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A Transition-To-College Course For Adult Learners: Effects On Gpa And Time To Graduation

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A TRANSITION-TO-COLLEGE COURSE FOR ADULT LEARNERS: EFFECTS ON GPA AND TIME TO GRADUATION

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to help fill the knowledge gap on stand-alone transition-to-college courses for adult students in an institutional setting where such courses have been extensively utilized via different delivery mediums. The ultimate goal was to use the knowledge obtained to aid personnel who work with nontraditional degree programs to determine if the implementation of a transition-to-college course had benefits, and if so, in what ways.

The research investigated if there was a difference in college grade point averages and the number of semester hours taken to graduation for adult students who participated in a transition-to-college course versus those who did not. The findings indicated the students who participated in the transition course had significantly lower GPAs at the end of the first semester versus those who did not take the course. There was no difference in semesters to graduation for the two groups. The research also investigated if there were differences in performance based upon the delivery method of the course (weekend format versus distance-education delivered). The findings indicated that there was no difference for GPA but that students who took the distance course completed their degrees in significantly more semesters than those who took the course in the weekend format.

Reflections on these collective findings in light of the control variables suggested helpful opportunities for program design as well as future research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many years ago, my grandfather said how important it was for me to earn my bachelor's degree. From that day forward, I knew how important it was for me to earn an education for the sake of those who loved and cared for me. Somewhere along the way, I realized how important it was for me personally, to complete not only a master's degree, but also a Ph.D.

As much as this achievement was for me personally, it would not have been possible without the ongoing support from so many people. I am so very grateful for my dissertation chair, Dr. Joshua Powers for his patience, mentoring, direction, and friendship. It is also an honor to have Dr. Denise Collins and Dr. William Hine serve as members of my committee. I cannot thank these three committee members enough for their guidance and wisdom.

To my very special friends and work family, I appreciate you more than you will ever know. You always believed in my ability to complete my goal and you constantly found the right thing to say or do to keep me going.

To my family (and my honorary family members), I appreciate all of you so much and you all hold such a special place in my heart and in my life. I love you all more than I can say and I am so thankful for your willingness to stand by me. I am so very blessed to have each of you in my life!

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INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education have been reporting a consistent increase in the number of adults who are either returning to college or enrolling for the first time (U.S. Department of Education, 2011a). Whether a returning student or a first-time enrollee, these adults often cite events in their pasts that interrupted or delayed their quest for a baccalaureate degree. Later in life, due to the wisdom gained from experience and maturity, these adults determined that it was in their best interest to attend or return to college for a bachelor's degree. The adult learners are a diverse group in similar and different ways from traditional-aged students. For example, many may be first-generation students, parents or single parents; they may work full-time, while attending college part-time. Some of these students may care for aging parents, balance a wider range of community obligations and, in general, confront a degree of life complexity that is often greater than that of traditional-aged students (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Fairchild, 2003; Kasworm, 2008). Furthermore, their financial resources may be limited, either due to the demands of being responsible for a family or from the impact of today's economy.

There are a variety of reasons why adults may desire to return to college. One is to serve as an example to their children and other family members. Another is to make a better life, both financially and emotionally, for themselves and their families. A third reason is that the adult may realize he or she has a special talent or gift that can be used to help others, but he or she

needs a degree in order to accomplish his or her goals. In times when the economy is bad, adults may also be back in school because they have been laid off from their work and are trying to retool their skills (Kasworm, 2008).

Aslanian (2006) noted that roughly 40% of all students enrolled in higher education were adults, defined as those who are 25 years of age or older. This population of adults equates to nearly 7 million students from a total of 18 million overall in higher education. In 1970, the number of adult learners was 2.4 million; by 2009, it had reached 8 million (U.S. Department of Education, 2011b).

In 2007, the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) reported approximately 43.5% or 300,708 of the nearly 700,000 students enrolled in higher education in the state were adults. A breakdown of the data revealed that in undergraduate programs, 15.1% were enrolled in public universities, 56.8% in community colleges, and 28% in private institutions while for graduate programs, 27% were enrolled in public universities, 22.7% in community colleges, and 50.2% in private institutions (IBHE, 2007).

Although the number of adult learners continues to increase, there is still a large number of adults in the United States who do not have any education beyond a high school diploma or, at the most, an associate's degree. Research on the college wage premium and other benefits indicates that those who do not achieve a college degree experience considerable opportunity cost for not attending college (Seftor & Turner, 2002). The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE, 2006) reported that in 2004 the national average of bachelor-degreed 1998 high school graduates was 51.8% (Figure 1). In other words, in 2004 only about one-half of 1998 high school graduates had received a bachelor's degree within six years of graduation. However, this statistic varied considerably by state, with Alaska having the lowest percentage of

graduates at 21.2% and Rhode Island reporting the highest at 97.4%, with Rhode Island being a clear outlier from the other states. In the state of Illinois, the average was 45.8%, somewhat below the average for the nation and the lowest in the Midwest region of the country.

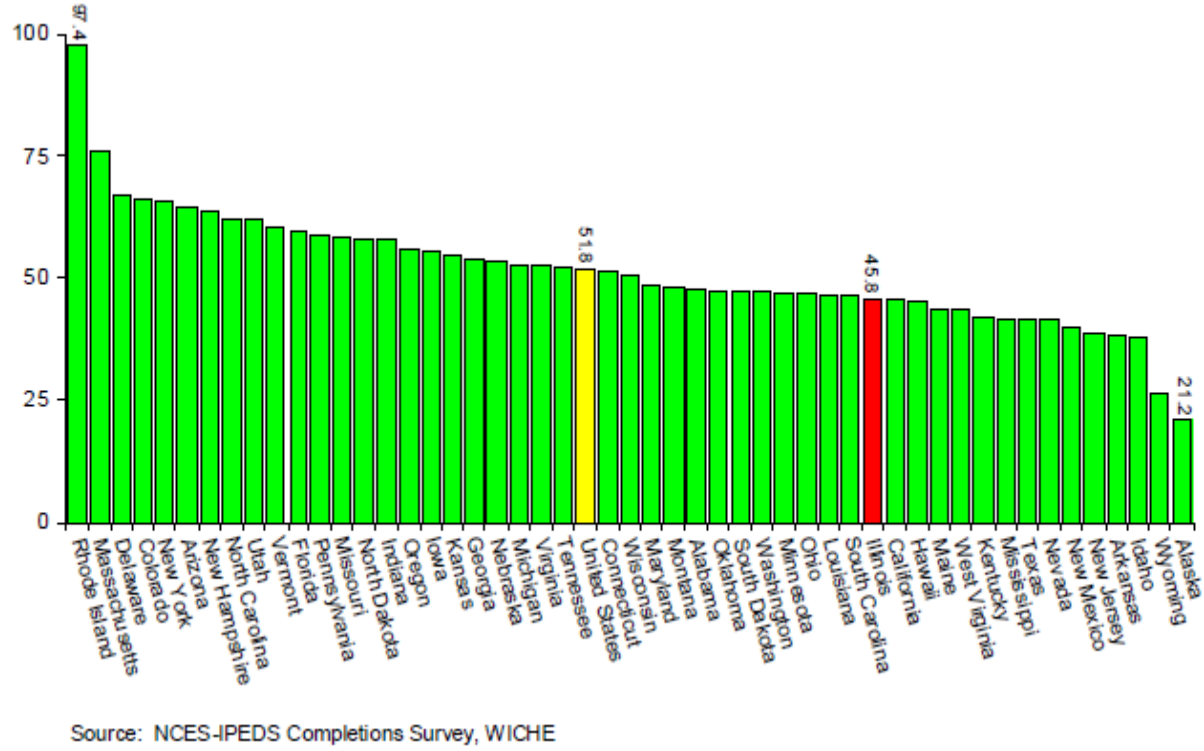

Figure 1. Bachelor's degrees awarded per 100 high school graduates in 2004. Used by permission from the Illinois Board of Higher Education.

Although the data displayed in Figure 1 provide a perspective on the potential numbers of adults who may return for a college degree at some point, other population-related data provide insights as well. The U.S. Census Bureau (2009) indicated that the oldest of the baby boomers, the generation born between 1946 and 1964, turned 60 years old at a rate of approximately 330 persons per hour. In addition, the data indicated that nationally, approximately 9.3% of adults between the ages of 25 and 34 had an associate's degree or higher, and 22.8% of adults in the age group had a bachelor's degree or higher for a total of 32.1%. Within the state of Illinois,

5% of adults ages 25 years or older have an associate's degree or higher, which is just slightly above the national average (IBHE, 2009). Further analysis of the national data reveals that there are considerable discrepancies by race, with 68.1% of White adults in the 25-34-year-old age bracket having earned an associate's degree or higher, and for African Americans and Hispanics respectively it is 12.6% and 11.3%.

In the state of Illinois, 50.6% of White adults between the ages of 25 and 34 have an associate's degree or higher (Figure 2). The percentage decreases to 25.4% for African Americans and 16.5% for the Hispanic population. It is important to note that, as the age of adults increased in Illinois, the percent of that age group who had completed an associate's degree or higher decreased, indicating that the likelihood that a person will complete a college degree declines as he or she ages, perhaps in part due to the real or perceived barriers that he or she may confront going back to school.

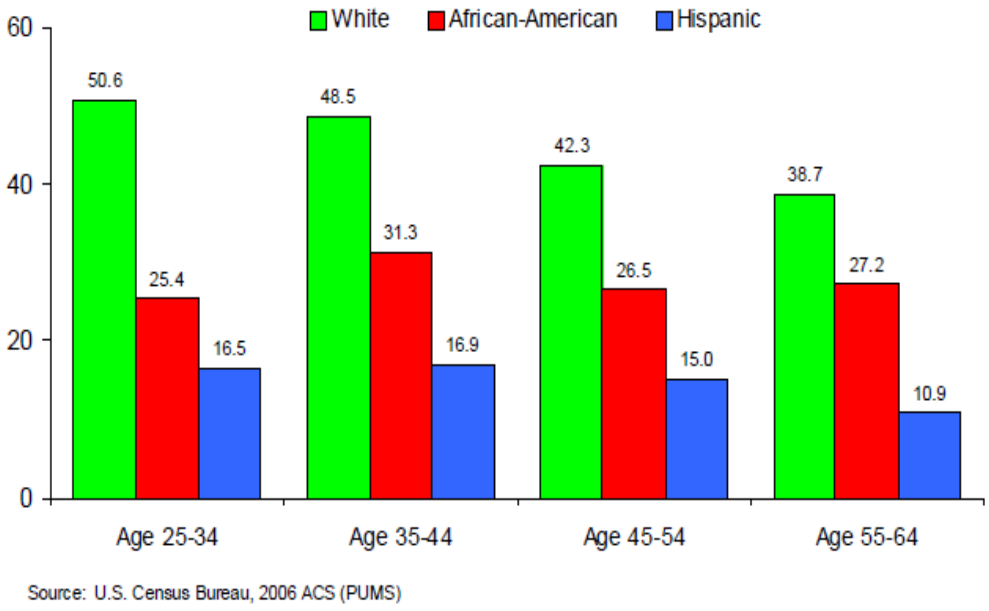

Figure 2. Percent of adults with a college degree (associate's or higher) by race/ethnicity for the state of Illinois in 2007. Used by permission from the Illinois Board of Higher Education.

Given that the focus of this study involved adult learners in Illinois, it was essential to examine how the data also varied by region of the state. Figure 3 (IBHE, 2009) reveals there is significant variance in the educational attainment of persons across the state, depending on where a person lives, ranging from highs in the wealthy suburbs around Chicago and the large university metropolitan areas to lows in poorer inner city and rural areas. It can be inferred from the data that location is a significant variable associated with level of education attainment. Additionally, these data support the need for institutions of higher education to offer degree programs designed to accommodate the needs of adult learners in less populated areas of the state.

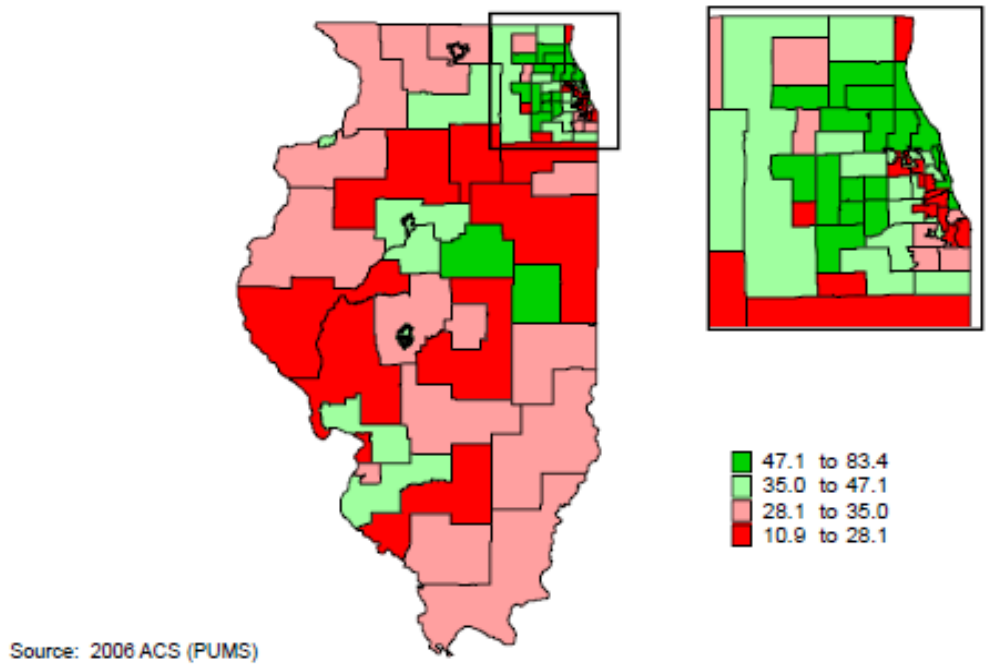

Figure 3. Percent of Illinois population age 25-64 with an associate's degree or higher in 2006. Used by permission from the Illinois Board of Higher Education.

Given the considerable opportunities for adult education as reflected in the above data and commentary, the importance of higher education to be optimally positioned to provide those

programs becomes more apparent. One particular challenge higher education has encountered with the increase in the adult student population has been that of retention or, in other words, ensuring students' success and persistence through to graduation (Brown, 2004). Considering the unique and complex challenges that adult learners confront in their return to higher education, there are a myriad of forces that increase the chances that they will not return to the classroom nor complete their degree at all (Brown, 2004; Hadfield, 2003). The added pressure to excel while balancing career, education, family, and many other responsibilities heightens the responsibility of institutions of higher education to find ways to assist them.

There are many ways to address the needs of adult learners and potentially increase their persistence in college while also allowing them to perform well academically. This may include classes being offered on weeknights and weekends; varying delivery formats such as face-to-face, online, or hybrid delivery methods; and other support services such as writing assistance centers, day-care facilities, and/or tutoring assistance. Another possibility is the implementation of a transition-to-college course designed specifically for adult learners who are returning to college after a significant time away or for those adults who are starting college for the first time.

