – Rebecca

Rebecca felt as though her advisor made the assumption that she should know how to navigate her courses and the institution better as an older student. As a first generation student, she found this troublesome because she often knew less about available resources than her traditional-age peers. Similar to his impression of faculty, James dismissed academic advising as a valuable resource, saying, "Advisors have favorites". He had not met one that he felt truly cared about his situation, and after negative interactions, chose to request assistance with offices that did. Gina also felt that advisors made assumptions about her as a student, and expected her to place all her outside commitments behind her academics.

It's a little frustrating even from that perspective that my advisors sometimes don't – I don't want to say don't care, but don't care that I do have another obligation that is during all these times. You know, they're trying to fill out a full-time schedule for me and I have a full-time job -- that's not gonna happen. I kind of feel like I'm expected for it to be an option and not even just an option, but the *only* option. I don't really want to talk about a sense of belonging, but it almost kind of makes me feel like this might not be the right place for me. – Gina

As validated and supported as some participants felt by the Academic Advising office, others felt dismissed and marginalized. As Gina noted, this prompted some students to question whether students like them were welcome at the institution.

*Advocacy offices.* Some of the participants had identities that granted them additional advocates and support systems at Great Plains University. For the students with disabilities and student veterans, having a central resource appeared to help them navigate challenges, whether or not they felt the services adequately met their needs. GPU did not place a high emphasis on veterans when George first enrolled, but Katherine spoke positively of the veteran's liaison and the support she had received, "She's awesome. She makes the process – you just feel like she's got your hand". As a student with disabilities, George had received more services from the disabilities office and was grateful for their assistance:

I have been under the caring wing of the [disabilities] office, and I haven't used their services in a couple years, but when I was I used them pretty extensively for math heavy classes. I've gotten great service there. So, that's one of the few offices that I've had a lot of interaction with. – George

James and Rebecca also utilized disability services, but mentioned the limitations that those offices have to fully support students.

They're pretty decent. I think [the Director] really tries to go out of her way, she does a nice job, but there's only so much they can do. – James

[The Disabilities Director] is who I normally work with and you know she's been really great about helping me as far as *class* is concerned. [For my physical disability accommodations] she told me straight up, "We don't have the funding for that kind of thing." They don't have the funding to help the disabled students get to the building they need to for their class that they pay for. That is the biggest disappointment. – Rebecca

For participants, the institution's support or lack of support of these advocacy offices reflected the level of commitment they had for students with their particular circumstances. As George noted, the increase in support for veteran's services was a positive change that would encourage greater support for students like him. In the case of

James and Rebecca, GPU had an agenda of items they supported and the Disabilities Office was not one of them, which impacted how they perceived the overall institutional climate for students with disabilities.

**Theme II: The impact of systems of support on adult learner experience.** The second major theme that developed out of the participant interviews helped to pinpoint outside factors that can impact adult learner experiences at a public research university. Even with similar age and special status identities, participants' needs were dramatically different. The theme of outside support emerged and appeared to have an effect on the level of support, as well as what types of support the participants felt they needed from the institution to be successful. The elements of support that appeared to have the greatest impact on adult learners needs and experiences at the institution were: *financial support, family support, and employer support*. Each one of these elements is examined and discussed in the subsections below.

***Financial support.*** As adult learners entering GPU, the eight participants had varying levels of concern and stress related to the financial burden of college. Whether or not they carried this burden appeared to be tied to their outside systems of financial support. For example, as a veteran, George was the recipient of educational benefits that completely covered his school expenses and provided an additional stipend for living. When discussing his faculty's lack of investment in him as a below average student, he said:

If a professor is spending time with making sure that a good student learns more, that's fine with me. I get a paycheck whether I'm working or sitting playing video games. They've got student loans to pay off and I don't. – George

George expressed a lack of concern with failing and retaking classes, and his veteran benefits certainly appear to have played a part in his lack of financial need. In contrast, Bob, another veteran student, was not utilizing benefits to pay for school and mentioned that his personal investment helped keep his motivation high.

I just paid my own way and got some minor student loans. I had a college savings plan... and it also helped me stay on task because it was money out of my pocket now that I was spending, blowing if I failed a class...My benefits as a veteran are not what prompted me to go back to school, and I think a lot of people that's probably different, like oh, I can go back to school, I have free college money, I'll do that, you know, as an adult learner, whereas that really had no bearing on my decision to go back to school. – Bob

Gina and Karen were receiving tuition remission from their employers, a form of both financial and employer support that affected their articulated needs. Gina explained the pending issue this presented:

I realize there will be a time in my college career where I will have to quit work and go full-time cuz I'm pre-med, but it doesn't have to be the whole time, and I'd like to take as few student loans as possible. And my job pays for school... So, it's another incentive for me to stay working. They pay 100% of my schooling.  
– Gina

For Mary and Rebecca, two individuals who discontinued working to pursue their education, the lack of financial support was a salient concern. Rebecca said that the financial commitment of college had been what had deterred her from pursuing her degree sooner, “My whole life everyone's been telling me and I just didn't do it because I could never validate spending this kind of money on something.” Mary and her husband had built up a savings prior to her enrollment, but the funds were quickly running out.

