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## Older Undergraduate English Majors and their Self-Described Value of English

Joseph W. Price

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, [jprice@unomaha.edu](mailto:jprice@unomaha.edu)

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OLDER UNDERGRADUATE ENGLISH MAJORS AND THEIR SELF-DESCRIBED  
VALUE OF ENGLISH

By

Joseph W. Price

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Educational Studies  
(Educational Leadership and Higher Education)

Under the Supervision of Professors Brent Cejda and Donald Uerling

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2013

# OLDER UNDERGRADUATE ENGLISH MAJORS AND THEIR SELF-DESCRIBED VALUE OF ENGLISH

Joseph W. Price, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2013

Advisers: Brent Cejda and Donald Uerling

The purpose of this multiple case study was to develop an understanding of what older nontraditional undergraduate English majors voiced as the challenges, attributes, and promises concerning their choice of that academic major.

Ten participants took part in this study; these were students enrolled during the Spring 2012 semester as English majors at an urban state university in the Midwest. Data from ten interviews were analyzed using a combination of structural and verses coding. Thirteen themes surfaced that cut across cases and questions and offered insight and explanation to the research question and sub questions. These included (in alphabetical order): being older, coping strategies, encouragement, fear, finances, interruptions to enrollment, possibilities, reading's influence, resistance, skills gained, understanding the world, the English major's worth, and writing's influence.

While these participants voiced challenges such as being older, fear, and interruptions to enrollment, in all but one case, the life-long love of reading and/or writing sustained their aspirations in the major. All participants envisioned careers that would utilize the skills gained in the study of the English major. All participants also stated that understanding the world better was a benefit of the English major. However, the encouragement to pursue the English major that participants received, whether the source of that encouragement was internal or external, took place in formal or informal

settings, or was mostly positive or negative, permeated their entire lives. These participants swam in a sea of mostly positive encouragement that reinforced their choice of an English major. In some cases, these positive encouragements were nothing more than simple courtesies or compliments professors bestowed upon participants. While seemingly minor, these actions had a profound effect on students. Implications and future research are discussed.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Problem**

A constellation of events is emerging in higher education in America. As the average age of the U.S. population increases, and as more students beyond the “traditional college-going age” of 18-24 come to college to either begin or complete their undergraduate collegiate careers, educators should strive to better understand this growing cohort of undergraduate nontraditional students. What motivational factors keep these students enrolled? Of particular interest are older nontraditional students who choose humanities majors such as English despite the current climate and environmental “noise” that surrounds students concerning the importance, promise, and employability of STEM majors (those undergraduate majors in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Understanding how these students continue to persist and how they voice the value of their undergraduate major choice of an English major would deepen educators’ understanding of this older cohort and benefit not only undergraduate departments of English but other humanities disciplines as well.

#### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this multiple case study was to develop a better understanding of what older nontraditional undergraduate English majors voiced as the challenges, attributes, and promises concerning their major field and their persistence in that study. Specifically, I set out to discover how these students’ choice of the English major affected and shaped their aspirations for their futures. Were these students pursuing the degree for the degree’s sake, did they envision jobs, careers, or avocations that would

utilize skills they have learned and developed, or was it something else motivating them?

How did these older students create meaning of their choice as an undergraduate

academic major of English?

### **Central Question and Sub Questions**

The central question under consideration was as follows: What are the challenges and rewards older nontraditional undergraduates encounter as English majors?

Sub questions included the following:

1. What “path” led students to choose English as a major?
2. What factors aid and/or hinder students’ continued enrollment semester after semester?
3. What kind of value do students believe the English major holds for them?
4. What kind of use do students believe the English major holds for them?

### **Definitions**

*Older Nontraditional Student*—This describes those participant students who were 25 years of age or older at the time the data for this study were collected. However, I discovered that participants had other nontraditional characteristics as well, as measured using Horn and Carroll’s (1996) typology that labels students as minimally nontraditional (one characteristic), moderately nontraditional (two or three characteristics), or highly nontraditional (four or more characteristics). At the very least, the participants in this study were “minimally” nontraditional due to their age (25 years or older). Horn and Carroll (1996) listed seven specific trends that characterized a student as nontraditional; these included being older, having financial independence (i.e.,

from parents), enrolled part-time, working full time, having non-spouse dependents, being a single parent, and having nontraditional completion of high school.

*English Major*—Those participants who had officially declared undergraduate English as a major at Urban State University within the College of Liberal Arts during the spring semester of 2012.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this research included the nature of case studies, which are meant to develop a rich understanding of particular situations, beliefs, or experiences. The context of the research was another limitation, as the information was gathered from a public urban university in the Midwest; therefore, one could not generalize to larger populations or even similar populations at similar institutions. The questions posed to participants might not hold the same significance in future years. I also assumed that the participants in the study shared their beliefs and experiences in a candid and honest way.

### **Delimitations**

This study was delimited to students at one Midwestern urban university; further delimitations included the criteria of being an English major and being 25 years of age or older. This study did not consider English majors at other institutions or English majors who were younger than 25 years of age. Students 25 of age or older, who identified English as a “concentration,” and were enrolled in the research site’s Center for Adult Learning were not included in this study.

### **Background**

My interest in nontraditional students, particular older students, was two-fold: first, like many students and scholars, I gravitated toward interests and topics that mirror

my own experiences. Studying nontraditional students had been interesting to me because it matched my own experiences. I had been following the “pipeline” of the traditional undergraduate student. I entered college directly after high school; in fact, I did so immediately after graduation, taking up residence and enrolling at a private religiously affiliated residential liberal arts college just two weeks after my high school graduation. After two years of full-time undergraduate enrollment, my reasons for going to college had changed, and, like many students, I took a hiatus to strike out in the “real world.” When a friend caustically remarked that I would never complete my undergraduate degree, I set out to prove him wrong and finish what I had started. Like one of the participants in my study, I, too, had “unfinished business.”

I returned to full-time status at another institution, but this time I was on my own. I was not only older, but was now financial independent of my parents and working to support myself. I had at that point the qualifications to earmark me as a “moderately nontraditional” student (Horn & Carroll, 1996, p. 45). For that matter, I was also a first-generation student and a transfer student.

Second, in my professional capacity as manager of a large English department at a state institution, I had the opportunity to visit with and informally interview both traditional and nontraditional students, graduates and undergraduates, non-English majors and English majors alike. The stories of those older undergraduate English majors were often the most interesting: like their traditional cohorts, these students were doing their best to balance a full- or part-time schedule of classes with full- or part-time employment responsibilities. Unlike the traditional cohorts, however, these students had additional work-life balance issues, most notably family or care-giving responsibilities. What these

undergraduate students said intrigued me. The more I learned about nontraditional students, the more multi-dimensional this cohort appeared, like the layers of an onion, always something under what seemed to be the surface.

The issue of the humanities major choice in lieu of the popular majors in business and those in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines emerged personally for me as an interest when the associate dean in the college I work for called my office one day and pleaded, “Quick, I need a list of famous English majors.” This administrator asked because sitting in his office was a traditional-aged college student who, despite his parents’ push for him to major in the hard sciences in hopes of a future medical career, wanted only to read good literature and write about it. The student and associate dean needed to convince his parents, particularly his father, that the English major was a good fit for him.

However, what of the older undergraduate student who also chose English as a major, the student for whom the parental push and influence no longer held sway? Unlike the “traditional” student, he or she chose this major without the burden of parental press. What motivated him or her?

Success of all college students, including nontraditional students, should be of importance to any higher education professional. More recently, however, other constituents began to stake a claim in the discussion and direction of higher education. For example, the Obama administration voiced hopes to have America lead the world in proportion of college graduates per capita by the year 2020, and educational experts have cited that this equation must include older students (Nelson, 2010). At the time of this writing, the current politics surrounding the higher educational environment was also

extremely favorable to the STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) in both private and public funding initiatives, including incentives for undergraduate students to choose such disciplines as majors since these disciplines were believed to be crucial to maintaining economic viability in a global market. “Traditional” students heard this message; “nontraditional” students heard it as well, students who, according Choy (2002), now accounted for nearly 75% of all undergraduates.

This group of nontraditional students included older students seeking undergraduate degrees. It was an overwhelmingly significant and growing number of students. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES] (n.d.b), students aged 25 years and older constituted nearly one third of the 17.5 million undergraduate students enrolled in 2009.

Much of what is known about why students stay in college had been linked to understanding why they may leave. The most well-established theoretical student integration or attrition models focused on the undergraduate (Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). Less had been available about the nontraditional student until Bean and Metzner (1985) developed an established theoretical model that explains why nontraditional undergraduate students leave college.

### **Significance**

At the time of this study, English majors in particular were often misunderstood and undervalued. Part of this poor reputation was due to the stereotypes that developed over the years that portray the English major and the corresponding degree as suspect. What did one do with an English major? Beidler (1985) playfully responded, “The question is usually a rhetorical one, with a clever answer implicit in the very question:

‘Nothing’ or ‘Frame it’ or ‘Starve’ or ‘Marry her’” (p. 39). Contemporary cultural artifacts suggested this sentiment has changed little since the mid-1980s.

In ways, therefore, English majors suffered the same fate of dropouts described when Tinto (1993) refined his student attrition theory; that is, like dropouts, these students suffered from “a number of stereotypes and misconceptions” (p. 4).

However, the climate in education at the time of this study, including higher education, favored policies and incentives that hoped to boost the number of degrees awarded in STEM disciplines: science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Much of this was driven by perceptions of America’s prominence or lack thereof in the global economy with the “solution” resting in more persons educated in STEM fields, the outcome of which would theoretically position America more favorably in an ever competitive global marketplace. One group of scholars (Soldner, Rowan-Kenyon, Inkelas, & Garvey, 2012), went as far as saying “[n]ow is the time for a renaissance in STEM education” (p. 311).

The push to advance the humanities was sometimes more subtle and diffuse. One notable exception surfaced after the death in 2011 of Apple Computer founder and chief executive officer Steve Jobs. Johnson (2011) noted that Jobs had modeled his own leadership style to that of Edwin Lands, founder of Polaroid who believed that successful businesses were located at the “intersection of art and science” (n.p.).

As this push to advance STEM disciplines advanced, the number of college-going Americans increased, including the number of “older” college students, those 25 years of age and older. Historically, higher education’s policies and programs focused much of its institutional attention and energies on services for the first-time freshman, mostly coming

from high school (obviously, there are notable exceptions here). This had changed, as the link between older adults and a more college-educated workforce is envisioned.

For example, Pusser et al. (2007) pointed to the importance of getting more adults into the post-secondary system. As these authors stated, “the nation’s labor force includes 54 million adults who lack a college degree; of those, nearly 34 million have no college experience at all. In the 21st century [sic], these numbers cannot sustain us” (p. 1).

Sustainability issues might have had importance, both on a personal and national level. Yet, some of these older students were choosing majors such as English, a major that in and of itself may not have had an apparently immediate or obviously visible economic use, or for that matter a great deal of then current administrative support at the local or national level.

The discussions concerning humanities disciplines, like English, particularly the disciplines’ usefulness, fell less on diametric opposites of a scale and more along a continuum. While Checkoway (2001) and Nussbaum (2010) argued that the humanities were necessary for enlightened citizenship in a democracy, Bok (2003) all but intimated that humanities programs had “lost their intellectual moorings” and mission (p. 5). Davidson (2011) contended that humanities programs faced the same types of problems of being relevant that they always have, and that they missed the mark when they do not make their majors more job relevant.

Since the first part of the 21st century, scholars argued the purpose or mission of higher education, often in the process defending or calling into question humanities’ place within that higher learning (Bok, 2003; Checkoway, 2001; Donoghue, 2008;



Duderstadt & Womack, 2003; Nussbaum, 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Brubacher (1982) earlier posed the argument in terms of its epistemological and political dichotomy: those who saw higher education as an end in and of itself and those who saw higher education as a utilitarian tool to be used to solve the complex problems of society, including those faced by governments and industry (see Pusser et al., 2007, above).

Brubacher (1982) favored the epistemologists and went as far to state the following:

students in the halls of higher learning who are included to regard their studies as work—and many do—sadly misconceive their education. Not to find one's studies self-rewarding but only worthwhile for some external end—a grade, a diploma, a job—is evidence of immaturity. (p. 81)

However, it is important to note that his was certainly not a new concept.

The issue of practicality of higher education was not some new issue, one particular to the 21st century, or something recently developed, though it has compounded. Veblen (1935) reminded readers years before Brubacher (1982) that higher education's "aim is to equip the student for the work of inquiry, not to give him facility in that conduct of affairs that turns such knowledge into 'practical account'" (p. 17).

Veblen (1935) connected such practicality to the "era of barbarism in Europe, the Dark and Middle Ages" where persons were bound by "a hard and fast utilitarian animus" (pp. 34-35).

However, it was exactly this practical cohort that Donoghue (2008) stated most universities needed to cater to, the "new breed of student, who is older, more pragmatic, and more earnings-conscious than ever before" (p. 91). Duderstadt and Womack (2003) acknowledged that "[u]niversities will have to change significantly to serve the educational needs of adults" (p. 32).

In part this practicality had been brought about by economic climate, in particular how college is funded. Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) addressed the move toward the high tuition model, which assumed that higher education was a “private good” (p. 283) rather than a social investment that left college for the “privileged players” (p. 283). Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) also acknowledged the fact that “[c]orporations in the new economy require well-educated workers in business-related areas—science, engineering, medicine, law—to create and protect knowledge-based products, processes, and services” (p. 303).

Assuming that older students had a more advanced level of maturity than their 18 year old cohorts, one might have assumed these students would choose fields of study that would have a more direct positive impact on personal economic well-being, particularly in hard economic times. In a pre- and post-recession survey of 444 graduates, Stone, Van Horn, and Zuken (2012), found that 37% of students would “have been more careful in choosing a major” (p. 17), and of those students, 70% would have chosen a professional field or STEM major (p. 19). This harkened back to one of Bean’s (2005) nine themes of student retention, which included developing an attitude that education is “of practical value for getting work” (p. 227). This type of practicality was earlier studied by Cebula and Lopes (1982), whose quantitative regression analysis found that among other variables salary and occupational outlook were determinants in major choice.

Yet, older students who chose an undergraduate major like English, one less obvious to that practicality, swam against the current. Why did they do so, and related to this, how did they verbalize the value of their studies?

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement included the postulate that all students invest psychological and physical energy into their studies in order to stay involved. Moreover, as Silverman, Aliabadi, and Stiles (2009) stated, like their other nontraditional colleagues, adult students specifically had "to prioritize according to their own perceptions of the return-on-time investment for each demand in their lives" (p. 226). What things kept older, nontraditional English majors motivated to engage in continued enrollment in the face of these priorities?

Understanding these individual models of success in light of other elements would better inform the decisions administrators made in crafting policies that met the needs of this important student cohort. Understanding the older English undergraduate major would also better inform faculty and chairs of college and university English departments and could also benefit other humanities similar to English; understanding this particular cohort could have positive implications for recruiting and retention.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

This literature review discusses the evolving definition of the nontraditional student, which includes a history of nontraditional students in higher education with a focus on the second half of 20th century, a review of attrition, retention, and student motivation, a comparison of traditional student attrition and retention models and nontraditional models. Finally, the review covers a “current” state of the English major.

#### **Definition and History of Nontraditional Students**

Studying nontraditional students is difficult, in part, because it has been a complex undertaking. The term “nontraditional” has been hard to define due to its tendency to be all encompassing although scholars have offered definitions (Borden, 2004; Chickering, 1974; Jacoby, 1989; Kim, 2002) and others have offered insights to those definitions (i.e., Horn & Carroll, 1996; Perna, 2010). In many ways, its definition has depended on its context over time.

For example, women were considered a “nontraditional” cohort of students ever since Lucinda Foote was denied admission to Yale in late 18th century (Thelin, 2004). Two centuries later, when Rudolph (1990) revised his history of higher education in America, things had changed immensely. In the early part of the 21st century, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics, women constituted the majority of undergraduate enrollments (n.d.b). In terms of sheer numbers, women can no longer be considered higher education’s “outsiders,” to use Horowitz’s (1987) term.

Likewise, Public Law 346, also known as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, and commonly referred to as the G.I. Bill, brought a wave of veterans into college, which highlighted the fact that older students were a new force to be reckoned with (Horowitz, 1987; Rudolph, 1990; Thelin, 2004). As Howowitz (1987) stated, "veterans came to college eager for the vocational and academic rewards that it offered (p. 185); and, Howowitz added, "they were serious" (p. 185).

However, while women comprised the new majority of college students and were no longer considered "nontraditional" per se, individual characteristics, such as ethnicity, marital and parental status, and age, still made certain female cohorts very "nontraditional" indeed.

The previous example illustrates that along with time, context also helps drive and confound the definition of the "nontraditional" student: racial minority students attending a Predominately White Institution (PWI) can be seen as nontraditional; White students attending a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) can be seen as nontraditional; men attending a women's college or enrolled in an undergraduate program that has been historically dominated by women—such as nursing—can be seen as nontraditional. Nontraditional students abound.

Yet, this is only one aspect of the definition; scholars generally define the nontraditional student as one who does not fit the historic trajectory of one who enrolls full time at a post-secondary institution the fall following high school graduation (Horn & Carroll, 1996). According to Silverman et al. (2009), nontraditional students included those who commute to campus (compared to those students who have a residential experience at college), those who are part-time students, those who transfer credits from

one or more other institutions, and those older new or returning students—students generally 25 years of age or older who did not originally have college aspirations or had to put their original colleges careers on hold. Earlier, Horn and Carroll (1996) extended the criteria of the nontraditional student to include seven specific identifiers that rated a student as minimally, moderately, or highly nontraditional. However, as Kim (2002) pointed out, even categorical definitions can be complex not to mention confounding.

As an example of this complexity, consider the largest single subcategory of this group: commuters. This definition included over 86% of all students enrolled at colleges or universities (Horn & Berkold, 1998); this figure was an increase of 9% from those earlier published (Jacoby, 1989). For this reason, it is safe to state that if this trend continues through the second decade of the 21st century, nearly all students will fall into the commuting group. This is not to diminish the challenges or special characteristics of the nontraditional student, specifically the commuting student. Scholars pointed out that commuters face academic challenges and performance issues their residential cohorts do not (Chickering, 1974; Jacoby 1989, 2000).

Likewise, part-time students constitute a very large subgroup; according to National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.b), part-time students constituted 38% of all enrolled students in 2007. Transfer students, depending on how they were counted, made up another large subgroup, and these students were particularly hard to track, as patterns of transfer behavior identified by McCormick (1997) proved. Students considered traditional full-time students can also be counted as nontraditional depending on their transfer behavior (Borden, 2004; McCormick, 1997). Working students also constituted

a type of nontraditional status, particularly when these students work over 20 hours per week or even work full time (Perna, 2010).

It is no wonder the term “nontraditional” is confusing. In addressing just those in community colleges, Kim (2002) stated, “the term nontraditional is too broad to be helpful in identifying specific student needs at a community college because of the large number of students fitting within the definitions of nontraditional” (p. 74).

However, Horn and Carroll (1996) offered seven attributes that either singularly or in combination identify the nontraditional student. These include enrollment postponement into higher education, part-time attendance, financial independence from parents, full-time employment status, dependent responsibilities other than spouse, single parenthood, and/or completion of high school via means of a nonstandard path (i.e., high school diploma). Horn and Carroll (1996) categorized students with only one attribute as “minimally” nontraditional, two to three attributes as “moderately” nontraditional, and over four as “highly” nontraditional. Others have gone so far as to assign four categories of risk of collegial success associated with the number of nontraditional attributes, from “low” (one nontraditional characteristic) to “ultra-high” (over four nontraditional characteristics) (Pusser et al., 2007). However, it is important to note that the occasional example still exists when “nontraditional” specifically means “older students” (DelBlanco, 2012).

### **Attrition, Retention, and Student Motivation**

Theoretical student integration or attrition models such as Spady’s (1970) and Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) have been used over the years to help explain the departure decisions of traditional undergraduate students. Housed in Tinto’s (1993) theory were a

number of now well-established tenants of attrition and retention. Tinto (1993) also identified elements that led to attrition, including external “pull” (p. 63) and external “forces” and “choices” (p. 100). For older nontraditional students, these forces are part and parcel of their entire undergraduate experience. Understanding attrition has helped educators develop retention theories and models meant to keep students enrolled.

However, it should be noted that Tinto’s model may be less applicable to older students. Tinto (1993) himself acknowledged the difficulty adult students had acclimating to college life, including feeling out of place in “the youthful environment of college” (p. 187). However, the biggest barrier for the older (adult) student is that of lack of time for the appropriate interaction with faculty, students, and other programs (Tinto, 1993). Kasworm and Pike (1994) also questioned the appropriateness of using traditional attrition models with nontraditional students.

However, Bean and Metzner (1985) offered a theoretical explanation of student departure or drop out specifically focused on the nontraditional undergraduate. The variables and the combination of those variables identified by Bean and Metzner (1985) indicated success or failure; these variables included academic outcomes expressed by grade point average, and psychological outcomes that encompassed utility, satisfaction, goal commitment, stress, and intent to leave.

Other scholars have studied nontraditional student attrition as well (Bean & Metzner, 1985; DeRemer, 2002; Geisler, 2007; Kaswork & Pike, 1994; Kuh & Ardaiole, 1979; Powers, 2010). DeRemer (2002), Geisler (2007), and Powers (2010) studied factors that led to student attrition. However, all of these treatments were limited in the types of nontraditional students studied. For instance, Geisler’s (2007) qualitative



grounded theory study looked at nontraditionals at two small private colleges; Powers' (2010) study focused only on males; Metzner and Bean (1985) studied only part-time commuting freshman. Kuh and Ardaiole (1979) compared nontraditional adult residential students and traditionally-aged residential students. Missing in the research is the attrition or retention of older, undergraduate English majors.

### **Current State of the Undergraduate English Major**

Perhaps one of the reasons for the apparent lack of research on older undergraduate English major attrition and retention is the presumed assumption of a shrinking cohort. This is not an invalid assumption. However, despite the reduction in overall numbers, undergraduate degrees conferred upon English majors remained a significant number of total degrees awarded in the United States. To compare, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (n.d.a), in 1970 the percentage of undergraduate degrees conferred to English majors was significant: 7.61% of all undergraduate degrees, fourth only to those conferred in education (21%), the social sciences and history (18.5%), and business (13.74%). According to the same statistics, three of these fields remained in the top four for undergraduate degrees conferred in 2008-2009--business (21.73%), social sciences and history (10.52%), and education (6.35%).

However, according to these same 2008-2009 statistics, degrees conferred to English majors comprised approximately 3.24% of undergraduate degrees granted (NCES, n.d.a). This is less than the 7.61% of 1970; however, while this percentage has diminished, it still, nonetheless, represented a significant percentage of students, and is worthy of study.

Throughout the years, approximately ten dozen doctoral dissertations have focused on or have specifically studied the English major. These studies can be categorized into two main groups: those that focused on American English majors on U.S. campuses or those that focused on English majors at universities outside of the United States. Whether looking at the domestic or foreign English major, most all studies focused on some aspect of skills development, such as a specific aspect of reading or writing proficiency, including teacher training, or were comparative in nature.

However a handful of these works were particularly notable for the purposes of this study (Davis, 1990; Dowd, 1998; Frankland, 2009; Khost, 2010; & Korpan, 1994). While Khost's (2010) study focused on the plight of the non-tenured PhDs in English versus their tenured cohorts, Khost acknowledged the English major's shrinking numbers and addressed the relevancy of the major.

Addressing, among other things, English major stereotypes, Korpan's (1994) study compared scientific understanding between fourth-year psychology majors and fourth-year English majors. The psychology majors had a more measured understanding of scientific inquiry than did the English majors (Korpan, 1994).