Statement of Problem

With the growing number of adult learners and the challenges of completion, it is important for institutions of higher education to determine ways in which student persistence can be increased, because the ultimate goal is to complete the degree. Research on transition to college has demonstrated that programs that help students to connect with their institutions, as well as their peers, for mutual support and that break down the barriers of ambiguity as to what makes for success in college have shown utility in advancing student retention/persistence (Laanan, 1996; Steltonpohl & Shipton, 1986; Zafft, Kallenback, & Spohn, 2006). The more

limited research on transfer-student transition as well as adult student transition shows similar degrees of importance of the same factors for retention and persistence that were identified for traditional students but that require unique approaches to meet the needs of adult learners (Zafft et al., 2006).

One subject that has not received extensive focus in the literature, though, has been transition courses for adult learners that are distinct from those provided to traditional-aged students. Although a number of University 101 courses are offered on college campuses, they are designed to primarily serve a traditional-aged population. However, when the course is taught to a combined traditional and older student population, it may be a less than ideal fit. In summary, there is a lack of research on transition-to-college courses designed specifically for adult learners and certainly on those that utilize a mix of traditional and distance-based delivery mechanisms. Hence, key questions remain. Does a "transition-to-college" course make a difference for the adult learner? Does it affect persistence or academic performance? Does the type of delivery format make a difference in the success of a student's performance or persistence? These are important questions that need to be addressed and answered. Due to the growth of nontraditional learners and the desire for adult learners to excel, personnel in institutions of higher education must determine if transition-to-college courses have a positive effect on student persistence and academic success.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to help fill the knowledge gap on transition-to-college courses designed specifically for adult students in an institutional setting where such courses have been extensively utilized and offered via different delivery mediums. The ultimate goal was to use the knowledge obtained to aid personnel who work with nontraditional degree

programs to determine if the implementation of a transition-to-college course has benefits for adult learners and, if so, in what ways. The specific research questions were as follows:

1. Was there a difference in (a) college GPA and (b) number of semesters taken to graduation for adult students who participated in a transition-to-college course versus those who did not?
2. Was there a difference in (a) college GPA and (b) number of semesters taken to graduation for adult students who participated in a transition-to-college course based on format of course deliveries?

Summary

This chapter defined adult students and their role in higher education. In addition, this chapter developed the need for the study of persistence and academic performance among adult learners with the implementation of a transition-to-college course. Finally, the research questions that guide this research were presented. The next chapter further develops the significance of the study by providing a review of the literature relative to an investigation in this arena and that undergird the research questions.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to help fill the knowledge gap on student performance and persistence among adult learners as they may have been affected by a transition-to-college course designed specifically for adult learners. In order to contextualize the need for this study and position its importance, this chapter provides a review of the salient literature. The chapter begins by exploring the research on student transition to a four-year college or university, not only as it regards what was known about this experience for traditional aged students but also as it regards adult students. From there, the literature review transitions to a discussion of student persistence in college followed by a discussion of factors that influence student academic performance. Following that, adult learning theory is explored as a means of helping to establish why participants in a transition-to-college course might outperform students who do not participate in such a course. Adult learning theory is next explored as a means of helping to establish why participants in a transition-to-college course might outperform students who do not participate in such a course. The literature review concludes with a discussion of what may be true for adult students who take the course in traditional versus distance education formats based on what is known about adult learning theory and distance-education research.

Student Transition to College

From elementary school through middle school, children begin to identify their strengths and interests. Once in high school, students start to have greater control over the courses they can take, an experience that matches their growing maturity and independence and one that continues if/as they embark on a college career. The high school students who decide to continue to college make a choice of attending a technical or trade school, a two-year community college, or a four-year university, either public or private. Any choice is a transition to a new and challenging environment during a time when students are developing personally, intellectually, emotionally, and socially (Chaves, 2006). Colleges and universities have the task of first recruiting the student to their institutions and second making it possible for the student to remain or persist at the school, to be successful, and to earn a degree.

Transition to Community Colleges

Community colleges typically have the widest range of students in attendance, especially when considering age, stages of life, socioeconomic levels, motivation, and goals for completion. The diversity of the student population at the community college level requires that the institution be well-prepared to provide the services needed to facilitate a successful transition to the academic environment. In recent years, the concept of instituting a "one-stop shop," where services necessary for a successful transition are located in close proximity to each other, has gained some serious consideration, especially in regard to providing services for adult learners who often have responsibilities that necessitate they be able to interact with the institution in the most expeditious manner possible. Balancing career, family, and community obligations, while still working to complete a degree, limits both the amount of time and the time of day that can be used for educational purposes. Those students who typically have fewer responsibilities or who

have the luxury of a more flexible schedule are not as restricted as many adults are and therefore can take advantage of tools intended to assist with the transition-to-college, such as orientation programs, new student advisement sessions, and activities which are effective at helping students become acquainted with the college setting.

When community colleges were first established, then called junior colleges, one of their primary missions was to provide the first two years of coursework, which would prepare the student with a sound foundation in preparation for transferring to a four-year university (Cohen & Brawler, 1996; Townsend, 2001). Recognizing the importance of the mission, community college personnel carefully examined both the educational process and their ability to provide all students with a solid foundation for transfer work. Since the 1970s, many junior colleges' names were changed to community colleges to reflect the expanded missions, namely to continue to prepare students for transfer to a four-year college but also as a finishing experience with students ready to enter the workforce, typically in technical fields (Dougherty, 2001).

With this expanded mission, and the enormous enrollment growth that community colleges have experienced, the challenges associated with student retention and success have increased. Much has been discussed in the literature about the benefits and costs of the dual mission for community colleges (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 2001) and if two-year colleges were by design established to derail students with perceived lack of ability from the pursuit of a four-year degree (Clark, 2001). Regardless of one's views on the subject, it is clear that varied educational goals, under preparation, and life challenges, including the need to work while in college, have resulted in lackluster retention and graduation rates at two-year colleges. Sydow and Sandel (1996) conducted a study to determine reasons for the unusually high attrition rate at a community college. There were several reasons revealed through the research for the

approximately 110 students, including work conflicts, personal or family illness, cost of attendance, and, as noted by faculty, low self-esteem. As a result of these findings, a task force developed several recommendations for reducing attrition, including establishing "a process for monitoring student behaviors associated with failure, a strengthened academic advising program, and evaluating and revising their orientation program to better prepare students for the college experience and to help them develop attainable academic career goals" (Sydow & Sandel, 1996, p. 10). Furthermore, for those students who start at the community college with the intent of obtaining a four-year degree, they are much less likely to do so than if they had started at a four-year institution (Astin, 1993). Recent research looking at the data on community college students found a six-year graduation rate of just 45%, meaning the students had earned a degree or transferred to a four-year institution by that time (Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2006). Eight percent remained enrolled, but 47% had left the institution without earning a credential. Although these data points do not consider the fact that some students enter the community college without the intent of achieving a degree or to transfer, nevertheless, the reality is clear that there are concerns for student retention and outcome achievement.

Within the small, although growing, literature on student transition to the community college, there is evidence that certain practices do help. Most noteworthy has been the work of the Lumina Foundation, which has invested millions of dollars to explore promising practices designed to support community college student success. Their report on these promising practices (Achieving the Dream, 2011), as an outgrowth of the *Achieving the Dream Community Colleges Count* initiative, focuses on practices at "leader colleges" who participate in practices across nine categories including committed leadership, use of evidence to improve programs and services, broad engagement, systemic institutional improvement, developmental education, first-year experience, curriculum and instruction, retention and support services, and equity. These participating colleges assess the

effectiveness of their policies and practices and then share their findings with other colleges to help promote improved retention and success of community college students.

There are several ideas and programs listed in the promising practices document (Achieving the Dream, 2011) with particular saliency to student transition to a community college. One such program is holistic advising, which focuses on enhancing students' strengths and deemphasizing weaknesses that may inhibit their success in college. The program helps with both the personal and academic areas of their college lives and makes for better-adjusted college students. Another college implemented a student-success center that provides student resources in the areas of academic tutoring and mentoring, study group sessions, and academic guidance. Other programs include a first-year experience program, a mandatory new student orientation, and a transition math project, just to mention a few.

Another tool shown to help students be successful when transitioning from high school to a community college is a *foundation* course or program (Achieving the Dream, 2011). The intended goal for having students take the course or participate in the program is as a mechanism for them to better understand college as well as the services, resources, and activities available to them for their success. Some of the items in the course or program may include learning tutorials, learning style analysis, directions on maneuvering through the online registration system and student accounts, a directory for contacting the appropriate persons to answer their questions, sessions on time-management, and a variety of other resources important for their time at the college (Flower & Rhodes, 2005; Schutte & Malouff, 2002; Townsend, 2001). Many of the items included in the course or program are designed to help build students' study skills, social ability, and character. A 2000 dissertation study (Gonzales, 2000) examined 500 students at a community college to determine if an intervention program would help students attain a higher level of student involvement as well as social and academic integration, thus helping them

achieve greater success and, ultimately, increase student retention for the college. The study indicated that the intervention program significantly changed the student persistence rate from year one to year two. From the research findings, the recommendations included a focus on training and development for the faculty so they would have increased participation and involvement with students, thus increasing student retention (Gonzalez, 2000).

One particularly large challenge at the community college is responding to the needs of developmental education. Although four-year institutions are often involved with remedial education, the majority of the need for such efforts centers at the community college, where many students must participate in remedial coursework as part of their transition process. As described by Kozeracki (2002), developmental education is for students who do not meet a preferred standard set by a college or university and therefore must take developmental courses. A report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2008) indicated that 36% of undergraduate students considered to be in their first year reported having ever taken a remedial course, and 20% had actually taken one in that same year. At public two-year institutions, about 42% of students had ever taken a remedial course.

Transition to Four-Year Colleges

The number of students entering postsecondary institutions immediately following high school has progressively decreased (Flower & Rhodes, 2005) and, as noted earlier, research shows that when students starting at a community college are matched on entering characteristics with students beginning at a four-year college, the four-year college students are more likely to complete the baccalaureate degree (Townsend, 2001). Even with this being the case, those students who enroll directly from high school to a four-year institution still need to be comfortable with the transition.

The four-year college setting is often different from the two-year college environment. Entering students typically experience a larger student-to-professor ratio, are more responsible for time management of projects and classroom assignments without as many reminders, have more options for involvement in activities, and, if at a residential campus, are at a place where the students spend much of their time. "There is absolutely nothing seamless about a move that places a student in a new environment as complex and as threatening as a major university, especially if the student comes from a small, rural community … and has never lived away from home" (Vaughan, 2006, p. 29). A study by Glass and Harrington (2002) examined retention and graduation rates of traditional-age transfer students and native four-year university students. The sample included 100 community college transfer students from 58 community colleges who transferred to a large four-year university, along with 100 students who had started at the four-year institution. Conclusions drawn from this study indicated that the transfer students had equal or better performance than the native students at the end of their course work. Transfer students did, however, appear to experience a shock from the transfer process, resulting in a drop in their GPA during their first semester, and, therefore, the recommendations from the study included that the four-year institution continue to find ways to reach out to the transfer students through counseling, tutoring, and mentoring programs (Glass & Harrington, 2002).

The designs of many transition-to-four-year college programs are similar to those at community colleges, including the topics that relate to study skills, orientation, university foundations, life skills, written and oral communication skills, as well as the transition to the university social life and a connection to the university. In addition, at the four-year level, a transition-to-college course may expand its offering to include a focus on critical thinking skills (Flower & Rhodes, 2005). Schutte and Malouff (2002) conducted a study where first-semester

students at a university were required to participate in a three credit hour transition-to-college course. The course included such topics as emotional, communication, and critical thinking skills. The average age of the 77 students participating in the course was approximately 18 years, with a higher percentage of women. The study indicated the completion of the course resulted in "an enhanced ability to recognize, regulate, and harness emotions. Students also indicated they learned important information that challenged them intellectually. Further, students enrolled in the course showed a significantly higher retention rate" (Schutte & Malouffe, 2002, p. 17). This study supports the idea that a transition-to-college course increases the value to students and their retention in college.

Transition to College for Adult Students

Over the past several years, the student population has been changing across all higher education campuses, and is becoming more nontraditional. The term *nontraditional* has had a variety of definitions, but for the purposes of this study, nontraditional is synonymous with *adult students* and refer to those students who attend an undergraduate institution and are typically 25 years of age and older. The trend data on adult students indicate that in 2007, the number of adult students in college was 38%. In the years from 2007 to 2018, projections suggest this number will remain stable or increase. The NCES (2011) suggested that when the definition of nontraditional student expands to include seven additional characteristics, approximately 78% of students would be classified as nontraditional. Those seven characteristics are delaying entry to college by at least one year following high school, having dependents, being a single parent, being employed full time, being financially independent, attending part-time, and not having a high school diploma.

Because of the growth trend in adult students, higher education has found itself having to be more responsive to them as it regards accommodating their unique needs (Fairchild, 2003). Monroe (2006) believed that very few studies addressed the true needs of the nontraditional student. Nevertheless, there is a growing literature that is informative on the topic and helps to further contextualize this research project.

Several authors (Donaldson, 1999; Richardson, 1994; Ross-Gordon, 2003; Weaver & Qi, 2005) have shown that the needs of adult students are not necessarily the same as traditional-aged students; hence, an orientation program tailored to their unique needs is needed. The demands they will face as students, including expectations and requirements in coursework and the extent of time and energy required to succeed, may not be as obvious to them nor often is their ability to devote the time needed for success vis-à-vis the traditional undergraduate (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). For the adult learners, their reasons for attending college often differs, and some adults who once attended college previously as traditional-aged students dropped out or stopped out for a number of reasons, including financial considerations, competing responsibilities, lack of focus, motivation, and maturity. Adults often find themselves returning to school because of changing job requirements; career changes; family life transitions, such as marriage, divorce, or death of spouse; or self-fulfillment (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992).

What adults require from an education is often different from traditional-aged students as well. They typically have less need for the development of social skills and arguably less for the extracurricular activities that are embedded in the residential college experience. Instead, their needs typically focus more on addressing the fears associated with returning to college as well as practical study skills, writing support, and time management in the academic setting, because they often have not been in an academic setting in some time and also find themselves juggling

multiple life needs such as family and work (Donaldson, 1999; Fairchild, 2003; Richardson & King, 1998). Adult students have preconceived expectations about college, based on experiences from a previous college or university or from other past life experience. In either situation, as indicated in Monroe's 2006 study about nontraditional transfer student attrition, adult students are often pulled in different directions because of their multiple responsibilities. This study indicated a need for colleges and universities to create programs designed around the needs of adult learners, including more lenient transfer policies, the ability to attend part-time, and giving credit for life and work experience, just to mention a few (Monroe, 2006).

One stigma about adult students is that they are not able to learn. It goes along with the adage that you "can't teach old dog new tricks." This is a manifestation of fears about nontraditional learners and possibly the faculty members' inability to understand adult learners. Some studies indicate that academic performance improves after the age of 21 (Richardson & King, 1998). Adult learners are quite capable in the classroom and excel in their education, often because they are taking classes by choice, as opposed to traditional-aged students who are often there at the demand of their parents or simply normative expectations to go to college. Donaldson's (1999) work indicated adult students do as well as or better than traditional-age students in higher education settings based on grades and aptitude/content test performance measures. A study conducted by Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) supports the idea that adult learners excel. This study of traditional and nontraditional female learners indicated that the nontraditional students performed at a higher academic level than the traditional-aged students. The study also concluded that the nontraditional students were able to achieve academically, even with more stressors at home.