When asked what she needed from the institutional to be successful, she replied:

A low-interest loan. Or a grant... I mean we're professional people, we have professional people bills...For people that want to finish their degrees or further their education, these are people that really wanna be here, I mean these are

people that REALLY WANT to be here...I just think that surely there's got to be some way to find some kind of funding or scholarships for students who aren't full-time! I can't believe the prices...and it's all fees! I can't believe that I use like \$400 worth of water from the bathroom a year. I mean, I don't know what other fees -- what else do I get? ...I don't go work out... maybe if they took some of that off for people... but it's just the prices are just ridiculous for people who -- that are trying to work and go to school. – Mary

Mary articulated an important point that likely deterred many adult learners from pursuing their degree at GPU: the requirement of full-time enrollment to receive additional financial support. Many of the participants expressed the challenge of enrolling full-time and balancing their adult roles, and if a student already has limited financial support, this is a difficult cyclical relationship and barrier to overcome.

***Family support.*** When asked about their college journey, participants naturally transitioned into talking about family members and partners and their changing dynamics at home as they began college. When Katherine was asked whether her partner was supportive of her being in school, she simply said, “It wouldn't work if he wasn't.” After discussing her frustrations and challenges with GPU, Rebecca returned to her source of motivation to continue on, saying, “I have my family that's pretty loud in their cheers for me to keep going.” In Mary's situation, her being in school transitioned her family into a single-income household, but her husband was in full support of her choice to return to school and understood the benefits for their family in the future:

He really wants me to be in school. He's supportive of what I want to do because he knows I want to go into business for myself. He's 58, and so this would be something if I could start my own business that he would be able to do in retirement. – Mary

As a working adult with children also enrolled in college, Karen discussed overcoming feelings of selfishness as she pursued her goal and had to miss opportunities to support her daughters:

My daughter's a cheerleader and so she's had games that I haven't been able to go to because I've got homework, and she's fine with that. They are very supportive, very understanding. There's three girls and my husband and I, and so yeah, we just support each other, and I keep telling my girls how important it is to get their degree and keep working hard and just get it finished. – Karen

Most participants reported that family was their primary support system while in school, and this could have been an explanation for why nearly all of them felt little need for social support from other adult learners. The only participant to express this need was Bob, the only participant who was also a single parent. When asked whether his children were supportive of him being in school, he said:

[When they were younger] it was a lot harder for them to kind of recognize what I was trying to do...but yeah they're actually very supportive and pretty proud, and they are planning my graduation party. – Bob

Family support appeared to be a necessity for all the participants to be enrolled, and there is a possibility that for these adult learners, their strong family ties alleviated their need for social support at GPU.

***Employer support.*** This final element of support was prominent among the adult learners who were working adults. Fortunately, all of the participants were afforded a moderate to high level of flexibility from their employers that allowed them to take courses concurrently. Bob felt as though his level of employer support was rare for an older student returning to school:

I was very lucky in my job, to have a lot of flexibility, but I would be an anomaly, really in my opinion, for a person of my age trying to go back to school at a four-year brick and mortar campus, and I found it very difficult, even with my flexibility, to find classes that could fit my work schedule. – Bob

For Karen and Gina, their employers provided tuition remission and allowed them to arrange their work schedule around their classes. In Gina's case, course scheduling was

her largest concern, and having the support of her employer to leave work and take courses in the middle of the day was the only way she could continue in school:

If I didn't have such a flexible job, I probably wouldn't be able to come here at all. The only reason I'm able to is because my boss allows me to work from home on the mornings I have class, come to class, and then go to work. – Gina

Karen was an employee for an educational organization and felt as though her employer placed high value on her enhancing her education. Similar to Gina, Karen's employer allowed her to create her work schedule around her course times:

I'm fortunate enough that in our profession here that if I do need to take a 9am class twice a week or something I can make it work... I mean that's what we're about is education, so they're very flexible about that. – Karen

The students with high employer support were not necessarily relieved of the burdens of course scheduling and financial concerns, in fact most cited scheduling as their principle complaint and need from the institution. However, for the students who noted employer encouragement, all signs point to the likelihood that they would not be enrolled without this support at a public research university like Great Plains.

**Theme III: Common needs of adult learners.** The third and final theme suggested that with many different roles and circumstances, there may still be common needs of adult learners at an institution predominantly attended by younger undergraduates. Although requests varied greatly from larger print on class PowerPoint handouts to a nontraditional cohort support group, underlying trends tied to larger issues of validation and support. At their core, the common needs participants articulated were: *acknowledgement, accommodations and flexibility, advocacy* and a *central resource*. Each one of these needs is explored in the subsections below.

***Acknowledgment.*** The eight participants of this study were often reluctant to complain about Great Plains University, even if they could admit to feeling ignored or invisible to the institution. When asked what they needed from the institution to be successful, many participants initially said nothing, believing that they were resourceful enough to seek out anything that might be missing along their journey. However, after digging through explicit and implicit messages from this group of adult learners, the concept of acknowledgment repeatedly appeared. Bob was more explicit about his request to be acknowledged, and became visibly worked up explaining the institutional rationale behind ignoring adult learners:

If we realize that 80% of the population here is an 18-22 year old person, then I understand that that's where 80% of the resources need to go. It's just not a good business model if you do it any other way. However, just more awareness, more hey, this is the nontraditional student lounge, do you know what I mean? Probably just more awareness that we exist... a nontraditional support group ... a nontraditional faculty luncheon or something... You don't see any of that, so that's the part where I feel like we're very low on the priority list. Maybe there's not enough students, but I think there are, I've seen quite a few. Let's not pretend they don't exist! ... People look at the university and say, people my age, and say yeah I'm too old to go back to school, and I'm too old to do that, and I don't think that's the right vibe the university wants to give off to people of my generation.  
– Bob

Bob's request, similar to the requests of the other participants was small: to be recognized by the institution as a part of the community worth supporting.