Frankland's (2009) narrative study, which traced the educational experiences of six community college presidents, found that these participants' educational experiences as English majors was a force that informed their leadership abilities and understanding of people. Davis (1990) investigated six students entering into the English major and the journey these yet-to-be English majors took in joining a new academic and discourse community; however, this research was limited to students who were entering the major, not students who were already there. Dowd (1998) used case study to examine the

influence of earning potential. This study found that English majors had realistic earning expectations and that these students voiced reasons other than financial ones for seeking the degree. This study was limited to women and not specifically older, nontraditional students. However, the study was important because it linked earning expectations, which can be equated with Bean and Metzner's (1985) utility variable, with the English major; this variable measures "perceptions of the usefulness of [students'] college education for employment opportunities" (p. 522).

Nearly 15 years earlier, Biedler (1985) also studied employment opportunities. Using an informal instrument, he surveyed 256 English majors from Lehigh University; with a 60% response rate, 95% of students reported that while the English major had not necessarily an effect on "landing" the job, the English major proved incredibly useful while on the job (p. 41). However, before Biedler (1985), Orange (1979), using a much larger survey instrument, had not only identified the types of employment English majors engaged in and the unique skills employers reported that these majors brought to a broad spectrum of organizations across the economic sector, but also theorized that the major would be useful in the pre-professional preparation for law, medicine, and business.

Yet, a later emerging market opened in the publishing world to specifically cater to liberal arts or English majors. These authors promised to show students and graduates of English programs how to envision themselves in the job market, how to translate skills learned in the classroom to "real world" applications, and how to market themselves to prospective employers (Bly, 2003; Brooks, 2009; Curran & Greenwald, 2006; Lemire, 2006).

These non-academic advice manuals were similar to *What color is your parachett?* (Bolles, 2012), the generic, popular work on career choices and opportunities. However, these specific manuals differed in focus. Lemire (2006) stressed the marketing of the English major's apparent critical thinking skills. Bly (2003) specifically addressed writing-based jobs and industries such as book publishing and technical writing. Brooks (2009) focused on a non-linear approach to job hunting and assured English majors and graduates of such programs that finding a job was often serendipitous.

Most interesting in the group, perhaps, is Curran and Greenwald's (2006) manual; these two authors offered a series of anecdotal case studies focusing on student successes and challenges in finding a job. The two even include a forward for parents meant to comfort their fears of having a child who has chosen a liberal arts major, placing these parents in the same category of those who might seek the help of a support group for a child with a rare medical condition or a behavioral disorder: that disorder, it turns out, is the child's assumed dismal job prospects. However, these authors held out hope that (with the help of their manual) these liberal arts student would get "off the family payroll" (Curran & Greenwald, 2006, p. xiii).

### **Summary**

While at the time of this research, much literature existed about the multifaceted nature and characteristics of the nontraditional student and his or her role in the history of higher education, little, specific research on older, undergraduate English majors existed other than those works focused on skills comparison or career development. Little, if any, literature existed about how older, undergraduate English majors express the value of their academic major choice. This research addressed this void.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this multiple case study was to develop a better understanding of what older nontraditional undergraduate English majors voiced as the challenges, attributes, and promises concerning their major field of study and their persistence in that study.

#### **Location and Context of the Research Site**

I gathered data about older, nontraditional English majors at a Midwestern urban university. While the identity of the institution may be obvious to some, I added an additional layer of anonymity for protection of the participants in this study; thus, I referred to this institution as “Urban State University” or USU. Moreover, I used synonyms for any proper nouns in the study that may have identified participants in any way.

Urban State University is located in Riverton, a city in the Midwest, with approximately one million inhabitants in its metropolitan area and the counties that immediately border its city limits. Urban State University (USU) and its multi-campus locations are in the center of what city leaders and residents refer to as “Mid City.”

Originally a municipal university, Urban State is part of the state university system, which includes a land-grant institution, a medical school, and a smaller comprehensive university. The system is governed by an elected board of trustees, and its central administration is housed in the same city as its land grant institution. Urban State University is a predominately White institution, with approximately 15,000 students

enrolled at the time of the study. At the time of the study, Urban State offered majors in approximately 65 undergraduate programs across seven colleges and had a graduate college offering degrees in the Master of Arts and Sciences and various doctoral degree programs.

Urban State also had a long tradition of serving nontraditional students, particularly commuting students and both active and veteran members of the military. However, approximately 10 years previous to this study, USU built several residence halls, which catered to mostly traditional-aged and international students, where approximately 10% of the student population resided.

In 2012, the Department of English at USU was housed in USU's Liberal Arts College, the oldest and largest college at USU. Department personnel consisted of 20 tenure or tenure-track faculty, 10 full-time nontenure track faculty, 15 graduate teaching assistants, and 25 adjunct or part-time faculty. The department was assisted by a full-time manager, a full-time staff assistant, and a number of part-time student workers and other hourly workers. The department offered programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Each semester the department had approximately 120 enrolled undergraduate students who had declared the English major. My original intent was to identify 8 to 12 English majors, 25 years of age or older, who would agree to participate in this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

I approached this research from a constructivist perspective. While its definition can "prove elusive" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 37), constructivists contended that "human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as to construct or make it" (Schwandt,

2007, p. 38). The constructivist framework fits best in this research situation since I was interested in how participants construct and express the value of the English major.

### **Research Design**

I conducted this investigation using qualitative methods. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) stated that “qualitative research confronts a changing and historical world” (p. 13) and challenged positivist scientists’ “attempt[s] to legislate one version of truth over another” (p. 12). According to Bryant (2004), “there is no need for a lengthy defense or apology for the qualitative approach” (p. 99). Earlier, Creswell (1998) noted that qualitative methods needed no “comparisons to quantitative research” (p. 9).

However, the acceptance and popularity of these methodologies resulted in an expansion of these types of studies over the years; it was true that qualitative studies abounded. Dressman (2008) even warned that the abundance of qualitative research, particularly in educational research, numbered like the stars, and to use Dressman’s analogy, starlight provided insufficient illumination for guidance. This might have been the case if one was walking along a darkened path at night, yet even modern naval and air navigators, like ancestral mariners, still used those same stars to guide ships great and small across calm and turbulent seas and skies.

In the later part of the twentieth century, Spradley (1979) identified 10 priorities for strategic research, including “[e]ducation for all people, at every stage of life” (p. 15). Older students met this criterion. Spradley (1979) also advocated that informant needs should drive research. While this multiple case study was not an ethnography, much of the lessons learned from ethnography, one of Creswell’s (1998) five traditions, was useful. In particular, part of the my reasoning for selecting participants “in the middle”

linked one of Spradley's (1979) qualities for selecting good informants, that being "current involvement" (p. 46). Participants who must recall their experiences risked not remembering their experiences fully, remembering only the "general outlines of activities that went on" (Spradley, 1979, p. 49). For this reason it was imperative that I studied these students *in media rex*.

I conducted a multiple bounded case study involving older (nontraditional) English majors at one Midwestern university. It was multiple in the sense that the researcher collected data from a number of participants. Creswell (2005) called collective, or multiple, case study a type of ethnographic research method designed to "provide insight into an issue" (p. 439). It was bounded in the sense that the data were collected separately from outside the classroom environment in the strict confines of the research interview sites.

### **Central Question and Sub Questions**

The central or grand tour question under consideration was as follows: What are the challenges and rewards older nontraditional undergraduates encountered as English majors?

Sub questions included the following:

1. What "path" led students to choose English as a major?
2. What factors aid and/or hinder students' continued enrollment semester after semester?
3. What kind of value do students believe the English major holds for them?
4. What kind of use do students believe the English major holds for them?



**Limitations**

Limitations of this research included the nature of case studies, which are meant to develop a rich understanding of particular situations, beliefs, or experiences (Creswell, 2005). The context of the research can also be seen as a type of limitation, as the information was gathered from a public doctoral granting urban institution in the Midwest; therefore, I could not generalize to larger populations or even similar institutions. The questions posed to participants may or may not hold the same significance in future years. The participants included English majors who willingly volunteered to participate and were not randomly chosen. I also assumed that the participants in the study shared their values, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences in a candid and honest way. Another important limitation was my own involvement with the site department and its faculty and students. I was the manager of the English Department at the time of these interviews; therefore, some participants knew of my connection with the department as its manager. As a result, they may have altered their responses when speaking about specific professors and experiences within the department.

**Delimitations**

As previously stated, this study was limited to students at one Midwestern urban university; further delimitations included the criteria of being an English major and being 25 years of age or older. This study did not consider English majors at other institutions or English majors who were younger than 25 years of age. This study only solicited older English majors who were currently enrolled in the spring semester of 2012. It did not include students who may have met the criteria for this study but had opted to not enroll during the Spring 2012 semester.

Further delimitations included students who were 25 years of age or older, who identified English as a “concentration,” and were enrolled in the research site’s Center for Adult Learning; these students were not included in this study. I purposely excluded these students from the study despite the fact that they may have “concentrated” in English. While many of their classroom experiences may have been the same as their English major counterparts, they were advised outside of the College of Liberal Arts and outside of the department, and they fulfilled their concentration and degree requirements differently than the *bona-fide* English majors seeking the Bachelor of Arts degree.

### **Ethical Issues**

I gained approval for this study via USU’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, which is tied to its state system’s medical center (see Appendix A); this approval was later transferred to the University of Nebraska Lincoln IRB Office (see Appendix B). I also sought the approval of affected department at the research site and the institution where the research took place.

When participants individually contacted me to schedule their interviews, I asked them to agree to a pseudonym to protect and shield participant identity. I used this pseudonym throughout the entire data collection and research process. If individuals assisted in the research process (for example, transcriptionists, research consultants, or the researcher’s supervisory committee members), they only knew of the individual participants by their pseudonyms, and even this knowledge was on a “need to know” basis only.

I also made the conscious choice to exclude any data I may have known or learned about participants that was not shared during the actual recorded interview. This was done specifically to keep this study bounded.

### **Participant Selection and Recruitment**

After securing IRB approval and approval of the study from the university, I requested that the Office of Institutional Research at USU develop a list of those English majors enrolled in spring term of 2012 who were 25 years of age or older; the list included student names, university identification numbers, gender (female or male), and mailing addresses. I did not request the Office of Institutional Research supply prospective participants' race or ethnicity, as my question protocol invited participants to self-identify during the interviews, and only if they wished to do so. I then contacted all students within this population through the U.S. mail (see Appendix C).

The study's cover letter invited participants who were aged 25 or older and who were recently enrolled as English majors at USU to participate in the study. The population of this group of students was small ( $N = 20$ ). The response rate was anticipated to be between 40% and 60%, with the anticipated number of participants to be between 8 to 12 older undergraduate English majors. If more than 12 students had volunteered, I intended on using purposeful sampling, which involves the intentionality of the researcher to select individuals "to learn or understand the central phenomenon" (Creswell, 2005, p. 204). However, an ideal number of participants responded. Moreover, the demographic profile of these 10 participants offered a robust range of ages and offered relative gender balance.

As noted above in the delimitations, I emphasized an important caveat concerning the selection of participants. At the time of this research, USU also had a unit within another college, which for the purposes of this study I referred to as “The Center for Adult Learning (CAL),” whose specific mission was to help returning adults obtain the Bachelor’s degree. These students were able to “concentrate” in English, and while they may have been enrolled in many of the same classes that English majors were enrolled in, and while USU’s Institutional Research Office counted these students as part of the annual official unit productivity of the Department of English at USU, these students were not considered for this study.

The reasons for this were two-fold: first, the degree obtained by these students through the CAL is a general baccalaureate degree and not the Bachelor of Arts degree English majors obtained; second, faculty did not advise CAL students (CAL students had their own advisors). While both CAL students and older, nontraditional English majors may have had many things in common, their curricular experiences and their interaction with department faculty differed enough to confound this research if CAL students had been included in this study.

### **Number of Participants**

The researcher aimed for between 8 and 12 participants. This number was in line with recommendations for qualitative study, as “the overall ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture diminishes with the addition of each new individual” (Creswell, 2005, p. 207). Ten participant agreed to be interviewed for this study.

## Methodological Procedures

The methodology of this study was composed of three main phases:

1. The pre-data gathering phase, including IRB approval, site institution approval for the study, and initial contact of participants;
2. The data collection stage, which included conducting a main interview with participants; and,
3. The data analysis and reporting stage.

**Pre-data collection phase.** After IRB and site institution approval, I made initial contact via U. S. Mail (see Appendix C) with the entire population ( $N = 20$ ) of students aged 25 or older who were enrolled as English majors in the College of Liberal at USU during the Spring 2012 term. Fortunately, an ideal number of participants ( $n = 10$ ) expressed interest and participated. These interested potential participants contacted me via electronic mail (email) or telephone. Consent was obtained before the main interview through the initial cover letter (see Appendix C). During the telephone or email exchange, I explained the research project to each participant, allowed each participant to ask questions about the project, and screened each participant for suitability.

**Data collection phase.** Along with gathering data, one purpose of the main interview was to develop trust and rapport between the researcher and participant, a critical part of any successful qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2005; Spradley, 1979; Yin, 1994). Before this main interview began, and before recording began, the participant selected a pseudonym of his or her own choosing that was used throughout the research project to refer to the participant, including the reporting of data.

I conducted the interviews with participants at a quiet location agreed upon by me and the participant following the interview protocol (see Appendix D). The interview location took place either on or off campus, or at a “neutral” location (excluding for example, the participants’ or researcher’s homes or offices). I audio-recorded the main interview, took notes during the interview, and followed up with memorandums of the interviews when appropriate. I also used observation of the participants during the interview, as Yin (1994) and Stake (1995) list observation as a credible point for data collection.

**Data security.** All notes, memoranda, audio files and other research materials were primarily housed at my home or my professional office under lock and key; on occasion, however, all or part of these materials, or copies of such, were transported to my office or other locations (such as the interview site or a library). I made every effort to assure records were under my control at all times or under lock and key. Copies of audio file originals were used in transcription by a third party to protect the original files in case of loss or file corruption. These copied files were uploaded over a password-protected and secure website. To protect the participants, the third party transcriber, a professional transcription firm knowledgeable of academic research protocols, had no knowledge of the identity of the participants other than their pseudonyms chosen for the study. This firm also provided a confidentiality statement (Appendix E). Data analysis followed data collection and is discussed in detail below.

**Verification.** Creswell (1998, 2005) outlined at least eight procedures to assure verification, and recommended that at least two were necessary to validate qualitative research, and I engaged in four of these.

Rich, thick description—Transcription of interview, notes, and memoranda provided the rich, thick description necessary not only for data collection but design verification.

Auditor—I employed an outside and impartial auditor to assure accuracy in transcription and to check to see if theme development has taken place (See Appendix F).

Member checking—I emailed the transcription of each participant’s transcribed audio recorded interview to allow participants to verify their information and facts, thus providing “member-checking.”

Clarifying researcher bias—As stated previously, my own bias was checked at every stage of the study. In the preliminary stages of research, this included developing an interview protocol that did not produce leading questions. I also used the expertise of other qualitative researchers and/or peers to assure interview protocol was sound. While using this procedure can be seen as another verification procedure (Creswell, 1998, 2005), I used it only on an “as needed” basis, particularly in question development and the coding process.

### **Pre-data Collection Phase**

In the spring semester of 2012, USU’s Office of Institutional Research provided me the names and addresses of those students who (a) were 25 years of age or older, (b) enrolled for the Spring 2012 semester at USU either as full- or part-time students, and (c) were declared English majors seeking the Bachelor of Arts degree in the College of Liberal Arts. Included in this group were students who had declared English as a second major within the College of Liberal Arts.

The query produced the names, identification numbers, genders, and addresses of 20 students. I contacted this 20 student population using the IRB approved cover letter (see Appendix C). Each letter was individually addressed to prospective participants and mailed in mid-June through the U.S. Postal Service using first-class mail.

Ages of the study's population ranged from 25 to 54, with the average being 31 years of age. Females (12, or 60% of the population) had the most age variation, ranging from 25 to 54, with an average age of just over 33 and a half years. Males in the population (8, or 40% of the population) had less variation in range, from 25 years to 31, with the average being 27 and a half years.

Between mid-June and mid-July of 2012, 10 students, or 50% of the total population, accepted the invitation to participate in this study; half of these 10 students responded by telephone, the other half by email. All 10 respondents agreed to be participants.

The participants consisted of seven women and three men. The group ranged in age from 25 to 54, with female participants having the most variation in range (25-54, average just over 36 and a half years of age) compared to male participants (26-29, average just over 28 years of age). The average age of all 10 was just over 33 years of age at the time of the interviews.

### **Data Collection Phase**

I conducted face-to-face, one-on-one interviews with all 10 participants between June 18, 2012, and July 23, 2012. Nine of the 10 interviews took place at a neutral location on the campus of USU (various private study rooms within the campus's main library). The library location was suggested by me and agreed to by nine participants who



also had the option of selecting another venue off or on campus. To better accommodate one of the participants, one of the 10 interviews took place at a public coffee shop in another town located south of the Riverton area.

Individual times spent interviewing ranged from 25:58 minutes to 55:04 minutes with an average interview length of 40:09 minutes and a median time of 43:28 minutes.

The central question under consideration was as follows: What are the challenges and rewards older nontraditional undergraduates encounter as English majors? Sub questions included the following:

1. What “path” led students to choose English as a major?
2. What factors aid and/or hinder students’ continued enrollment semester after semester?
3. What kind of value do students believe the English major holds for them?
4. What kind of use do students believe the English major holds for them?

I began each interview with a series of background questions before asking questions linked to the sub questions above. The purpose of these background questions was to elicit demographic information that would help me construct both the individual and collective stories of the participants. In analysis, much of the background information was crucial in understanding participants’ responses to the other protocol questions.

However, I did not press participants for demographic information if they did not offer it. To single out two examples, one participant offered scant personal information about his background while another offered incredibly detailed information about her background, including the community she grew up in, how it had changed, and how it

was influenced by the culture of the times. Another participant shared demographic information after the interview was concluded that was not included in interview itself. I felt including this now-known detail violated the ethics of the research, as it was a deviation from the methodology (see discussion above). I then proceeded with the content questions following the question protocol (Appendix D).

I recorded each interview using an electronic Sony brand recorder. Audio files were created for each participant and stored in a secured location.

After the audio interviews were completed, I reviewed each audio file, writing a summary memorandum for each. The summary memos focused only on the data shared by participants. Then, I contracted with a private transcription service to transcribe all 10 audio files into Microsoft Word documents. Each audio file copy was delivered over a secure password-protected website, and the corresponding transcriptions were received over the same secure website in Microsoft Word document format, which were saved in accordance to the IRB's specifications.

I then reviewed the accuracy of the original transcripts using a three step process. After the original transcripts were printed, the first step included a surface reading through each transcription noting any transcriber's note marked "inaudible." I checked inaudible notes of the Microsoft Word file against the audio file of each case, and made corrections when necessary. I then saved these new corrected files as new Microsoft Word documents. The second step involved a deep and careful comparison against the audio file and the printed transcription from the start to finish of each interview. I made handwritten corrections on these second drafts, and saved these as a second edits. These second edit drafts were emailed to each of the respective participants for input as to their

accuracy. Any corrections or additions made by participants were saved as the third edit of the Microsoft Word document transcription. If a participant did not respond to the member checking email invitation, I assumed the transcript's accuracy, creating the third edits from which the coding and analysis occurred.

For clarity of reading, the transcription service edited out some of the interruptive language. For instance, in Bob's case, the audio file begins with "And, we are recording. And, I'm talking with Bob," However, the transcription read "We are recording. I'm talking with Bob."

In almost all cases, the superfluous "ands," and "I don't knows," and "ums" that acted as linguistic filler were edited out by the transcriber. I, however, added some of these back into the transcript when their reinstatement added to understanding or meaning. For instance, in Bess' case, while responding to "tell me the story of how you became an English major," Bess responded with the following statement: "[m]y senior English teacher told me she thought I should be an English major. My sixth grade teacher told me that. But, that was the sixth grade." The transcriber edited out the contradictory coordinating conjunction "but" in the original transcription document; however, I felt that this omission obscured the meaning of the participant, who appeared to dismiss or qualify the sixth grade teacher's advice by using the coordinating conjunction "but," so I reinstated the conjunction.

When these second edits were completed, I emailed all 10 participants the transcription of their individual interviews as part of the member checking process. Five participants responded to this emailing. Individual participant reaction varied.

One participant responded that his transcript was accurate and suggested no changes. Three others approved their individual transcripts with minor changes. One returned her transcript and responded with 58 comments added in the “Track Changes” feature of Microsoft Word. I responded via email to each of these 58 comments using an Microsoft Word document attached to my responding email.

In each case of disagreement, I reviewed the audio file to assure that the transcription and audio file was a correct match. In one particular case, a participant stated that even though she said one thing, she intended another. In all of these cases, I deferred to the participant’s intention, as the changes did not affect the substance of the data. This same participant also made seven punctuation suggestions. These suggestions neither aided to nor detracted from the substantive meaning of the statements; therefore, out of professional courtesy, I agreed to change these. These were, after all, English majors, many of whom had a keen eye for editing.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis included three rounds of first-cycle coding and one round of second-cycle coding. The first round of coding I completed was simply exploratory: a space to allow me to investigate what the data was saying. During this initial coding, I used both open and in-vivo coding techniques to develop short descriptive memos. While these techniques were specifically used in grounded theory methodologies, I used them so as not to make any assumptions about what the data might contain. I had originally made descriptive short memo notes in the margins of “third” edit paper copies of the transcripts, as well as analytic memos when appropriate. I loaded these descriptive memos and in-vivo codes into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet with locations attached (i.e.,

short memo “part of a community”, cl-13, 3”), which would indicate the memo was taken from the “Chaire” transcript, page 13, paragraph one.

I had developed descriptive short memos for 1,060 individual pieces of data in this first coding cycle. I used Creswell’s (2005) constant comparison method while going through all the data, reviewing previously written memos, and writing new memos that made connections to the data. As at least one other scholar noted that constant comparison was suitable for other qualitative applications (Merriam, 1998).

While certain topics began to surface that were in common (community college, giving something back, unfinished business), I realized I needed a coding strategy that was directly linked to the central or grand tour question, the sub questions, and what I was asking participants to share.

I engaged in a second and third round of first-cycle coding to discover how best the data ultimately could be coded. The second round of first-cycle coding was experimental, and I abandoned it. During this second and third round of first-cycle coding, I copied transcribed data directly from the third edits of the Microsoft Word document transcripts into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, and identified each piece of data by participant and page and from where the pieces of data came. The individual pieces of data from the interviews had expanded from 1,060 in the exploratory coding cycle to 1,590 in the subsequent cycles. Given this large amount of data, I considered using a computer program specifically geared toward managing qualitative data (such as *NVivo* brand); however, I instead opted for using Microsoft Excel software, as I had familiarity with the program, and the data sources (interviews) were homogenous in structure.

In cases where a portion of data may have started on one page and ended on the next page, I used the next page as its referent point. For instance, a piece of data starting on page three and ending on page four would have page four as the referent point. During this round, I also constructed pseudonyms for proper names that might identify not only the participants but individuals at the institution. This also included pseudonyms for the names of other institutions or cities mentioned by participants. This information was listed in brackets. States other than USU's and country identifiers remained intact.

Also, in this round of data coding, there were times when participants would be interrupted by something; there was something that interrupted the data, such as cross-talk or an interruption like "Hmm" from the participant. However, what they may have continued with may have been relevant and connected to the statement before the interruption. In this case, the data was strung together on the same line with the same coding, but separated by an ellipsis. In this example from Michael's interview, "I think I went to like 12 schools. . . . Yeah, I actually went to three schools in fourth grade, which is very strange" (Michael, p. 1), I wanted Michael to expand on the phenomenon of attending 12 schools in 12 years and stated, "Wow, that's almost like one a year."

In the end, and using Saldaña (2009) as a starting point and source, I found the most appropriate construct to be structural coding that linked data directly with the main research and sub questions. As Merriam (1998) stated, "the real learning takes place in the doing" (p. 156).

Coding was specifically linked to answers to the protocol questions. So, for instance for the following data "I went to community college right after high school" would be coded, "P" (Path) with a short memo "Community college" and "my parents

always wanted me to go to college” was labeled “P” with a short memo of “Encouragement, Parent.” Following this arrangement:

P Short memo;

A Short memo;

H Short memo;

V Short memo;

U Short memo.

Since I also asked a series of background questions, I also included the following:

B (Background), short memo.