Another significant difference for adult learners versus traditional-aged students is that they display those learning characteristics often lacking in traditional-aged students. Specifically, adult students are sometimes more intrinsically motivated and, at times, less motivated by the extrinsic rewards of downstream jobs or income (Richardson & King, 1998). At the root of this is the fact that prior life experiences often promote a deeper appreciation for academic study and the application of classroom learning to real world settings (Richardson, 1994).

Orientation Programs

One of the most commonly cited tools for assisting with transition to a four-year college is a formalized orientation program. Orientation programs take many forms, however. Some are simple and of short duration (e.g., few hours to a day or so) and designed to focus on the most basic of needs, the informational. Others have the information embedded but also seek to meet some of the psychosocial needs of students and address the affective and self-confidence issues associated with going to college. Still others span across some weeks and perhaps a full semester through credit- and non-credit-bearing courses that more fully integrate offices on campus into the sessions, engage the students in relationship building, and, in general, provide a foundation on which a sense of integration to the campus can be built, an issue of central importance for retention (Tinto & Russo, 1994).

Regarding adult students, many are returning to the classroom after a period of some hiatus and often with anxieties about their return or memories of previous bad experiences. Orientation for them, then, can necessitate a refresher in basic study skills and how to maximize their learning experience. A program to help cope with these deficiencies and needs can be

valuable for formulating realistic expectations about negotiating family, school, and employment responsibilities (Fairchild, 2003).

Research also indicates that academic success in college has a direct correlation with classroom engagement (Chaves, 2006; Tinto & Russo, 1994). Hence, an orientation program designed for adults to become comfortable with the actual classroom experience can result in positive benefits to students, including academic grade performance, time to degree, study habits, and other related outcomes (Isserlis, 2008). More intensive orientation mechanisms that integrate psychosocial concerns can lead to "increased self-esteem, role gratification, and ego enhancement from taking on an unfamiliar role" (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002, p. 149) for adult students. These positive outcomes can lead to higher levels of self-efficacy and classroom performance, as manifested through grades. Students enrolled in transition-to-college courses such as these have also been shown to have a significantly higher retention rate than those students who did not participate in this type of program (Schutte & Malouf, 2002).

Other Tools for Adult Student Transition

Although orientation programs are a common tool for the transitional support of adult students, they are not the only mechanism serving this purpose. Other examples cited in the literature that have positive benefits include providing online and face-to-face support groups, honor societies, social groups, and advising services, all targeted specifically to adult students' life situations (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Flower & Rhodes, 2005; Kasworm, 2010). Research on these tools suggests that well-integrated components, namely those that are flexible, build confidence, and meet the needs of the adult learners, can have positive benefits for the transition, retention, and ultimate success of adult students (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Flower & Rhodes, 2005; Kasworm, 2010).

Student Persistence in College

In this section of the literature review, research and scholarship on student persistence is discussed. The section begins with a discussion of Tinto's (Tinto & Russo, 1994) model of student departure, the most well-known and studied model of student persistence in higher education. From there, the section explores those factors that affect student academic performance, a literature that draws in particular, but not exclusively, from the student engagement research. Woven into both of these discussions is what is known about adult students in these arenas (Tinto & Russo, 1994).

Tinto's Model of Student Departure

Arguably, the most well-known model of student persistence in college is Tinto's model of student departure (Tinto & Russo, 1994). Developed through a course of 20 years of research and subsequent work by others, the model explains why college students persist to graduation or its corollary, drop out. Core to the model is the notion of integration, namely that students need to experience and take advantage of opportunities that enable them to feel a part of the institution and in a way that aligns with their personal goals. Figure 1 presents the model.

To understand Tinto's (Tinto & Russo, 1994) model of student departure, it is important to describe the six core elements within it. The five factors, namely pre-entry attributes, pre-entry goals/commitments, institutional experiences, integration, and in-college goals/commitments, all lead to the outcome, the decision for the student to either depart or persist in college. In the following subsections, each of these factors impacting persistence is discussed.

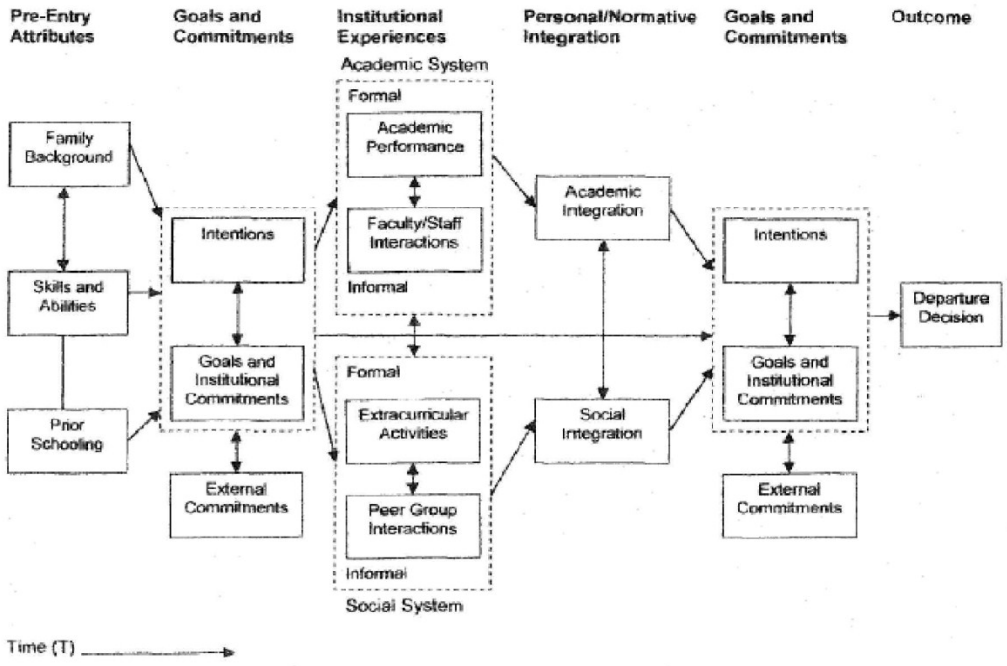

Figure 4. Tinto model of student departure (Tinto & Russo, 1994).
Used by permission from Dr. Vincent Tinto.

Pre-entry attributes. When students enter a college or university, they arrive with pre-existing characteristics and qualities learned from their previous life experiences and education. Included here are students' family backgrounds (i.e., those aspects of who they are that is impacted by family factors such as educational attainment of parents, values about education, etc.), skills and abilities (i.e., what they have learned by way of negotiating life and confronted challenges, including school), and prior schooling (i.e., how much of it and its quality). All of these pre-entry attributes have been shown to impact not only the choice to attend college but students' willingness to persist when confronted with challenges or ill-defined expectations of college.

One source of literature that evidences this is the research that clearly shows a link between academic performance in high school and future college success (Pascarella &

Terenzini, 2005). More specifically, the best students from high schools are more likely to remain so in college. Tinto and Russo's (1994) research, for example, showed that of the high school students who were in the highest academic quarter of their class, 57.5% persisted to earn a bachelor's degree in college. Of those students in the lowest academic quarter of high school, only 17.6% completed college (Tinto & Russo, 1994).

Tinto and Russo's (1994) research also explored this relationship via socioeconomic status. For instance, their study found that 55.4% of university graduates had been in the highest socioeconomic quarter of their high school classes, and 30.1% of completers were in the lowest socioeconomic quarter. The same was true when examining student ethnicity, in which 56.6% of the White students persisted to earn a bachelor's degree, but only 44.1% of Black students from their highest socioeconomic quarter persisted to graduation. For Hispanics, 22.5% achieved a bachelor's degree. Related research has shown a link between parental education and student retention and success in college (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009).

Goals and commitments. The goals and commitments factor in the Tinto (Tinto & Russo, 1994) model focuses on the aspirations of the individual and his or her linkage to college choice (Tinto & Russo, 1994). Also intimately linked in this arena of the model are the intentions to act on those goals (actually go to college and then a particular one), as well as the extent and intensity of external commitments the individual may have at the time (e.g., family, work, responsibilities for parents, military service). Previous research on this domain of the model (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto & Russo, 1994) has shown its influence on later stages, including on a student's ability to respond in unexpected circumstances (e.g., having to revise his or her notions of what it will take to be successful in the classroom, dealing with difficult others).

For the adult learners, they will begin their college education when it is time to improve on his or her skills for a job or return after a time away from college. With each of these various times and reasons for entry, students also bring a different level of goals and commitments that influence their persistence. For them, although their goals may be strong, and arguably stronger than their younger and more naïve student counterparts, the external commitments component may loom large, particularly if/when the need arises to support themselves and other dependents, something that can preclude their ability to integrate into the college. Furthermore, they may see alternative options to attendance at their particular institutions for cost or convenience reasons. Hence, for example, they may opt to drop out of a four-year institution and attend a community college, an action evidencing satisficing, or what Simon (1957) defined as making an action choice on less than full information that is seen as "good enough" for achieving a goal.

Institutional experiences. Once a student arrives at a college, his or her experience on the campus also affects persistence. Tinto (1994) organized the institutional experiences factors into two sets, one focused on the academic system (classroom performance and faculty/staff interactions) and the other on the social system (extracurricular engagement and peer group interactions). Furthermore, he subdivided each section into the formal and informal domains and argued that both are important for impacting persistence (Tinto & Russo, 1994).

One can intuitively see, and the research supports, that institutional experience factors do have a substantive impact on student retention and completion for both traditional and adult students. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005), through their Documenting Effective Educational Practice project, evidenced the important links between different measures of student curricular and co-curricular engagement and their success in college. Astin (1993), in his seminal book, *What Matters in College,* also established a clear link between academic system

and social system components of college and outcomes of importance to students, including retention and graduation.

For adult students, though, their ability to devote the time needed to establish a strong social network of support within the institution, perhaps coupled with the beliefs that their external networks are adequate, puts them at risk for persisting as would be implied by the Tinto (Tinto & Russo, 1994) model. On the academic side, some adult students may feel it is more challenging to spend after-class time engaging their faculty; thus, if the faculty member is not intentional about it, the student may not get the level of support needed in that arena. Hence, when his or her expectations about college are challenged, as invariably they are to varying degrees through interaction with fellow students, faculty members, and staff, the student can start to feel disconnected, a precursor to departure if left unchecked. The unique challenges noted earlier, such as balancing full- or part-time work, managing a family, taking care of a parent, and the like, can take its toll. Without the supports of academic and social systems, the student may drop to part-time status, quit school altogether, or stop out for a period of time, a choice that clearly reduces his or her chances of returning (Carney-Compton & Tan, 2002; Eastmond, 1998; Monroe, 2006; Tinto & Russo, 1994).

Integration. Integration is another key factor in Tinto's (Tinto & Russo, 1994) model of student departure, one that holds true for both traditional and nontraditional students. In sum for this factor, how well a student integrates into the institution will affect persistence. Tinto grouped integration into two types, one associated with academics and the other with the social, natural outgrowths of the experience sets reflected in the institutional experiences factor. Hence, if a student fails to perform well academically, he or she chooses to both seek assistance and improve performance or chooses to do nothing, slowly giving up and stopping attending class, as

he or she sinks further academically and emotionally. Outside of the classroom, either students integrate socially or they do not. Those who do not integrate socially begin to withdraw from others. Likely, they also often end up departing from the institution (Tinto & Russo, 1994).

Adult learners also need to integrate socially, but this is often in a different way than traditional-aged students. They typically already have support networks externally that help, but from among their inter-college networks, they tend to seek and associate with others like themselves (Flower & Rhodes, 2005). Sometimes these supports manifest through electronic formats, such as email or in groups designed for nontraditional learners, especially for campuses where distance education is well integrated (Chaves, 2006). Academically, adult students, like their traditional-aged counterparts, need the reinforcement that comes through academic achievement but also through the reinforcement provided by faculty, either through personal or electronic interaction or via substantive feedback on papers and assignments that speak as much to what the student did well as did poorly (Walberg, 1999).

Within college goals/commitments. Tinto's (Tinto & Russo, 1994) final stage focuses on the students' goals associated with continued attendance at their chosen institutions as impacted by external commitments and personal intentions for action (Tinto & Russo, 1994). Said another way, once a student is in college, he or she still brings with him or her all the factors from pre-college life, namely the pre-entry attributes and the pre-entry goals and commitments. Yet, when he or she experiences college, his or her feeling of integration is impacted by the experiences there, the sum total of which leads to some decision point (or ongoing decision points) to persevere or leave. One example of this is the way in which students often set goals for themselves to make particular grades. When those are not achieved, the student may experience feelings of inadequacy or self-doubt that can lead to a decision to leave. However, a

strong, caring peer support network and faculty can overcome those feelings and perhaps enable the student to see new and more effective ways to study or prepare for tests. They may also see new ways to adjust life priorities, including extracurricular activities.

Another example is a significant life event that may occur during a student's time that suddenly changes his or her priorities and by extension his or her grades, up or down, or his or her attitude toward grades. He or she may feel that earning a degree is less important than the life-changing event occurring. This may also be the case if a student is having difficulties with finances. For example, it is possible the student is struggling financially because a parent lost a job and is not able to support the students' college tuition, fees, and housing. Students leave college for a mix of individual and institutional reasons: change of major, lack of money, family demands, and poor psycho-social fit, among others (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008), that can get placed into the Tinto (Tinto & Russo, 1994) model.

If a student is also struggling to learn new things, this can also affect his or her commitment to the institution and ultimately lead to a departure decision. If he or she does not believe he or she is learning much in the classroom, he or she will likely skip class and stop trying to learn more. This will ultimately influence persistence. There seems to be a fine line between pushing students too much and not pushing them enough. We know that student learning is enhanced when students participate in shared, collaborative learning experiences, when they are active rather than passive in the learning process, and when their discourse is wide-ranging and interdisciplinary (Kuh et al., 2005).

Outcomes. All factors in the model, namely pre-entry attributes, pre-college goals/commitments, institutional experiences, integration, and college goals/commitments lead to the final outcome of deciding whether to stay at college or to depart. This decision is based on

interaction with peers, faculty, and/or staff. Furthermore, the model clearly shows the complexities involved and that such a decision is dependent on many factors, only some of which are within the college's ability to control or influence. For the adult student, the decision to depart or not is affected by unique factors associated with his or her particular demographic and others that match those of traditional students. Regardless, a decision to depart is problematic in so far as the literature indicates that doing so heightens the chances of never completing or completing over a longer time frame (Richardson, 1994; Spanard, 1990).

Critiques of Tinto

Vincent Tinto was one of the first to conduct research on student attrition and is also referred to in almost all written documents pertaining to retention (Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002). Although this is the case, there is research to suggest flaws in Tinto's work, and it is important to point out these possible weaknesses. Tinto's work originated with five factors, but after various criticisms over these points, Tinto revised the theory (McCubbin, 2003; Metz, 2002; Tierney, 1992; Tinto & Russo, 1994). Even with these revisions to the theory, researchers have continued to criticize the theory. Continuing arguments state that Tinto's research disregards the older, returning students, ignores the two-year college, and fails to consider minority students.

Metz (2002) identified shortcomings in Tinto's model on two-year college persistence. Metz noted that Tinto's research failed to consider "factors such as parental involvement, finances, and support from friends as possible influences on persistence" (p. 13). McCubbin (2003) agreed with Metz's analysis but also added that Tinto's model is only applicable for traditional, residential students or those who lived near campus and who entered school directly after leaving school. Tierney (1992) clearly pointed out issues with Tinto's model and primarily

the point that the model views college participation as if it were a "rite of passage where academic and social integration is essential for student persistence" (p. 603).