George and James discussed their needs in terms of their special status, as a veteran and student with disabilities respectively. During Orientation, George had hoped that someone would have asked all of the military veterans to stand, but this did not happen, "I would have liked to have been acknowledged for being a vet." A simple acknowledgment of his service would have helped George to feel that GPU was an

institution that supported veterans. Similarly, James wished that instructors would take an interest in students with disabilities in their development and career transition, “There could be different majors or different instructors that others have contact with but the ones that I’ve – maybe like I’d say less than 1% really care what you’re doing once you graduate.” An acknowledgement of their adult roles and the obstacles they have overcome to be enrolled is a simple request in many fashions, and yet, the participants were leery to ask for acknowledgement. Nonetheless, the participants suggested that a small amount of recognition for their unique challenges and needs would go a long way to make them feel as though GPU cared about their experience.

*Accommodations and flexibility.* The theme of flexibility surfaced from the interviews as participants discussed ways in which Great Plains University could show a greater commitment to adult learners. Gina had volunteered for the research as an outlet to notify administration of a greater issue of course flexibility and youth-centered academic advising:

The main thing that I really wanted to do this for was I guess to complain – or voice my concerns, I guess, about the lack of flexibility for people like myself. Especially with the online classes, I could take so many more classes if they had more online classes here. [During academic advising meetings] it would be nice if those kinds of things were discussed...if they had like a...adult plan. Not to say the other students going here aren’t adults...but a working adult plan. – Gina

Gina and Bob both experienced limited course offerings in the evening, and found that online courses were often their only option to maintain enrollment. Bob mentioned an institutional policy that limited online course registrations, which he felt was inflexible to the needs of adult learners:

You can only take one online class per semester if you’re a resident student, so that limited how many classes I could take online per semester that would go

toward graduating...so then I ended up having to space it out. It actually took me longer to graduate than it probably could have...because I had to wait until summer sessions or until I didn't have a conflict with another class. – Bob

As working adults, both Gina and Bob hoped for greater flexibility and opportunity to enroll in courses that would fit with their lifestyle.

As students who identified as individuals with disabilities, James and Rebecca depended on the Disabilities Office at GPU to serve as advocates on their behalf.

Although the accommodations they received were necessary for their success, James perceived frustration and indifference from instructors when he needed assistance.

Accommodations people are frustrating for instructors. Maybe like I'd say less than 1% really care what you're doing once you graduate... They're not really paid to care about me, they're paid to teach and research once in awhile. You run into instructors and then teachers who instead of trying to notice that you're different and that you might have a different learning style, they'd rather just put you in a category and not try to make a difference. - James

Rebecca also expressed irritation with the lack of support available for students like her.

Although she experienced support for her learning disabilities, her physical disability continued to be a barrier.

I'm still having problems getting any sort of accommodations with the [Disabilities Office], it's totally disappointing and I'm not at all shocked when I look up the retention rates for the University. I can see why people would want to go elsewhere, and at least at the moment, I'm considering looking for a better fit for me. – Rebecca

Whether they were requesting greater online course availability, more varied degree plan options, or orientation sessions that fit their needs as older students, several participants voiced a desire for flexibility. Accommodations and flexibility are not to be confused with “special treatment”, as this would not accurately reflect the participants’ requests or their academic commitment. Rather, these adult learners were balancing competing adult

roles and challenges to be in school. The data suggested that institutional policies, practices, and priorities, which were likely developed to focus resources on the needs of younger students, may need to be reexamined through the lens of an adult learner's experience in order to be fully inclusive and comprehensive.

*Advocacy.* As previously mentioned, the eight participants in this study each articulated their ability of serving as their own advocate. For many, this was a necessity as there were not individuals that were available at GPU to advocate concerns on their behalf. As a large public research institution with a majority youth undergraduate population, some of the adults in this study appeared to understand why their needs or requests would be lost or unheard. Karen said, "I think it's because of the size, you know, nothing against GPU, but I think you do have to be your own advocate and find a place that works for you." When this invitation to participate in this research was released, the overwhelming response signaled that there might have been many adult learners at GPU who were looking for an advocate who could share their feedback with administration. Rebecca explained her hesitation of voicing her concerns on her own:

I'm not about to go and complain to somebody about it. It just takes me that much longer to get done. Ya know? They just need to reevaluate what kind of students – and you know maybe they don't know that I have a full-time job. I don't think anyone's ever asked me and I don't know that I put it anywhere. They might just think I'm just a student who only wants to take one class. I would hope that in itself would raise some red flags, but you never know. But that may be part of it also, they may not know I'm working fulltime and have these issues because, like I said, I'm not about to go and complain to somebody about it. It's just not really what I do. – Gina

Similar to Gina, other participants were resistant to filing complaints because they felt that, for the most part, the institution was doing a wonderful job serving students.