This coding schema, then, followed this particular order: A (factors that aided enrollment), short memo; B (background), short memo; H (factors that hindered enrollment), P (path to major), short memo; U (use of major), short memo; V (value of major), short memo.

During the review of the structured coding cycle, it was clear that major dominate themes were surfacing that cut across cases and across questions. To respond to this phenomenon, I engaged in a last round of coding, this time coding for these specific themes. This edit became my final second-cycle coding from where I made my analysis.

Thirteen themes became evident in this coding cycle, themes that were describing and explaining the answers to the main research question and sub questions.

I also discovered that these 13 themes all shared specific sets of attributes that additionally could be coded in what Saldaña (2009) labeled “verses coding” (p. 94). I added this layer of coding because imbedded in my grand tour question “what are the challenges and rewards older nontraditional undergraduates encounter as English

majors?” were “binary terms” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 94) that lent themselves to this coding process. While these specific terms did not necessarily suggest “strong conflict,” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 94), they nonetheless suggested a powerful dichotomy between the positive experience of rewards and the negative experience of challenges. Miles and Huberman (1994) offered various ways to display visually this type of information in within- and cross case analysis, shown and discussed in Chapter 5.

Terms in the sub questions also lent themselves to this additional layer of versus coding, for example, factors that aided versus factors that hindered continued enrollment. However, during analysis of the interviews, it became clear that versus coding would go beyond just labeling a theme positive or negative. When discussing barriers to enrollment, one of the study’s participants said, “I was not used to going to school in a serious manner. That’s a, kind of an internal barrier, I guess.” He acknowledged that his lack of work ethic affected him in college, and it was an internal barrier. On further reflection and analysis of the data, I discovered that these themes had more than just one attribute. Therefore, each piece of data was additionally coded as follows:

- Attributes of the theme’s origin (labeled as either internal or external);
- Attributes of the theme’s setting (labeled as either informal or formal); and,
- Attributes of the theme’s influence (labeled as either positive or negative).

I coded attributes of theme’s origin as either originating from the participant or from an outside influence. Likewise, I coded a theme’s setting as either taking place in the formal structure of the educational environment (a high school class, a professor’s comment during an advising session) or an informal setting (such as the home). Finally, I coded each theme’s influence on a participant as being either positive or negative.



For example, when talking about her background, one participant said that her parents had just “wanted us to go” to college. This piece of datum was coded as a background statement, (B) with the theme of encouragement (Encouragement) that came externally from her parents (Ext) in the informal setting of the home (Inf) and was positive (Pos). If a piece of data indicated only demographic information (i.e., “I was born in Riverton”), it was coded as “demographic”; no attributes were assigned to these pieces of data.

## Chapter 4

### Biographical Sketches of Participants

#### Introduction

Throughout this research, my goal was to discover the answers to my research questions; however, I also wished to honor the voices and stories of those participants who engaged in this research. Before discussing results and findings presented in Chapter 5, this chapter includes brief biographical sketches of each of the participants, presented below in alphabetical order.

#### Individual Biographic Sketches

**Bess.** At the time of her interview, Bess, a White female, was 37 years old. She was born in Riverton and lived there all her life, but for a brief time lived in Germany when her family traveled there on her father's business. She was born in what she describes as an upper-middle class home. Her father, a widower since the mid-2000s, worked for a military contractor, and before her death, Bess' mother was a stay at home parent. Bess described the house she and her two siblings grew up in as a place that was always filled with books. Her father and mother were both avid readers. Her father received his undergraduate degree in history from USU.

Bess herself began reading at an early age and was an advanced reader. When she was six years old, she had asked her parents why the rival families in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the Montagues and Capulets, hated each other. Her parents asked Bess if she had heard about this story from somebody, or did she see it on television or in a movie? No, she answered; she had read it in one of their "big books."

This most likely did not surprise her parents too much, as two years earlier when Bess was four, she announced to her family that she was “going to be an actor.” Her family encouraged her interests early by getting her involved in the local children’s theater.

Bess attended Catholic grade school for the first eight grades and high school at one of Riverton’s public high schools. She headed to USU right after high school, first majoring in French and then in theater. Finally, her theater mentor asked Bess why she was not considering a major in English; all Bess did, after all, was read all the time, and she could spend her college years reading and writing about literature. So, she switched to English.

Then, a grave health crisis intervened, as Bess was diagnosed with cancer. Her enrollment in college fluctuated semester by semester. Her illness and treatments began to take a toll on her grades, and her professors finally encouraged her to drop out of school to first take care of her health, which she finally did.

After nearly 12 years of fluctuating health and treatments, Bess’ cancer was in check. She returned to USU to continue her studies.

**Bob.** At the time of his interview, Bob was 30 years old. While not a Riverton native, Bob lived in Riverton for a total of 22 years. He was born in Massachusetts to a German father and an American mother, and shortly after he was born, his parents moved to Germany on a military assignment. He considered his Germany experience formative and part of his identity. However, when he was a very young boy, his parents sent him back to the United States to live in Riverton with his grandmother, and while German was his first language, he lost all proficiency in it.

After high school, Bob took a sponsored trip to Japan. He had the opportunity to speak in front of a Japanese high school English class. The experience was transformative. Never before had he felt so comfortable speaking in front of others. It was then he decided that he wanted to teach English in Japan as a career.

Right after high school, he began attending community college in Riverton full time. He also started to work for a national airline company full time as well, doing everything “but flying the plane.” However, the stress brought on by the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks took a toll on Bob, and he quit the airline, taking a pizza delivery job to make ends meet. He then spent several years living in Texas and South Carolina, living with his fiancée at the time, and working for her father’s business, a check cashing company. After a year in Texas, he followed the family to South Carolina and continued working. Bob returned to Riverton, where at the time of the interview, he was a full-time student.

**Claire.** When she was interviewed, Claire was 54 years old. In 1993, Claire’s husband’s military job was transferred to the Riverton area.

Claire was born in Southern California and was raised north of the San Francisco bay area; at the time, the area of Marin County was still a mostly rural area. She went to a brand-new high school in the 1970s. As a sign of the times, the area, including her high school, was affected by the drug culture of San Francisco. Claire reported that at least one of her classmates died of a drug overdose every year.

Claire’s parents met while her father and mother were both working in Venezuela. While living in California, her father made a good income in the Merchant Marines, but “he wasn’t sending any of it home.” This had an impact on the family’s socio-economic

status, even resulting in homelessness for a time. This turmoil was reflected early in grade school when Claire wrote her first book, a story about a homeless family. When Claire was in high school, the chaos in her home caused by alcohol and divorce led Claire to live with her school's secretary for a year.

When Claire graduated from high school, she attended a few community colleges, starting and stopping, taking on interesting jobs, including managing a rock band. She finally ended up at a small Catholic liberal arts college. However, by her senior year of college, Claire had taken classes she wanted to take, not necessarily any that matched her degree requirements. She found an excuse "to leave nobly": she bought a one-way ticket to Europe, where she lived and worked for a short time.

Claire found her way back to the San Francisco area in the early 1980s, this time single, pregnant, and unemployed. She tried to go back to school, but the logistics were difficult. She resumed the free-lance writing career she began in Europe. She married in 1988 and had two more children with her husband. When the family was transferred to Riverton's nearby military base, she continued to home-school the three children. All the while, Claire said she had a troubling reoccurring dream about going back to school to complete her degree. In the meantime, her husband finished community college and started his own business. His change in employment was stressful on many levels, emotionally and financially. It finally took its toll.

In 2006, Claire's husband had a mental breakdown due to the stress of running his own business, but he recovered, getting a new job. This prompted Claire to think about getting back to that recurring dream and that "unfinished business" of getting her degree.

She returned to community college at age 51 to tackle her general education requirements for USU, which proved to be more daunting than she anticipated.

One evening her local community college was hosting a presentation by a USU English professor reading from his published creative nonfiction. Claire was hooked. “This is me; this is where I live.” She visited with the professor after the talk; he advised her to keep on her current course of study and come to USU when her fundamental requirements at the community college were completed, which she did. During the spring of 2012, she was enrolled as a full-time student at USU.

**Gigi.** At the time of her interview, Gigi was 48 years old and identified as single, Catholic, and a Riverton native. While her parents did not read to her when Gigi was young, her mother took her to bookstores where she often let her buy books from the clearance rack; when Gigi played “school” with her sisters, she was always the teacher. She had also always been an avid reader.

Years earlier, Gigi attempted coming to USU in 1982 as a traditional student, but Gigi was not aware of all the rules of the university, including withdraw procedures. “I did not know you had to drop.” As a result, she failed her initial university courses.

Gigi worked full time for many years while married. She had a 15-year-old son, a 25-year-old step-son, and grandchild, whom she babysat for on a regular basis. Gigi had a good relationship with her ex-husband and his wife, which she said helped with raising their 15-year-old son.

After her divorce, Gigi began going back to school in 2006 by attending the local community college, where she studied American Sign Language. A health issue intervened, but she did complete a general Associate’s degree. When she came back to

USU over 20 years later, she laughed and said she already had a negative grade point average as a result of those previously failed classes.

Along with being a full-time student and raising her 15-year-old son, Gigi was helping care for her twice-widowed father.

**Jerry.** Jerry was just about to turn 27 when he was interviewed. He grew up in a family with four other siblings in a rural community of about 2,000, located approximately 150 miles from Riverton, which was “a lot different than the city.” While growing up, he was raised on a farm, and then moved to town, then the back to the country. His parents divorced when Jerry was approximately 10 years old.

While reading was always one of Jerry’s “deepest pleasures,” he described himself as a lackluster student and joked that he had a “solid history of being a quitter.” His break between high school and college was a forced one. Jerry identified himself as a “fairly rebellious” student in high school. The most serious outcome of this rebellion was that he got in trouble with the law, mostly during his senior year of high school. As a result, he was on probation for the year following high school. Rather than deal with the bureaucratic issues of transferring his probation from his small-town community to Riverton, he decided to stay in his hometown where he worked full time for a year.

He moved to Riverton to go to school at USU. However, after a year in Riverton, he returned to his hometown for a year to help out his sister, whose boyfriend had left her alone to raise her children. Jerry enrolled in the closest state university, an approximate 65 mile commute one way. After that year, he returned to Riverton and USU. At the time of his interview, he was living with his girlfriend and his dog. He was employed full time at an engineering firm doing technical editing, but took a part-time job in the

summer of 2012 in anticipation of entry into USU's Master's degree program in English. He completed his undergraduate degree in the spring of 2012.

**Michael.** Michael was 29 at the time of the interview and came from a military family. His father, a divorced parent, was from San Antonio, Texas, and was in the Air Force. Michael was born in Mississippi and moved around a great deal as a child; he went to 12 schools in 12 years, three schools in one year alone. He did not get to know people for very long.

Neither of his parents graduated from university, but both had Associate's degrees. His parents were not avid readers, and the house "wasn't particularly" filled with books. His father was not much "for schooling." Yet, Michael began reading at an early age; his parents said he started reading when he was about two years old.

Michael also said he was not a very dedicated student, especially in high school. "I went to school around [n]oon, stayed for about two hours." He ended up in alternate high school programs to get through. When his father remarried, the family moved from Texas to North Dakota, which was a cultural change for Michael.

After high school, Michael joined the Army National Guard and entered college when he was 20. When his G. I. Bill financing came through, he enrolled in college in Minnesota.

At the time of the interview, Michael had been in Riverton for three years. He originally came to Riverton to go into the restaurant business, but that opportunity did not work out for him, so he went back to school.

**Nina.** Nina was 27 years old at the time of her interview. She was born in Riverton and identified as growing up in a lower-middle class neighborhood. Her father



was African-American, and her mother was African-American, Native American, and White; Nina considered herself of mixed race. She was one of three children; she had two older brothers. Both parents worked, her father as a technician and her mother as an accounting clerk. Nina considered herself coming from a working class family. “We weren’t doing badly, but we weren’t rich either.”

While she really did not want to go to community college, it was a less-expensive alternative to USU, so she went, but she did not like it. After the first quarter, she did not go anymore. After that, she decided to take a break for a few years. She worked various jobs; she was a waitress, a cashier, a telemarketer, and she worked for a maid service.

When she decided to go back to USU, she was now over 25.

**Shae.** At the time of her interview, Shae was 25 years old. She was born and raised in Riverton and lived in the same neighborhood for most of her life. She had a half-brother, her only sibling who was 19 years her senior. At the time of the interview, Shae was living with her parents, saving up enough to afford an apartment or small house. The neighborhood Shae lived in was old, considered historic, and was “tight knit.”

Shae attended Catholic grade school and a small private all girls’ college preparatory high school, where she said they emphasized writing in every subject, including science and mathematics.

Shae developed a love of reading, even “sneaking” books into classes to read them instead of listening to her class lessons. That love evolved to an “adoration” of how words created meaning. Shae’s well-educated parents had read to her since she was an

infant. Her father had the D.D.S and Ph.D.; her mother had a Master's degree. Getting a college degree was something that was simply expected in Shae's household.

Right after high school, Shae had enrolled in a small liberal arts college in Missouri for almost four years, where she ultimately tried to major in art. She considered her last year there a loss, as she experienced academic burn out. She returned to Riverton and took a year off before returning to classes at USU.

Shae was enrolled full time at USU as an English major in the spring of 2012, and completed the requirements for the degree in May, 2012. She was beginning the next stage of her life.

**Tracy.** At the time of her interview, Tracy, 32, was married with two daughters. Tracy's family was originally from the Kansas City area; they also lived in Texas and Virginia, and her family moved to the state when she was 14 years old. She was adopted, and was an only child, and her parents encouraged her in her quest to find her birth mother. Her biological mother finally contacted her through a social media website in the early 2000s. She found out much about her biological family, including the fact her birth mother was Jewish, and she was of Middle Eastern heritage, which was different than the Irish Catholic home Tracy grew up in. She grew up going to Catholic schools; however, as an adult she considered herself "somewhat of an atheist."

Tracy began reading at three years of age, and her parents had trouble getting her nose out of a book. While her parents were not avid readers, they nonetheless encouraged her to read. Being an English major was the only thing Tracy ever wanted to do.

Tracy went to college right out of high school, a liberal arts Catholic college that she herself did not choose; her mother wanted her to attend the Catholic institution. Tracy stayed at that institution for a year.

However, she did not like that English program at the college, so she “wasn’t too jazzed about staying there.” In 1998 she and a male friend were in a serious car accident together. They married two years after the accident. She and her husband settled in the state’s capital, which allowed Tracy to attend USU’s flagship institution there; however, the Catholic college would not allow transfer of Tracy’s credits until all of her outstanding balance was paid.

Tracy and her husband soon had a daughter, but making ends meet was a struggle. However, her husband got a better job, as did Tracy. A transfer to Riverton for her husband “really turned around for us.” He was making more money; she was working two jobs, and accepted another job at a small consulting firm that offered her the opportunity to advance and “do everything there.”

All during this time she was thinking about going back to school. She considered community college to get “some kind of degree” to get better jobs, but “it never panned out.” She had taken a few classes at the community college “here and there . . . but it never turned into anything.” She took classes because they looked fun. She even tried this strategy at USU. All the while, Tracy was working on paying off her previous student loans.

When the consulting firm Tracy worked for closed, Tracy was on maternity leave with her second child. After that period ended, she went to work for a corporation and found she didn’t like “being a number in corporate America.” Tracy then took a job with

the local branch of a national nonprofit agency, which she loved and still supported, but she was downsized. The organization gave her a good severance. It was then she decided to go back to school.

Along with being enrolled full time, Tracy worked full time, was married, had two young daughters, and was helping take care of her mother who was living in a nursing home.

**Zorra.** At the time of her interview, Zorra was 31 years old and single. She and her only brother were children of military parents, and her family moved a number of times around the United States, including Texas, where Zorra was born, Arkansas, and Florida. Her father had multiple degrees. Zorra said her father still enrolled in classes for personal enrichment. Her mother had an art degree. Zorra called her mother “a Jack of all trades,” with a propensity not to follow up on things. “I get that from her.”

Zorra also spent several years in Japan when her family was stationed there, and she went to middle school and high school at a U.S. military base. She also modeled while going to school and living in Japan. After Japan, the family located to the Riverton area as part of her father’s military assignment.

She grew up in a nondenominational Christian church, considered herself more “spiritual” than religious, and attended church sporadically. After completing high school in the Riverton area, she left for Texas to live with a friend. Her parents divorced after the move to Riverton.

Zorra’s interest was in multimedia, and the college program she was interested in was on the East Coast. Her parents objected, so instead, Zorra went to community college in Riverton. After three years of study there, she received an Associate’s degree

in history from the local community college. After that, Zorra took a year off from school. She then attended a proprietary college and a community college in Texas and then moved back to the Riverton area, going first to community college then to USU. She was also enrolled in the local community college while attending USU.

## Chapter 5

### Results

#### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to investigate the following central and sub questions: What are the challenges and rewards older nontraditional undergraduates encounter as English majors?

Sub questions included the following:

1. What “path” led students to choose English as a major?
2. What factors aid and/or hinder students’ continued enrollment semester after semester?
3. What kind of value do students believe the English major holds for them?
4. What kind of use do students believe the English major holds for them?

This chapter discusses the results and findings of this research, first by within case analysis of each participant and then by cross-case analysis of all participants.

As discussed above in Chapter 3, data was coded using a structural coding strategy that linked data to the specific research questions. Thirteen themes surfaced in this analysis, and these themes were assigned to their corresponding pieces of data. In addition to the structural coding, three sets of versus coding were added to further explicate the analysis. Each piece of data was additionally coded to express three specific attributes: the origin of the theme (internal or external), the theme’s setting (formal or informal), and the theme’s influence (positive or negative). Many of the summaries are displayed below in table format by theme, the number of times that theme

is referenced in the data, and a breakdown of that number by attribute. A summary follows.

### Case Analysis, Bess

**What “path” led Bess to choose English as a major?** When I asked Bess to tell me the story of how she ended up being an English major, she said it was a “long story.” Bess grew up in a comfortable home in what she described as an urban setting. Her father had instilled in Bess’ family the importance of living in a diverse community. Moreover, he was educated, well-employed, well-read, and worked in an occupation where he himself relied on writing skills. While Bess’ mother did not have a college education, she and Bess’ father were “always encouraging for whatever we did.” This kind of encouragement, coupled with a house that was filled with “tons of books,” exemplified the two dominate themes that described Bess’ path toward the major: encouragement and reading’s influence, shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Number of Times Dominate Themes Referenced in Bess’ Path to the Major*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	31	6/25	8/23	28/3
Reading’s Influence	11	8/3	1/10	11/0

Always an avid reader, Bess swam in a sea of positive encouragement that came for sources other than the formal classroom or educational environment. Her parents, her

mentor in the community theater, and later after her treatment and recovering health, even her cancer therapist and doctor urged Bess to pursue the English major. Her oncologist told Bess, “No, you have to. You know you’re good at this. You need to go back.”

External, formal, positive encouragement came from high school and even grade school teachers; moreover, positive encouragement came from the formal sector even when it was not always positive on the surface, but ultimately in Bess’ best interest. During her first attempt at USU and when Bess’ ill health began to affect her enrollment and performance, she recalled, “All the teachers, all the professors got together and said you have to [drop out]. You know, you’re not doing well, you’re not healthy, and I was not.”

Other themes that described Bess’ path toward the major included the following shown in Table 2.

Obviously, the biggest interruption that made Bess an “older nontraditional student” in the first place was her diagnosis of cancer, subsequent failure of health, and the outcome of that failing health: poor academic performance and attendance that resulted in her deciding to drop out of college.

However, the theme of resistance caught me by surprise. Throughout her secondary and even grade school years, Bess resisted the suggestion from teachers that she be an English major. “I remember when I got to high school—when I was a senior in high school—my senior English teacher told me she thought I should be an English major.” Bess resisted. “I told my senior English teacher I was not going to become one because I thought that was too easy.”



Table 2

*Number of Other Themes Referenced in Bess' Path to the Major*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Interruptions to Enrollment	9	1/8	0.8	2/7
Resistance	7	3/4	2/5	3/4
Possibilities	6	6/0	3/3	4/2
Being Older	3	3/0	1/2	1/2
Finances	2	0/2	0/2	2/0
Coping Strategies	2	0/2	0/2	2/0
Fear	1	0/1	0/1	0/1
Understanding the World	1	0/1	0/1	1/0

After exploring other possibilities at college in the form of other majors, such as a major in French and one in theater, Beth finally listened to her long-time mentor from the theater. Annie asked her, “Why? Why in God’s name aren’t you an English major? ... You can read and write about all the books you like—all day—that can be your thing.” Bess finally gave in and declared the major.

When her health returned, she returned to the classroom, even though being older made her feel “weird” because, among other things, Annie’s daughter was in one of Bess’ classes, “Oh gosh, it makes me feel old that I knew her when she was a kid.”

Interestingly, the theme of fear did not dominantly surface when analyzing Bess’ case. Certainly, having faced a grave health crisis would strike fear in anyone, let alone a young college student filled with hopes and dreams. However, coming to an

understanding of cancer’s normality, even for a young person, was ultimately a way that Bess coped with her situation, just as reading during those 10 plus years of sickness helped Bess cope, “That’s how I got through being sick.”

**What factors aided and/or hindered Bess’ enrollment semester after semester?**

*Factors that aided enrollment.* While Bess mentioned Federal aid in the form of the Pell Grant as important to financing her return to school, similar to her path to the major, encouragement surfaced as the dominate theme that explained the factors that aided Bess’ enrollment. As outlined in Table 3, just over half of those references to encouragement took place in a formal educational setting, and Bess mentioned nearly every level of the institution, from USU in general (“I thought [USU] was very helpful with my wanting to come back”) to the financial aid office at USU (“they really helped me figure out how I could finance this to come back”) to the English Department and the professors themselves (“they went out of their way to be helpful”).

Table 3

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Bess’ Aid to Enrollment*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	27	17/10	14/13	27/0
Being Older	2	0/2	2/0	2/0
Finances	2	0/2	2/0	2/0

Like the types of informal encouragement Bess received as a child from her parents and mentor to pursue the English major in the first place, the encouragement to return to school after her illness came from Bess' doctors who, according to Bess, "could see that I should be in school." This push even came from Bess' cancer support group, "they're helpful... they know that's really important to me." Bess seemed to understand that her individual success was in part the result of group efforts, formally from the university and its various departments and personnel who assisted her and informally from her doctors, her therapist, and members of her support group who journeyed with her back to health.

However, much of Bess' encouragement was internal. Not only doing well in her academics again, but having the courage to make new friends again this second time around was something that even surprised Bess, "I have a lot of friends now that I'm in school with, and yeah—I was not expecting that." Meeting older students helped Bess too. As she stated, "I guess I met other students that were older, so that made me feel better. I wasn't the only one coming back as an adult."

In the end, though, two different statements hinted at Bess' own self-determination to stay enrolled, the encouragement she mustered up herself. "I think that it's also I had a lot of determination to get this done. This is like important to me. . . . So, it's drive. It's like I'm not gonna give up." Total numbers are shown in Table 3.

***Factors that hindered enrollment.*** When specifically discussing factors that hindered enrollment, Bess did not dwell too much on these hindrances. Certainly, the most obvious hindrances to her enrollment were those two pieces of data I coded as "interruptions": her health, which she mentioned only once yet in profound way, "it

stopped me cold in my tracks” and her being on disability, which in turn affected her finances. However, Bess was nervous about coming back. These nerves came from the feeling of being older. How would Bess fit in? As she stated, “being older I was really nervous to come back because being 37, it’s going to be like these 18 year olds. . . .

‘What the heck is she doing here?’”

Yet, the theme of fear surfaced in Bess’ doubt of her now rusty academic abilities. “It had been so long since I’ve been in school, like, could I still write? I don’t know. Can I write papers?” This fear was realized when she entered the class of one of her professors who used scare tactics on the first day of class, announcing that he only gave out a handful of As. “Oh, no,” Beth pondered, “what did I get myself into?”