Although the criticism appears to be toward Tinto and his research and model, it is important to note that the criticism is more about departure and retention theories in general. There is a need for further research to clearly identify and confirm points in the theories. Tinto arguably just happens to be a target of criticism because of the widespread use of his model in both practice and research (Tinto & Russo, 1994).

Student Achievement in College

With Tinto's model as the backdrop, the literature review now transitions to student academic achievement in college and what is known that impacts students in that regard. Central to any discussion of performance, however, is the importance of the growing literature base on student engagement, most notably the work that has occurred in recent years via the National Survey of Student Engagement or NSSE (Kuh et al., 2008; Meyers, 2008; Tinto, 2006). Hence, this is where this section of the literature review turns first. Subsequent to that discussion will be the exploration of other literature on student academic performance, grade achievement in particular. The section will close with a discussion of adult students and academic performance.

Student Engagement in College

A key to academic success for students is engagement. Student engagement is a precursor for knowledge and understanding; it is both a proxy for learning as well as a desired outcome in itself. By being engaged--something not represented in outcomes measures--students develop habits that promise to stand them in good stead for a lifetime of continuous learning (Kuh, 2007). "Involvement, or what is increasingly being referred to as engagement, matters most during the critical first year of college" (Tinto, 2006, p. 4). Kuh (2007, 2008) has produced

a rich literature base on early interventions to increase student engagement during the first year. Others have treated engagement as an independent variable to see its effects on student academic attainment, acquisition of general education, development of academic competence, development of cognitive skills and intellectual dispositions, occupational attainment, preparation for adulthood and citizenship, personal accomplishments, and personal development (Kuh et al., 2005).

From this research base, what appears to matter most to success in the first year is what students actually do, not what institutions have in terms of resources such as facilities and faculty credentials (Hayek & Kuh, 2004). Some studies also show that students who leave college prematurely were less engaged than their counterparts who persisted to graduation. However, most of the research examining the connections between student engagement and college outcomes is based on single institution studies that do not always control for student background characteristics and/or involve the entire population of students, limiting their generalization.

Within the literature on student first-year engagement, Kuh et al. (2005) came up with two key findings important for framing this dissertation study. First, student engagement in educationally purposeful activities is positively related to academic outcomes such as first-year grades and persistence to the second year of college at the same institution. Second, teaching first-year students as early as possible how to use college resources effectively leads to persistence.

This research and others suggest that the classroom can be an important locale for student engagement. The classroom is an ideal location for facilitating student-to-student and student-to-faculty interaction, both of which are important to persistence. The classroom is also a potentially valuable place for receiving early warnings that a student needs help (academically or

psychosocially). The earlier a potential trouble can be identified, the quicker a student can receive what is needed to better assure success. The in-class settings also enables the faculty member to role model good study habits and/or point it out when he or she sees it in students.

Other engagement studies show that students with a learning community experience were substantially more engaged across the board in other educationally effective activities, compared with their counterparts who had not participated in such a program (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Participating in high-impact activities such as learning communities early in college can launch students on a trajectory of achievement that benefits them both in college and beyond (Kuh, 2007). Hence, intentionality on the part of institutions in these arenas are supported by the research as having real benefits. In addition, in a 2005 study on student engagement, Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan, and Towler developed a student course engagement questionnaire. The study and the questionnaire were designed to help determine if student engagement would help to optimize the learning environment and outcomes. The study supported a multidimensional construct of student engagement. Although this study was primarily focusing on classroom outcomes, it is evident in the research that multiple forms of engagement in the classroom result in the most positive outcomes.

When looking specifically at adult students, there are similar and different ways to help them become more engaged. It is often difficult to involve adult learners in the campus environment due to their conflicting life roles (Donaldson, 1999). A key factor is to have quality programs with substantive content, providing excellent support services, setting realistic expectations of completion time, and building a sense of loyalty and community among students. Research about adult student retention and engagement reveals “a constant theme of early and continuous attention and follow-up” (Brown, 2004, p. 58). Eastmond (1998) found that adult

students expect a supportive and flexible learning environment where they are treated by the teacher as equals and where social relations are comfortable rather than tense or competitive. In addition, accessibility, flexibility, convenience, efficiency, and sensitivity are equally important.

Opportunities to integrate, synthesize, and apply knowledge are essential to deep, meaningful learning experiences (Kuh et al., 2008). These experiences help all students become engaged in the learning process. If the primary goal for a college or university is to help students achieve academically and earn baccalaureate degrees, engagement appears to be a necessary ingredient.

College Student Performance

Within the literature on college students, one area of particular attention has been studies that explore the factors associated with student academic performance, typically measured as a student's course grades or overall GPA over a given time frame. This research has been important because, fairly or not, course grades are seen as a measure of achievement, albeit not necessarily one of learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). What we know from this literature with the greatest applicability to this study is twofold. First, grades have been shown to be the "single best predictor of student persistence, degree completion, and graduate school enrollment" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 396). Academic achievement during the first year is especially important as it is the greatest indicator of retention to the subsequent year. Second, more nuanced research has shown that this effect may vary over time. What has been found is that the benefit of grades is probably strongest in the first to the second year with progressively less benefit in later years of college, albeit not without benefit (DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 1999).

When looking at programmatic interventions in college, these, too, have been shown to be associated with either student grade performance and certainly retention and persistence. Remedial program completion, despite the controversy swirling around them, are nonetheless at least moderately associated with later grade achievement, at least to the next semester, as well as with retention, so long as the student is able to overcome the deficiencies the first time (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Academic-skill interventions such as study-skill workshops, supplemental instruction opportunities, and tutoring have positive effects on course grades and persistence, especially for high-risk students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). First-year seminars have also been widely studied with at least indirect but nonetheless substantive effects on course grades and various measures of academic and social integration that are themselves associated with student success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Finally, advising and counseling programs, programs to support particular at-risk students, and undergraduate research programs have been shown to have significantly positive effects on grades and/or persistence.

Adult Students and Academic Performance

Adult students return to school for a myriad of reasons, including wanting to improve their skills, move up on the pay scale in their jobs, and/or to learn new tasks or skills among other goals. The purpose for returning to school can be sourced either in internal or external factors. For some, it is important to have the return on their investment exceed their time and cost of returning to college. Adults have many responsibilities, and they do not want to feel they are spending their money and time on something that is not beneficial. They need to know that experience and knowledge gained will help them excel in their personal and professional lives. Adults are often very achievement oriented and highly motivated (Benshoff, 1993). Because of their busy schedules, they often need to have flexible class schedules and instruction that is

appropriate to their development levels, learning styles, and available time. Generally, adults prefer a more active approach to their learning, and they value opportunities to integrate their learning with the personal life and work experiences (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992).

As noted earlier, many adult learners return to college after being away for several years. They are typically employed full-time, caregivers for children and/or aging relatives, community leaders, and volunteer workers (Fairchild, 2003). They are also often attempting to manage family, school, and work--a daunting task.

Although a nontraditional student's home life and busy schedule can adversely affect his or her persistence in college, it can also positively affect his or her performance in college. His or her drive and focus often leads them to work especially hard and efficiently. This intensive effort can often result in higher GPAs for adult students vis-à-vis matched traditional-aged students (Benshoff, 1993). The ability for adult students to learn and achieve excellent grades, however, is sometimes a controversial issue. Some believe adult students take easier courses; therefore, their grades are higher (Richardson, 1994). Others believe adult students just cannot learn things as well as their younger counterparts (Donaldson, 1999). Yet, research indicates that adult students are quite capable of learning at the same pace as traditional-age students (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). What can and likely make a difference for adult learners are the ways in which a course is designed and the content delivered. Carney-Crompton and Tan's (2002) study included 63 female student participants between the ages of 21 and 55. The purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship between support, psychological function, and academic performance. The findings concluded that even though adult learners had multiple and varying responsibilities, they performed at a higher academic level than did traditional students. Donaldson (1999) found that adult learners did as well as or better than traditional-aged students

across all four measures of intellectual and academic outcomes in his study, despite different patterns of involvement both on- and off-campus.

There are specific reasons why nontraditional learners often do well in their educational endeavors. Adults are often used to managing multiple tasks at one time; they often balance their careers, families, and school simultaneously. They also make tough decisions about how to spend their time. In addition, adults employ complex meta-cognitive decision tools as in their approaches to study, learning, and balancing the many demands on their time (Donaldson, 1999).

Other research, though, indicates that adult learners struggle to make the grade and excel in college. Richardson and King (1998) found that adult students often obtain degrees in the arts and social sciences, whereas the traditional students earned degrees in the more difficult areas such as math and science. It also appeared as if adult students seemed to encounter some difficulty when assessed through timed and surprise examinations but then tended to do better than the younger students when assessed by coursework, leading to little to no difference in pass rates. Other evidence by Richardson and King is that mature students lacked in the basic skills for effective studying in higher education because they were out of practice in the art of learning.

Adult learners, because they face many obstacles and conflicting responsibilities in their lives, often need support and assistance from their family, friends, and institutions of higher learning (Benshoff, 1993). They need help in building their self-confidence as students, in acquiring or refreshing study skills, and in managing their time and other resources while in school. Adult students greatly benefit from opportunities to interact with their peers, and they need to be actively involved in the educational process through sharing relevant work and life experiences (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992). Adult learners often question their ability to fit in and compete with the traditional-age student. They fear the inability to understand and retain

information and question their ability to cope with the academic environment. Fairchild (2003) believed that an orientation program designed specifically for adults can help them anticipate problems that may arise from conflicting life responsibilities and help them gain realistic expectations about negotiating these multiple roles. This type of program can help develop the adults' ability to use successful time-management skills, improve on rusty study skills, decrease low self-confidence, and reduce fears about returning to college.

Research indicates that adults may have difficulties setting their personal lives aside and focusing on their education. They may not be able to keep up with their education since they are "out of practice in the art of learning, may lack basic study skills, and may exhibit increased learning difficulties as the consequence of age-related impairment in intellectual ability" (Richardson & King, 1998, p. 70). Donaldson (1999) argued that adults experience equal or greater outcomes as those achieved by traditional-age students. Adults also seem to make more use of time-management strategies than younger students do. They also tend to be proficient in aspects of expertise and the development of systems of knowledge (Richardson & King, 1998).

Adult Learning Theory

As a way of further framing the literature review, it is important to discuss adult learning theory. Rooted in the disciplines of philosophy, psychology, and sociology, adult learning theory has only come into its own as a definitive discipline in the latter part of the 20th century. Linked to early work on experiential learning by Dewey, expanded from the cognitive development work of Piaget and Erickson, adult learning theory has today become a valuable means by which researchers have sought to understand what is unique about learning in older humans (Ross, 2002). For the purposes of this research, three theories will be discussed, Kolb's

(1984) learning styles model, Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory, and Knowles, Holton, and Swanson's (2005) notion of andragogy and adult student motivation for learning.

Kolb's Learning Styles Model

Kolb (1984) published his learning styles model, which gave rise to related terms such as experiential learning theory. The model is based on a theory of learning and the Learning Styles Inventory, a tool that makes it easier to tell which learning environments and instructors are best suited for particular students. Kolb explained that different people naturally prefer one of four learning styles, converger, diverger, assimilator, or accommodator, each with a different combination of preference for the abstract versus the concrete and experimentation versus reflection. Convergers, for example are characterized as preferring abstract conceptualizations of ideas and active experimentation as their "way" of learning. Divergers, by contrast, prefer concrete experience and the opportunity for reflection. Assimilators like abstract conceptualization like convergers, but reflective observation like divergers. Accommodators are the opposite of assimilators, namely in that they prefer the concrete with active experimentation.

The Learning Styles Inventory emerged from Kolb's (1984) work and suggested that, as a person ages through developmental stages, the ability to integrate the styles to respond to a situational learning environment needs improvement. People internally decide whether they wish to do, watch, think, or feel. People choose a way of grasping the experience, which defines their approach to it, and they then choose a way to transform the experience into something meaningful and usable. Kolb defined this as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (p. 41).

Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory

Kolb's (1984) theory is one that is applicable to all learners throughout their education. Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory focuses more on the adult learner and emerged within the field of adult education as a powerful image for understanding how they learn. Mezirow believed that educators do not necessarily teach content in remarkably different ways, but they teach the content with a different end in view, often using quite different instructional strategies. Based on his work with returning adult women students, Mezirow's theory is that adults make meaning of experiences through reflection, critical reflection, and self-reflection called *perspectives*. The perspectives are derived from a set of beliefs, values, and assumptions that people acquire throughout life experiences.

As adults learn, they take an active role in the learning process and co-create or construct what they are learning as they work through course material. This view is a meaning-making process where learning contributes to a new way of viewing and understanding experiences. Adults go through what Mezirow (1997) called perspective transformation in which there is changes in the understanding of self (the psychological), revision of belief systems (convictional), and changes in lifestyle (behavioral).

Knowles Andragogy

Moving from Kolb (1984), who examined a learning theory applicable to all students, to Mezirow's learning (1997) theory, applicable to the adult learner in particular, one comes to Knowles (2005) who took an even more focused look at adult learning theory. Knowles et al.'s noted contribution was the term *andragogy*, which is described as the art and science of helping adults learn, in contrast to pedagogy, which is the art of teaching children. Andragogical approaches to learning are "based on the learners' needs and interests so as to create

opportunities for the learners to analyze their experience and its application to their work and life" (Sims & Sims, 1995, p. 3). The key elements to Knowles' work are

- enabling an adult student to transition from dependent to independent, self-directed learning;
- drawing upon a growing reservoir of student experience as a learning tool;
- understanding adults' readiness to learn based on actual social roles;
- recognizing adults' need to apply new knowledge and skills immediately; and
- understanding that adult learners are internally, rather than externally motivated. (Chaves, 2006, p. 149)

There are many specific characteristics about nontraditional learners, according to Knowles et al. (2005). They tend to be achievement oriented, highly motivated, and relatively independent with special needs for flexible schedules and instruction appropriate for their developmental levels. Adults or nontraditional students generally prefer more active approaches to learning, and they value opportunities to integrate learning with their lives and work experiences. They strongly believe they are more responsible and ready to learn; at the same time, they have a strong desire to know the reason for learning something. Adults are busy and do not want to have their time wasted.

Alternative Delivery Methods and Adult Student Learning

In recent years, alternative delivery models, particularly via distance education, have exploded on college campuses, often as a means of more effectively reaching students who cannot or cannot easily take classes on traditional campuses. Adult students are often the ones most likely to be taking such courses, in part, because locational challenges make it impractical to take courses in a face-to-face manner and/or even via a synchronous course delivery method.

Knowing that adults balance multiples roles and responsibilities, higher education personnel have adapted their programs and the design of their courses to help meet the demands of these learners (Benshoff, 1993; Carney-Compton & Tan, 2002; Fairchild, 2003; Wlodkowski & Kasworm, 2003; Zembylas, 2008). This includes a variety of course delivery formats with flexible delivery models, such as weekend and evening course formats and varying times throughout the day and night. The flexible formats help the adult learners have the time necessary to take classes because they may be working around a first-, second-, or third-shift work schedule, taking care of children and/or parents, and working part- or full-time jobs.