Several dismissed their own negative experiences, but were able to validate and

empathize with the negative experiences of others. Mary and Bob explained that advocacy could assist in helping more adult learners feel welcomed at the institution:

It would be nice to have more older people who don't have degrees feel like they can go to school... I know people do it, but I'm not one of those brilliant people that can make straight A's and be on all the clubs, leader of all the clubs, and raise kids at home and take care of my sick grandmother... I know there's people out there that can do it, but not everybody can. I think at some point when you've proven yourself, there should be some help. – Mary

Ninety percent of what works here works for all students, you know, but there are additions or what have you that would really help the nontraditional or adult learners as you call them feel like they're part of the university system too. – Bob

For the adult learners who did not have a special status that granted them an advocacy office at the institution, some conveyed a desire for individuals who could speak on their behalf to the “powers that be”. The overwhelming response from volunteers to participate in this research study may also suggest that adult learners at GPU are eager for an advocate who can speak with their best interests in mind.

***Central resource.*** As they discussed their experiences at Great Plains University, several of the participants spoke of moments when they had to seek out information or answers without guidance. These moments tended to lead to discoveries of hidden resources, which would have been helpful for them to be aware of from the beginning. As a veteran, George was grateful to see the institution beginning to grant credit for military experience to incoming students, but he was concerned that these opportunities would not be made readily available:

I really hope that the admissions are asking, “Are you a veteran?” Ok, if you're a veteran, this is -- you can get these hours. You know, I hope that it's not a, “Well if you find out about it, you can get it.” But not... you know one of those things you have to research and figure out. – George

Bob also felt as though many of the resources for adult learners he found while at GPU were through luck and happenstance, rather than having a resource to point him in the right direction from the beginning.

I think those things were just serendipity, that I found the right people or the serendipity that the university has hired the right people in those positions. I don't know that their structure in and of itself facilitates a rewarding experience for the [adult learner] finding their way here. – Bob

James and Katherine both questioned whether there was a go-to resource for adult learners at Great Plains, and discussed the benefit of having a centralized resource.

Katherine said she would have liked to have someone tell her, “If you have more questions, this is who you contact... I really don't know – I don't know if there's some kind of a place for nontraditional students.” She also spoke of a hidden treasure she discovered that would have helped her enjoy the athletics and school spirit aspect of a large university more as an older student:

I had to find this out kind of in a roundabout way – but as a nontraditional student, I can get season football tickets that aren't in the student section, and that would've been nice to know my first year. I would've gotten tickets... I would have loved to do that, but I did not want to sit in the student section... that's not how I like to experience football anymore. – Katherine

At a public research university, the participants described the challenges of being an older student navigating the institution without a central contact person. Although each of the participants were resourceful and able to find what they believed they needed to be successful, institutional departments were not always aware of the opportunities and support other areas offered adult learners. Several of the participants suggested that having a central resource to gather information and serve as a point-of-contact for adult learners would go far to increase the climate of support for older students.

## **Conclusion**

The three central themes gathered from interviews with eight adult learners at Great Plains University highlight the varying perceptions and support systems of older students at a public research university, and demonstrate how these individual circumstances can impact the experiences and needs of this student population. Chapter five will discuss the implications of this study, exploring the research findings in connection with previous literature on adult learners. From this analysis, the researcher will suggest potential best practices for serving older students at an institution predominantly attended by traditional-age undergraduates and make recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

#### **Introduction**

Adult learners are a growing student population on many college campuses with diverse needs and educational goals. Some return for career advancement, while others seek opportunities for lifelong learning. Whatever their purposes are for enrollment, adult learners are often overlooked in policy and practice at institutions where they constitute a relatively small segment of the undergraduate population. Institutions have clear priorities for investment of resources, and public research universities in particular still appear to focus the majority of theirs on recruiting and retaining younger students. However, as economic challenges and career enhancement programs bring older generations to college, finding practical strategies to support and retain adult learners will be vital.

#### **Summary of Findings**

The research questions developed for this study intended to explore the experiences and needs of eight undergraduate adult learners at Great Plains University. The research questions created for this study were:

- What are the experiences of adult undergraduate students at an institution predominantly attended by “traditional” age students?
  - d. How do adult undergraduate students experience the academic climate of the institution?
  - e. How do adult undergraduate students experience the social climate of the institution?

- f. How do their systems of support impact their overall experience?
- What are the needs of adult undergraduate students at an institution predominantly attended by “traditional” age students?

Interviews and a semi-structured protocol were utilized to allow participants to describe their subjective experiences using their own voice. As the primary researcher, I entered the participant recruitment process hopeful that a few individuals would be motivated by the idea of a potential prize and would be willing to make time to speak with me. Within days of the recruitment letter being sent out, nearly 50 students volunteered to participate. This influx of immediate responses, both exciting and troublesome, sent a clear message: adult learners at GPU had something to say. Eight of those students were given the podium and an opportunity to have a voice. They shared stories of challenges and failures, as well as successes, many of which were despite a lack of institutional acknowledgment. From the structure of the institution to the false assumptions often made about the students it serves, it is unlikely that the rest of the volunteers will be afforded the same opportunity at Great Plains in the near future.

In this concluding chapter, the three primary themes of the research will be summarized and links to previous literature on adult learners will be discussed. Subsequently, the researcher will offer four overarching implications of the study and offer recommendations for future research.