**What kind of value did Bess believe the English major held for her?** When discussing the value of the English major, Bess was brief but concise. Understanding the world better, writing’s influence, and reading’s influence all surfaced as themes that described the value of the major. For Bess, reading was the link to understand the world better. “When you read books, you understand the world more. I believe that. I think you understand the world better.” Writing’s influence was another important theme for Bess, “with an English degree you are better at writing and expressing yourself logically and succinctly in writing, which I think is not always well developed in people.”

However, Bess’ own internal encouragement added deeper value for her. For her, it was not just that English was something she always wanted to do (despite her resistance), it was not something that she was simply good at, it was something that was linked to her very survival, “I’m gonna show this [world] that I could come through the cancer and come out the other side right where I wanted to be.”

**What kind of use did Bess believe the English major held for her?** I coded nine of ten data statements Bess made concerning the use of the English major. All but one of these fell under the theme of possibilities. While Bess had “a lot of people talk to me about different things” as to the use of the degree, Bess’ possibilities appeared somewhat traditional for an English major.

My plans are either to finish my Master’s and maybe try to get in a teaching program and teach high school for a while . . . since some of those teachers were so helpful to me, I should give back to other kids . . . somebody who won’t think they’re so horrible and such a nerd for reading so much. You know? They won’t think they’re just dreamy kids in the classroom.

Ultimately, Bess wanted to earn a Ph.D. in English, but she acknowledged the tough job market and was a realist when it came to her prospects. “I know the job market’s tough for Ph.D.’s, but I just want it . . . there’s always the chance someday I can teach college.” For her, the theme of worth of the degree was inseparable from its use. “It’ll feel like I’ve made an accomplishment.”

Whether she taught college or helped those “dreamy kids in the classroom,” Bess wanted to give something back; she wanted to add her “two cents to the world of English.” After all, Bess herself was a dreamer, but those dreams were not fragile or fleeting; they were tempered by the cold reality of experiencing a life-threatening illness and the profound gratitude of a subsequent restoration of health and the promise of a full life.

### **Case Analysis, Bob**

**What “path” led Bob to choose English as a major?** For Bob, English was not particularly a favorite subject, especially in high school. “Up until this point, I hadn’t

really tried very hard on the homework.” Then, a transformative high school English teacher changed all that. Bob recalled the following:

He was very strict, in a good way. He really motivated students to do the work. . . . For the first time in my life, I actually read the assigned assignment, and I enjoyed both books. Then when it was time to take the test, I got an A+ on both tests, which was a first for me. That really got me excited.

The external, formal, and positive encouragement Bob received from this teacher and the internal, formal, positive encouragement Bob experienced after getting those “A+’s” was the cumulative spark that lit Bob’s path toward the English major.

Along with the influence of encouragement, other dominate themes in Bob’s path to the major included the theme of interruptions to enrollment and the theme of possibilities, referenced in Table 4 with three other themes: Coping strategies, skills gained, and understanding the world.

Table 4

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Bob’s Path to the Major*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	15	8/7	11/4	14/1
Interruptions to Enrollment	9	3/6	1/8	0/9
Possibilities	7	6/1	5/2	4/3
Coping Strategies	1	1/0	1/0	1/0
Skills Gained	1	0/1	0/1	0/1
Understanding the World	1	0/1	0/1	0/1

Bob was singular in his focus as to what he wanted to do with his life. He wanted to teach English in Japan. This goal, which I coded under the theme of possibilities, surfaced while he was on a high school graduation trip to Japan and had the opportunity to speak in front of Japanese students eager to ask Bob questions about the language. “Well, it was the first time I was in front of a group of people, and I wasn’t nervous.”

When he returned to Riverton from this trip, he began his studies full time at a local community college. He was also working full time; moreover, he was working full time for a national airline at Riverton’s local airport, doing everything “except to fly the planes and to sell the tickets.” Bob’s work environment soon deteriorated sharply. Bob attributed that deterioration to aftermath felt by U.S. airlines as a result of the terrorist attacks on America on September 11, 2001. As Bob said, “it got worse and worse. I ended up having to work—do the job of six people—by myself. It was just too much work.” The stress was ultimately too much. “I just gave up. I was burnt out, physically and mentally.” He quit his job, dropped out of community college, and left Riverton to work in South Carolina and Texas.

When Bob returned to Riverton, he resumed his studies at community college and transferred to USU with an Associate’s degree. He entertained other possibilities, other majors including chemistry and education, but he rejected these, as he did not have the mathematical skills to succeed in chemistry, and the education requirements did not match his career goal to ultimately teach high school in Japan. He still received encouragement from the two communities he straddled:

I live in two communities. One would be at school here among students and friends, and the other community I’d have to say is the online community... I’ve got online friends that I’ve been in communication with for many years. We’ve talked often—almost every day.

These online friends helped Bob stay connected to Japan, his ultimate destination.

During his recollection of how he ended up being an English major, Bob said he struggled through some classes, “but I made it through.” I coded this data as a coping strategy. The extra time he realized it would take to get his degree also allowed him the time to pick up a Native American Studies minor, an addition that added to his understanding the world better.

**What factors aided and/or hindered Bob’s enrollment semester after semester?**

*Factors that aided enrollment.* Bob attributed encouragement as a factor that aided his enrollment. When he talked about factors that aided him, two internal, yet formal encouragements had a positive effect on Bob; those two pieces of data referred to taking every English class possible at the community college and taking prerequisite courses there as well. Three informal, internal encouragements also helped Bob stay enrolled, his ability to make and maintain friendships. Two examples of these included Bob’s statement “I’ve had the opportunity to make friends with Japanese foreign exchange students,” and “Several of them have returned to Japan and we are still in contact.”

However, his college professors in formal settings encouraged him, too. It was important to Bob that his experience in college was an enjoyable one. As he stated, “they make the overall school experience enjoyable which gives me the motivation to continue.”

Bob mentioned other aids to his enrollment, which coincided with the following themes: Coping strategies (getting help from others); finances (living off student loans);



interruptions to enrollment (choosing a minor as a result of having to spend extra time getting the degree); skills gained (learning new languages); and understanding the world (learning to think differently), all listed in Table 5.

Table 5

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Bob's Aid to Enrollment*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	9	4/5	6/3	9/0
Coping Strategies	1	0/1	0/1	1/0
Finances	1	0/1	1/0	1/0
Interruptions to Enrollment	1	0/1	1/0	1/0
Skills Gained	1	1/0	0/1	1/0
Understanding the World	1	1/0	0/1	1/0

***Factors that hindered enrollment.*** The three themes explained factors that hindered Bob's continued enrollment: interruptions to enrollment, negative encouragement, and failed coping strategies, summarized in Table 6.

The negative encouragements did not hinder Bob's continued enrollment directly; however, they were a persistent strain on Bob. The courses he needed for his specific degree program were not offered frequently enough, making his program "dragged out an additional year because this class was only offered one time." He identified this as his main barrier.

Table 6

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Bob's Hindrance to Enrollment*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Interruptions to Enrollment	5	5/0	0/5	0/5
Coping Strategies	3	3/0	1/2	0/3
Encouragement	3	3/0	3/0	0/3

Beyond the lack of specific course offerings, however, Bob did not seem particularly fond of writing, perhaps an oddity for an English major. For him, it was a burden. He felt that some of the professors in the English department focused too much on writing and papers, and the time commitment needed for papers was a struggle for Bob; nonetheless, he figured out a way to cope. "I'm at the point now where I'm fine with all the papers, but when I first started back in school, it was just very time intensive and it was really a struggle."

However, during his first attempt at community college, working full time at a stressful job and trying to go to school full time also took its toll on Bob; this led to his largest interruption to enrollment. He specifically referenced being "burned out" when talking about his experience of working full time and going to community college full time as well. Bob said, "That's probably what burnt me out was full-time work, full-time school." He finally made the decision to drop out, "That's what really killed me. Then I quit school, continued with Northwest."

Certain coping strategies he attempted failed him. Bob remembered his daily routine: “I would actually work all night and then go to school at 8:00 in the morning. Then take morning classes, and then I would go home and go to sleep.” While the scheduling worked in theory, the reality was undeniable. “I remember just being tired all the time. My grades started to fall because I was so tired. Then I just gave up.”

Ultimately, the stress of this job and the opportunity to work and travel opened up, postponing his return to studies.

**What kind of value did Bob believe the English major held for him?** When Bob pondered the personal value of the English major, he focused mainly on two themes, the possibilities that the major offered him and a better understanding of the world he learned by studying the major. All themes are shown in Table 7.

Table 7

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Bob’s Value of the English Major*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Possibilities	6	6/0	0/6	6/0
Understanding the World	6	6/0	6/0	6/0
Skills Gained	3	3/0	2/1	3/0
Worth of the English Major	2	2/0	2/0	2/0

For Bob, possibilities boiled down to one ultimate goal: a specific job teaching high school English in Japan. Bob had apparently done his homework. “It’s very

preferable to have an English degree, and because it is competitive, I needed to go above and beyond the preferences so that I can get the job that I want.”

Understanding the world better was also a strong value of the major for Bob. While the possibilities Bob saw were all internalized for him, his broadened understanding of the world was gained in the context of the formal classroom and formal learning environment. His Native American Studies minor opened up the world for him. “That was an eye-opening, life-changing experience as well. Just seeing the other side of the coin really. We’re used to being raised with the White perspective on history.” His study of linguistics also aided in his understanding of his minor. He saw the connection between linguistics and the oral tradition of Native Americans. Understanding a culture different than his own would certainly be of value to Bob if he achieved his dream of teaching in Japan.

The other value Bob saw to the major fell under the theme of skills gained. There was an irony to this appreciation of skills. Bob had previously admitted that he thought professors focused too much on papers, and Bob previously stated that these paper requirements were a barrier for him. Nonetheless, he appreciated the value of the skills he had gained. “I think the purpose of the whole ordeal is to teach you how to organize your thoughts. That’s why I think the papers get easier, because you know how to organize your argument accurately and make an outline.”

The final value of the major for Bob was the worth of the degree. In Bob’s case, it was all about certification, the specific certificate he would get in addition to his Bachelor’s degree.

**What kind of use did Bob believe the English major held for him?** When discussing the use of the English major, one theme dominated his discussion, the theme of possibilities (11 of the 12 references). For Bob, it was all about the possibility of teaching in Japan, and he defended his position when answering questions from others about what he planned to do with the English major. Bob said, “the most common question is, ‘Are you gonna be a teacher?’ I say, ‘Yes, I’m gonna be a teacher.’”

When considering the value and the use of the English major, Bob contextualized his long-time hope to work, live, and teach in Japan. “I’ve wanted this job for [12] years. I still want it. So, I figure if I still want it a decade later then it must be—must be fate, or it must be what I have to do.”

Bob had been studying what he considered problems in the Japanese system and hoped to offer solutions. Ultimately, his focus was on those students, like the students so eager to hear him speak on that transformative trip to Japan. “I will do everything I can to assist them in their passage through high school.” Bob planned on giving something back to the world in the form of English instruction in a foreign country.

### **Case Analysis, Claire**

**What “path” led Claire to choose English as a major?** When analyzing the data concerning Claire’s path toward the English major, I found that encouragement was the dominate theme followed by the themes interruptions to enrollment, skills gained, and finances. Six other themes also surfaced (all themes listed in Table 8).

When talking about her path to become an English major, Claire described two journeys: her initial journey after high school and the journey to USU years later.

Table 8

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Claire's Path to the Major*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	45	21/24	22/23	29/16
Interruptions to Enrollment	20	15/5	5/15	11/9
Skills Gained	16	16/0	2/14	11/5
Finances	15	10/5	1/14	9/6
Coping Strategies	10	5/5	2/8	1/9
Reading Influence	9	5/4	0/9	9/0
Writing Influence	8	8/0	2/6	11/5
Possibilities	6	6/0	5/1	3/3
Being Older	5	3/2	2/3	2/3
Worth of the Major	1	1/0	0/1	1/0

However, the origins of both of these journeys started when Claire was a very young child.

While not referenced as many times as encouragement, writing's influence had a profound effect on Claire at a very early age. In two specific references, Claire recalled her first big attempt at writing.

It really started when I was in the third grade and I wrote this book, and I announced I was going to be a writer. I did, that's what I did for entertainment. I'd come home after school, and I worked on my collection of short stories.

Reading's influence was also an important theme, both from an external standpoint (family members who read) and internally: "I was also a voracious reader. I inhaled books. I loved books."

Much of Claire's initial encouragement came from within herself. "English was a class that I enjoyed the most all the way through school. This was like dessert." Claire's early home life, however, was less than sweet or positively encouraging. She came from what she described as an alcoholic home. To compound matters, while she was growing up, she would see school mates die of drug overdoses, "at least one a year." She attributed this to the drug scene of the late 1970s in the San Francisco Bay area, and called it a "sign of the times." However, given her chaotic circumstances at home, the influence of alcohol abuse, a father often absent from home on business, and a mother struggling to pay bills, I wondered if Claire must have sensed her own vulnerability.

Claire's mother even discouraged her from the English major, even though her mother graduated from university with a degree in English. Claire reflected on this external, informal, negative encouragement from her mother. "She had gone on and gotten her teaching credential, and remained unemployed for teaching jobs so long that she gave up her career. I think some of that disappointment was coming in my direction."

When the chaos at home became too much, her high school teachers, another source of Claire's encouragement, came to her aid: "a lot of the teachers and everybody, they just kind of made it their job—they nominated me. They looked after me." This included the secretary who would allow Claire to live in her home for a time during high school.

Claire admitted to not trying very hard in high school; she “dinked around a lot” after graduation, hopping from community college to interesting job back to community college, and trying different majors. She finally found stability and serenity at the Catholic liberal arts college she finally attended full time for several years. The Catholic nuns were source of external, formal, positive encouragement for Claire. Claire recalled one such nun: “Sister [Nicola], who’s been teaching English for her entire life. She has this amazing, gentle teaching style, whether it’s Chaucer or what the topic was.” For Claire, “getting that exposure to the nuns that were teaching English with this love of literature” exposed her to others like Claire, people she called “kindred spirit[s].”

However, Claire’s abrupt departure from college before completing her degree to go to Europe began a string of interruptions to enrollment. Not all of these interruptions were negative. As Claire stated, “I was getting a lot of exciting sideline excursions that weren’t necessarily contributing to finishing my degree—getting a lot of life experience, but not getting that degree.”

In fact, another theme, skills gained, surfaced from this life experience years later as one of Claire’s self-described proudest accomplishments, “I can say I taught all three of my biological children how to read and write.” Nonetheless, being single and pregnant on her return from Europe did not help in her return to school, as the logistics proved difficult. The years stretched on, and Claire got married, had two more children, and ultimately moved to Riverton.

It was after this move that Claire’s second journey to the English major began. Once again, the theme of encouragement was strong. For Claire, it began internally as what she labeled a “massive frustration dream,” a recurring dream where she found



herself back in the dormitory of her Catholic college, but at her current age. “I don’t know what’s going—this unfinished business is going to make me ill.”

Also during this time, finances became a recurring theme, as her husband had quit his job and started his own business, which ultimately failed and contributed to his mental breakdown. Claire was faced with being the sole provider of her family, but being older, another theme weaving throughout her path to the major, was evident: she was twenty years out of the workforce. More immediately, she was faced with finding coping strategies to deal with a spouse’s ill health. “I had to remove the guns from the house. There weren’t that many, but I had to get them out of the house.” Claire knew she had to go back to school, and like her first time around, she considered other possibilities, other majors, or in this case, other occupational fields. “I would get sucked into some accelerated degree program, and then realize with those programs, okay, I could do computer programming or hospital management. Neither one of them was not even close [sic].”

Claire had a plan: she would go to community college, get her deficits from years ago out of the way, and transfer to the university. She had coping strategies for this: “My strategy, because [Community College’s] on the quarter system, was three quarters and transfer.”

### **What factors aided and/or hindered Claire’s enrollment semester after semester?**

*Factors that aided enrollment.* The two main themes that surfaced when I analyzed Claire’s aid to enrollment were those of encouragement and coping strategies.

Claire attributed being older as another theme that aided her enrollment. These themes and others are listed in Table 9.

Table 9

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Claire's Aid to Enrollment*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	20	8/12	14/6	17/3
Coping Strategies	14	10/4	9/5	12/2
Being Older	5	5/0	1/4	5/0
Possibilities	1	1/0	1/0	1/0
Skills Gained	1	1/0	1/0	1/0

For Claire, most of the positive encouragement she received that aided in her enrollment came from others (external) in educational settings (formal). The majority of these individuals were teachers either at the community college or university level. In Claire's specific case, it is difficult to discuss the themes prevalent in factors that aid enrollment without referencing those themes that hindered enrollment as well.

Claire had a self-described mathematics problem. She needed to take a remedial mathematics course at the community college before she could complete the mathematics requirement she planned to transfer to the university. She failed that course, several times, but her instructor helped her. As Claire recalled, "I met with her in her office at one point and she says, 'This is really bad. You shouldn't have to do this. You're a writer!'"

However, Claire had an arsenal of coping strategies. She utilized learning centers for mathematics, tutors for science, and an informal network of friends to help her through the coursework. She also relied on her own pluck. For instance, when dealing with one of her interruptions to enrollment, specifically the evaluation of her old transcripts, she relied on a coping strategy she called “birddogging.”

It took a year of birddogging, and I think two aspects—of that, one is that the strength that I brought as a nontraditional student was that I knew how to birddog people and stay on top of, “Okay where’s my transcript, and what’s my status, and what needs to be done?” And send that email and leave that phone message.

Claire acquired this birddogging technique over the years, a skill she attributed to being older. “I’m a little bit annoyed with myself that it took me that long to be assertive. Whereas, when I was 19, 20, 21, 22, I was more easily buffeted by circumstance.” She was frustrated by her traditional-aged peers in the classroom who failed to take full advantage of the resources available to them that had been so helpful for her. “I see them in these classes—you want to just grab an 18 or 19-year-old and say, ‘Look, you know there’s all this fruit for the picking right here.’”

***Factors that hindered enrollment.*** The dominate theme in Claire’s hindrance to enrollment were those under the theme interruptions to enrollment, shown with other themes in Table 10.

For Claire, these interruptions included evaluation of old transcripts, which Claire identified as the biggest barrier to her enrollment as an English major. However, her own health issues, along with her mother’s health, threatened her continued enrollment. If these issues took center stage, she would have to drop out of the coming semester. These, coupled with her anxiety about mathematics (discussed above), added to the threats to enrollment. She also carried one fear, a fear related to her age. “One of my

Table 10

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Claire's Hindrance to Enrollment*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Interruptions to Enrollment	13	5/8	9/4	0/13
Being Older	3	3/0	1/2	0/3
Skills Gained	3	3/0	3/0	0/3
Encouragement	2	2/0	1/1	0/2
Fear	1	1/0	0/1	0/1

greatest fears was that I would be continually feeling like the square peg in the round hole.” She was the “dinosaur” and “[t]he old lady in the class with the teenagers.”

Claire also realized that time was not on her side. There was an urgency in completing her undergraduate degree: “I’m not 20, and I’m running out of time.”

**What kind of value did Claire believe the English major held for her?** In analyzing this question of value, I noted two dominate themes and three other themes, listed in Table 11.

For Claire the value of the degree was obvious; communication was what separated human beings from the animals. In discussing its value, Claire often juxtaposed the enduring core skills gained through the English major experience versus the fleeting skills that the study of technology offered. “I would argue that an English degree is vastly superior to, certainly and especially at the undergraduate level, to a technology degree.” She related the story of one of her friends. Claire’s friend told her,

Table 11

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Claire's Value of the English Major*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Worth of the English Degree	8	8/0	0/8	8/0
Skills Gained	6	5/1	0/5	3/3
Encouragement	3	3/0	0/3	3/0
Understanding	3	3/0	0/3	3/0
Interruptions to Enrollment	1	1/0	0/1	1/0

“[Claire], every technical skill I acquired in my Associate’s degree is already defunct. It’s dead. It’s not being used.”

This left a profound impression on Claire. For her, the ability to tell stories and to communicate those stories in verbal and written form was important, and not only for her own benefit, but for the next generation’s benefit was well; it was what Claire said gave the next generation its “roots.” “Without those roots,” Claire said, “we just become drifters.”

**What kind of use did Claire believe the English major held for her?** In analyzing the question of use, I noted two dominate themes and four other themes, listed in Table 12.

While there was only one reference to resistance, it was important nonetheless. Claire stated that she resisted the major because she felt she had to somehow “be legit.” However, when answering this question she was confident of what uses the major could offer her. Claire envisioned possibilities that included graduate school and teaching,

Table 12

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Claire's Use of the Major*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Possibilities	8	8/0	0/8	8/0
Skills Gained	5	5/1	0/5	3/3
Encouragement	3	3/0	0/3	3/0
Writing Influence	3	3/0	0/3	3/0
Worth of the English Degree	2	2/0	0/2	2/0
Resistance	1	1/0	0/1	0/1

perhaps teaching nontraditional students such as herself. However, the use of the degree and the skills she had as a writer had been proven to Claire in her lifetime, such as when she advocated to a state agency to pay for a foster child's braces:

I knew how to write a good email and good letter, and follow up and speak to people, and say, "No, my kid needs braces not so he cosmetically looks better, but because his head is abnormally small because of in utero toxic exposure, and it is impacting his teeth, his speech, and his ability to chew and swallow."

Claire was able to use her specific English skills to get the things her family needed.

However, use and value were often hard to distinguish in Claire's case, as exemplified in the following passage:

I still think that's a fundamental skill. Not just to be able to read, but to be able to make value judgment on the information you're reading. Because otherwise, we'll just post silly videos to each other on our Facebook page, and we don't get any deeper than that.

Claire's return to the university after 20 years was testimony to that search for deeper meaning, a value that proved important for her.

### Case Analysis, Gigi

**What “path” led Gigi to choose English as a major?** When analyzing the data concerning Gigi’s path toward the English major, I found three dominate themes: encouragement, interruptions to enrollment, and reading’s influence; other themes also influenced her path to the major (listed in Table 13).

Table 13

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Gigi’s Path to the Major*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	21	9/12	5/16	8/13
Interruptions to Enrollment	17	2/15	0/17	2/15
Reading Influence	11	11/0	8/3	11/0
Coping Strategies	4	3/1	1/3	4/0
Possibilities	4	2/2	3/1	3/1
Being Older	2	1/1	2/0	0/2
Skills Gained	2	1/1	0/2	0/2
Fear	1	1/0	1/0	0/1

Gigi grew up in the south part of Riverton, the oldest of three girls. Her life-long influence of reading began at an early age. She reported reading at the second grade level when she was in kindergarten. Reading even helped get her through when she was sick and missed much of the sixth grade. Her teachers suggested that she join the public library’s summer reading program to make up her deficiencies. Her response should not

have surprised her teachers, “No big deal. I do that every summer,” she recalled telling them. Even as an adult, the public library was an important place for Gigi, a place she described “like a family.”

Gigi also had external, informal encouragement, but not all of it was positive. Her father had attempted college but had decided it was not for him. Gigi told the story of his first and only semester to study architecture at USU. “My dad hated school.” Even as an adult, Gigi still experienced external, informal, negative encouragement, this time from a sister who teased Gigi about being the “perpetual student” and her own son who hated being dragged to the local public library by his mother, a favorite spot for Gigi.

Yet despite these types of negative encouragements, positive encouragement happened at an early age. Gigi’s mother would take her downtown to a bookstore that sold teachers’ editions. She would buy Gigi books off the clearance rack, books often above her grade level. Gigi would also play “school” with her sisters where she was “always the teacher.”

However, later when she attempted college enrollment for the first time at USU, she did not know that if she didn’t officially withdraw from classes, she would get automatic failures in those courses:

I tried coming to [USU] in [19]82, then I went to—I didn’t know that you had to drop and I just walked away. I already had a negative GPA when I came back 20 some years later, which is still affecting me now.

Failure, this ultimate negative encouragement, helped put Gigi’s education on pause for nearly 20 years.



Gigi got married, worked full time, and had a family. What finally brought Gigi back to her post-secondary studies was a nagging regret of not having finished her Bachelor's degree. The catalyst for that return was divorce. "The divorce kind of made everything go 'pfft.'" Yet, Gigi acknowledged the fact that this event also allowed her the space to return to school. "I went back to school after the divorce, I started at [Community College] in the American Sign Language program." While she did complete her Associate's degree, she realized that she had taken a large number of English classes, so she switched to the English major. It seemed a natural fit: "I just have loved English, and words, and word play, and talking, and discussions, and reading."