Research on alternative delivery methods for nontraditional learners suggests institutions need to evaluate how the structure and delivery of courses, as well as provision of resources, meet the needs of the learner. "Many institutions already have adopted more flexible program designs and varied course formats, for example, using distance education" (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002, p. 150).

Distance education formats consist of not only internet courses but also interactive television, Elluminate, Skype, correspondence, hybrid, etc., which vary between synchronous and asynchronous delivery. These varying forms of delivery methods, along with at least 21 different models of learning styles, make the task of designing and teaching a course a challenge (Santo, 2006). Adults, who typically learn best by example and experience, require courses that include interaction between learners, memorable learning experiences, a safe and inviting environment, and real-world problems (Meyers, 2008).

In addition to distance-based programs, another form of delivery is the accelerated learning program, which is a series of courses taught within a shorter amount of time. For adult learners, accelerated learning programs are optimally designed around the best way for adults to

learn, but also within strong academic performance evaluation and depth over breadth so the adult learner knows they are learning as much in the shortened class as in a semester-long course (Scott, 2003). "There is evidence that accelerated learning programs are more effective with nontraditional learners, operate at significantly lower costs, and signal a tidal wave of change for higher education" (Wlodkowski & Kasworm, 2003, p. 96).

Although there is evidence adult learners may perform exceptionally well in accelerated and web-based courses, they possess specific challenges in the learning process (Wlodkowski & Kasworm, 2003). Often, the nontraditional learner is not familiar or comfortable with computers and technology, so there is often a greater learning curve associated with preparing for a class. The learning environment is quite different in the delivery formats compared to a semester-long, face-to-face course, so it is a challenge requiring a different form of organization and time-management for the courses. The fact that the adult learner is balancing so many other responsibilities makes taking these accelerated and online courses an even greater challenge (Eastmond, 1998; Wlodkowski & Kasworm, 2003; Zembylas, 2008).

Summary

In this chapter, a variety of different literature has been presented, all designed as a foundation to this research study. The chapter opened with a discussion of student transition, first to community colleges and then to four-year institutions, followed by what we know about adult-student transition in particular. From there, the chapter switched to explore student-persistence research, most notably via a discussion of Tinto's (Tinto & Russo, 1994) model of student departure. The third section explored student achievement, both in terms of engagement and academic performance, with a closing sub-section focused on adult students in particular.

Three important adult-learning theories were discussed next, followed by a final section looking at alternative educational delivery methods relevant to adult learners (Tinto & Russo, 1994).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

As noted in Chapter 1, the purpose of this study was to investigate whether or not participation by adult learners in a transition-to-college course had an effect on their academic performance while in college, as well as if it made a difference in their persistence to graduation, operationalized as the number of semesters to graduation among those who go on to graduate. Furthermore, I was interested to see if there were differences in performance based upon the delivery method of the course, traditional semester-long delivery versus weekend format versus distance-education (technology delivered) format, a key insight that could further aid in the design and implementation of transition-to-college courses. In this chapter, the research method used for the investigation, the population and sample, the variables of interest, the procedures for data collection, the means of data analysis, and the possible study limitations are discussed.

Research Method

This was a quantitative, ex-post-facto study design. It was ex-post-facto because it utilized archival data (i.e., data that captures a phenomenon that has occurred in the past) rather than a true laboratory study where a treatment and its effect are formally controlled and observed while they happen (Creswell, 1994). As with any research of this kind, the goal of the study was not to determine causation but rather to surface relationships and differences that may exist based on participation or delivery method.

Population and Sample

The population for this sample was undergraduate adult learners who attended a mid-size four-year public university located in the Midwest. These students all enrolled through a continuing education program between the years 1999 and 2002, a period of time when students had the option of taking or not taking the transition-to-college course. If they elected to take the course, they took it in one of three formats: a traditional course spread over a full semester, a weekend course that was offered in fewer extended sessions over the course of a semester, or an on-line version of the course delivered via the web over a period of six weeks and in which students participated asynchronously. The entire population of data was used to ensure representation from each of the continuing education campuses where adult students were enrolled over the period of time being studied, estimated to be approximately 500 students.

In order to establish a meaningful framework for this study, it is necessary to provide a brief history and description of the degree program in which the students were enrolled, as well as specifics about the transition-to-college course, including the nuances of the various delivery methods and its nuances by delivery type. In 1969, the Board of Governors of State Colleges and Universities established a special task force on nontraditional education. The task force was charged with developing a program to serve the needs of adult learners throughout Illinois. The establishment of the task force began as a result in a downturn in the economy, the traditional student population was decreasing, and the lack of educational opportunities for adults. Dr. Robert Pringle, the vice-chancellor for the Illinois Board of Governors System, was appointed as the chair of the task force. Other members of the task force included representatives from five public universities throughout Illinois, including Chicago State University, Eastern Illinois University, Governors State University, Northwestern State University, and Western Illinois

University. The task force developed the idea of the Board of Governors Degree Program and presented it to the Board of Directors in 1972, which was when the program was first approved and initiated, beginning with the Board of Governors Bachelor of Arts Degree Program (Board of Governors, 1972; L. K. Woodward, personal communication, December 29, 2011).

The Board of Governors Bachelor of Arts Degree Program (BOG-BA) existed from 1972 to 1994, at which time the Board of Governors of State Colleges and Universities changed the name of the program to the Board of Trustees Bachelor of Arts Degree Program (BOT-BA). Although the name changed, the degree program and the graduation requirements remained nearly the same. In 2003, the BOT-BA program made a few changes to better serve the adult learner. Students, community members, and potential employers were confused by the program name, not recognizing the degree that corresponded to the program name. The Board of Trustees name did not clearly describe a degree program and, therefore, the university that was the focus of this study decided to change the name to the Bachelor of Arts in General Studies Degree Program (BGS). According to Dr. L. Kaye Woodward (personal communication, December 29, 2011), the former Director for the BGS program, this name change more clearly defined the degree earned by students and was more acceptable by potential employers.

After 2002, when the BOT-BA degree program changed to the BGS program, the number of hours required in the program changed slightly, but the transition-to-college course moved from an option to a mandatory graduation requirement for the program. Since this study focused on the period when the transition-to-college course was optional, the description of the degree-complete program was based on the timeframe when the program was the BOT-BA program.

The BOT-BA program was offered at the focal institution in this study that was and is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission, the Midwest regional accreditor in the United

States. The degree was an individualized, nontraditional program designed specifically for adults who had significant life and work experience, were approximately 25 years of age or older, and needed an alternative route to a baccalaureate degree. The program was designed to meet the educational goals of the mature adult learner through a format and structure compatible with the varying career, family, community, and education responsibilities of the adult learner. In addition to earning a bachelor's degree, BOT-BA students also had the option of earning up to two minors. Data collected over the past 15 years, through program review and institutional accreditation studies, indicate that approximately 76% of graduates enrolled in graduate programs within five years of completing the baccalaureate degree.

Student admission to the BOT-BA program, which was at the discretion of the program director, included consideration of any of the following criteria: parent, married, divorced or single, caring for elderly parents or another family member, a veteran, experienced a significant break in their college education, entering college for the first time not right after high school graduation, or full-time, part-time, or seasonal employee. It should be noted that previous academic performance was not a primary factor in determining eligibility for the program. An adult applicant, who may have not done well in his or her first venture into the higher education arena, was given serious consideration if there was at least one year since the previous attempt at admission and the applicant demonstrated serious commitment to returning. In addition, it was recommended that the prospective student had previously earned 60 hours of earned college credit at the time of application; however, a minimum of 30 semester hours was usually required. Graduation requirements for the BOT-BA program included those noted in Table 1.

Table 1

Core Requirements of BOT-BA Program

Core Requirements
1. 120 semester hours total
2. 40 semester hours at the junior-senior level
3. 20 semester hours taken from Midwestern State University
4. 12 semester hours in Humanities/Fine Arts
5. 12 semester hours in Social/Behavioral Sciences
6. 12 semester hours in Scientific Awareness/Mathematics
7. 6 semester hours in Communication/Language
8. 1 course in Cultural Diversity
9. 1 Senior Seminar

In addition, students had an option to complete the two-credit-hour Adults in Transition course, preferably in their first semester in the program. Students were required to demonstrate writing competency and maintain a minimum 2.00 cumulative GPA. No more than six one-credit-hour workshops could be used toward the degree, and, after admission to the program, only grades of C and above would be counted toward meeting graduation requirements, although grades of D and F earned after admission to the program would be included in the cumulative GPA, (consistent with the institution's grading policy).

At any given time, there were approximately 2,200 students in the BOT-BA degree program who were considered active students. An active student was defined as a student who was enrolled and receiving credit for coursework during a two-year period of time. Students who were no longer taking classes after a two-year period were considered as inactive. Of the 2,200 students in the program, 500 to 600 enrolled in the university classes offered at off-campus or on-campus locations. Approximately 200 students took classes at other colleges and universities for transfer credit, while another 150 students were not currently taking classes but

were developing a portfolio for the assessment of prior learning, a process of detailing the college-level knowledge and skills acquired through non-academic means, which is evaluated by appropriate academic professionals for a possible award of credit. The remaining 800 to 1,000 students, considered as active by the two-year definition, found it necessary to stop out for a period of time while taking care of other life issues such as medical or family emergencies, work responsibilities, needs of their children, or the care of other family members. As a whole, BOT-BA students had an average of 154 hours of course credit upon graduation, approximately 66% were women and 34% were men, 90% were employed full-time or part-time, and the majority were single, either from divorce or having never married.

Courses available to students were delivered at a variety of locations throughout the state via face-to-face delivery, technology-delivered, interactive television, or a hybrid format combining face-to-face and online formats. There were approximately 20 locations for face-to-face delivery but online course deliveries enabled an infinite number of locations. Courses included all those necessary to meet the graduation requirements for the BOT-BA degree.

Adults in Transition Course

In terms of the transition-to-college course, Adults in Transition, there were specific goals and learning objectives that students were expected to achieve and that continue in place today. The overarching one, though, was for this course to assist students in the ongoing and future success toward degree completion. The specific goals and objectives of the course include (the entire syllabus is presented in the appendix)

1. Identifying appropriate sources of information about university rules, policies, and procedures, or sources for student information and support;

2. Understanding the educational philosophy supporting the development of nontraditional degree programs;
3. Understanding the philosophy and policies of the BOT-BA degree program;
4. Practicing and improving abilities to communicate effectively, both formally and informally, in a written format;
5. Applying critical thinking skills in the evaluation and analysis of issues affecting the return of mature adults to higher education;
6. Identifying learning/study strategies, styles, and techniques designed to enhance student confidence and success;
7. Developing skills in using evolving technology to research topics; and
8. Developing a skill set in accessing student information available through university systems.

The course had clearly stated learning objectives for the students in the course syllabus. However, the motivating factors that led to the development of the course were not so obvious to the students. The course was created, hoping to engage the students as quickly as possible after being admitted to the program, by helping the students identify with other adults who had similar life experiences. The goals were to help the students become more comfortable with the learning environment; and provide them with the knowledge that others faced the same challenges as they did when returning to college as adults. In addition, it was apparent there was a need for a way to identify students who needed additional services and support, such as writing assistance, as early as possible. Hence, the course was considered writing intensive. Another factor was the need to help students remember or acquire some of the study and learning skills that had not been used in a formal setting for a long time. Finally, another objective was to provide the

students with information that would empower them to make some decisions about how to proceed in the BOT-BA Program and how to maximize his or her options and opportunities.

Variables

Dependent Variables

Grade point average. GPA was the first dependent variable investigated and operationalized on a standard four-point scale (4.0 - 0.0) as a continuous measure. The GPA is a commonly used measure to assess student academic performance. Although it is not necessarily a measure that captures learning, and it can be subject to the realities of grading differences and standards across faculty instructors, it is nevertheless a reasonable proxy for how well a student does in a class or a course of study. Furthermore, the GPA is the measure that is used to assess whether a student was in good academic standing, or if the student should be placed on academic probation due to consistently poor academic performance. Additionally, research has shown that students who struggle academically are more likely to stop out or drop out (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Seidman, 2005).

Number of semesters to graduation. From among those who completed their degrees within six years from the date of their admission between 1999 and 2002, the number of semester hours to graduation was the second dependent variable investigated. The variable was operationalized as a continuous measure, with a minimum number of semesters of one to 12 semesters. The number of semester hours to graduation is an indication of how persistent a student was toward completing his or her degree (Seidman, 2005). Although the number of semester hours to graduation is an indicator of persistence, it is, of course, true that students may stop out, and then return later or not at all. However, given the attention that is placed on

students completing in a reasonable time frame, it was important to assess if key factors, such as completing a transition-to-college course or not taking it at all, impacted persistence.

Independent Variables

Participants in college transition class. Participants in college transition class was be the first independent variable investigated as a dichotomous measure. Students either participated or did not participate in the transition-to-college course. This was used to help answer Research Question 1. Students were assigned a 1 if a participant and a 0 if not.

Method of delivery. Method of delivery was the second independent variable observed in the study. The delivery method was a categorical one, coded as 1 if a traditional face-to-face format, 2 if a weekend-delivery format, and 3 if a distance-education format. This was used to help answer Research Question 2.

Control Variables

In order to help control for other factors that might explain either GPA or number of semesters to graduation, a few additional control variables were included. The first one was a student's age, because age may influence a student's orientation to study and/or his or her persistence. The second control variable was the end of first-semester GPA. A student's first-semester academic achievement is likely correlated with his or her graduating GPA and may be a proxy for his or her orientation to study and, by extension, to persist. The third control variable was gender. Gender may be a proxy for a student's orientation to academics or potentially suggestive of life factors that may inhibit his or her ability to be successful with college (e.g., women are more likely to be primary caregivers of children than are men, and/or men may be more likely to hold a full-time job, a possible distraction to their studies). The fourth control variable was time since last college class completed prior to returning to college. The time away

from college may be an indication of their ability to study effectively and to persist. The last control variable was the number of credit hours earned upon readmission to college. The number of credit hours earned was assumed to be likely correlated with the number of semester hours to graduation.

Procedures

The fact that this program and the transition-to-college course was being studied at a single institution and that the window of time being investigated was limited to when all three course-delivery options were offered created a unique and valuable opportunity to study the effects of both participation and delivery methods. Furthermore, the study included the entire population of students from each of the campuses where students were enrolled and could take any of the delivery options or not take the transition-to-college course at all. Because the students self-selected whether or not to participate in the course and the delivery format, the control variables included in the study were designed to at least partially mitigate the impact of alternative explanations for the findings.

The actual archival data were collected from the central office of the School of Continuing Education on the flagship campus of this university. The office maintains a database of information on all students enrolled in the program and tracks their progress from the time of admission through graduation. The various pieces of data were drawn from multiple sources, linked by the unique number assigned to students admitted to the program and enrolled through continuing education. A campus technology support specialist was the one who gathered the actual data about the students enrolled in the program. The majority of data was available in the BANNER student registration system. The key variables required for the research were included in a written program and automatically pulled the required data from the system. Data that were

not accessible in the system were the course location and type, which were determined by the School of Continuing Education, Office of Academic and Professional Development (OAPD). The data included the course section number, which was the key identifier for the course type. Once the electronic data were collected, the OAPD completed the course location, finalizing the data needed for the research, and provided it to me in anonymous form (i.e., no student identifiable information provided). The data were entered into an SPSS file. Student names were not included in the study.