### **Summary of Themes**

Three primary themes were drawn from the data gathered in this study, and subthemes were developed which identified factors that attributed to participant’s overall perception of institutional climate, elements of support, and perceived needs. Factors that

attributed to overall climate included the subthemes of *faculty relationships*, *peer relationships*, *campus services*, and *advocacy offices*. The essential systems of support for adult learners that had a positive or negative impact on their experience were condensed into three subcategories, which were *financial*, *family*, and *employer* support. Finally, the most common needs of the adult learners in this study were placed into four subthemes: *acknowledgement*, *accommodations and flexibility*, *advocacy*, and *central resource*. The major takeaways from the findings are summarized below:

- Adult learners primarily experienced the institution through the classroom, and as such, relationships with faculty appeared to be the most influential to how they perceived institutional climate.
- Adult learners experienced neglect in campus policies and practices, often acting as their own advocates and information-seekers.
- Adult learners were not engaged in campus social structures, perceiving them as serving the needs of younger students and preferring existing family and friend support groups.
- Adult learners who were employed experienced limited course flexibility, and often depended on support from family and employers to balance their adult roles.
- Adult learners perceived many campus services and offices to be youth-centered and expressed a need for greater acknowledgment of their individual circumstances.
- Adult learners expressed a need for advocacy and a central resource in order to feel prioritized by the institution and for ease of navigating campus structures.

## **Connections to Literature**

As discussed in Chapter 2, numerous research has been conducted on the status of adult education in the United States. This study will contribute to growing body of qualitative literature on adult learners attending traditional, youth-centered institutions. The thematic connections between the research findings and previous literature are discussed below.

**How adult learners experience institutional climate.** When adult learners choose to attend GPU, they often arrive knowing that the institution has not been designed for them. From the hours that service offices are available, to the times slated for course offerings and the themes of campus programs, nearly everything is developed to serve and support younger, “traditional-age” students. They walk into a classroom on the first day and are commonly mistaken for faculty, or, as James described, they are avoided and ignored in large classrooms until they choose to speak up. With limited interactions outside the classroom, Rebecca said she looked to her instructors to put her on the pathway to success.

Previous literature suggested that older students experience college as an academic venture, seeking out relationships and experiences that help build ties between classroom material and practical application (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2012). Mary, Katherine, and Rebecca each came to GPU with clear goals in mind and instantly sought out faculty mentors because they wanted to make the most of every opportunity. For all three of them, their faculty member was a validating figure both in and out of the classroom. Public research universities like Great Plains often serve adult

learners as an ancillary responsibility, regularly overlooking their needs in policy and practice (Kasworm, 2010; Flint & Frey, 2003; Merriam & Brockett, 2007). Gina and Bob both expressed frustration with course availability, having been forced to take only a few courses at a time because they were the only courses that could fit with their work schedule. Gina noted that the institution had not asked whether she was working full-time, and believed GPU assumed that school was her first priority. Great Plains and similar public research universities make many assumptions about students that often place additional barriers for those who are managing concurrent adult roles. As such, older students tend to pursue mentor relationships with supportive faculty and view instructors as a primary source of institutional validation and support (Kasworm, 2010; Lynch & Bishop-Clark, 1994; Zacharakis, et al., 2011). Consistent with past research, the themes that emerged from this study suggested that adult learners at public research institutions experience institutional invisibility, and relationships with faculty have a large impact on the student's sense of belonging. Mary leaned on her mentor for support as she and her husband managed unsupportive interactions elsewhere, while a single interaction Rebecca had with her mentor outside the classroom made her feel as though she was in the right place. As Apps (1998) suggested, the participants had a deep appreciation for instructors who understood their competing adult roles and supported them as students.

In relation to social climate, literature suggested that older undergraduates place less value on peer relationships and social activities while in college (Kasworm, 2003a; Kuh & Ardaiole, 1979; Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989; Scheuer Senter & Senter, 1998). Instead of viewing college as a foundational period in their lives, adult learners

come to institutions with pre-developed peer support systems and pre-established adult roles in society (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2012; Ross-Gordon, 2011). George spoke about his time in the military, and simply said that after facing death, nothing else seemed to be that memorable. His time at GPU was not a life-changing experience because he did not come to GPU to become an adult like many of his younger peers. Although he considered joining a fraternity in an attempt to have a more “traditional” experience, he recognized the vast differences developmentally between him and his peers and decided against it. Similar to many of the participants, he had little interest in sharing social space with them outside the classroom. As higher education professionals, we are trained on student development theories that are rooted in the needs of younger students. As a result, institutionally supported activities and organizations are often focused on their needs and desired experiences, and are by their very nature unwelcoming to adult learners.

However, older students have typically reported mixed experiences with younger students within the classroom, feeling both supported and ignored by their peers (Lynch & Bishop-Clark, 1994). This study echoed similar sentiments with participants experiencing invisibility in larger classroom environments and support among their program cohorts. Katherine described the way peers would sit next to her as a last resort in a large classroom and how she felt as though she grew three heads when she would chime into a conversation. James spoke about not feeling included with peers, and he and Rebecca both described how they took on extra work during group projects because they were more academically committed than other students. For the most part, even with limited peer interactions, students felt greater acknowledgement at the institution

from younger students than from campus services and administration. George, Katherine, and Bob each explained that age became less of a factor in smaller classrooms, and expressed acceptance and support from the majority of their cohort classmates. For adult learners attending similar institutions today, a small amount of acknowledgement and acceptance from their peers is more than they come to expect from the institution as a whole.