However, there were interruptions to enrollment that affected Gigi, most notably the loss of her mother and the subsequent time she ended up caring for her widowed father. "When my mother first died he couldn't cook at all. When my mom died, he did not know how to write a check. He did not handle the household finances at all. My mom did all of that."

Therefore, Gigi, always the teacher, found herself teaching her father simple life skills, "let's train dad how to do this." When her father lost his second wife to cancer, Gigi was faced with supporting her father yet again, this time helping out more emotionally.

### **What factors aided and/or hindered Gigi's enrollment semester after semester?**

*Factors that aided enrollment.* The two main themes that surfaced when I analyzed Gigi's aid to enrollment were those of encouragement and coping strategies. Other themes that aided her enrollment are listed in Table 14.

Table 14

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Gigi's Aid to Enrollment*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	19	8/11	12/7	19/0
Coping Strategies	15	7/8	2/13	15/0
Finances	4	3/1	4/0	4/0
Being Older	2	1/1	2/0	2/0
Possibilities	2	2/0	2/0	1/1
Fear	1	1/0	1/0	1/0

Gigi benefited from many formal forms of encouragement. The most significant of these were encouragements from professors, particularly when a crisis arose. Gigi recalled one professor, Dr. Owens, who worked with Gigi over a summer to finish a course. “[L]ast year, my dad’s wife was dying of cancer. We were up at the hospital almost every day, so I didn’t get everything done, and he gave me an incomplete and let me finish up over the summer.” This small accommodation meant the world to Gigi. It also had another major effect. It encouraged her want to be a better student: “You want to please that person because they believe you, and they believe in you.”

Building and maintaining good relationships were important for Gigi. She said, “if you’re actually honest, open and honest . . . they will work with you, and that goes a long way into you’re wanting to finish that class and not drop out.” Gigi also attributed other encouragements that had external, formal, and positive attributes as aids to her continued enrollment, namely USU’s TRIO Program, and the culture of the university

itself. For Gigi, the level of instruction was a type of encouragement for her. When she compared her experience at the local community college to that at USU, she was aware of and appreciated a more challenging academic environment. Gigi craved this additional academic challenge:

The requirements in the classroom are harder, and I think I needed that. I just—I enjoyed it, and now I enjoy it even more here. There’s a greater level of academia floating around here than there is at [Community College].

Along with encouragement, Gigi developed coping strategies that aided her continued enrollment. Gigi developed a support group of family who helped out, for example coordinating child care to coincide with the classes Gigi had to take. Gigi and her ex-husband Daryl did not follow their divorce decree’s parenting plan. They bent the rules in order to get their son to and from school and hockey practices. She, in turn, was part of the support group for her step-son, who was also attending USU. All of these relationships were important to Gigi, whether these relationships were within the family, with other students whom she made friends and socialized with, or her friends at the public library, and all of these appeared to have a positive influence on Gigi’s enrollment.

Finances was also another important theme in Gigi’s aid to enrollment, particularly her eligibility for the Federal Pell Grant: “Now, being a single mother and with the help with the Pell Grant and stuff, I was able—financially able to go, because when I was married we couldn’t afford it.”

While only referred to once, the theme of fear also surfaced when Gigi talked about those things that aided her enrollment; however, unlike her first experience at USU years earlier when she admitted she wouldn’t “say boo,” she was now filled with more confidence. “I’m not scared to say anything in the classroom now. I’m comfortable.”

***Factors that hindered enrollment.*** The main themes that surfaced when analyzing Gigi’s hindrance to enrollment were negative encouragements, being older, fear, and interruptions to enrollment; to a lesser extent finances and understanding the world also were hindrances. All are shown in Table 15.

Table 15

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Gigi’s Hindrance to Enrollment*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	10	2/8	8/2	0/10
Being Older	10	7/3	8/2	0/10
Fear	7	5/2	3/4	0/7
Interruptions to Enrollment	7	0/7	0/7	0/7
Finances	2	2/0	2/0	0/2
Understanding the World	1	1/0	0/1	0/1

For Gigi, being older fed her fears of returning to the classroom. Gigi pondered whether she would fit in with her younger classmates: “I’m gonna be older—all these young kids. . . . It was just like, oh gosh, am I gonna fit in?” Her fear was even palpable. She said she was “deathly afraid” to walk back into the classroom after being away for twenty-plus years. For her the hardest part was just “walking through the door . . . I was shaking. . . . You could probably smell the fear on me. It was that bad.” For Gigi, it was not how professors would receive her, but how students would react to her presence. “I

didn't know if they would accept me as an older student in their classes. . . . Well, you know, they always think you're the old fart."

Her fears were compounded by her own internal, negative encouragement when she compared herself academically to her classmates. At times, she felt these younger students were better and smarter than she was although she knew otherwise. "Sometimes I think that they're better than I am. Really. I don't feel like I'm better than them. I'm learning just along with them. Maybe it's just the way they discuss things and talk." Gigi had other negative encouragements that threatened her enrollment. She lost touch with some of her friends who had graduated or older students who had dropped out of school. She understood why these students dropped out, "you just feel like it's right there at your reach, but you just can't quite grasp it."

Moreover, while Gigi's family was incredibly helpful with juggling her schedule and childcare and were instrumental in developing her coping strategies, they were not always sources of positive encouragement when it came to her studies. "More or less, it's just I'm explaining what I'm doing, what I'm learning. You can see that their eyes glaze over."

Moreover, her family contributed to nearly every single interruption to enrollment that Gigi faced: when her son got suspended from school repeatedly, Gigi was forced to miss classes; when she experienced a death in the family, the emotional turmoil and strain affected her enrollment; when her own illness forced Gigi into the hospital, she had to delay her studies. All of these things were outside of her control.

These delays had other effects as well. As a single mother, Gigi was eligible for the Pell Grant; however, with her delays she ran out of that eligibility and faced the

prospect of funding the rest of her education with student loans. “It kind of puts me on a little bit longer to graduate, another three semesters now, and I’m out of financial aid, Pell Grants, because you can only get six years, so it’s gonna be all done on loans.”

**What kind of value did Gigi believe the English major held for her?** At the time of Gigi’s interview, she was still learning what value the English major held for her. For the most part, the value was internal, and it hinged on the new ideas Gigi was exposed to. “It’s opened up a new world of writers, and techniques, and understanding how the language works, and what you can do with it.”

**What kind of use did Gigi believe the English major held for her?** Gigi hoped to someday work with deaf children to improve their literacy. The English degree was something she felt could help her achieve this goal. She wanted to give something back, ultimately get young people just as excited about reading as Gigi was when she was a girl. “I would like to be doing that and make a difference in at least somebody’s life, you know?—open up their world of reading.”

### **Case Analysis, Jerry**

**What “path” led Jerry to choose English as a major?** When analyzing the data describing Jerry’s path toward the English major, 9 of the 13 themes surfaced, with encouragement being the dominate theme (all themes listed in Table 16).

At the time of his interview, Jerry described himself as a rebel. His rebellious nature got the best of him while growing up in and near Smalton, a farming community approximately 150 miles west of the Riverton area. Jerry was not a joiner. As he stated, “I’ve dropped out of every sports team that I ever joined.” Jerry also admitted to not trying very hard in high school, another type of negative, internal encouragement on his

Table 16

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Jerry's Path to the Major*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	15	12/3	2/13	5/10
Possibilities	5	5/0	2/3	3/2
Interruptions to Enrollment	4	3/1	0/4	2/2
Resistance	4	4/0	3/1	1/3
Finances	2	2/0	0/2	0/2
Skills Gained	2	2/0	1/1	1/1
Coping Strategies	1	1/0	0/1	1/0
Reading's Influence	1	1/0	0/1	1/0
Understanding the World	1	1/0	0/1	1/0

path toward the major. Life in a small town did not help matters, as Jerry described it, “everyone knows what you’ve done and who you talk to and who you hang out with.” Jerry fell in with the wrong crowd, got in trouble with the law, and ended up on probation for a year after high school graduation.

He pondered transferring his probation to Riverton so that he could attend school sooner; however, the “red tape” and “hassle” proved too burdensome, so Jerry bided his time in Smalton for a year before beginning at USU. As soon as he was able to move, he did, breaking ties with his old group of “cohorts.” He still was not too connected with any kind of community. One of the few positive, external, informal encouragements came from the fact that his older brother had a degree. While admittedly not too

competitive, sibling rivalry played a role. As Jerry joked, “I can’t walk around without a degree if my brother has one.”

His original major, coded under the theme possibilities, was computer science, but it bored him, and it was an expensive proposition. Jerry resisted being an English major at first, but he finally relented. As he stated,

I have always been drawn to books. Reading is one of my deepest pleasures. I enjoy writing very much. It’s just part of who I am and has been since I can, since I can remember. It seemed a natural selection.

After coming to what he called that “jarring realization,” Jerry switched his major to English.

#### **What factors aided and/or hindered Jerry’s enrollment semester after semester?**

*Factors that aided enrollment.* The overwhelming theme that surfaced in Jerry’s aid to enrollment was positive encouragements he received, along with two other minor themes, all shown in Table 17.

Table 17

#### *Number of Times Themes Referenced in Jerry’s Aid to Enrollment*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	17	1/7	10/7	16/1
Finances	3	2/1	3/0	3/0
Coping Strategies	1	1/0	0/1	1/0



While he had not been part of a particular community, he was developing a close circle of friends; moreover, he was becoming “enmeshed in the university” and was surrounded by professors who challenged him. This challenge proved rewarding as well. As his classroom performance consistently improved, Jerry had the internal encouragement to continue. As he stated, “hearing support from professors, and professors saying, ‘This is a really good job,’” and earning their respect was something Jerry valued and attributed as an aid to his continued enrollment.

While only mentioned several times, financial aid was “immensely, abundantly important” as an aid to Jerry’s enrollment. Jerry reported coming from a very low-income family, and they could not support his college aspirations. As he stated, “feel free to cry this from the mountaintop. . . . Financial aid from the U.S. government has been one of the key factors for why I continued to go to school and why I graduated.”

***Factors that hindered enrollment.*** All themes relating to Jerry’s hindrance to enrollment are shown in Table 18.

Table 18

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Jerry’s Hindrance to Enrollment*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	5	5/0	3/2	0/5
Coping Strategies	3	3/0	0/3	0/3
Finances	3	2/1	0/3	0/3

Jerry identified internal forms of formal negative encouragement as hindering or threatening his enrollment and his success in college. Not having been a good student in high school, Jerry lacked key success skills. “I was lacking fundamental habits that I needed when I first started going to school, like knowing when to study and how to study, a lot of the self-control that is required.” Also, not managing stress effectively was another internal, informal, negative barrier.

I think I had one semester my sophomore year where I was under a lot of emotional strain, and it was very difficult to keep everything up in the air at once. Something had to give, and it was school.

Despite these barriers, Jerry succeeded and graduated at the end of the Spring 2012 term with his degree in English.

**What kind of value did Jerry believe the English major held for him?** Jerry identified only two themes when discussing the English major’s value; these are shown in Table 19.

Table 19

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Jerry’s Value of the English Major*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Understanding the World	11	9/2	0/11	10/1
Worth of the English Degree	8	8/0	1/7	8/0

For Jerry, understanding the world better and the worth of the English degree took prominence in his discussion about the value of the English major. The attributes

associated with these themes were nearly all internal, informal, and positive. Reflecting on the English major's value, Jerry said the major allowed him to better understand the role of meaning. Moreover, as Jerry stated, "it's really important, in my opinion. . . . I feel like it helps me see things that others don't see." To Jerry, understanding texts and symbols helped him understand the world better.

The worth of the English degree was also personal for Jerry. "[I]t enriches my life." He needed to understand what was happening around him. It also gave him the kind of self-control he needed, different than the rebellious days of his youth. "I don't feel like I'll every have the power to control anything but myself. I want to be able to control myself." Discerning meaning and understanding power was important to Jerry, and the degree gave him skills to maneuver meaning and choices, whether it was deciding who to vote for or what product to buy.

**What kind of use did Jerry believe the English major held for him?** Jerry referenced three themes when he talked about the use of the English major, listed in Table 20.

Table 20

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Jerry's Use of the English Major*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Possibilities	7	7/0	0/7	7/0
Understanding the World	2	2/0	0/2	2/0
Encouragement	1	1/0	0/1	1/0

Now at the end of his undergraduate journey, Jerry saw many possibilities for his future. “I felt like I had to choose something that I was good at and that I could do . . . for the rest of my life, I mean as a job, as far as selecting a career.” He envisioned ultimately getting a Ph.D. in linguistics, perhaps working directly with language policy, perhaps living and teaching overseas.

Jerry beat the odds. He was from a low-income family, had poor study habits, had a delayed matriculation to university due to the trouble he had gotten into with the law, had a false start in the wrong major, and even stopped out briefly to help out a family member in need. By his own admission, he was a self-described “quitter.” Yet, this quitter crossed the finish line of graduation, and Jerry planned on crossing other finish lines in the future.

### **Case Analysis, Michael**

**What “path” led Michael to choose English as a major?** Themes referenced in Michael’s path to the major are shown in Table 21.

Michael’s path to the English major happened despite himself and his circumstances. While his parents both had Associate’s degrees, neither read very much, unlike Michael, who began reading at an early age. Despite his aptitude for reading, Michael admitted to not trying very hard in high school. “I was the type of student [who] went to school around noon and stayed there for like two hours.”

Understandably, Michael could not get too invested in any one school, given the fact that Michael’s divorced military father moved the family around numerous times when Michael was young. Michael attended 12 schools in as many years, three in

Table 21

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Michael's Path to the Major*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	7	4/3	5/2	4/3
Possibilities	4	4/0	3/1	0/4
Coping Strategies	3	3/0	1/2	2/1
Interruptions to Enrollment	3	1/2	0/3	1/2
Reading's Influence	3	1/2	3/0	1/2
Skills Gained	1	1/0	1/0	0/1
Worth of the English Degree	1	1/0	0/1	1/0

the fourth grade alone. Likewise, his father was ambivalent about Michael's college aspirations, offering an external, informal, negative encouragement that must have left an impression on Michael; as Michael stated, "he doesn't really say a lot about it. I mean, I guess he's not unsupportive but it's not a priority."

However, despite the fact that Michael bounced from school to school, reading became a coping strategy that got Michael through. "It's always been something that carried me through school. . . . Having such an interest in reading carried me through school for the most part."

Michael's main interruption to his first enrollment was joining the military reserves. He did not start college until he was 20, as he had to wait for his G.I. Bill financing to become available. When it did, Michael enrolled and tried several possible majors: film studies, athletic training, even biology. He moved with this father and step-

mother and attended universities in Minnesota and Oklahoma. Ultimately, it was an influential college professor who intrigued and challenged Michael to really think about the literature he was reading, and in the end, it was the love of the story that convinced him to switch to from the study of film to English. “I cared more about the story itself and crafting a story and the way it affects people. That gained my interest in literature.”

**What factors aided and/or hindered Michael’s enrollment semester after semester?**

*Factors that aided enrollment.* The main theme that surfaced in Michael’s aid to enrollment were the positive, mostly external, and formal encouragements he received, shown with two other themes in Table 22.

Table 22

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Michael’s Aid to Enrollment*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	8	2/6	7/1	8/0
Being Older	1	1/0	0/1	1/0
Reading Influence	1	1/0	0/1	1/0

Michael acknowledged his own internal drive to succeed. As he stated, “neither of my parents graduated from a university, so that sort of is something that I want to accomplish.” However, it was the external positive encouragement he received in the formal setting of the university that aided in his enrollment. One professor in particular

had an impact on Michael; she challenged him, respected his opinions, and as a result, Michael wanted to do better. “I really respected this professor and I wanted to do well with this English that I really liked.”

Michael also attributed being older as an aid to his enrollment. Michael described it this way:

I’ve lived a lot of places and I’ve been into a lot of classes, different colleges. I think it’s the experience that I’ve had in so many classes and being able to succeed in so many—over and over. It’s helpful.

The experience of being older, coupled with reading’s influence, helped Michael tackle the intimidation other students might feel when reading through a large amount of texts. Life experience had prepared Michael for just this thing.

***Factors that hindered enrollment.*** Michael mentioned one sour experience he had at university that may have not threatened his enrollment, but was certainly an external, formal, negative encouragement that dissuaded him from studying English. He encountered a lack-luster English instructor whose patronizing tone irritated Michael.

Michael only mentioned skills gained as the main hindrance to his continued enrollment, specifically the changes to technology he faced over the years of attending universities. Since he had been going to universities for several years, technologies had changed over time. Michael did not like to type, and he did not like computers. He jokingly recalled his classmates who poked fun at him. “They said you know you’ve been in school for too long when the technology you’re using has changed over the time you’ve started to the time you’ve finished.” Like the technological glitches that perturbed Michael, these hindrances were minor obstacles in Michael’s experience in the English major.

**What kind of value did Michael believe the English major held for him?**

Others often asked Michael what he felt was the value of the English major. For Michael, understanding the world was a theme that surfaced when he talked about the value of the major. Reading literature was a window that helped him understand the world and its history; “with literature it’s all a reflection of what’s going on at the time.” The English major also gave Michael the skills he needed to succeed in other areas of his life. “I’ve always felt like I could learn new material because of spending so much time with the English major.” This skill helped Michael in his other subjects, but in the end it was about reading’s influence and his love of reading. As Michael stated, “it always comes back to reading stories, great stories.”

**What kind of use did Michael believe the English major held for him?** All of the three themes associated with the uses Michael believed the English major held for him had attributes that were all internal, informal, and positive. These themes included possibilities, understanding the world, and skills gained.

Michael saw a connection between the social injustices he was reading about in his classes and the world around him. This understanding of the world helped shape Michael’s response to that understanding. One theme that dominated Michael’s response to this question was that of possibilities. Michael wanted to help, to give something back to society. He pondered the prospect of graduate school or law school or working with a nonprofit organization. He wanted to “do something involved with the community or a community of people that aren’t able to provide for themselves.”

Michael’s path to the English major literally covered the map of the United States. He was used to moving with his family, and his journey through higher education from



one institution to another led him on a multiple state, multiple university trip to the English major. It is very likely that the English major is not the end but only the beginning of his journey.

### Case Analysis, Nina

**What “path” led Nina to choose English as a major?** When Nina talked about her path to the English major, six themes surfaced that described her path to the major, encouragement and possibilities being relatively dominate; all themes are listed in Table 23.

Table 23

*Number of Times Referenced in Nina’s Path to the Major*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	6	2/4	3/3	5/1
Possibilities	5	3/2	5/0	3/2
Finances	3	2/1	1/2	1/2
Interruptions to Enrollment	3	3/0	0/3	1/2
Reading Influence	2	1/1	1/1	1/1
Understanding the World	1	1/0	1/0	1/0

For Nina, English had always been a favorite class of hers in high school. She was encouraged to take honors classes, but to her regret did not do that. Her parents, neither of whom finished college, while not specifically encouraging her to be an English major, nevertheless encouraged Nina and her brothers to go to college. Her financial aid

package would stretch farther at the community college, so she began there, though she did not particularly like the community college environment. She took several foundational courses and then transferred to USU.

Nina described herself as coming from a working-class family. Money was often tight, and Nina spent time thinking about money, including majors that could make money. As Nina said, “when you think about money it kind of leads you to think, especially if you’re going into college, what makes money.”

Nina’s main interruption to enrollment was stopping out of college to go to work full time. She did a variety of jobs, but ultimately found her way back to USU; she first majored in journalism then switched to English and creative writing.

**What factors aided and/or hindered Nina’s enrollment semester after semester?**

*Factors that aided enrollment.* While Nina cited the theme of finances as often being a hindrance to Nina’s enrollment semester after semester (discussed below), Nina acknowledged how certain aspects of financing helped her stay enrolled. This and other themes are listed in Table 24.

Nearly all the positive attributes for the theme of finances were formal. These included Nina’s eligibility for more Federal aid in the form of Pell Grants when she had turned 25 and winning a needs-based scholarship that helped pay for tuition and books. Nina appreciated even the small financial benefits that the scholarship program provided. “If you’re trying to find a place to print something or if you don’t have any money on your . . . card, things like that. Those were really helpful.” For Nina, any and all help was appreciated. While her working class parents could not directly help with Nina’s

Table 24

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Nina's Aid to Enrollment*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Finances	15	7/8	13/2	15/0
Encouragement	13	1/12	12/1	13/0
Interruptions to Enrollment	1	1/0	0/1	0/1
Possibilities	1	1/0	0/1	1/0

tuition, they could help out financially in other ways. Nina reflected about her father's contribution of always providing his children with reliable transportation to get to classes:

Our dad had always made a point of making sure we always had a car. If we needed a car, he would always get us a car. It wouldn't be like a nice brand new, you know, BMW but . . . it would run and be safe and have heat and air conditioning and that kind of stuff. He did help us a lot there.

Nina also received much external, formal, positive encouragement. It was a Native-American outreach coordinator at USU, a person Nina's brother told her about, who taught Nina the process of applying for scholarships, helped her understand her eligibility for Federal aid, and encouraged Nina to keep a consistent and high grade point average to be eligible for scholarships. Other positive encouragements with formal and external attributes came from other offices, such as USU's TRIO Program and the needs-based scholarship program that had a learning community component.

These programs helped Nina feel as if she was part of a community. As Nina said, "they try to get you involved with different things around campus. You never feel like you're just coming to school." Interestingly though, when I asked Nina to expand on

the types of extra-curricular events she participated in, she could only recall one, a free movie she went to “a few years ago.” Just knowing those things were available was important for Nina; however, of more importance were things like access to computers, free printing, and tutors.

***Factors that hindered enrollment.*** The references Nina mentioned under the theme of finances all had negative attributes and were mostly informal. These references all listed in Table 25.

Table 25

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Nina’s Hindrance to Enrollment*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Finances	12	6/8	2/10	0/12
Interruptions to Enrollment	4	4/0	0/4	0/4
Encouragement	2	0/2	0/2	0/2
Coping Strategies	1	1/0	0/1	1/0

Nina spoke frankly about finances. “The biggest barrier that I’ve had has been money, without a question, not having money.” She described her experience of applying for financial aid right after high school. Her Expected Family Contribution (EFC) was unrealistically large given her family’s financial situation; her parents’ response was most likely a common one: “they expect us to pay that?” Not knowing how to apply for financial aid and having parents who were reluctant about Nina applying for student loans did not help.

Moreover, even while she was living at home, Nina was expected to contribute to the family budget. Worrying about money and not have enough money to go to college ultimately led to one of her main interruptions to enrollment, stopping out to work. Other themes surfaced as well when Nina talked about barriers that hindered her enrollment. Other students Nina talked to had families who had been to college and understood the kind of time needed to study; Nina's case was different: "they don't know how many hours are required to go outside of class to study, to read, to research." Nina developed an internal, informal, and positive coping strategy to overcome the family's pull, that of being firm. "If you're not very firm, you can find yourself procrastinating terribly because you're like, well I have to study for a couple of hours."

For Nina, the theme of finances was a looming one, both in her hindrance and aid to continued enrollment. Fortunately for her, she ultimately found the right kind of formal guidance at USU to pursue and secure funding.

**What kind of value did Nina believe the English major held for her?** Nina heard the negative encouragement and resistance from others when forming her value of the English major; people would ask Nina why she would major in English when "it doesn't pay anything." However, for Nina, the critical thinking skills gained were the major's reward. One of the English department's professors shared her own personal story of how the English major honed the professor's own critical skills and sharpened her eye for detail when she was working in another profession, and that got Nina thinking about the skills she herself was learning. Even professors from outside of the English department positively influenced Nina's perception of the English major's value. Six

different themes surfaced when Nina talked about the value of the English major, shown in Table 26.