Analysis

The data for this study were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive results were calculated, including variable averages, standard deviations, range values, and frequencies. Inferential analysis included tests of the assumptions for ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to ensure the data were suitable for such an investigation (i.e., reasonable normality of the data with no substantive outliers or skewness, no excessive collinearity). In order to investigate Research Question 1, an OLS regression procedure was employed in which the control variables were entered as a block followed by the independent variable of interest, student participation or not in the transition-to-college course. To investigate Research Question 2, a second OLS regression procedure was employed, although this time the independent variable was the categorical variable that captured format of delivery.

Summary

This chapter presented research methodology used in the study. The chapter began with an introduction followed by a discussion about quantitative, ex-post-facto study design, including the population and sample for the study group. The next section discussed variables and their operationalization followed by the procedures and analysis used in the research.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of a transition-to-college course designed specifically for adult students enrolled in an adult degree program at a four-year university. This course has been offered in both weekend-format and online-delivery methods. Using an ex-post-facto research design on archival data, the focal research questions were as follows:

1. Is there a difference in (a) college GPA and (b) number of semesters taken to graduation for adult students who participate in a transition-to-college course versus those who do not?
2. Is there a difference in (a) college GPA and (b) number of semesters taken to graduation for adult students who participated in a transition-to-college course based on format of course deliveries?

This chapter is organized into three sections. The first section presents descriptive statistics on the variables of interest. This is followed by a description of the inferential findings associated with OLS regression analysis that was utilized for the study, prefaced by a discussion of the suitability of the data for such analysis. The third section provides a summary to the chapter.

Descriptive Findings

The data included in this study were collected from the BOT-BA program at Midwestern State University. The participants consisted of learners who enrolled in the program between the years of 1999 and 2002, a period of time when students had the option of taking or not taking the transition-to-college course, as described fully in Chapter 3. During the designated timeframe, 502 students were admitted to and began their studies in the BOT-BA program; 326 were women and 176 were men. Of the 502 students, 386 students (76.9%) did not participate in the transition-to-college course, while 116 students (23.1%) did participate, 44 via the weekend format and 72 through the online program. No students participated in semester-long courses.

In regard to the continuous variables, there are two dependent variables and two control variables included in the data findings. GPA, the first of the two dependent variables and operationalized as the cumulative GPA at the end of the semester in which the student started the BOT-BA program, had a mean of 3.53 and a standard deviation of .73. Although the grading range results were quite broad (.38 to 4.0 on a 4.0 scale), approximately half of the sample achieved a 4.0 (271 students), likely in part due to the fact that Midwestern State University does not use pluses and minuses in their grading system. In terms of the second dependent variable, the number of semesters to graduation following enrollment in the BOT-BA program, the average was 10.62 semesters with a standard deviation of 6.62 and a range of from 1 to 37 semesters. Given the standard deviation and the range values, these descriptive findings indicate substantive variability with this variable and indicative of the fact that many of these students had completed multiple semesters of college prior to admission in the BOT-BA program.

In regard to the independent variables, transition to college course participation and delivery method, both were dichotomous and reported previously in terms of the number and

percentage in the respective categories. Because there might be alternative explanations for the research question findings, however, the three additional control variables were included as noted in Chapter 3, student gender, student age, and number of credit hours earned prior to admission to the University. Gender is a dichotomous variable and hence those frequency descriptives were presented previously. The first of the two continuous control variables, student age, had a mean of 36.9, a standard deviation of 10.33, and a range of 18-78, indicative of quite broad age variability. The second continuous control variable, credit hours earned prior to admission, had a mean of 87.87, a standard deviation of 33.48, and a range of 3-220 previous credit hours earned. This descriptive finding is also reflective of a wide range of previous college level work completed at Midwestern State University or transferred in from other institution(s) upon admission to the BOT-BA program. Broken out into class year equivalents, that equated to 20 freshmen (4% of the sample), 51 sophomores (10.2% of the sample), 215 juniors (42.8% of the sample), and 210 seniors (41.8% of the sample). Data for six of the students in the sample were missing.

Inferential Findings

The intent of the research was to investigate possible differences in academic performance (i.e., GPA and time to graduation) based on transition to college course participation and method of delivery. Given that both measures of performance were operationalized as continuous variables, and both continuous and dichotomous independent and control variables are involved in the study, OLS regression was selected as an inferential tool that can accommodate such a study design. Prior to conducting the analysis, however, it was important to test the suitability of the data for such analysis and ensure that there were no substantive violations of OLS regression assumptions.

As a first test, the data were investigated for skewness and outliers, circumstances that if extreme can influence the validity of the findings. An examination of scatterplots did not reveal excessive problems with the possible exception of the two dependent variables. In the case of the GPA variable, however, the skewness was caused by the frequency of 4.0 scores (as noted earlier, approximately one-half of the dataset), so no reasonable data transformation was possible. In terms of the semesters to graduation variable, it showed some positive skew, but subsequent variable transformation tests did not change the regression results. Therefore, the original, non-transformed variable was used for ease of interpretation.

Tests of the data for collinearity were investigated, a first step being the examination of a bivariate correlation matrix presented in Table 2. The results indicated no independent or control variable correlations above .35, well below the rule of thumb of .80 for indication of excessive collinearity (Lewis-Beck, 1980). These findings suggest that the data were suitable

Table 2

Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. GPA							
2. Semesters to Graduation	-.24**						
3. Transition Class (1/0)	-.28**	.37**					
4. Delivery Method (1/0)	.22**	-.38**					
5. Gender (1/0)	.17**	-.08	-.07	-.03			
6. Age	.39**	-.17**	-.19**	.35**	.12**		
7. Credits Earned Prior	.19**	-.38**	-.19**	.19*	-.07	.15**	

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

for regression analyses and that problematic correlations among two or more independent and/or control variables were not present.

Once it was determined the data were suitable for regression analyses, two models were run. The first was with the GPA dependent variable and the second was with the semesters to graduation dependent variable. In each case, a partial model was run, first with the control variables, followed by the full model with the addition of the appropriate independent variable of interest. Proceeding with the analysis in this manner illustrated if the control and independent variables of interest were significant and also determined if the addition of the respective dichotomous variables added relevant information in explaining variance.

Research Question 1 Findings

The results of the regression analyses associated with Research Question 1 are shown in Table 3. In regard to Model 1, the partial model explained 18.5% of the variance in GPA and the full model explained 21.5%. This 3% increase in explanatory power was significant as evidenced by the fact that the *F*-value in the second model was significant ($F = 33.39$) with

Table 3

Regression Results for Research Question 1

Variables	Model 1: GPA $n = 474$		Model 2: Semesters to Graduation $n = 363$	
	Partial Model	Full Model	Partial Model	Full Model
Control Variables				
Gender	.14**	.13**	.21*	.22*
Age	.36***	.33***	.39***	.36***
CRs Earned Prior	.14**	.11**	.07	.07
Independent Variable				
Transition Course		-.18***		.10
F-Value	36.81***	33.39***	23.87***	27.67***
Adjusted-R^2	.185	.215	.159	.228

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

the addition of the independent variable, transition course. For Model 2, the partial model explained 15.9% of the variance and the full model explained 22.8% of the variance, an increase of 6.9%.

Regarding the coefficients (standardized betas), all three control variables in Model 1 were positively significant in the partial model and remained positively significant in the full model. In other words, women outperformed men in terms of GPA, older students outperformed younger students, and students who had completed more credit hours prior to starting the BOT-BA outperformed those with fewer credits. With the addition of the transition course dichotomous variable (1 = participant in transition course; 0 = did not participate) in Model 1, the coefficient was negative and significant (-.18), indicating that for this sample, the students who did not participate in the transition course were statistically more likely to perform better in terms of their GPA than those who did participate in the transition course.

For Model 2, two of the three control variables were significant in both the partial and full models, but one control variable, credit hours earned prior to starting the BOT-BA program, was not significant in either the partial or full models. In other words, women took longer to graduate than men and older students took longer than younger students. The transition course independent variable in the full model was not significant, implying that there was no statistical impact of the course on how long it took a student in the program to graduate.

Research Question 2 Findings

The results of the regression analyses associated with Research Question 2 are shown in Table 4. In regard to Model 3, the partial model explained 22.6% of the variance in GPA and the full model explained 22.7% of the variance, .1% more variance than the partial model. Although the full model was significant ($F = 9.16$) and hence legitimately superior to the partial

Table 4

Regression Results for Research Question 2

Variables	Model 3: GPA $n = 112$		Model 4: Semesters to Graduation $n = 88$	
	Partial Model	Full Model	Partial Model	Full Model
Control Variables				
Gender	.21*	.22*	-.18^{+}	-.21*
Age	.39***	.36***	-.37**	-.27*
CRs Earned Prior	.07	.07	-.09	-.07
Independent Variable				
Delivery Method		.10		-.25*
F-Value	11.80***	9.16***	8.32***	8.17***
Adjusted-R^2	.226	.227	.201	.248

$^{+}p < .1$; $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$; $***p < .001$.

model for explaining variance, the actual variance change was small. For Model 4, the results showed a partial model Adjusted-R^2 of 20.1% and a full model that was 24.8%. This 4.7% increase in variance explanation was significant as indicated by the *F*-value result in the full model of 8.17. In other words, the full model was statistically better than the partial model for explaining variance in semesters needed to graduation.

In terms of the coefficients for Model 3, two of the three variables were positively significant in both the partial and full models. In other words, women outperformed men and older students outperformed younger students in terms of GPA. Students who had earned more credit hours prior to starting the BOT-BA, in terms of GPA, were not significant. With the addition of the delivery method dichotomous variable (0 = online format; 1 = weekend format) in Model 3, the coefficient was positive but not significant (.10). This indicates that for this sample, the students who took the online delivery method of the course were not statistically more likely to perform better in terms of their GPAs than those who participated in the weekend format delivery method.

Looking at the standardized beta coefficient findings associated with Model 4, one of the three control variables was negatively significant in the partial model, and two of the control variables were negatively significant in the full model. In the partial and full models, the older the student, the fewer semesters remaining until graduation, and in the full model only, the data indicate men require more semesters to graduation. With the addition of the delivery method dichotomous variable, in Model 4, the coefficient was negative and significant (-.25). This indicates for this sample, the students who participated in the online delivery format required more semesters to graduation than those who took the course via the weekend format.

Summary

This chapter began with the descriptive statistics on the variables of interest. The next section described the suitability of the data for OLS regression analysis. From that point forward, the findings for the study were presented. The final chapter of this dissertation focuses on the findings along with the implications for policy and practice, the limitations of the study, and the opportunities for future research.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of participation in Adults in Transition, a college course designed for adult students entering or reentering college. The data collected sought to ascertain if completion of this course increased student GPA, shortened time to degree completion, and affected student persistence to graduation. In addition, the data further analyzed to assess whether taking the course online or face-to-face had any influence on the three aforementioned outcomes. To explain the findings and their meaning, this chapter is organized into four sections. The first section reflects upon the findings. Next, the implications for policy and practice are discussed. The third section offers the limitations of the study along with opportunities for future research. The final section provides a summary to the chapter and the dissertation.

Reflections on the Findings

The data included in this study were collected from the BOT-BA program at Midwestern State University. The participants consisted of learners who enrolled in the program between the years of 1999 and 2002, a period of time when students had the option of taking or not taking the transition-to-college course as described fully in Chapter 3. During the designated timeframe, 502 students were admitted to and began their studies in the BOT-BA program. Three hundred and twenty-six students were women and 176 were men. Of the 502 students, 386 students

(76.9%) did not participate in the transition-to-college course, while 116 students (23.1%) did participate, including 44 via the weekend face-to-face format and 72 through the online program. No students enrolled in the semester-long version of the course. The research questions for the study were as follows:

1. Is there a difference in (a) college GPA and (b) number of semesters taken to graduation for adult students who participate in a transition-to-college course versus those who do not?
2. Is there a difference in (a) college GPA and (b) number of semesters taken to graduation for adult students who participated in a transition-to-college course based on format of course deliveries?

The findings related to Research Question 1, in regard to GPA, indicated that women outperformed men, older students outperformed younger students, and students with more credit hours prior to admission to the BOT-BA program outperformed those with fewer hours. With the addition of the transition-to-college course into the model, the findings indicated that students who did not participate in the course were likely to perform better academically as measured by the end of semester GPA than students who did participate. In terms of the number of semesters to graduation, women took longer than men, older students took longer than younger students, and there was no significant relationship between the number of credit hours earned prior to admission to the BOT-BA program and number of semesters to graduation. With the addition of the transition course in the model, there was no significant difference between those who did and those who did not take the transition course in regards to how long it took them to graduate.

In regards to the findings related to Research Question 2, for those students who took the transition-to-college course, women outperformed men and older students outperformed younger

students in GPA, but the number of credit hours earned prior to admission to the BOT-BA program was not related to GPA. With the difference in the delivery method variable entered into the model, students who took classes online performed statistically the same as those who took the course in the face-to-face weekend format. In terms of semester hours to graduation, men took longer than women, older students took less time to graduate than younger students, and credit hours earned prior to admission to the BOT-BA program was not significantly related to time to graduation. With the delivery method variable entered into the model, students who took the online course took longer than those who took the weekend format course in terms of the number of semesters to graduation.

Variable Relationships

Control variables. By way of reflection on the control variables first, starting with gender, the findings were positively significant in Models 1 and 2, with women outperforming men in terms of GPA but taking longer to graduation overall. There are several reasons why these findings may be accurate. First, given the research on bachelor degree completion and in-college performance, we know that men trail women in these areas, a pattern that may also be an explanation for the findings in this study (Baenniger, 2011; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Lewin, 2006; Richardson & King, 1998; Wlodkowski, Mauldin & Gahn, 2001). Adult women may also have more real or perceived personal responsibilities than men for raising a family or caring for others such as aging parents and hence, have a stronger inner drive knowing that others depend on their success as has been shown in the literature (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Fairchild, 2003; Kiely, Sandmann & Truluck, 2004). Hence, as an adult learner, because they face such real or perceived obstacles and responsibilities, their ability to attend college may necessitate a lighter course load than men (Benshoff, 1993), a possible explanation for why in

this study women took longer to obtain their degrees via taking fewer courses per semester, a choice that would by definition mean a longer time to graduation. Kiely, Sandmann, and Truluck (2004), in their study of a four lens model for understanding adult learning theory, stated that adults, women in particular, face "possible obstacles including time, cost, confidence levels, personal and social responsibilities, fears, and levels of self-esteem" as potential barrier to completing a degree in a more timely manner (p. 21). Another study, conducted by Mikolaj and Boggs (1991) at a private women's college, surveyed adult women, 60 % of the total enrollment at the institution. The findings showed that in addition to having multiple responsibilities, 77% of the adult learners attended college part-time. Other possibilities for women outperforming men in terms of GPAs but taking longer to graduate overall are possible but requires further research.