Researchers have also investigated how adult learners perceive institutional support through the lens of experience with campus services and advocacy offices, although less has been focused on advocacy offices specifically. Previous studies have found that adult learners identified academic advising as the most critical service office (San Miguel Bauman, et al., 2004; Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989; Zackarakis, et al., 2011). The adult learners in this study most often cited experiences with academic advising, describing both positive and negative interactions. Mary almost entirely avoided the more urban campus of GPU because she perceived a chilly climate. When she took the risk to speak with an academic advisor on that campus, the individual did not make eye contact and was disconnected. Similarly, Gina and Rebecca both expressed irritation with their advisors for the assumptions made about them as older students.

Secondary to academic advising, interactions with admissions staff and advocacy offices (whether positive or negative) appeared to have a considerable impact on whether some participants felt the institution identified and addressed their needs. Katherine and Mary found the enrollment process especially maddening, feeling as though the counselors did not understand how to work with older students seeking lifelong learning, or those with previous degrees. Katherine was asked to walk across campus to multiple

offices before professionals acknowledged that she was indeed an undergraduate-level student in her program. She was grateful to have the support of the veteran's liaison to make the rest of her transition seamless, describing that campus advocate as someone she felt had her hand during the process. George, Rebecca, and James also articulated gratitude to disability services for advocating on their behalf, intervening with unsupportive faculty members when necessary. Older students have fewer interactions with campus services, likely due in part to the decreased time they spend on campus or their nature of seeking answers independently. Public research universities like Great Plains are not structured around the needs of adult learners, and as a result, a single positive or negative experience with a campus service office can have a vast impact on how they perceive institutional climate.

**The impact of systems of support on adult learner experience.** A great deal of the literature on adult learners has focused on individual barriers and systems of support. Studies have shown that the elements of support needed for an older student to be successful can fluctuate dramatically in relation to their adult roles and circumstances (Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989). The key elements of financial, family, and employer support found to greatly impact needs and overall experience in this study were supported in previous research on adult student retention (Askham, 2008; Bean & Metzner, 1985). As veterans utilizing military benefits to pursue higher education, Katherine and George had little concern about the cost of tuition and fees at GPU. Conversely, Mary could not comprehend how she was being charged for services that she never intended to utilize. Supporting a family and paying a mortgage, Mary urged the institution to consider scholarships and additional financial support for adult learners.

Consistent with the trend of supporting younger students, institutional aid at Great Plains typically required a student to be full-time, neglecting highly dedicated students like Mary, Bob, and Gina who were unable to balance full-time enrollment with their other responsibilities.

Also consistent with the literature, participants who had less support from family tended to express a need or desire for greater social support within the institution (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Fairchild, 2003). Katherine, Mary, Karen, Rebecca and Gina all rejected social activities because their “extracurricular activities” while in school were their partners and children at home. However, as a single parent, Bob hoped for more support structures for adult learners. He explained that without assistance, adult learners were unlikely to find one another at a large institution, and simply knowing others who experienced similar challenges would be helpful.

In this study, the relationships between systems of support, student experiences, and student needs were multilayered and complex. As students with outside responsibilities, these adult learners were often place-bound when selecting an institution to attend. Kasworm (2003) found that adult learners selected a college based on convenience of location, program availability, course flexibility, and cost. However, students were likely to forgo one of their preferred conditions for the prestige they associated with a public research university. In this study, participants echoed comparable sentiments, as many had transferred to Great Plains from more adult-oriented colleges. Gina and Rebecca were both highly disappointed with the decreased flexibility and support at GPU, but did not necessarily intend on transferring elsewhere. As adult learners with established roots and commitments, they felt they had no choice other than to make the best of their

situation and keep pushing forward. This study supported the idea that adult learners at public research universities experience greater invisibility and less flexibility than they would at adult-centered institutions designed to support their competing roles and responsibilities (Kasworm, 2010; Lynch & Bishop-Clark, 1998; Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001). Dedicated to achieving their academic goals regardless of added barriers, these students exhibited incredible resilience despite being continually disregarded and overlooked by the institution.

**Common needs of adult learners.** The second research question was intended to explore the needs of adult undergraduates at an institution primarily attended by traditional-age students. Hadfield (2003) explained the challenge of effectively serving an oversimplified student population with such diverse experiences and needs. However, literature suggested that public research universities, and similar traditionally youth-centered institutions, do not need to recreate their existing systems with sweeping changes in order to better serve adult learners (Scheur Senter & Senter, 1998). Participants in this study appeared to share this same attitude, primarily requesting greater acknowledgment and flexibility from the institution.

In policy and in practice, the needs of adult learners at Great Plains University are ignored by sheer design of the institution. Students like Bob and Karen are not tracked by whether or not they are working adults or parents, and the assumption is made that as an enrolled student, higher education is, and should be, their number one priority. The support systems in place are not created to fit their needs, placing them in a position to find solutions on their own. The concepts of institutional acknowledgement and flexibility appeared in the literature, specifically in relation to course availability,

financial aid, and support structures for adult learners sponsored by the university (Carrier, 2010; Gast, 2013; Hadfield, 2003; Scheur Senter & Senter, 1998; Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989).

Carrier (2010) found that many older students attending institutions like GPU have no choice but to enroll in online courses because they are often the only courses offered that fit within their working adult schedule. Although students like Karen and Gina appreciated the increase in online course availability, several participants expressed the desire for face-to-face teaching. Rebecca explained that online courses did not fit her learning style, and that she preferred the opportunity to have an open discussion in-person about the course topic. For Bob, online courses were primarily self-directed, and he felt he learned more from his instructor and peers in the classroom environment. Hadfield (2003) found that flexible course options and campus resources had a considerable impact on whether adult students felt their experiences mattered to the institution. The eight adult learners in this study often voiced concerns that the institution was attempting to apply a “one-size-fits-all” model that only applied to students without competing adult roles. Until public research institutions like GPU consider a different model or approach, they are likely to continue marginalizing students who do not fit the mold of the “traditional student”.