Table 26

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Nina's Value of the English Major*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Skills Gained	8	3/5	3/5	7/1
Encouragement	7	3/4	1/6	6/1
Worth of the English Degree	4	2/2	1/3	3/0
Reading Influence	3	3/0	0/3	3/0
Resistance	1	0/1	0/1	0/1
Understanding the World	1	1/0	0/1	1/0

Yet, much of Nina's encouragement was internal in nature. "Everything else," she said, "seems like it'd be kind of drudgery for me." The worth of the degree was even strong enough for Nina to recommend the English major to others.

**What kind of use did Nina believe the English major held for her?** When asked about the use of the English major, Nina responded by talking mostly about the possibilities. At the time of her interview, however, Nina was already experiencing a possibility; she was working with at-risk girls as a volunteer at a county youth center. "They've had a lot of damaging experiences, terrible, terrible experiences in their life." Nina taught these girls to express themselves through creative writing and poetry.

However, Nina saw herself going to graduate school, maybe even law school, though she doubted whether she would do well there. She had been considering other options as well: publishing, teaching, even working outside of the traditional fields English majors might typically gravitate. Whatever she chose, she wanted to continue to give something back. As she stated, “I hope that that with my English degree I’ll be doing something really important for people.” For the girls at the county youth center, she was already doing just that.

### **Case Analysis, Shae**

**What “path” led Shae to choose English as a major?** When talking about how she became an English major, Shae said, “Oh, God. It’s convoluted”; and it was, as evidenced in the number of themes that surfaced when she talked about her path into the English major. Nearly all themes, 10 of 13, surfaced when Shae talked about her path to the English major, shown below in Table 27.

Shae grew up in a sheltered and privileged background with highly educated parents and good private elementary and secondary schools. She considered herself an only child. Although she did have a much older step-brother from her father’s first marriage, he was out of the house as far back as Shae could remember. Shae had a lot of encouragement, nearly all positive, from formal settings such as her all-girls’ private high school, but much of the foundational encouragement came from her parents. The decision to go to college, according to Shae, was always assumed. Shae remembered conversations with her parents about college as early as when she was in the third grade. “It was always ‘when’ you go to college.”

Table 27

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Shae's Path to the Major*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	36	10/26	10/26	31/5
Possibilities	11	11/0	6/5	9/2
Coping Strategies	4	4/0	0/4	4/0
Worth of the English Degree	3	3/0	1/2	3/0
Interruptions to Enrollment	3	2/0	0/2	0/2
Reading's Influence	2	1/1	0/2	2/0
Resistance	2	2/0	0/2	0/2
Understanding the World	2	2/0	1/1	2/0
Writing's Influence	2	2/0	1/1	2/0
Finances	1	1/0	0/1	1/0

Shae was a successful student, always doing well on standardized tests. Even when she was faced with a class in grade or high school that would bore her, she found a way to be “stealthy” about sneaking a book into the classroom. Shae used this as a coping strategy to get her through school. For her, it was “always the book.”

When Shae did go to college, she started in a small liberal arts college in another state. While she liked many aspects of the college, she was not encouraged by the college's small English department; the department was lacking, according to Shae, and this “killed” English for her. She also had resistance to the major. Her contrary nature rejected the assumptions of others. As Shae stated, “[b]ecause I've always liked to read



and I've always liked to write and I've always liked words, people assumed I would be an English major." She set out to prove them wrong. She also tried other possibilities, such as an art major; however, she ultimately rejected that because she did not love it enough. Shae later reflected that she was "being an idiot and that my first love would always be English."

The stress of college life took its toll on Shae. She decided take some time off from her studies and returned to Riverton. This break was revealing. During her interview, Shae spoke a great deal about her half-brother, comparing the two of them. In some aspects, this may have been because her brother Jack had delayed college himself. Shae knew that not finishing college had consequences in her family: "College dropout is one of those phrases in my house [that] should be a curse word because people just invest it with that much loathing and disdain." Shae did not want that label. She found her way back to the university by enrolling as an English major at USU.

**What factors aided and/or hindered Shae's enrollment semester after semester?**

*Factors that aided enrollment.* Once again, the main theme that surfaced in Shae's aid to enrollment was that of encouragement, and these encouragements had attributes that were mostly positive and external and all formal, shown below with other themes in Table 28.

Shae acknowledged that many people had helped her. She also acknowledged that she was lucky not having to worry about financing her education as some of her other friends did. However, what aided Shae the most was the encouragement she received from those teachers who "grab my attention and engage me in what they're

Table 28

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Shae's Aid to Enrollment*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	19	6/13	19/0	17/2
Fear	2	0/2	2/0	0/2
Finances	2	2/0	0/2	2/0
Coping Strategies	1	0/1	0/1	1/0

teaching.” One college instructor at USU in particular was influential, as his positive encouragement in the classroom was the push she needed to do better.

[T]hat was really important for me, just to have a teacher that I liked and I could connect with and that made me feel like achieving academically and learning things and thinking harder about things that I might normally kind of gloss over. It was really helpful. Helpful is such an anemic word for it.

***Factors that hindered enrollment.*** Four themes surfaced when Shae talked about the factors that hindered her continued enrollment, listed below in Table 29.

Shae loved going to college, so much so that she did not want it to end. I labeled this piece of data as an internal, formal, positive encouragement; however, this love of college was also a hindrance since Shae did not want the college experience to end. In fact, this hinted at another theme that surfaced when Shae talked about the things that hindered her continued enrollment: fear. Shae feared what came after college. As Shae stated, “My problem, where the barrier comes in, is that I never knew what was going to come after college. It was high school, college, blank . . . oh, it scared the crap outta me.”

Table 29

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Shae's Hindrance to Enrollment*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	11	5/6	9/2	1/10
Fear	4	4/0	0/4	0/4
Interruptions to Enrollment	3	3/0	0/3	0/3
Resistance	2	2/0	1/1	0/2

However, Shae's biggest barrier was herself. One reason for this was her poor work ethic she attributed to not trying her best in high school; this had spill-over effects when she came to college. Other negative encouragements also affected her. While she could suffer through professors she considered "duds," one professor from her first institution affected Shae's attitude toward college and the English major itself. Shae was stifled by this professor; as she stated, "I would offer a differing opinion, I would get shot down pretty hard." Ultimately, these types of stresses led to the burn out she experienced at her first institution and led to her stopping out for a year.

**What kind of value did Shae believe the English major held for her?** Shae referenced seven different themes when talking about the value of the English major, shown below in Table 30.

For Shae, the worth of the English degree had all been internal in origin. The English degree helped her understand the world better. It gave her a "window into how people think, how society works, how a society thinks about different subjects." It also had broad applications different from other areas of study. As Shae stated, "it's not

Table 30

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Shae's Value of the English Major*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Worth of the English Degree	10	10/0	0/10	10/0
Skills Gained	4	4/0	3/1	4/0
Possibilities	3	3/0	1/2	2/1
Understanding the World	3	3/0	0/3	3/0
Encouragement	2	1/1	0/2	2/0
Writing's Influence	2	2/0	1/1	2/0
Resistance	1	1/0	0/1	1/0

something like chemical engineering where it's a skill and you get a job as a chemical engineer." The English degree, according to Shae, could be applied to everything.

Through her experience in her undergraduate English internship, she applied what she identified as "transferrable skills," skills she said she planned to use her entire life. In the end, however, the degree's worth was lodged in her love of language and her love of words. It was something almost sacred to this self-identified agnostic. "It's something that just touches my heart."

**What kind of use did Shae believe the English major held for her?** While obtaining her degree, Shae encountered the negative assumptions of what others had about the English degree. Shae expressed these assumptions this way:

When I went to college, I had, people had told me that being an English major was a degree you couldn't use. It was a nothing degree like art, you know, degrees you can't really use in the real world. It's not a real skill.

However, Shae felt she did have real skills, and her discussion of the use of the English major focused around her self-described strongest skill: her ability to edit. Editing was something Shae always did, even for entertainment in her spare time. It was something that she wished she could turn off at times. Therefore, she pictured herself in what would be considered a traditional role for an English major, that of an editor.

### **Case Analysis, Tracy**

**What “path” led Tracy to choose English as a major?** When she first attended college, Tracy “threw around the idea of being an English major”; however, she ultimately admitted that it was the only thing she “ever wanted to do.” Her story of how she got to be an English major at USU was complex and filled with rich detail.

When discussing her path to the major, the only themes Tracy did not mention were the themes of fear and writing’s influence. Eleven of 13 themes surfaced in Tracy’s discussion of her path to the major, shown in Table 31.

In Tracy’s particular case, understanding the world and understanding her world were one and the same. Tracy was a rebel; she stuck out, not only in school but in her family. She called it part of her “Catholic rebellion,” but it was also part of her search for her own identity. Tracy always knew she was adopted, and her parents encouraged her to seek out her biological mother, who she finally came in contact with several years before her interview.

In the meantime, Tracy’s path to the major was filled with mostly positive encouragement. That encouragement came from her parents, who always encouraged her interest in English. However, many of those encouragements happened in the formal classroom setting. The most notable external, formal, and positive encouragement came

Table 31

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Tracy's Path to the Major*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	21	6/15	11/10	17/4
Interruptions to Enrollment	11	7/4	4/7	6/5
Understanding the World	9	9/0	3/6	8/1
Reading's Influence	8	5/3	2/6	8/10
Finances	6	4/2	1/5	2/4
Resistance	5	5/0	2/3	1/4
Possibilities	4	4/0	2/2	3/1
Coping Strategies	3	2/1	0/3	2/1
Being Older	1	1/0	0/1	1/0
Skills Gained	1	1/0	1/0	0/1
Worth of the Degree	1	1/0	0/1	1/0

from a high school teacher who homed in on Tracy's love of reading. Tracy had always been an avid reader, reading by the time she was three years old. The high school teacher saw that talent and went beyond the standard curriculum, giving Tracy extra books to read and things to think about and write. "She would have me journal and then draw comparisons between books that I'd read and genres and, you know, just going all over the place with it and it was really, really an amazing experience." The experience was not without risk. The Catholic high school teacher even had to even get approval from the local bishop so that Tracy could read Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*.

Tracy also mentioned interruptions to enrollment and finances as playing a role in her path to the major and specifically her path to USU. She could not get her first college, a private institution, to transfer her credits until she had paid down part of her student debt. As Tracy's financial situation did ultimately improve, she realized she wanted to return to college.

**What factors aided and/or hindered Tracy's enrollment semester after semester?**

*Factors that aided enrollment.* When Tracy described what factors aided her continued enrollment, two dominate themes surfaced; all themes are shown in Table 32.

Table 32

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Tracy's Aid to Enrollment*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	18	4/14	14/4	18/0
Coping Strategies	14	11/3	2/12	13/1
Finances	2	0/2	1/1	2/0

For Tracy, the majority of her encouragements came externally, from others, in the formal setting of the classroom or advising session. As she stated, "as far as the university itself, I would say it's been nothing but encouragement." She particularly singled out the English department faculty at USU. Not only had they been understanding of Tracy's demanding schedule, but they also encouraged her by

recognizing her efforts. As Tracy said, “[their] recognizing the effort that I’m putting in has just probably been the biggest thing for me, keeping me going some days.” Her family was also encouraging.

Another major aid for Tracy was her reliance on coping strategies. Tracy was a full-time student and a married mother of two elementary school-aged children. She was also balancing a full-time job and managing the care for an elderly parent in a nursing home. She relied on an arsenal of coping strategies. Her biggest coping strategy was just knowing when to step away from her demanding workload. As Tracy said, “just taking a step away. You know, putting down everything and taking the kids to the park, and then I can sit and think about what I’m trying to do.” Realizing just how much she was doing acted as motivation for Tracy as well.

***Factors that hindered enrollment.*** When her coping strategies failed, Tracy’s enrollment was threatened. She carved out time for her studies by sacrificing sleep, but that coping mechanism did not always work. Ultimately, she faced what she called “meltdowns.” As Tracy stated, “there have been times that I just have had absolute meltdowns where I’m curled up, fetal position on my bed, sobbing, saying, ‘I can’t do this anymore,’ and then somehow I get over it.” Her husband and children were empathetic and understanding during these meltdowns; however, they still relied on her in her role as wife and mother.

Her other family responsibilities also acted as an interruption to enrollment, namely dealing with a parent in a nursing home located in another city. As the only child, this responsibility rested mostly on Tracy. The trips out of town and the time spent at the nursing home also hindered Tracy’s progress.



[T]he other really big thing that's been a stressor and a barrier for me, my mom. . . . She's not taken very good care of herself through her life, which is why she's now living in a nursing home. She has—she's dealing with a lot of dementia, so having to deal with the business end of that, and then, of course, the emotional strain of that too, but then finding time to go down and take care of things that I need to take care of.

It was no wonder that given these demands, Tracy often expressed ideas of giving up:

“I'm done with this. I'm not taking classes next semester. I can't do this anymore.”

**What kind of value did Tracy believe the English major held for her?** Seven different themes surfaced when Tracy discussed the value of the English major, shown in Table 33.

Table 33

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Tracy's Value of the English Major*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Coping Strategies	4	4/0	0/4	4/0
Encouragement	3	0/3	1/2	1/2
Understanding the World	3	3/0	0/3	3/0
Worth of the English Degree	3	3/0	1/2	3/0
Reading's Influence	2	2/0	0/2	2/0
Being Older	1	0/1	0/1	1/0
Resistance	1	1/0	0/1	0/1

Interestingly, Tracy's coping strategy of taking a step back allowed her the space she needed to ponder the value of the English major. As she stated, “it's forced me to

kind of step back and look at the things that I feel passionate about and look at my priorities in life.”

Tracy also had to defend the English major’s value to others; to Tracy the English major was more than just books and grammar. She wished others could see what she saw. “I don’t think that people understand that.” Ironically, in Tracy’s search for her own biological family, she found another kind of family in the English Department; as Tracy stated, she had “met my people.”

**What kind of use did Tracy believe the English major held for her?** The theme of possibilities was dominate when Tracy talked about the use of the English major. She pondered her dream job: “I mean, ideally, if we’re going absolute dream job, I would be working for a publisher in New York City, helping out new writers and what not, but that’s a dream world.” Tracy was realistic. She also rejected the possibility of getting the Ph.D. in English, as she understood the tight job market and the esoteric focus many Ph.D. studies took.

However, she did not dismiss the possibility of going to graduate school or teaching at the community college. As Tracy said, “it’s interesting being an adult learner and kind of looking at the possibility of teaching adult learners.” She wanted to inspire passion in them, perhaps like her own high school teacher did for her years ago. Tracy understood what it meant to be an adult learner, a person who juggled working full time, parenting full time, and the additional duties of a child caring for an aging parent. She understood the stress.

Tracy was still learning new things and chasing her passions; she was now around others who shared and fired those passions. For her, the stress and the meltdowns were all worth it.

### **Case Analysis, Zorra**

**Introduction to Zorra's case.** Of all 10 cases in this study, Zorra's might be considered the most unique. It became clear during her interview that she was attempting to obtain not only the Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in English, one of the criteria for participant selection, but she was also attempting to obtain multiple degrees from USU and the local community college. This added a level of complexity in her situation.

Moreover, during the interview, Zorra disclosed that she had not yet passed the second semester of first-year college composition, Composition II, a prerequisite class for many other courses at USU, including almost all of those courses offered in the English Department that majors would take; in fact, she failed the course multiple times. She told me during the interview that she hated "comprehension" classes like Composition II and listed Composition II as a barrier to her continued enrollment. It was clear from her interview that at least in one situation she bypassed the Composition II requirement to get into what was most likely a literature survey class. However, I also knew that without Composition II, Zorra's exposure to the English Department in general and the department's faculty in particular would be extremely limited.

While I struggled with the decision to include Zorra's case, in the end, I included it, as the same thirteen themes that cut across questions and across cases with other participants also surfaced when analyzing Zorra's data. Despite my ultimate decision for inclusion, I considered her case an outlier.

**What “path” led Zorra to choose English as a major?** Seven of the study’s 13 themes surfaced when Zorra talked about her path to the English major, shown in Table 34.

Table 34

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Zorra’s Path to the Major*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Possibilities	23	5/18	17/6	20/3
Encouragement	17	4/13	6/11	10/7
Interruptions to Enrollment	11	9/2	2/9	3/6
Writing’s Influence	10	7/3	1/9	8/2
Coping Strategies	8	8/0	3/5	4/4
Skills Gained	3	3/0	1/2	0/3
Understanding the World	1	1/0	1/0	1/0

Zorra knew she wanted to use her life-long love of writing and get involved in the world of animation, but that path resulted in multiple starts and stops at different institutions in different majors. For Zorra, these multiple attempts at different majors at different institutions contributed to the themes of possibilities and interruptions to enrollment.

Encouragement was also a dominate theme; however, Zorra’s encouragements did not always have positive attributes. Zorra’s father encouraged college and was himself college educated and modeled the importance of life-long learning by continuing to take

classes (an encouragement that had external, informal, and positive attributes); likewise, her mother encouraged Zorra to keep a journal. However, Zorra's own motivation was lacking. When she talked about her brother's and her motivation level she said, "I'd have to say that my brother and I are the underachievers of our clan. We're very smart, very intelligent; we don't like to push ourselves. I'm very unmotivated." External, formal, negative encouragement also took place at the community college, where Zorra felt as if she was being pushed out of the program. "They finally, my third year there, said we're getting rid of you. They took everything I had, looked at what I had the most of, and that's how I ended up with a history degree."

Interestingly, Zorra developed positive coping strategies that helped her along the path to the English major. Before enrolling in a course, she visited with the instructor to find out just what was expected in terms of workload.

**What factors aided and/or hindered Zorra's enrollment semester after semester?**

*Factors that aided enrollment.* When Zorra described what factors aided her continued enrollment, three themes surfaced, all themes shown in Table 35 below.

For Zorra, encouragements came from college counselors who could help her deal with her stress as well as understanding professors.

As Zorra stated, "If I'm struggling, or I don't understand something or I have a really stupid question, they're willing to talk to me, either in class or on the side in their office hours."

Table 35

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Zorra's Aid to Enrollment*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Encouragement	12	5/7	10/2	11/1
Coping Strategies	5	5/0	5/0	5/0
Finances	2	0/2	2/0	2/0

***Factors that hindered enrollment.*** As discussed above, one of the biggest barriers that Zorra faced was her inability to successfully complete Composition II. Zorra knew she was in a predicament dealing with this interruption to enrollment. As she said, "I've taken every class I can around it. Now I'm at that point where that's all I can take now." Other themes are shown in Table 36.

Table 36

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Zorra's Hindrance to Enrollment*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Coping Strategies	7	6/1	2/5	1/6
Interruptions to Enrollment	7	2/5	4/3	0/6
Encouragement	3	0/3	0/3	0/3
Finances	2	1/1	2/0	1/0
Possibilities	1	1/0	0/1	0/1
Understanding the World	1	1/0	1/0	1/0

Another interruption to enrollment was the difficulty Zorra experienced in scheduling her classes around her hectic work schedule. Zorra said she worked up to three different part-time jobs while being enrolled. This situation, in turn, caused stress that coping strategies failed to address. Zorra stayed very busy, busy to the point of being overwhelmed. “If I have time to think about it, I get stressed and everything crashes, and I crash hard.” The university also denied recognition of a learning disability Zorra admitted having, accommodation of which might have been a positive coping strategy she could have used.

Zorra also identified her parents as a barrier to her enrollment. “Because I’ve changed my degree so much, my parents are under the impression I don’t know what I want in life.” Her parents encouraged Zorra to focus on supporting herself; her father still helped Zorra pay down student loans, which she knew he would rather not do.

**What kind of value did Zorra believe the English major held for her?**

Encouragement, skills gained, worth of the English degree, reading’s influence, understanding the world, and writing’s influence were themes that Zorra touched upon when discussing the value of the English major. While Zorra’s father still struggled with the value of the degree, Zorra did not. She saw value in the English degree, particularly in the skills gained. As she stated, those skills “are needed in the world all over, but you can do so much more.” To Zorra, literacy was key: “No matter where you go literacy is the most important thing in the world, and English is literacy.”

**What kind of use did Zorra believe the English major held for her?** When Zorra discussed the English major’s use, she referenced one dominate theme, that of possibilities. This and other themes and their attributes are listed in Table 37.

Table 37

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Zorra's Use of the English Major*

Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
		Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Possibilities	22	20/2	0/22	21/1
Writing's Influence	6	6/0	6/0	6/0
Worth of the English Degree	2	2/0	0/2	2/0
Encouragement	1	0/1	0/1	1/0
Understanding the World	1	1/0	1/0	1/0

The data that I coded under the themes of possibilities and writing's influence all referenced Zorra's dreams for her future. One statement captured her big ideas best:

I'd like to get started on some plans that I have to open up my own business. While I will be writing on the side, I would like to have a basement animation business going where we'll also do print binding.

Her plans did not stop there, however; they expanded exponentially. Zorra also planned to write a best-selling novel, set up a children's medical charity, open up a catering business, and build a facility, a type of creative cooperative, a place where other writers and artists could get "sponsorship from the local billionaires who invest in these kind of art projects and theaters and things of that sort." These dreams differed with her father's more pragmatic suggestion that Zorra focus on linguistics since she had a propensity to easily understand languages.

Regardless of the scope of her plans, Zorra did have a grasp on what she felt the English major's use was; for her it was basic. "In a way it is probably the most basic degree a person could hope for. It's very useful in a lot of ways."



As stated in the introduction to this analysis, Zorra's case proved difficult. While much of Zorra's progress toward the degree seemed scattered and uncertain, and while many of her plans seemed unreachable, Zorra nonetheless provided rich detail into what she regarded as the challenges and rewards of being an English major.

### **Cross-Case Analysis**

**Introduction.** As stated above in the in Chapter 3, all data was coded to correspond to following sub questions:

1. What "path" led students to choose English as a major?
2. What factors aid and/or hinder students' continued enrollment semester after semester?
3. What kind of value do students believe the English major holds for them?
4. What kind of use do students believe the English major holds for them?

Thirteen themes surfaced that cut across questions and across cases; the data associated with these themes were additionally coded with attributes of origin, setting, and influence using a versus coding scheme. The summary of all themes and their attributes are listed in Appendix G.

**What "path" led participants to choose English as a major?** The most dominate theme in participants' path to the English major was that of encouragement. All 10 participants swam in a sea of encouragement with mostly external, informal, and positive attributes. Much of the time, this type of encouragement came from parents (external and informal), who promoted reading or college attendance or who themselves read or went to college. However, this was not always the case. In a few cases, family members did not understand the participant's desire to be an English major. For these

participants, positive encouragement was internal or came from the formal setting of the classroom, most often from a high school teacher. For three of the older participants, wanting to finish the degree they had started years ago was an internal form of encouragement.

The second most prominent theme was interruptions to enrollment. In all 10 cases, interruptions to enrollment were what made these participants “nontraditional” in the first place. Not surprisingly, many of these interruptions were coded with the negative attribute (i.e., dropping out of college due to burn out in the case of two participants, probation in the case of one). However, some interruptions were happy ones, such as a work promotion or marriage.

The third most prominent theme to participants’ paths to the major was that of possibilities. Possibilities in this particular analysis of this question most often referred to participants’ attempts at other collegiate majors. Every participant had tried something other than English, including disciplines aligned with English such theater, journalism, or education, and majors not so traditionally aligned with English, including exercise science, biology, chemistry, and computer science.

Reading’s influence was also another strong theme that surfaced when participants talked about their path to the major. Eight participants mentioned reading’s overwhelming positive influence in regard to their path to the English major. Many of these admitted to reading at an early age or above grade level. In many cases, reading was a something that got participants through rough patches. In some instances, reading was an internal, informal, and positive coping strategy. Nine participants also mentioned coping strategies that affected their path to the major.

While it was not a dominate theme, resistance played a role in describing the path to the English major. Half of the participants mentioned something about their own resistance to choosing English as an academic major.

**What factors aided and/or hindered participants' enrollment semester after semester?**

*Factors that aided.* While the themes of coping strategies and finances were mentioned by seven and eight participants respectively as important factors that aided enrollment, the overwhelming theme that dominated this discussion was that of encouragement. Mostly external, predominately formal, and nearly all positive, encouragement was a big reason why participants stayed enrolled at the university. This encouragement often came from college professors. In some cases this type of external encouragement was due to a participant's exposure to a great professor; in other cases, the encouragement participants received from professors was more mundane and seemingly minor, such as granting a deadline extension or simply understanding a participant's "weird schedule."