In Model 3 (mode of delivery) women obtained higher GPAs at the end of the semester than men. Once again, this could be for the reasons discussed above. However, in terms of the time to degree (Model 4), women in this group completed their degrees in less time than men, the opposite of the finding from Model 1. The reason could be that women who took the transition course entered the program with fewer credit hours needed to complete overall. A deeper analysis of the descriptives revealed that women came in with 75 previous credit hours completed while men had completed 79 previous credit hours, a finding suggesting that at least in terms of previous credits, there did not appear to be much difference between men and women. When specifically focusing on men who took the transition course, they did not perform as well as the women and took longer to complete. A deeper look at the descriptives showed that the average GPA at the end of the first semester for men in the transition course was 2.89 while for women it was 3.38. Further research is required but, there could be a disproportionate

number of men who took the course versus those who did not, and they may have also been working full-time, trying to support families, and had lower levels of academic achievement prior to admission to college. "Men are often employed full-time and this is negatively associated with persistence" (Wlodkowski et al., 2001, p. 19). Adults often find themselves returning to school because of changing job requirements; career changes; family life transitions such as marriage, divorce, or death of spouse; or self-fulfillment (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992). In Wlodkowski et al.'s 2001 study, 574 adult learners at Regis University and the University of Missouri at Kansas City were involved in a study and the data indicated that women are twice as likely as men are to graduate within a six-year period. In addition, students with higher GPAs, graduate in a faster timeframe (Wlodkowski et al, 2001). In sum, the life issues that men and women faced in the two groups (those who took the transition course versus those who did not) may have been different, thus explaining the reverse relationship for men and women in regards to time to degree.

For the second control variable, age, it was significant in all four full models in the same pattern as with gender, namely positively significant in Models 1-3 and negatively significant in Model 4. In other words, older students performed better academically but took longer to graduate in the sample of students who did and did not take the transition course. The first finding with GPA may be reflective of the seriousness with which older students may take their studies vis-à-vis younger students and the recognition of how a college degree can aid their goal achievement, a finding that has shown support in the literature (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Donaldson, 1999; Richardson, 1994). The contrasting finding for semesters to graduation suggests that there may be something different about the students in the sample and discussed in the next paragraph.

First, in regard to Model 2, older students took longer to graduate in the sample of students who did and did not take the transition course. Further research is necessary to understand the reasons for this finding. In Model 4, however, the result was the opposite, namely older students completed more rapidly than younger students. This suggests something unique about the students in the transition course that differs from those who did not take the transition course. A deeper look at the descriptives from among those who did and did not take the transition course reveals that although the average age of students in the sample was approximately 37, the average age of students who took a transition course was 34. Given the considerable standard deviation in the overall sample (10.33), this suggests some kind of age inflection moment may be occurring in the mid-30s where older students start to feel the need for greater focus than younger students do, as indicated in the literature (Eastmond, 1998; Wlodkowski & Kasworm, 2003; Zembylas, 2008).

In regard to the third control variable, credit hours earner prior to enrolling in the program, it was only significant in Model 1 with GPA. In other words, the more credit hours that students earn prior to college, the higher their GPA at the end of the first semester they enrolled. Given the unique and complex challenges that adult learners confront in their return to higher education, there are a myriad of forces that increase the chances that they may stop out or drop out of college, the former reducing the chances that they will return to the classroom and the latter that they will complete their degree at all (Brown, 2004; Hadfield, 2003). Wlodkowski et al., in their 2001 study, indicated that the number of transfer credit hours the adult learner has upon admission is an important factor in persistence and graduation. In addition, the higher the GPA, the less likely the student will drop out or stop out of college (Wlodkowski et al., 2001, p. 21). Students leave college for a mix of individual and institutional reasons such as change of

major, lack of money, family demands, and poor psychosocial fit, among many others (Kuh et al., 2008). Now, as adults, they are re-entering college and are no longer as familiar or comfortable with the classroom setting. Their GPAs might be low at admission to college or they might have a difficult time reacquainting themselves to the classroom, which results in a lower GPA. Other students may have recently been in the classroom and achieved an excellent GPA previously as it appears may be one explanation for this finding. Additional research is necessary to determine the amount of time the adult students have been away from the classroom.

Independent variables. Research Question 1 focused on whether or not there were differences in GPA and semesters to graduation for students who took the transition course versus those who did not. For GPA, the findings revealed an inverse relationship, namely students who did not take the transition course outperformed those students who did take the course in terms of their academic performance at the end of the first semester of enrollment in the program. One obvious question this raises, then, is if somehow the transition-to-college course provided detrimental information to the students in terms of skills and practices for academic success when transitioning back to college and the students were better off not getting any transitional support at all. Although such an explanation is possible, a deeper analysis of the descriptive data suggests that the two groups were not necessarily the same in regard to their starting places and life issues. Specifically, 67% of the students who did not take the course were women whereas 59% were women among those who did take the course. Additionally, the average age of students who did not take the course was 38 but those who did were 34. Finally, students who did not take the course transferred in an average of 91 credit hours, but those who took the course averaged 76.5 pre-program college credit hours.

Given these descriptive findings, at least three possible explanations for the non-course-taking group outperforming the course-taking group are reasonable. First, Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) stated that "as a woman ages, mean age of 40.29 years, psychological and academic performance improved" (p. 149). They go on to suggest that as women who are attending college either full-time or part-time age, they may become more self-assured and confident about their ability to succeed. Therefore, as they attend their classes as older students, they may be more likely to excel academically than if they had done so as a younger student. "Nontraditional students often occupy a greater number of roles" and "multiple roles can provide opportunities to experience success and an overall sense of personal well-being" (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002, pp. 140-141).

In terms of the results for semesters to graduation in Model 2, the students who did not take the transition course were no more or less likely statistically to take longer to graduation. Once again, this raises the question as to the potential value of the transition course. If students in the course do not outperform students who do not take the course, what is the point of requiring this course? Would it not be better to simply have them take courses that are directly part of the program of study toward graduation? Here again, though, reflection on the descriptives provides a helpful lens into the data and, hence, possible explanations for the speed of the two groups toward completion. Because the students in the group that did not take the course were disproportionately women and older and had more college credit hours completed prior to returning to college, this suggests that the content of the transition course is not fulfilling its desired goal of helping students feel a part of the university community. In addition, the content of the course may not provide what is needed to help the students persist toward graduation.

Research Question 2 focused only on those who did participate in a transition course (distance-based or face-to-face weekend model) also in regard to its effect on end-of-term GPA and the number of semester hours to graduation. In regard to GPA, there were no statistical differences between the two groups. In other words, taking the course via distance education versus face-to-face made no difference in terms of academic performance. Three possible explanations for this finding come to mind as potential reasons for this result. First, the method does not provide noted advantages and enabling students to self-select into a preferred approach optimally meets their needs for convenience, comfort, learning style, or desire for participation with others like them in the same room. Adult students are independent learners who see themselves as responsible, self-directed learners who use their life experiences for their pool of knowledge. Whether taking a class online or face-to-face, adult learners use their learned skills to be successful in the classroom (Chaves, 2006; Wlodkowski & Kasworm, 2003; Zembylas, 2008).

A second explanation for the finding may again reflect back on the demographics of the two groups and, by extension, their life circumstances. For the weekend format group, 57% were women whereas in the distance format group 60% were women, nearly the same proportion. Yet, for the weekend group, the average age was 39 versus 31 for the distance format group. With respect to previous credit hours earned, the weekend group averaged 84 credit hours and the distance format group averaged 72 previous hours earned. These descriptives suggest, as previously mentioned, that adult learners are equipped and used to balancing multiple roles. The delivery mode, although it requires a different way of learning, does not necessarily deter the student.

A third explanation for the result could be sourced in the idea that adult learners strive for excellent grades, with no differentiation of delivery type based on age or credits to graduation. Adult learners want to do well in the classroom. They are paying for their education and they really want to learn and not just receive a grade and a diploma. For them, it is about earning respect for themselves and from others. Often, it is a matter of completing a task successfully (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Chaves, 2006; Fairchild, 2003; Kasworm, 2008)

In terms of the semester to graduation result, online students took significantly longer to graduate than students who took the distance education-based transition course. One possible explanation, sourced in the descriptives noted above, would be that these students may already be at risk academically. It is possible these students were admitted with a lower than average GPA and were not as academically prepared for success. They may have also taken less difficult courses or simply did not attain the knowledge necessary to excel in the classroom.

A second explanation for this result may be the differences in the preparedness of the faculty teaching the transition course. The qualifications held by the faculty may be different, particularly in regard to degrees held and years of teaching experience with adult learners. In addition, the expectations held by each individual faculty member may vary as well. Programs and courses can be most helpful when it has content and support services targeted for adult learners to help them develop personally, intellectually, emotionally, and socially. All of these factors could create variances in the learning outcomes and success of the students participating in the transition course. (Brown, 2004; Chaves, 2006; Kasworm, 2008)

A third explanation is that the study did not measure the type of credits students received prior to admission, a potential source for the finding for terms to graduation. It is possible there is a high level of variance between student knowledge gained based on the type or types of

institutions they attended previously such as a community college versus a four-year institution and whether or not the institutions were public or private. The number of credits earned and transferred in upon admission may make a difference in a student's learning outcomes, as well as the number of credits they take and varying course levels. Students who have more upper-division credits will likely have more skills and knowledge than a student who transfers in more lower-division credits. Another important factor is the time since the student last participated in college-level courses. A student who transfers immediately from a community college versus a student who has been away from a college environment for a number of years is likely more prepared for college courses. The student who has been in the college setting comparatively more recently may be able to manage his or her time and balance life and school more effectively than someone who is out of practice on the demands of academic study (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Chaves, 2006; Kuh et al., 2008; Monroe, 2006).

Implications for Policy and Practice

The purpose for conducting a study was not only to learn more about the topic but also to determine ways to take the information gained and use it to develop policies and practices that align with what was learned. The first implication for policy and practice, then, is whether or not the transition-to-college course should be mandatory for all adult learners who return to college. Alternatively, based on the findings of the study, in some cases that suggested worse performance or non-significant effects on performance, whether or not to do away with such courses altogether. As a researcher, one cannot discount the possibility that a transition course is a poor investment of resources. As discussed earlier, though, it appears that these findings may be more of an artifact of group differences than of actual evaluation of the merits of the course itself. Furthermore, the findings run counter to a broader array of literature that has affirmed the

value of a transition-to-college program/course. Students enrolled in transition-to-college courses such as these have been shown to have a significantly higher retention rate than students who do not participate in this type of program (Schutte & Malouff, 2002). Relatedly, it may be that without the transition course, students would have taken even longer to graduate or not graduated at all.

What is warranted is more intensive study of the transition course experience itself, one way being through qualitative methods but another via the inclusion of additional control variables entered into the model, because it is generally not realistic to randomly assign students to such groups when studied in an ex-post-facto way. This topic will be discussed in more detail in the section related to opportunities for future research.

Given that students in the online version of the course took longer to complete their degrees, the possibility of concern for distance delivery of a transition course seems warranted. In other words, the benefits of convenience for a internet-delivered course, either to the student or to the university if space issues on campus are a concern, may in fact be outweighed by the costs of extending time to graduation. Research shows that careful design of distance-delivered courses is essential to student success (Eastmond, 1998; Meyers, 2008; Zembylas, 2008). When students are not as connected to the faculty member, their classmates, or the content, as can occur in a distance-based environment that is poorly designed, particularly an asynchronous one, they may not grasp or appreciate the importance of such content for future success. For example, if the skills of mastering institutional computing systems, accessing library search tools, or even best practices in note taking or studying do not sink in for the students, it is unlikely they will deploy those skills in their courses where their use is essential. Furthermore, the literature indicates that adults need flexible course opportunities to complete their degree. Eastmond

(1998) found that adult students expected a supportive and flexible learning environment where they are treated by the teacher as equals and where social relations are comfortable rather than tense or competitive. In addition, accessibility, flexibility, convenience, efficiency, and sensitivity are equally important. These aspects are in principle true for a distance-based course. Yet frustrations can accompany connectivity, including faculty who do not enable regular and active engagement in discussion board activities and virtual small group work or who simply upload course content notes or record themselves as a talking head can undermine the course's value. Knowing that returning students may have considerable anxiety associated with their return, a positive tone that is set through a transition course, distance or face-to-face, is essential and one that can either undermine confidence or transcend self-efficacy challenges.

To ensure that the latter and not the former occurs, it is necessary to help students have positive learning experiences in the online community. This might be accomplished by providing training for students on how to be successful in such a course. These could be via self-paced programs, face-to-face learning tools, or other possibilities. The key is to provide the adults with learning opportunities that will help them become more successful in the online environment.

A second implication for policy and practice, one that relates to the transition-to-college course itself, is to consider making curricular revisions to the course. Based on the findings from the study, it appears that the course may not be optimally designed. The purpose for the transition-to-college course is to help the student achieve their educational goals and by doing so, increase the students' GPA and time to graduation. A revision to the curriculum could incorporate more concepts, goals, and learning objectives, designed in a manner conducive to adult learning theories and techniques, that would help accomplish the desired outcomes.

A third implication for policy and practice, one that also relates to the transition-to-college course itself, is to provide the adult learners with technology support and training. It is likely the adult learner may not be as facile as the traditional-age student may with the technology. Providing online, face-to-face, or materials to help train the students could help their success in the transition-to-college course as well as other courses associated with their degree. In addition, adult learners should also have a person they can contact to help aid them with their technology concerns and questions. A key component to this training is that the materials and the training be developed in a manner conducive to adult learning theories and techniques.

A fourth implication for policy and practice is to utilize instructors who are trained in methods beneficial to the adult learner. This would be someone who understands adults and the teaching methods that go along with teaching nontraditional learners. If the instructor is not already equipped for this type of teaching, it should be the practice to provide the faculty member with the tools and training necessary to effectively teach adults. This would require knowing more in areas such as Knowles et al. (2005) andragogy and related authors' teaching techniques and methods salient to adult students. Andragogical approaches to learning are "based on the learners' needs and interests so as to create opportunities for the learners to analyze their experience and its application to their work and life" (Sims & Sims, 1995, p. 3).

Another implication would be to educate the broader faculty who teach adult students at any point in the student's studies about the adult learning literature and how it relates to effective classroom or online pedagogical practice. It is also important to help faculty understand how to help adult students work effectively on their own outside of the classroom. The more faculty

learn about adult students, the better they can be at enabling improved student academic performance.

A sixth implication for policy and practice is to develop a pre- and post-test for the transition-to-college course. At the present time, and with the current status of the course, there is not an effective way to determine if the course is making any sort of an impact on the learning outcomes of the students participating in the course. It is quite possible for the adult learners participating in the course to have varying degrees of educational ability in the classroom. It is also possible the course is only reaching some of the students. The development and implementation of a pre- and post-test could provide answers to the benefits the course is providing for the adult learners.

A seventh implication for policy and practice is to determine ways to build communities of adult learners. This is based on current literature and would likely assist in decreasing the potential for adult learners to either stop out or drop out of college. Research shows that students with a learning community experience are often substantially more engaged across the board in other educationally effective activities compared with their counterparts who had not participated in such a program (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). It would also help the adult learner feel more of an integral part of the institution, and therefore it might encourage and empower the learners and build stronger self-esteem. Research shows that students who are integrated into the learning environment are better all-around students (Flower & Rhodes, 2005). Well-integrated components such as those that are flexible, build confidence, and meet the needs of the adult learners can have positive benefits for the transition, retention, and ultimate success of adult students (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Flower & Rhodes, 2005; Kasworm, 2010).

The eighth implication is that not all students learn in the same manner. Therefore, it is important to develop a variety of transition-course formats available to adult learners. In addition to weekend and online courses, new courses might include options that have additional flexibility. One possibility is the inclusion of weeknight classes and hybrid courses, the latter a blend of face-to-face and online sessions. This would provide students with a variety of options that might meet their needs more efficiently and effectively.