The themes of advocacy and a central resource for students that emerged as needs from participant interviews were not a focus in much of the literature. Kasworm (2008) explored the role of advocacy offices in the experience of adult learners, citing the shortage of influence they often have to alter institutional priorities and policy. Several of the participants perceived similar power dynamics, believing that these offices were

only capable of so much in terms of how they could support students. James and Rebecca made comments about feeling invisible or unimportant in terms of institutional priorities, and Bob noted that GPU was not a welcoming place for adult learners attempting to find their way at the institution. While for-profit colleges, virtual universities, and adult-centered institutions continue to increase support and opportunities for older students to earn a degree, the findings of this study maintain that public research universities are still behind the curve (Kasworm, 2010; Gast, 2013; Kimmel, Gaylor, Grubbs & Hayes, 2012; Stein, Glazer & Wanstreet, 2010). As this student population continues to grow, public research universities will no longer be able to rely on advocacy offices to adequately serve the needs of adult learners. Instead, they will need to dust off their old policies and practices, and recognize that the “non-traditional” student is not so “non-traditional” anymore.

### **Implications for Future Practice**

This study explored the experiences and needs of eight adult learners at a public research university, as told through the participant’s own voices. The following are four major implications for future practice in adult education and student affairs at Great Plains University and similar public research universities:

- Adult learners perceived Great Plains University to be centered around the experience of traditional-age undergraduates, and inflexible to the needs of older students. These perceptions often came about from difficulties with course scheduling, admissions, academic advising, and educational affordability. The institution is strongly recommended to review policies related to enrollment and academic advising, and consider how such practices

could be amended for students with competing adult roles or who are seeking lifelong learning. Greater flexibility and acknowledgment for older students would not only benefit how adult learners perceive the institutional climate, but also encourage greater enrollment for students with adult roles.

- Relationships with faculty were highly influential to students' sense of mattering and support at the University. Research supports that building stronger connections for adult learners at public research institutions would likely increase their satisfaction and retention at the institution. In addition, older students are often motivated to participate in activities that relate directly to their academic goals. Programs facilitated to build connections with faculty present opportunities for a greater return on investment in their education. Understanding that older students often balance competing priorities, activities that would help build relationships with faculty outside the classroom and have a strong academic focus are highly encouraged.
- Social activities offered at Great Plains University were often viewed as irrelevant for adult learners due to their youth-centered nature. Few participants had opportunities to connect with similar-age peers in a social setting, and several mentioned that they would likely select time with family over attending existing campus programs. Research has suggested benefits to institutionally facilitated support programs for older students, particularly when those students would otherwise experience isolation from one another. GPU and similar institutions should consider the advantages of identifying students with adult roles during the enrollment process (including those under

the age of 25), and inviting those students to more family-friendly programs. Connecting adult learners using a cohort-model, similar to the model utilized for first-year experience courses, may also be an option in order to increase systems of support within and outside the classroom.

- Adult learners at GPU often sought out resources or answers on their own, and reported the common need to serve as their own advocate. Information was not always shared between departments, and as a result, older students would discover hidden resources by happenstance. In order to open channels of communication and improve training opportunities for staff, the researcher recommends that GPU and similar institutions appoint a central resource with a vested interest in this student population to advocate and seek information on their behalf. As a public research university, the likelihood that the institution already has a knowledgeable resource that can educate departments on how to better serve older students is high. Appointing such an individual would not only send a message to adult learners that they matter to the institution, but also ensure that the existing resources the institution has for students with adult roles are being utilized to their fullest potential.

At the time of this study, adult learners were a fairly invisible student population at GPU with a wide array of institutional perceptions and requests. The implications suggest that further investigation is necessary to understand their experiences, and ensure that new and existing practices more effectively address their needs.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Research on adult learner experiences at public research universities is limited, and exploratory studies such as this that aim to better understand this growing student population within different institutional environments should continue to be pursued. Previously, quantitative methodologies have been the dominant means of gathering data on students balancing adult roles while in school. However, as this study suggests, allowing older students the opportunity to reflect on their educational journey can be a rewarding experience for participants and increase the richness of data gleaned in the process.

This study confirmed previous research that suggested traditionally youth-centered campuses like Great Plains University continue to neglect adult learners. Although the eight participants in the study had varied life experiences, roles, and educational goals, their racial identities and educational backgrounds were relatively homogeneous. Further research on the intersection of adult learner identity with additional oppressed group identities and how this influences their experiences and needs in college should continue to be explored. In particular, studies that investigate identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, educational background, socioeconomic status, ability, parental status, military status, and sexual orientation and the impact of these intersections on adult learners' perceptions of institutional climate would add needed depth to the body of literature on adult learners.

As research on adult learners continues to focus on adult-centered institutions, studies that explore best practices implemented to support this student population within different types of campus environments are even more rare. Further study is necessary to

better understand the benefit and utilization of adult-oriented support services at public research universities. Literature supports the idea that small changes can bring about massive benefits for adult learner retention and satisfaction in college. Financial resources are often limited, and acquiring practical strategies that can be used to increase student support without massive expenditures would be incredibly beneficial to the future of adult education in the United States.