This kind of encouragement also had a cyclical effect. As professors encouraged many of these participants, participants performed better in the classroom, which in turn gave them increased confidence and their own internal encouragement to want to do better academically.

*Factors that hindered.* Eight participants mentioned interruptions to enrollment as factors that hindered their enrollment. While this seemed self-evident, the reasons behind the interruptions were incredibly varied. These included internal interruptions such as burn out, or the external interruptions such as helping out or caring for family

members, but it also included some interesting external interruptions with formal, negative attributes: transfer credit issues and difficulty finding classes when a participant needed them.

Encouragement, this time in the form of negative encouragement, also hindered enrollment. Nine participants noted this theme when discussing their hindrances to enrollment. While half of these encouragements came from informal settings (i.e., family), the other half happened in the formal context of the classroom. Some of these formal contexts were internal, including half of participants who voiced not trying in high school and the effect this had on their work ethic in college. However, some of these external, formal, and negative encouragements included “bad” teachers who had the ability to turn participants away from the English major.

Half of the participants noted finances as a hindrance for enrollment. As one participant said, “it’s such a huge distraction.” Half of the participants also noted failed coping strategies had interrupted enrollment. As one participant said, “I was under a lot of emotional strain, and it was very difficult to keep everything up in the air at once. Something had to give, and it was school.”

Not surprisingly, the three oldest participants referred to “being older” as a hindrance to enrollment, and this related to another theme that often hindered enrollment: fear. As their narratives unfolded, however, it turned out that those fears were unfounded, but it affected participants nonetheless. In two other specific cases, fear surfaced when participants thought about life after college. As one stated, “The lack of surety about what I should be doing afterwards was really a barrier for me.”

### **What kind of value did participants believe the English major held for them?**

Three of this study's 13 themes best contextualized participants' value of the English major: the worth of the English degree, understanding the world better, and skills gained. Participants voiced the degree's worth in concrete and abstract ways. One participant focused on the value of the major held for him in terms of certification; others, however, expressed more abstract values, such as understanding power or discerning meaning. However, it went beyond understanding to something very personal for many of these participants. To one participant, the worth of the English major was simply put, "It enriches my life," for another, it was "what I care about," and yet another it was something that simply "touch[ed]" her heart.

All participants talked about how the English major helped them better understand the world. The data connected to these themes had attributes that were nearly all internal, mostly informal, and nearly all positive. For some participants, reading literature from different historical eras allowed them to understand not only a specific time in history, but the continuum of the human condition itself. For others, being exposed to a new perspective was, as one participant put it, "eye opening," and as another participant said, "I

m finding out what a different world there is out there."

Participants' understanding the world also meant understanding symbols, and like many of their comments related to the worth of the English degree, their comments related to understanding the world were very personal. As one participant noted, "Being human is about reading symbols," and another added that reading those symbols was "what makes us unique as a species."

Six participants mentioned the theme of skills gained when addressing the value of the English major. For these participants, the English degree held value, as it gave them a toolbox of transferrable skills: critical thinking, reading, writing, organizing, and researching. These skills were not only useful in “other classes,” but were “core skills” that could be applied in other areas of life.

**What kind of use did participants believe the English major held for them?**

While 10 of this study’s 13 themes were mentioned when participants answered this question, one theme loomed dominate: possibilities. The use of the English major was interpreted by participants as those things that they could do with the major, those future options. The data associated with this theme had attributes that were mostly internal, almost all informal, and nearly all positive; nonetheless, some of the data under the theme of possibilities had negative attributes. Three participants mentioned the realities of the tight job market for Ph.D.s in English. One participant pondered her abilities to compete in law school, and one participant generally pondered her future and the complexity of the possibilities available to her and said, “I’ve had a lot of people talk to me about different things.”

When they talked about the use of the major, most participants mentioned traditional English degree career paths: they saw their futures as graduate students, teachers, lawyers, community college instructors, editors, linguists, and writers. While one participant said, “there’s a lot of variety with that degree,” none of the participants imagined uses beyond those traditional trajectories, save one, that of being an entrepreneur, and I identified that particular participant’s case as being this study’s outlier.

However, 9 of the 10 participants mentioned that they had hoped to give something back to their community, their society, as one participant said, to make a “difference in at least somebody’s life,” or as another put it, “doing something really important for people.” Interestingly, two participants specifically stated that they wanted to help older students; as one put it, “it’s interesting being an adult learner and kind of looking at the possibility of teaching adult learners.”

### **Summary**

During the within and cross-case analysis of this multiple case study of 10 older undergraduate English majors, 13 themes surfaced that addressed the grand tour question and the sub questions of this study. All themes, the number of participants referencing them, the themes’ frequencies, and the frequencies of each of the theme’s shared attributes (internal or external, formal or informal, and positive or negative) are shown in Appendix G.

The 13 themes that surfaced when analyzing the data for this study included the following: reading’s influence, writing’s influence, being older, fear, resistance, finances, skills gained, worth of the English degree, interruptions to enrollment, coping strategies, possibilities, encouragement, and understanding the world.

Not surprisingly, reading’s influence and writing’s influence were two important themes that helped shape these older English majors. Nearly all of these participants read or wrote at an early age; almost all spoke of a love or even passion for reading. Over half of the participants spoke of what it was like being an older student; some even equated this with fear of returning to the classroom and competing with younger students. Yet, fear was not confined to being back in the classroom; for some, it included the fear of

what came next, after the degree was obtained. Some participants even spoke of resistance to the English major. Almost all spoke of the complexity of finances, and the skills gained in studying the discipline of English. Nine participants referenced the worth of the English degree, and this was particularly noteworthy, as all the data coded with this theme was also coded with the positive attribute. These participants perceived or received information about the worth of the English degree in nothing but a positive light.

However, five themes were specifically referenced by all participants in this study. All ten participants mentioned the theme of interruptions to enrollment. These interruptions mostly had a negative influence on participants (coded as a negative attribute). Most of the data coded as interruptions to enrollment referred to instances or events that took place outside the formal educational setting of (coded as an informal attribute), and nearly half of the data coded mentioned interruptions to enrollment that were outside of the control of the participant (coded as an external attribute). Participants overcame these interruptions, however, as evidenced by their continued enrollment or, in the case of two participants, having had just completed the degree at the time of their interviews. Moreover, all of these participants responded to these interruptions by utilizing various coping strategies, another important theme, although these coping strategies had various levels of success.

All ten participants referred to the second most mentioned theme in the study, that of possibilities. While referenced in every question by at least one participant, participants most often mentioned possibilities in the context of their path to the major, when participants had tried different majors, when participants talked about the use of the major, or when participants imagined what they might be doing with the English degree



after graduation. Most attempts at other majors had negative influences on participants while the possibilities associated with the English degree's use had mostly positive ones. Participants could imagine using the English degree in their futures, and in some cases, could think of doing nothing else.

However, the overwhelmingly dominate theme mentioned by every participant in response to nearly every question was that of encouragement, and these encouragements happened over the course of participants' lifetimes. Taken as a whole, encouragement had most of its origins from participants themselves and had a positive influence on participants. Over half of the data coded with the theme of encouragement took place in a formal academic setting. However, regardless of setting, or whether encouragement originated from the participant in the form of internal, self-motivation or from an external source such as a parent who encouraged reading or a teacher who was willing to work with a participant, these participants were encouraged to be English majors and were encouraged to persist in the major despite what negative encouragement they may have received from other quarters.

While nine participants generically referenced the worth of the English degree, what theme specifically answered the question, beyond the skills one gained, what was the value of the English degree for these older undergraduate students?

The answer to that question was the last theme referenced by all participants: that of understanding the world. This was expressed by participants in a variety of ways. For some, reading literature connected them with the human condition and the understanding of the human condition across the span of time and history; for others, understanding the world meant understanding symbols and seeing things that others did not see. Through

the study of English, these women and men gained an understanding of the world that they considered unique, and it was something that they not only valued but even cherished.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Discussion**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter includes a brief review of this study's purpose, significance, review of methodology, and the study's findings. It also includes a discussion by theme and concludes with recommendations for educators, including recommendations for further research, and a brief summary.

#### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this multiple case study was to develop a better understanding of what older nontraditional undergraduate English majors voiced as the challenges, attributes, and promises concerning their choice of the academic English major and their persistence in that choice. Specifically, I set out to answer the following grand tour question and four sub questions:

What are the challenges and rewards older nontraditional undergraduates encounter as English majors?

1. What "path" led students to choose English as a major?
2. What factors aided and/or hindered students' continued enrollment semester after semester?
3. What kind of value did students believe the English major held for them?
4. What kind of use did students believe the English major held for them?

#### **Significance of Study**

At the time of this study, older students constituted nearly a third of all undergraduate students enrolled in post-secondary education in America (NCES, n.d.b).

Older students were still choosing the academic major of English, a major believed to hold less immediate or obviously visible economic use or utility, particular in light of the national emphasis and push for academic majors in the sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics at the time this study was conducted. According to scholars, utility for getting and securing employment was an important variable that had value for older, nontraditional students (Bean, 2005; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Donoghue, 2008; Duderstadt & Womack, 2003). Given this, understanding how older English majors defined and described the value and use of their academic major and understanding how these older students navigated the challenges they encountered would be of benefit not only to departments of English and other allied disciplines in post-secondary education but also to other professionals in higher education interested in understanding other unique older student cohorts.

### **Review of Methodology**

During June and July of 2012, 10 participants were interviewed following the IRB approved protocol outlined in Appendix D. I used 10 interviews as the source of data collection and followed a constructivist framework outlined by Schwandt (2007), as it best fit this research situation since I was interested in how participants constructed and expressed the value of English major. The questions asked of these participants challenged them to create a narrative of what led them to become English majors, what factors aided and hindered their continued enrollment, and what they personally understood as the use and value of the English major. As Bruner (1991) posed, “how do we cobble stories together to make them into a whole of some sort?” (p. 18). Their individual narratives provided a glimpse into that collective whole.

The coding of qualitative data included a two-part strategy: a structural coding scheme that linked data to the specific research questions. In addition to the structural coding, each piece of data was coded to express three specific attributes that surfaced during analysis of the data: the origin of the theme (either internal or external), the theme's setting (either formal or informal), and the theme's influence (either positive or negative).

### **Summary of Findings**

When these 10 older, undergraduate English majors talked about the challenges and rewards of being an English major, 13 themes surfaced when analyzing the data for this study. These themes included the following: reading's influence, writing's influence, being older, fear, resistance, finances, skills gained, worth of the English degree, interruptions to enrollment, coping strategies, possibilities, encouragement, and understanding the world.

### **Discussion by Theme**

**Reading's influence.** Perhaps not surprisingly in a discipline that is steeped in reading literature, nine of ten participants spoke of the influence that reading had on their entire lives and how it contributed to becoming an English major. Many participants reported reading at an early age, or having homes that were filled with books, or had parents who read to them or encouraged reading. However, this was not the experience of all participants. One participant, for instance, did not like reading or English that much until a transformative high school teacher challenged and fostered his interest in English. For many participants, however, reading was a deep pleasure, or in two cases, a guilty indulgence where the participants would find themselves "sneaking" books into a

high school lecture. In some cases, reading became a coping strategy (another theme in the study) that got participants through difficult times in their lives.

**Writing's influence.** Like reading's influence, it was not particularly surprising to find writing's influence surface as a theme when these English majors talked about their academic choices. Unlike reading, however, writing's influence did not surface at an early age for the six participants who referenced it, save two participants who were writing short stories and one who even attempted a novel while still in elementary school. While most all participants revered it, writing in general was something that was expected of these participants as part of their studies in the major, and often only tangentially referenced. One participant even mentioned writing in a negative way, stating that he though English faculty placed too much emphasis on papers and writing. There appeared to be something of a disconnect when comparing the love of reading, which nearly all participants shared, and the influence of writing, which just over half of the participants referenced.

**Being older.** Since this study specifically focused on older undergraduate English majors, it is not surprising that the theme of being older surfaced when analyzing the data. Also not surprising, the older the participant happened to be, the more the theme of being older took on importance. For the younger participants in the study, being an older student did not necessarily aid or hinder their success in the classroom nor did they particular identify as being older.

However, for the three oldest participants, being older did shape their identity as English majors and students in the classroom. This was expressed in a variety of ways. First, these participants most often compared themselves with their younger classmates;

the older students were sometimes intimidated by the fact that they were an older student in a classroom of teenagers; they stood out in the class, and they may have doubted their intellectual capabilities when compared to their traditionally-aged college classmates.

Secondly, these older students had the advantage of hindsight. They, too, were once young undergraduates. They had made decisions that ultimately made them nontraditional in the first place. When they were younger, they may not have understood the educational system, they may not have taken their studies as seriously as they should have, and for one reason or another, they ultimately discontinued their college careers. Now, these participants were on a mission to complete something they had started years before, something they wanted now more than ever. However, now they were seasoned adults who had already lived complete, complex, and rich lives; as a result, these older participants were now less timid than their former, younger selves. One participant now had the courage to speak up in class when as a young student she would not have; another used the same survival skills she developed throughout her adult life to navigate the complexities of returning to the university after such a long hiatus.

Finally, and perhaps unlike their younger cohorts, these older students were exceptionally cognizant of the fact that their time was finite, and being older meant that they had less of it to waste. As a result, these older participants took advantage of many of the educational opportunities available to them and had little patience with their younger classmates who did not do so.

Interestingly, while the oldest of these participants compared themselves to their traditionally-aged college cohorts in the classroom and appreciated the company and comfort of knowing other older students, none of them appeared uncomfortable with

younger professors, nor did they appear to voice any kind of kinship or commonality with professors their own age or older. Perhaps this was because these instructors, regardless of their age, were thought of differently by these older participants and fell outside the realm of comparison. Perhaps their role as content expert voided any concerns about their youth for these older students. Whatever the reason, this appeared to be unimportant.

**Fear.** For half of these participants, fear was a theme that surfaced in the analysis of this data and expressed itself in two ways. The first fear these participants shared dealt with issues in the classroom they faced as an older, nontraditional students. How might they be perceived by their fellow younger classmates? Could they handle the workload? In two cases, professors were initially intimidating. However, these fears were generally dismissed once these participants engaged in the classroom.

What was interesting was the second way in which fear was expressed. Two participants in particular stated that they feared what came after completion of the degree. In some ways, continued college enrollment was a safe harbor, a holding pattern for them that delayed answering the question, “what comes next?” This sentiment seemed to be in conflict with the urgency participants felt in completing the degree, particularly among the oldest of participants.

**Resistance.** Many of these older undergraduate English majors were rebellious by nature. One simply called it her contrary nature, one attributed it to ordinary teenage angst, another attributed it to a faith rebellion, while another participant’s rebellious nature had serious legal ramifications. Beyond this rebellious nature, however, several of these participants voiced a real resistance to being an English major in the first place.



The English major seemed too easy for some participants. In some cases, participants felt resistance from external sources, and found themselves defending their choice of the major to these detractors; in other cases, the resistance was internal, and participants struggled, literally, with the Shakespearean dilemma of “to be or not to be” an English major, raising issues of the legitimacy of their academic choice. Some participants even went as far as to engage in arguments with those friends, family, and teachers who suggested that they should choose English as their field of study. Ultimately, however, they relented, perhaps abandoning their doubts and insecurities.

**Finances.** Finances was a theme that nearly all participants raised when discussing the challenges and rewards of being an English major. Predictably, finances had a positive influence when students had access to funds and a negative influence when funds were inadequate or lacking. Not having money meant not going to college. However, the issue was far more complex than simply having or not having adequate funding for education. Finances involved an intricate web of family support, eligibility for loans and grants, financial policies, and other financial obligations and pressures outside of financing college.

One participant noted that she was raised in a comfortable home where money and her funding for college did not appear to be an issue. This was not the case for others. In one case, an older student was still relying on parental support in addition to loans for educational funding. In another case, a participant from a working-class family felt she had no choice but to attend community college, something she did not want to do, because her financial aid would stretch farther; moreover, this same participant was expected to contribute to the family budget while she was still living at home, and while

her parents could not pay for tuition per se, they helped out in other ways, providing cash for books or reliable transportation. Ultimately, though, this participant had to leave college to support herself, which made her an older nontraditional student upon her return to the university.

One participant's socio-economic background was such that he could not have attended college at all without the aid of Federal Pell grants. Ironically, other older participants stated that their eligibility for Pell grants did not start until they were older. In some ways, this governmental policy indirectly encouraged these students to wait until they were at least 25 years of age or older, or in the case of one participant, have other qualifications that deemed her eligible for the Pell. Likewise, scholarships aided these students in interesting ways. It wasn't just that certain scholarships helped pay for tuition or books; participants noted that some of these scholarship programs offered other types of support such as tutoring and free printing.

Some financial policies, though, had a detrimental impact on continued enrollment, such as one case where a private institution refused to transfer credit until a participant paid past-due tuition. Participants noted other economic stressors: having to drop out of college in order to make a living, trying to go to college while raising a family and making ends meet, and even dealing with a spouse's lost income and possible home foreclosure. These types of challenges went beyond simply funding or not funding college attendance.

**Skills gained.** Participants in this study voiced the advantage of being an English major in terms of the skills they felt they had gained in the course of their studies. These participants also had a firm grasp on their academic limitations; many participants, for

instance, struggled with the basic mathematics requirements necessary for undergraduate degree completion. The change of technology also offered challenges to these older participants. For instance, the advent of the Internet changed the way college students now conducted research, and this resulted in a learning curve for some participants. Yet, participants compared this very nature of technology's mutability to those immutable skills they felt they had gained in the major: critical thinking and writing skills that were transferrable to not only other academic disciplines, but other contexts in life as well.

**Worth of the English degree.** During their interviews, nine out of ten participants referenced the worth of the English degree. All of these participants had mostly internalized what the degree meant to them in terms of worth, and all references had a positive influence, the only theme in this study with that distinction. Participants mostly spoke of the worth of the English degree when answering the question concerning the value of the major. They voiced both concrete and intangible measures of this worth. For instance, the English major could lead to specific certification for some participants; for others, the major's worth rested in acquiring fundamental skills, or understanding the role of theory, and being able to recognize the role of power and influence that others might not see.

However, many spoke of the degree's worth in intangible and sometimes very personal terms. The worth of the English degree was fostered by an innate love and respect of language; participants understood that language was what made human beings unique. At times, these participants' expression of the English degree's worth reached nearly that of religious devotion whether these participants identified as belonging to an

organized religion, considered themselves mostly spiritual and not particularly religious, or were even self-proclaimed agnostics.

**Interruptions to enrollment.** Eight of ten participants in this study began their post-secondary careers directly out of high school and returned to post-secondary enrollment after stopping out from one or more previous community college, college, or university experiences. In some cases, the break from formal schooling was brief; in other cases, the break spanned many years. The reasons for these interruptions were both positive and negative. Participants stopped out to get married or to raise a family; sometimes they entered the workforce; sometimes they were called on to help a family member facing a financial or health issue. In three cases, participants themselves faced health issues that either threatened enrollment or forced them to take a break from their education. While family was often the interruption to enrollment, it could also be the source of help and encouragement. This was the case for two participants in this study and confirmed the findings of Vaccaro and Lovell (2010), who, in a grounded theory study focusing on adult women, found that family was not only a hindrance to enrollment, but could be an inspiration to enrollment as well.

Several participants reported suffering from burn out and dropped out of their post-secondary institution as a result. In several cases, the original institution a participant attended was not the right fit for her or him. In all but one case, one end result of these interruptions was that nine of these participants arrived at USU as transfer students with a wide range of transfer issues.

When participants referenced the theme of interruptions to enrollment, it was most often within the narrative of their path to the major or when responding to the

question of what things hindered their enrollment. One of those things that hindered enrollment was the rotation of course offerings in the English Department at USU and its clash with participants' work schedules. Participants had to seek compromises between the courses that they wanted to take and the courses their schedules would allow them to take. This reality resulted in some participants missing or delaying curricular opportunities, but these delays had some hidden benefits. One participant, for example, added an additional course of study to his program while he waited for the rotation of sequential courses he needed, filling in his time as a full-time student. This led to additional personal enrichment voiced by the participant.

**Coping strategies.** All ten participants referenced the theme of coping strategies, and only three other themes in this study (interruptions to enrollment, possibilities, and encouragement) were referenced more often. Participants had developed or taken advantage of an arsenal of positive coping strategies that contributed to their continued enrollment as English majors.

Most of these positive coping strategies were informal. Many of these strategies involved participants' families. In some cases, participants relied on the logistical support that family members could offer. One participant's family even went as far as breaking a divorce decree's parenting plan in order to accommodate a participant's weekly class schedule. In some cases, participants relied more on the moral support family members could provide. In one case, the family did not always understand the time commitment necessary for studies; this participant developed her own coping strategy of being firm and resolute with family members wanting to pull her in another direction when she knew she needed time to study.

However, participants developed informal coping strategies that went beyond the family unit, getting help from friends through networking or relying on their own personal stress-reducing mechanisms, whether it was taking regular exercise, taking a night off, or simply taking a deep breath. For several participants, one of those previous personal mechanisms for coping up until college was reading: for many participants, reading got them through tough situations throughout the course of their lives. Ironically, although participants acknowledged reading's influence in the path to the major, this former coping strategy was no longer a current one.

Several participants developed coping strategies in the formal educational setting as well; examples of these included asking for help from individual professors, getting to know college and university personnel who could help participants cut through bureaucratic red tape, seeking out special accommodations, and taking advantage of college and university resources such as tutors and learning centers.

However, sometimes coping strategies failed or participants lacked the tools to effectively deal with the emotional stress, fatigue, sleep deprivation, or family turmoil that faced them.

**Possibilities.** The theme of possibilities was the second most referenced in this study. All ten participants referenced possibilities, and when they spoke of what it meant to them to be an English major, this theme was expressed in three broad ways: first, possibilities included those past attempts at other majors, when participants may have tried other academic majors before finally declaring the English major; next, possibilities included what these older English majors might do once they get the degree and the

things they envisioned doing; finally, there was a transformative effect on participants when they did envision their futures.

These participants attempted academic study in the sciences, in other humanities disciplines, and in technology fields, such as computer science; however, they abandoned these for the study of English. Their experiences in these attempts at other disciplines proved to participants that these majors were not a good fit for them. The English major was the only thing many participants could see themselves choosing.

When participants spoke of what they would do with the major in terms of employment or avocations, all but one focused on futures that would be considered typical of English majors: teaching, graduate school, editing, writing, or working with language. However, no matter what they might see themselves doing, many saw themselves in altruistic roles, giving something back to others or to their communities.

**Encouragement.** Of all 13 themes that surfaced in this study, the theme of encouragement was by far the most recurring. I was not surprised that encouragement played a role in these participants' path to the major or their persistence in it. Bean and Metzner (1985), for instance, identified outside encouragement, one of five environmental variables in their theoretical model of older student attrition, as having a significant impact on these students' intent to stay or leave higher education. What did surprise me was encouragement's pervasiveness. Whether its origin was internal or external, whether its setting was formal or informal, or whether its influence was positive or negative, encouragement permeated the narratives of all ten participants.

While participants shared stories of occasional "bad" teachers, or parents who may have discouraged the study of the English major, most of the encouragement that

came from parents, family, teachers, friends, and mentors, and was overwhelmingly positive, started at an early age, and continued through these participants' lifetimes.

It is important to note that encouragement was something both more and something less than student engagement. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and associates (2010) outlined how differing institutions effectively utilized formal student engagement. Strange and Banning (2001) also documented how specific institutional environments and strategies positively affected student engagement. However, the theme of encouragement that surfaced in this study was something altogether different. Encouragement for these participants began at a very early age and was fostered throughout their formal educational and informal life experiences, often before they ever stepped foot into the college classroom either for the first or second time.