The final implication is to conduct a review of current practice surrounding the transition-to-college course. This review process should include all aspects of the program that provides the course. This could include how the faculty member communicates with the students, the goals and objectives for the program itself, the faculty teaching the course, the resources and training provided for the faculty member, and much more. This review of current practice could potentially provide insight into others areas of the program that either negatively or positively affects the adult learners' GPA and time to graduation.

Study Limitations

Although the study of the transition-to-college course for the degree program provides a valuable opportunity to study the effects of participation as well as delivery method, there are limitations to the study. The first limitation is that the time to degree may not be a direct result of the transition-to-college course but rather from the necessity to complete the degree in a timelier manner to qualify for a pay increase, promotion, new job, or other pertinent reason. This scenario could be the incentive necessary for a student to pursue his or her degree more intensely by increasing the number of credit hours taken each semester to meet a particular deadline. This kind of information was not obtainable for this study.

A second possible limitation is the lack of attention to race or ethnicity of the sample group. Previous research suggests that minority students may not achieve as well academically or persist as readily as majority students do in college (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). However, given the limited number of minority students available for the sample across all delivery format types, this variable could not be investigated.

A third limitation of the study is the actual number of courses and type of courses provided in any given semester. Although an assortment of courses are available to students each semester in a variety of delivery formats, the semester hours taken by a student could vary based on his or her individual needs for completion of the program/degree. Students may require a course in scientific awareness/mathematics to complete their degree, but the course may not be offered during a time convenient for a student during a given semester. This scenario could cause a delay in the student's completion of his or her degree.

A fourth limitation is the fact that the study was done using one program at one institution and thus may not be representative of another college or university's circumstance. Furthermore, the data are more than ten years old. Hence, arguably the needs of students and the nature of the program at that time may not be optimally relevant to current circumstances. However, the ability to study different delivery methods was uniquely possibly during the chosen timeframe. There are a number of potential reasons why the students who completed Adults in Transition were not more successful in fulfilling the stated goals than those who did not take the course. One possibility is the course itself. Was the instruction of the course in alignment with its stated objectives? Were the students provided with the resources they needed to support their re-entry into higher education? Did the instructors provide adequate instruction and feedback to support the student?

Another possible limitation of the study was the students themselves. Students self-selected into this course. Strategic advising and placement were not part of the process. Students might have chosen to enroll in the course for a variety of reasons that had nothing to do with the stated learning outcomes. They might have selected this course for things such as convenience, perception of this being an easier course than others they had to choose from, or desiring a certain instructor.

It is also possible that students who elected to take this course did so intentionally; these students could have struggled with previous coursework and enrolled in the course for additional learning support. Previous GPAs of the students were not considered in analyzing the data. The students who self-selected into this course might have been weaker students upon entering the program. If this was true, the course might have been beneficial in bringing those who took it up to a level comparable to the students who chose not to enroll.

Another limitation of the study is the lack of information about the faculty teaching the course. Their qualifications and teaching styles may have been quite different. Some may also have been more adept at teaching the adult learner. As discovered in previous research, teaching adults is a different process than teaching traditional age students (Chaves, 2006; Donaldson, 1999; Ross-Gordon, 2003). These factors could have an effect on the students' GPAs and time to degree.

The lack of information about the student upon entering the BOT-BA program is another limitation of the study. It would be useful to know where the students were prior to their admission into the program. Were they already taking classes elsewhere? If so, were they at a community college or four-year institution? Did they have a lapse of time between their previous college experience and the BOT-BA program? In addition, it would be helpful to know

the students' credit hours entering the BOT-BA program. The limited amount of information about the students leads to as many questions about the students as answers.

Finally, a limitation of the study was the fact that so many of the students who were included in this study had a 4.0 GPA after the class and at the end of the semester. These students with high GPAs might have chosen not to the take the transition-to-college course, and the ones who completed the course were not as well equipped in any class. The students with high GPAs may have believed they did not need the course. This also means the course may not have appeared to have value for all the students.

Opportunities for Future Research

Although there are substantial and well-supported reasons for the findings of the study, there are also many assumptions that can be made about the findings. These assumptions provide potential opportunities for further research. In addition, and as is true for many research studies, it raises new questions for possible study.

As indicated in the literature, there is a greater frequency of adult learners having full-time job responsibilities as compared with younger students and thus less ability or willingness to take as many courses per semester (Carney-Crompton & Tan 2002; Fairchild, 2003; Richardson & King, 1998; Wlodkowski, et al, 2001). This may result in a greater proportion of older students attending college part-time. Further study would help to answer these questions in this particular research arena.

Additional findings in this study showed that women outperformed men in regards to GPA. Could this be a result of the women having attended college more recently and thus potentially being more comfortable and accustomed to attending classes, something that might enhance their ability to do well and plan a course of study? It would appear as if the amount of

time away from the classroom could have a negative impact on both the time it takes to graduate and the GPA a student earns. Adult students, as opposed to traditional-aged students, are often back in school after a long time away from the classroom. Adult students may have opted to not pursue college right out of high school or started and stopped out because of poor grades, a job, family situations, or many other possibilities. Further research would help to confirm these assumptions about adult learners.

A third opportunity for further research is to study various age-groups of adult learners to determine if there are generalizations that can be made about their abilities, challenges, and situations. An assumption could be some kind of age inflection moment occurring within an age group, such as the mid-30s, where older students start to feel the need for greater focus than younger students do, as suggested in the adult student literature (Eastmond, 1998; Wlodkowski & Kasworm, 2003; Zembylas, 2008). This finding, coupled with the finding in this study that younger students had fewer credit hours completed prior to entering the program, suggests an opportunity to explore patterns for different age groups, possibly also via the analysis of interactions between age and credit hours completed.

Another opportunity for research is to investigate further the adult learners' experiences of previous course taking. Irrespectively of how recently a student took a course, the experience may prepare the students better for the rigors of college re-entry. Such students may have a stronger familiarity with what it takes to be successful with academic coursework compared to their counterparts who have less previous college experience, and therefore, have a higher GPA and shorter time to graduation.

Students who stopped out with relatively few previous credits may also be channeling the fact that more of them were academic dismissed or had poorer grades at the time they left college

previously. The students with more credit hours completed implies that they may have been doing reasonably well academically before but simply stopped out for other reasons (e.g., job, life challenge, family commitment, etc.). In sum, the students with greater numbers of credit hours completed prior to re-entry may have left college before by choice rather than by requirement. Further research is necessary to help explain these findings.

A fifth opportunity for future research is in regard to adult students who are parents and the degree to which that serves as a motivating factor to complete their studies in a timely manner. Studying this factor through the lens of gender would also be a useful future study. A possible assumption about women, particularly those who are single and raising children alone, is that they may have an especially strong desire to be a role-model or once their children begin attending school or move away from home, to start a career (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Chaves, 2006; Fairchild, 2003; Ross-Gordon, 2003). Further research would help to explore this factor.

Another area for further research concerns the students who opted not to take the transition course. These students may have had on average more previous credit hours completed and felt less of a need for a transition course. Their previous experience with college was deeper and, as noted earlier, more likely that their reason for departure was by choice not as a function of being suspended or dismissed for poor academic performance. Because the transition course is also a lower- rather than an upper-division class, that too may have served to discourage students with greater credit hours completed at the time of re-enrollment from taking it. In sum, the students who chose not to take the course appeared to have more readily obvious reasons for not doing so but were, most importantly, likely the stronger ones academically and

with stronger self-concepts about academics than their non-transition course counterparts. Additional research would shed further light on these findings.

A seventh area for future research focuses on the fact that there seems to be little research that discusses the actual needs of adult learners upon their return to college. It would add to the literature surrounding adult, nontraditional learners to know more about their social and academic needs. Knowing more about the adult students' return to college experience would help to create a stronger transition-to-college course. It might also help when developing courses either online or in a weekend format. Currently, it is difficult to know whether the findings pertain only to the adult learner or if these same findings would exist for the traditional-aged student. More literature is available on the topic of attending college as it relates to the traditional-aged student and less about the adult learner.

An eighth opportunity for further research is to know more about the needs of an adult learner in an orientation program. Current literature speaks about orientation programs for first-time college students and students who transition from a two-year to a four-year institution, but literature is lacking in this topic for the adult learner who has often been away from the classroom for some time. Sydow and Sandel (1996) conducted a study to determine reasons for the unusually high attrition rate at a community college. A task force developed several recommendations for reducing attrition, including establishing "a process for monitoring student behaviors associated with failure, strengthening the academic advising program, and evaluating and revising the orientation program to better prepare students for the college experience and to help them to develop attainable academic career goals" (Sydow & Sandel, 1996, p. 10). In order to develop courses and programs that are unique and helpful to the adult learner, it is necessary to have pertinent information on what would be useful for this student population. An effective

orientation program designed for adults should result in positive benefits to students, including academic grade performance, time to degree, study habits, and other related outcomes (Isserlis, 2008).

A ninth opportunity for further research is to know more about why adults choose or chose not to attend college. If adult students are attending college to gain more money, earn a promotion or change careers, they may feel the need to rush through the program and have little concern for their GPA if the perceived risks are low. If the learners are involved in a reimbursement program through their work and it is based on their grades earned in each class, they are likely going to try to make excellent grades. The purpose behind why a student participates may make a difference in their performance and commitment.

Another opportunity for further research is to study the race and ethnicity of the adult learners and whether or not this makes a difference on the GPA, time to degree, success in an online class or a weekend formatted course, or with the implementation of a transition-to-college course. Race and ethnicity are areas where research is quite prevalent but not as it pertains to the adult learners.

An eleventh opportunity for future research is to determine the qualifications of the faculty teaching the transition course. It would be helpful to know if the faculty had any expertise in adult learning theory. Faculty members' qualifications and experience could make a difference in the success of the implementation and findings of a transition-to-college course. Research on this topic would likely advance the literature in adult learning substantially.

In addition to knowing about the faculty teaching adult learners and a transition-to-college course, it would also be beneficial to know more about the adult learners. Although literature exists that defines the adult learner, there is little about what the adult learner really

needs to be successful in the classroom and in college. The primary focus of the literature pertains to the traditional-aged student. In addition to knowing about what the student needs, it would also be helpful to know the typical data points surrounding adult learners, including typical GPAs, hours to graduation for adult transfer students, age, etc.

The final opportunity for future research gleaned from this study and that was touched upon in the last point, is the GPA of the adult student. In this particular study, approximately one-half of the students achieved a 4.0 GPA after the completion of the course and the end of the semester. Often, adult learners have extremely high GPAs but this does raise questions. Is the excellent GPA because of grade inflation, or are the students so motivated and hardworking that they earn excellent grades?

Summary

This chapter began with a discussion and reflection upon the findings of this study. Next, the implications for policy and practice were discussed. The fourth and final sections offered the limitations of the study along with opportunities for future research. In summary, the findings of the study revealed that although particular control factors did matter to academic performance and time to degree, the delivery method also at times mattered but not always in a direction that would indicate value of a college transition course. Yet, through deeper descriptive analyses and reflection from the literature, it appears that the source of the findings may have more to do with unmeasured factors or simple differences that are associated with students at different life phases, previous educational circumstances, and gender characteristics that have been salient to understanding student motivations and performance in previous research. Nevertheless, it is essential that postsecondary opportunity be expanded for adult learners. Research such as that

conducted for this dissertation can aid in determining optimal ways to help older students make a successful return, or start, to college.

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APPENDIX: SYLLABUS

Midwestern State University
Adults in Transition
BOT 2985 – 2 Credit Hour

Instructor:
Office:
Office Hours:
Phone Office:
Email Address:

Course Assignments and Grading

Assignments

Writing Assignments – Essay – 250 words

The essay is to be on a topic of your choice and about something of importance to you. It may be serious or humorous, but it must be 250 words or longer. The writing assignments for this class are designed to provide opportunity for students to demonstrate their ability to communicate effectively in Standard Written English. The assignments will be graded on the criteria listed below.

a. Organization
b. Appropriate use of English grammar
c. Punctuation
d. Logical presentation of thoughts
e. Addresses the assignment or topic

Grading

When grading your assignments, the following is considered:

- Responses reflect an understanding of the question being asked and are appropriate to the question. Some of the assignments are asking for your opinion or preferences. Obviously, in these situations, there is not a wrong or right answer, but your response must be appropriate to the question.
- Completeness of information. Answers are given in an appropriate format and enough information is provided to be able to assess your level of understanding.

- Correct use of Standard Written English. This includes grammar, punctuation, and tense agreement. Logical organization and presentation of ideas is also considered.
- Accuracy of information, where appropriate.

Points for discussion topics will be based on an analysis of the student's response. Responses that reflect critical thinking skills, analysis and evaluation of the topics will be graded higher than responses which reflect only a surface level of thinking.

A.	9 – Discussion/Replies	135
B.	Learning Style Summary	50
C.	Learning Style Quiz	50
D.	Timed Writing – How Do I Feel About Writing	50
E.	MSU Web Information Search	50
F.	Final Essay	100
G.	Course Evaluation	50
	Total Points	485

Course Objectives and Outline

Objectives

As a result of this course students will be expected to:

a. Identify appropriate sources for information about MSU rules, policies and procedures, and sources for student information and support;
b. Understanding the educational philosophy supporting the development of nontraditional degree programs;
c. Understand philosophy and policies of the Board of Trustees BA Degree Program;
d. Practice and improve their abilities to communicate effectively, both formally and informally, in a written format;
e. Apply critical thinking skills in the evaluation and analysis of issues affecting the return of mature adults to higher education;
f. Identify learning/study strategies, styles and techniques designed to enhance student confidence and success;
g. Develop skills in using evolving technology to research topics; and
h. Develop a skill set in accessing student information available through the MSU web system.

Outline

1. Introductions
    a. Who are we?
    b. What do we have in common?
2. Adult Students
    a. Profiles of adult students returning to Higher Education
    b. Motivation for returning to college
    c. Barriers

    d. Issues/concerns/challenges of returning students
3. Strategies for Successful Learning/Writing
    a. Free writing, journalizing, mind-mapping
    b. Review of rules of grammar and punctuation
    c. Practice activities
    d. Developing written documents
    e. Outlines
    f. Draft copies
    g. Developing paragraphs
    h. Introductions and summaries
    i. Documenting sources
4. Assessment of Student Progress: Writing Skills
5. Learning Styles
    a. Gregoric and Butler Learning Styles Theory
    b. Learning Styles Inventory
    c. Concrete Random
    d. Concrete Sequential
    e. Abstract Random
    f. Abstract Sequential
    g. Techniques for enhancing various learning styles
6. Successful Study Skill Techniques
    a. Reading techniques
    b. Note taking techniques
    c. Listening skills
    d. Questioning skills
    e. Critical thinking techniques
7. Practice and Assessment of Study Skill Techniques
8. Introduction to Higher Education and Midwestern State University
    a. History of the founding of MSU
    b. Traditions
    c. Goals for higher Education in Illinois
        i. Citizens agenda
        ii. Workforce development
    d. Defining the meaning of "being an educated person"
9. Board of Trustees Degree Program
    a. Advisement process
    b. Planning for the future
    c. Program policies/rules
    d. Transfer of courses
10. Rules and Policies of MSU
    a. Course loads
    b. Textbook rental
    c. Exams and grading policies
    d. Academic integrity policy
    e. Grade appeal process
    f. Proficiency exam policy