### **Conclusion**

This study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of eight adult undergraduate students at Great Plains University, and invited them to reflect on their needs as working adults, single parents, veterans, students with disabilities, and first generation students in college. The overwhelming response to volunteer for this study indicated that adult learners at this public research university had stories to tell. Those stories reflected their passion and resilience as students, and the disregard and invisibility they often felt from the institution. The obstacles they confronted and resourcefulness they displayed, often in spite of services and structures that were not designed to fit their needs, were a true inspiration. The findings of this study suggested that Great Plains University and similar institutions are at the cusp of opportunity to challenge old, youth-oriented policies that marginalize older students, and the findings offered several suggestions for public research universities to better serve and validate the commitment of adult learners.

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**Appendix A**  
**Informed Consent Form**

## Informed Consent Letter

**IRB Approval#: 20131113977 EX**

**Identification of Project:** Not Designed with Us in Mind: Exploring the Experiences and Needs of Adult Learners at a Public Research University

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences and unique needs of nontraditional age undergraduate students, otherwise referred to as “adult learners”, at a public, four-year institution predominantly attended by traditional age undergraduates. You are invited to participate in this study because you are an undergraduate student 25 years of age or older, and you are listed as enrolled at [REDACTED] at least part-time.

**Procedures:**

Participation in this study will require approximately two hours of your time. You will be asked to participate in two interviews—one to discuss your experiences at the institution and another approximately 4 weeks following to reflect on your unique needs as a non-traditional age student. Both interviews will be audio recorded and conducted in a quiet, private space at your convenience.

**Benefits:**

This study will give you the opportunity to reflect on your unique experiences as an adult learner and non-traditional age undergraduate. This may allow you to make greater meaning of this experience and to share your experience with others anonymously for the benefit of institutions and future adult learners in higher education.

**Risks and/or Discomforts:**

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept confidential. The data will be stored in a password protected computer and in a password protected storage database. The data will only be seen by the principal investigators during the study, and will be discarded immediately after the study report is finalized in May 2014. The information obtained in this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at professional conferences but the data will be unidentifiable.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

You may ask any questions concerning this research by contacting one of the investigator(s) listed below. If you would like to speak to someone else, please contact Research Compliance Services Office at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

**Freedom to Withdraw:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers or the University [REDACTED], or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**Signature of Participant:**

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Research Participant

Date

By checking this box, I agree to have my interviews with the researcher be audio recorded.

**Name and Phone number of investigator(s)**

Stephanie Meyer, Graduate Assistant, Principal Investigator. [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

Deb Mullen, PhD, Associate Dean of Education and Human Sciences and Research Advisor.

[REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

**Appendix B**  
**Recruitment Email**

Dear Student:

I am an Associate Dean in the College of Education and Human Sciences. In order to earn a masters' degree in Higher Education our graduate students are required to do original research and prepare a thesis. My advisee, Stephanie Meyer, is conducting a research study on the experiences and unique needs of adult learners in higher education. Participation in this study will entail two individual interviews and will take approximately 2 hours of your time in total. For their time, participants will each be entered into a drawing to receive a \$50 gift certificate to the local restaurant of their choice with 1 in 8 odds of winning. If you are interested in participating, please reply to this e-mail by January 17, 2014

Further instructions will follow in a separate email. There are no known risks involved in this research.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact either Stephanie or myself.

Stephanie Meyer, Graduate Assistant, Principal Investigator

██████████ or ██████████

Deb Mullen, Ph.D., Associate Dean of Education and Human Sciences and Research

Advisor ██████████ or ██████████

Regards,

Debra Mullen, Ph.D.

**Appendix C**

**Semi-structured Interview Protocol**

### **Semi-structured Interview Protocol**

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences and needs of non-traditional age undergraduate students, otherwise referred to as “adult learners”, at a public, four-year institution predominantly attended by traditional age undergraduates. Numerous studies published during the 1980s examined the experience of non-traditional age undergraduate students. However, the researcher wants to explore whether those findings still apply to the needs and experiences of adult learners in the digital age of higher education.

#### Research Question(s):

- What are the experiences of non-traditional age undergraduate students at an institution predominantly attended by traditional age students? How do non-traditional age undergraduates feel they are perceived by faculty, staff and administration? How do they feel they are perceived by their peers?
- What are the needs of non-traditional age undergraduate students at an institution predominantly attended by traditional age students? How do they feel their unique needs are being addressed currently?
- What are some examples of practices that institutions can put into place that support the unique needs and experiences of adult learners?

#### **First Interview Questions:**

- 1) Tell me about yourself.
- 2) Tell me about your experience at this institution.
- 3) What brought you to this University?
- 4) Describe a memorable interaction you have had with University employees.
- 5) How do you feel that you are perceived by faculty and staff at the institution?
- 6) How do you feel that you are perceived by your classroom peers?
- 7) Is there anything additional related to your experience at the institution that you feel I should know? Describe.

#### **Second Interview Questions:**

- 8) Tell me about your needs as a student in college. What do you need from the institution to be successful?
- 9) How do you feel your needs are being addressed currently?
- 10) Give an example(s) of how you feel the institution addresses your unique needs.
- 11) Give an example(s) of how you feel the institution does not address your unique needs.
- 12) Is there anything additional related to your unique needs that you feel I should know? Describe.