Moreover, the encouragement from professors that was most profound and positively influential to these participants did not take a great deal of effort on the part of the professor nor did this encouragement take on the intentionality of formal student engagement strategies. These were simple courtesies: encouraging these participants to speak up in class, lending an understanding ear during office hours, or granting a deadline extension for a participant dealing with a family crisis. These little things meant the world to these participants. Furthermore, external encouragements from professors that praised participants' efforts, in turn, often resulted in participants' increased self-confidence. For some participants, this increased self-confidence resulted in self-reported improvements in academic achievement.

**Understanding the world.** The central grand tour question of this qualitative multiple case study was as follows: What were the challenges and rewards older



nontraditional undergraduates encountered as English majors? One of four sub questions asked participants, what kind of value did students believe the English major held for them? The last theme of this study answered these questions.

These participants' experiences in the Department of English at USU varied greatly: two of the participants had just recently graduated in the spring term of 2012 while others were either in the middle of their undergraduate careers or in the case of one participant at the very beginning of her required coursework. This could have been seen as a limitation. However, for all these ten older, nontraditional students, understanding the world was the English major's reward. Despite where they were in their program, by reading and analyzing literature that spanned hundreds of years, these participants gained access to and understood insight of the human condition and its own recurrent themes throughout history. Participants used this knowledge to understand the world they currently lived in and to make sense of their own complicated lives. Many said that studying English gave them exposure to and appreciation of different world views. Participants' self-reported understanding of language gave them the ability to decipher the meaning of things when others did not or even could not. Participants considered these things unique to the study of English, and they also believed this understanding gave them a clear advantage over others who did not possess this knowledge.

This particular finding echoed the themes expressed by Fowler (1979) in her review of Orange (1979) nearly 35 years prior to this study: that is that English majors developed a host of skills, which with development of peer empathy and "enhance[d] adaptive, interpersonal skills," included "understanding differing values" (p. 319). However, for the participants in this study, understanding the world held less prominence

with their own employment opportunities, the focus of Orange (1979) and Fowler (1979), and held more importance for their own personal life enrichment.

### **Implications, Recommendations, Further Research, and Brief Summary**

Horn and Carroll (1996) identified seven characteristics that helped define the nontraditional student, and participants in this study shared many of those characteristics. However, just as findings of a study such as this cannot be generalized to a larger segment of the nontraditional population, adopting common assumptions about nontraditional students could confound the understanding of special cohort groups, such as these older undergraduate English majors. For instance, the findings of this study suggested that the use and value of the English major was less about the utility of securing specific employment and more about the importance of understanding the world.

In an advice piece, Jenkins (2012), an English professor, encouraged colleagues to adjust their thinking about who their students are, as the new traditional student will actually be older and offered thoughts on making the classroom more welcoming and relevant for these individuals.

Policy makers, researchers, educators, and particularly those teaching older students in undergraduate disciplines like English can learn much from reflecting on the 13 themes that surfaced in this study. Like some of these participants, older English majors may have trepidation or fear about returning to the classroom, as Jenkins (2012) mentioned; they may doubt their abilities; they may have complex lives that include responsibility for others; they may struggle with financing their education and maneuvering the bureaucracy of financial aid or a registrar's offices. However, they may also be more appreciative of formal and informal supports available to them, and because

they are older, they also may be more cognizant of the fact that time is not a commodity they can waste. Most importantly, educators should understand the role encouragement can have on these older students, and as greater numbers of older students begin or return to their undergraduate careers, educators should keep these themes in mind when formulating theory about attrition and crafting formal institutional responses that address student retention and engagement for these older students.

This study was delimited in a number of ways. It considered participants only 25 years of age or older who were enrolled as English majors in the spring semester of 2012 in one particular college at one urban university. It did not consider students younger than 25, students at other institutions, or students from other colleges or majors. The study's limitations included the nature of qualitative research and also included my role in the site's Department of English, which may have had an effect on participant response. It would be dangerous to generalize these findings without further research. Further empirical research, both qualitative and quantitative, would be necessary to build a solid corpus of data on older English majors.

As stated in Chapter 1, at the beginning of the 21st century, there was a perception among some scholars that American higher education needed to experience a "renaissance" in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields (Soldner et al., 2012, p. 311) in order for the country to continue to compete in a global marketplace. Pusser et al. (2007) pointed out that getting older Americans into this more educated workforce was part of that equation. However, the 10 participants in this study, several of whom tried majoring in STEM disciplines previously, remained in the English major because they were encouraged to do so, and the major offered them a better

understanding of the world. Participants believed this understanding gave them an advantage over others, not only in possible employment opportunities, but more importantly, in life.

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## **Appendix A**

**Institutional Review Board Approval**

**University of Nebraska Medical Center**



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NEBRASKA'S HEALTH SCIENCE CENTER  
Affairs (ORA)

Office of Regulatory

Institutional Review Board

(IRB)

June 1, 2012

Joseph Price  
English Department  
UNO – Via Courier

**IRB #: 257-12-EX**

**TITLE OF APPLICATION/PROTOCOL: OLDER UNDERGRADUATE ENGLISH MAJORS AND THEIR SELF-DESCRIBED VALUE OF ENGLISH**

Dear Mr. Price:

The Office of Regulatory Affairs (ORA) has reviewed your application for **Educational, Behavioral, and Social Science Research** on the above-titled research project. According to the information provided, this project is exempt under 45 CFR 46:101b, category 2. You are therefore authorized to begin the research.

It is understood this project will be conducted in full accordance with all applicable HRPP Policies. It is also understood that the ORA will be immediately notified of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project.

Please be advised that this research has a maximum **approval period of 5 years** from the original date of approval and release. If this study continues beyond the five year approval period, the project must be resubmitted in order to maintain an active approval status.

Sincerely,

Gail Kotulak, CIP  
IRB Administrator  
Office of Regulatory Affairs (ORA)

gdk

## **Appendix B**

### **Review Board Approval**

**University of Nebraska-Lincoln**





November 21, 2012

Joseph Price  
Department of Educational Administration  
8205 Camden Ave Omaha, NE 68134

Donald Uerling  
Department of Educational Administration  
134 TEAC, UNL, 68588-0360

IRB Number: 20121113169 EX

Project ID: 13169

Project Title: OLDER UNDERGRADUATE ENGLISH MAJORS AND THEIR SELF-DESCRIBED VALUE OF ENGLISH

Dear Joseph:

This letter is to officially notify you of the certification of exemption of your project by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. The UNL IRB is accepting the external review of your project by the UNMC IRB.

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

- \* Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
- \* Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- \* Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
- \* Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- \* Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

This project should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines and you should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project. You should report any unanticipated problems involving risks to the participants or others to the Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 472-6965.

Sincerely,

Becky R. Freeman, CIP  
for the IRB



## **Appendix C**

### **Cover Letter**



IRB PROTOCOL # 257-12-EX

Page 1 of 2

**COVER LETTER****Title of this Research Study**

OLDER UNDERGRADUATE ENGLISH MAJORS AND THEIR SELF-  
DESCRIBED  
VALUE OF ENGLISH

June 5, 2012

Address

Greetings English Major,

You may know me as the Coordinator in the Department of English at UNO. What you may not know is that I, like you, am also a student. I am currently finishing my doctoral program in Higher Education Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. My dissertation focuses on “older undergraduate English majors.” I’m asking for your help. I would like to get information from you about being an English major.

Little research exists on this important student group; my research intends on adding to this knowledge and benefiting higher education studies and policy. Your address was provided to me as you are or have been currently enrolled as an undergraduate English major and are age 25 or older. If you agree to volunteer, I would like to interview you for about 45 minutes to an hour to learn about your experiences as an English major. I intend to do this in June or July of 2012. I do need to record this interview so that it can be transcribed. However, be assured that your responses will be kept completely confidential. No identifiable information will be associated with any of your responses. You will choose a pseudonym for identification purposes during the process. After the initial interview, I will invite you to read what I have written about you to assure accuracy. There are no potential risks or anticipated benefits to you if participating in this research. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the research at any time for any reason with no consequences to you.

If you’d like to volunteer, or if you’d like more information on this study, please contact me via email ([jprice@unomaha.edu](mailto:jprice@unomaha.edu)) or by telephone **402-554-3476**. If you have other questions, you can also contact my advisor, Dr. Donald Uerling at 402-472-0970, or UNMC’s Institutional Review Board at 402-559-6463.



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**IRB PROTOCOL # 257-12-EX****Page 2 of 2**

While I am unable to compensate you for your time, I can provide an incentive to participate. **If you complete the interview and follow up, you will receive a \$10 gift card from a selection of area retailers.**

**Your contacting me and verbally agreeing to be interviewed will serve as your consent to participate in this research.**

Thank you for considering this opportunity.  
My sincere thanks,

Joe Price

## **Appendix D**

### **Main Interview and Follow-Up Protocol**

## OLDER UNDERGRADUATE ENGLISH MAJORS AND THEIR SELF-DESCRIBED VALUE OF ENGLISH

### Main Interview and Follow Up Protocol

The central question under consideration is as follows: What are the challenges and rewards older nontraditional undergraduates encounter as English majors?

Sub questions include the following:

1. What “path” led students to choose English as a major?
2. What factors aid and/or hinder students’ continued enrollment semester after semester?
3. What kind of value do students believe the English major holds for them?
4. What kind of use do students believe the English major holds for them?

Older Undergraduate English Major Interview Protocol Form  
Initial Interview Protocol

### **The Main Interview Protocol**

- Introduction
- Background questions (including optional demographic questions)
- Current experience questions and value questions
- Wrap up/follow up

Introduction:

To aid note-taking, I am going audio tape your responses, as you agreed to when you phoned to make this interview.

This interview should take approximately 45 minutes. Your time is valuable to me and to you. I’d like to ask a little bit about your background and then have four main questions to ask, so I may cut you short in order to move on the next question and stay within the parameters of our time limit.

Background questions:

1. I’d like to begin by asking a few background questions. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? You might include, for instance, where you were born, what kind of community you grew up in, what type of community you live in now, and if you wish, your living arrangements (single, married, a parent, etc.). Of course, I’d also like to know your age, since this study is about “older” English majors. If you’re comfortable doing so, you may also want to share other demographic details about yourself (ethnicity, or religious upbringing or affiliation—though you are under no obligation to do so). (Sub question 1)

2. Tell me the story of how you ended up being an English major. (Sub question 1)

Current experience questions:

3. As a college student in general and as an English major in particular, describe what barriers, if any, have you face in the process of getting your degree, and for that matter what factors, if any, have helped you? (Sub question 2)

Value questions

4. If you had to explain to an acquaintance what you saw as the benefits or the value of the English major, what kinds of things would you say? (Sub question 3)

5. Imagine yourself five years after you've graduated. Where do you hope you might be, or what kinds of things might you be doing? (Sub question 4)

Wrap up/Follow up

Wrap up

Well, that about wraps things up. Again, I want to thank you for your time today. I'll be getting in touch with you to give you the opportunity to read what I've written about you. This is an important part of the research, as it helps verify the accuracy of the information you've shared.

**Follow up**

The Follow up Interview Protocol includes three parts

- Introduction
- Opportunity to review what I've written about you for accuracy.
- Wrap up

Introduction: I want to give you the opportunity to read what I've written about you. This is an important part of the research, as it helps verify the accuracy of the information you've shared.

Wrap up

Well, that about wraps things up. Again, I want to thank you your participation.

## **Appendix E**

### **Transcription Service's Confidentiality Statement**



## Transcription Service's Confidentiality Statement



Phone: (480) 922-1105  
Fax: (480) 922-6922  
Toll Free: (877) 922-1105  
[www.thelai.com](http://www.thelai.com)

### **Security/Confidentiality Measure**

#### **Data Transfer Protocols**

For maximum security, Landmark transfers data from its customers and its offsite servers via SSL encrypted endpoints.

#### **Physical Security – Servers**

The servers, which store Landmark Associates client data, are housed in nondescript facilities, and critical facilities have extensive setback and military grade perimeter control berms as well as other natural boundary protection. Physical access is strictly controlled both at the perimeter and at building ingress points by professional security staff utilizing video surveillance, state of the art intrusion detection systems, and other electronic means. Authorized staff must pass two-factor authentication no fewer than three times to access data center floors. All visitors and contractors are required to present identification and are signed in and continually escorted by authorized staff.

#### **Project Security**

Upon receiving a password protected login and account information, authorized project personnel will be able to upload audio files of using the secure upload feature of Landmark Associates, Inc.'s website. When transcripts are completed, the client receives an automatic email notification and then must log on to the system to retrieve the document.

Submitted client media files and completed transcripts are stored and maintained on a 256 bit encrypted secure server and available only via password and user identification validation.

#### **Confidentiality**

All of Landmark's employees, contractors, and executive staff are under non-disclosure agreements. Copies of which can be provided for each of the staff members involved in the project upon request.

#### **Institutional Review Board**

All of Landmark's employees, contractors, and executive staff assigned to project(s) involving human subject research, are required to complete IRB certified training courses.

• 520 South Mill Avenue, Suite 304 Tempe, AZ 85281 •

## **Appendix F**

### **Auditor's Statement**

External Audit Attestation  
By Jenny M. Powell, Ed.D.

Joseph W. Price requested that I complete an educational audit of his qualitative case study titled: Older Undergraduate English Majors And Their Self-Described Value of English. This audit was conducted between February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013 and March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013. The purpose of this audit was to determine whether the researcher left a clear audit trail. In leaving a clear audit trail, the researcher must delineate a path that others could easily follow. The audit also attempts to determine whether the study is trustworthy.

According to Merriam in her book *Qualitative Research*, the audit trail describes, “in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decision were made throughout the inquiry” (2009, p. 223). Merriam also discusses that fact that the audit trail can be used to ensure “consistency and dependability” in the data. It is the auditor’s job, “to authenticate the findings of the researchers by following the trail of the researcher” (2009, p.222). Creswell in his book *Educational Research*, suggests that the auditor answer several questions including the following:

- Are the findings grounded in the data?
- Are the themes appropriate?
- Can inquiry decisions and methodological shifts be justified?
- Are inferences logical (2002, p. 281).

To meet the outlined purpose of this audit, numerous materials were reviewed. The following materials were submitted for this audit:

- 1) A red thumb drive labeled “dissertation.” The drive contained the following main subfolders:

- Audio—original audio recordings of the 10 interviews
- Chapters—all drafts of chapters of the dissertation
- Codebook and Short Memos—Excel spreadsheets of first and second cycle coding
- IRB and Stats—UNL/UNO IRB approval documents, includes final cover letter sent to participants and follow up thank you
- Memberchecking emails—emails sent to all participants with transcriptions
- Memberchecking responses—email responses from participants, including “Claire response”
- Nvivo—directions for getting started using Nvivo (the researcher chose not to use Nvivo)
- Other Memos—memos connected to the dissertation that were outside of the “short memos” in the codebook subfolder
- Presentation—materials used for Spring 2012 proposal defense
- Reads—PDFs of selected research
- References—a list of sources consulted or used in the dissertation

Timeline—personal tracking time sheet for completing deadlines

Transcribed Interviews—originals, first, second, and third edits of transcribed interviews

Transcription—agreement and materials from the transcription service

2) A black binder containing the following: 3 copies of transcripts (one in color with notes on the side, one clean, one with notes and corrections). Each transcription was titled, “Older English Majors” with the name of each respondent listed on the top left hand side of the paper. The transcripts ranged from 11 to 22 pages in length. The binder also contained handwritten notes with the names of each respondent on the top, and a copy of the main interview and follow up protocol.

3) A brown expandable folder containing the following:

1) A final copy of the dissertation dated “May 2013.” The dissertation was 168 pages in length including appendices.

2) A paper-clipped set of data titled “First Cycle Coding” at the top left hand corner with “#, Code and In Vivo Code and Location” as titles for different columns of information. There was two to five pages of coding for each respondent. This set of data also contained another section of coding with the title “First Cycle Coding Combine” on the top left hand side of the paper with “#, Code/In Vivo Code, and Location” at the top of each column. This set of data numbered 1-1060 and totaled 23 pages in length.

3) A second set of paper-clipped information with three pages of handwritten notes, and data titled, “First Cycle Coding” on the top left hand side of the paper with “Nontraditional English Majors” under that heading. Each column then was labeled, “#, Cat., VBAD, and Coding Term.” This set of data was 37 pages in length and contained handwritten notes on the side of each page.

The audit consisted of the following steps:

1) I reviewed all materials that were submitted for the audit as listed above.

2) I examined the transcripts, comments, and notes in the margins of the transcripts. I listened to the audiotapes and compared them to the transcriptions.

3) I read the entire dissertation draft.

4) I read the entire dissertation proposal. I paid particular attention to the introduction, research questions, data collection and analysis procedures,

and the interview protocol. I wrote down key steps that were listed in the proposal and later compared them to what the researcher actually did in the completed study.

Summary of the audit findings:

After careful examination of both the process and product of this researcher's work, I believe that this study is trustworthy. This was determined based on the fact that the research procedure was sound and the findings were clearly grounded in the data. The research questions remained consistent from the proposal to the draft with one exception. One additional question was added, number four, which asked the respondents, "What kind of use do students believe the English major holds for them." I assume that the researcher added this question as he became more involved with the research and to further understand the impact of the major choice for the respondents. The unit of analysis (older undergraduate students) remained consistent from the proposal to the final draft of the dissertation.

This study's research plan was well defined in the proposal. The information presented for analysis was clear, clean, and organized. The materials submitted for the audit clearly supported the procedures he outlined in his proposal and dissertation. The audiotapes were transcribed professionally, and the researcher followed up with checking and changing the transcriptions as needed. The qualitative approach was explained by the researcher, as were his reasons for conducting the study.

The researcher was much more specific in his dissertation draft regarding how he analyzed the qualitative data. This is common in qualitative studies as the researcher becomes more immersed in and familiar with the data.

In conclusion, I believe the information provided to me by the researcher, as well as the descriptions in the dissertation draft, allow for an easy to follow audit trail. The study contains a high level of trustworthiness, and the researcher has clearly outlined how he determined his themes and conclusions. Based on all of the above, I believe other researchers could follow this clear audit trail.

Attested to by Jenny Powell this 17<sup>th</sup> day of March, 2013.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Powell Ed.D.".

Jenny Powell, Ed.D.

## **Appendix G**

### **Coding Summary of Themes and Attributes**

### Coding Summary of Themes and Attributes

**Note:** 1,590 pieces of data across this study's ten interviews were coded using a structural scheme that linked data to the study's four sub-questions. Thirteen themes surfaced relating to these questions, and the data associated with these themes were additionally coded using a verses coding scheme that identified individual datum by three attributes: its origin (internal or external); its setting (formal or informal); and, its influence (positive or negative).

#### Total

##### *Number of Times Themes Referenced by Participants*

Theme	Participants Referencing Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
			Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Being Older	6	36	27/9	18/18	18/18
Coping Strategies	10	110	84/26	29/81	75/35
(Demographic Information)	10	231	--	--	--
Encouragement	10	447	268/179	229/218	329/118
Fear	5	23	18/5	11/12	1/22
Finances	9	80	47/33	34/46	48/32
Interruptions to Enrollment	10	145	74/71	29/116	31/114
Possibilities	10	203	177/26	64/139	171/32
Reading's Influence	9	61	45/16	8/53	58/3
Resistance	7	25	19/6	9/16	6/19
Skills Gained	8	76	65/9	25/51	50/26
Understanding the World	10	62	58/3	39/23	59/3
Worth of the English Degree	9	52	50/2	7/45	52/0
Writing's Influence	6	39	33/6	6/33	33/6

## By Question

### Sub question 1: What “path” led participants to choose English as a major?

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Participants’ Path to the Major (Included Data Coded as “Path” (P) and Background Information (B), Demographic References also Included)*

Theme	Participants Referencing Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
			Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Being Older	4	11	8/3	3/8	6/5
Coping Strategies	9	37	29/8	8/29	21/16
(Demographic Information)	10	224	--	--	--
Encouragement	10	214	82/132	84/130	151/63
Fear	2	2	2/0	1/1	0/2
Finances	6	29	19/10	3/26	15/14
Interruptions to Enrollment	10	91	46/45	12/79	30/61
Possibilities	10	75	65/10	51/24	51/24
Reading’s Influence	8	47	36/11	6/41	44/3
Resistance	5	19	15/4	8/11	5/14
Skills Gained	7	26	25/1	7/19	13/13
Understanding the World	7	16	14/2	7/9	15/1
Worth of the English Degree	4	6	6/0	2/4	6/0
Writing’s Influence	3	20	17/3	4/16	16/4



**Sub question 2: What factors aided and/or hindered participants enrollment  
semester after semester?**

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Participants' Aid to Enrollment (Included Data  
Coded as "Aided" (A), Demographic References also Included)*

Theme	Participants Referencing Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
			Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Being Older	4	10	7/3	5/5	10/0
Coping Strategies	7	51	34/17	18/33	48/3
(Demographic Information)	2	3	--	--	--
Encouragement	10	162	60/102	118/44	154/8
Fear	2	3	1/2	3/0	1/2
Finances	8	31	16/15	26/5	31/0
Interruptions to Enrollment	2	2	1/1	1/1	0/2
Possibilities	3	4	4/0	3/1	2/2
Reading's Influence	2	2	2/0	1/1	2/0
Resistance	--	--	--	--	--
Skills Gained	2	2	2/0	1/1	1/1
Understanding the World	2	3	3/0	3/0	3/0
Worth of the English Degree	--	--	--	--	--
Writing's Influence	--	--	--	--	--

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Participants' Hindrance to Enrollment (Included Data Coded as "Hindered" (H), Demographic References also Included)*

Theme	Participants Referencing Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
			Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Being Older	3	14	11/3	10/4	1/13
Coping Strategies	5	18	17/1	3/15	2/16
(Demographic Information)	1	1	--	--	--
Encouragement	9	38	21/17	19/19	2/36
Fear	4	17	14/3	7/10	0/17
Finances	5	20	12/8	5/15	2/18
Interruptions to Enrollment	8	51	26/25	16/35	0/51
Possibilities	1	1	1/0	0/1	0/1
Reading's Influence	--	--	--	--	--
Resistance	1	2	2/1	1/1	0/2
Skills Gained	2	9	8/1	3/6	2/7
Understanding the World	2	2	2/0	1/1	1/1
Worth of the English Degree	--	--	--	--	--
Writing's Influence	--	--	--	--	--

**Sub question 3: What kind of value did participants believe the English major held for them?**

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Participants' Value of the English Major*

*(Included Data Coded as "Value" (V), Demographic References also Included)*

Theme	Participants Referencing Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
			Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Being Older	1	1	1/1	0/1	1/0
Coping Strategies	1	4	4/0	0/4	4/0
(Demographic Information)	--	--	--	--	--
Encouragement	8	23	12/11	6/17	16/7
Fear	--	--	--	--	--
Finances	--	--	--	--	--
Interruptions to Enrollment	1	1	1/0	0/1	1/0
Possibilities	4	11	10/1	1/10	9/2
Reading's Influence	5	10	10/0	1/9	10/0
Resistance	3	3	1/2	0/3	1/2
Skills Gained	6	28	22/6	10/18	24/2
Understanding the World	10	36	34/2	11/25	35/1
Worth of the English Degree	7	39	5/2	1/6	7/0
Writing's Influence	4	7	5/2	1/6	7/0

**Sub question 4: What kind of use did participants believe the English major held for them?**

*Number of Times Themes Referenced in Participants' Use of the English Major (Included Data Coded as "Use" (U), Demographic References also Included)*

Theme	Participants Referencing Theme	Total Number	Attributes		
			Internal/ External	Formal/ Informal	Positive/ Negative
Being Older	--	--	--	--	--
Coping Strategies	--	--	--	--	--
(Demographic Information)	2	3	--	--	--
Encouragement	8	10	4/6	2/8	6/4
Fear	1	1	1/0	0/1	0/1
Finances	--	--	--	--	--
Interruptions to Enrollment	--	--	--	--	--
Possibilities	10	112	97/15	9/103	107/5
Reading's Influence	2	2	1/1	0/2	2/0
Resistance	1	1	1/0	0/1	0/1
Skills Gained	5	11	8/3	4/7	10/1
Understanding the World	3	5	5/0	1/4	5/0
Worth of the English Degree	5	7	7/1	0/7	7/0
Writing's Influence	4	7	5/2	1/6	7/0