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A Qualitative Study of Adult Women in a Northeast Tennessee Community College.

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A Qualitative Study of Adult Women in a Northeast Tennessee

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ABSTRACT

A Qualitative Study of Adult Women in a Northeast

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The purpose of this study was to determine the motivations and characteristics of returning female students ages 23-50 and to investigate the implications for the community college. Participants in the study were 30 female students ages 23-50, selected from required classes in math and English in a community college in Northeast Tennessee. The participants volunteered to participate in this study. Responses were grouped in three major categories: motivation, characteristics, and implications for the community college. The responses were then analyzed and compared with the information from the literature review.

Findings suggested that job-related reasons motivated students to return to college, and these reasons were those that were most acceptable to family and peers. Self-improvement, however, was also a strong motivation. Job satisfaction seemed more important than high salaries. Many single parents wanted more for their children and further education was the only way they could get a better-paying job. These students were highly motivated, determined to reach their goals. Almost all of them had experienced some academic successes in their past, but most of them had families who were indifferent to higher education, and often, in the same family, attitudes toward the student's attempt to obtain more education were ambivalent.

Students did not express many problems in the areas of scheduling, transportation, or child care, even though the community college could be classified as a "commuter college." Their attitudes were positive toward the school, and toward their educational experiences. Most of them were enrolled in a business or medical curriculum. Students viewed general education courses positively. They saw such courses as expanding their outlook on life and opening up new worlds for them. All of the students said they would recommend returning to school to other women in their age group.

DEDICATION

       This dissertation is dedicated to my beloved husband, Dan McMillan, who has been exceptionally supportive, helpful, patient, and understanding during almost 45 years of a wonderful marriage. Many times I could not accompany him or spend as much time with him as he would have wished because I had deadlines to meet, assignments to finish by a due date. Some of these assignments were enhanced by his beautiful lettering and his helpful suggestions about which kind of illustrations would aid in understanding and where they could be placed for the most effectiveness. I have made much use of his artistic talents and his willingness to help me whenever he could.

       He has my deepest love and appreciation.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In recent years nontraditional students (students 23 and above in age, many of whom are employed, at least part-time, and often have young children) have entered or returned to college in greater numbers than ever before. Shifting enrollment patterns indicate that by 2005 well over half of the students attending college will be over 25 years of age (Litner, 1997). The last time colleges were faced with such proportions of older students was in the years just after World War II ended, when a large number of men took advantage of the 1944 Servicemen's Readjustment Act, popularly known as the G.I. Bill (Garrison, 1997). Witt (1994) noted that the need for adult education had been public policy as early as 1936; however, most of the community colleges were under local control, applying public funds to meet district needs. The GI Bill forced junior colleges to respond to adult needs. This situation challenged the assumption that older students could not learn as well as younger students.

In 1928, Thorndike performed systematic studies comparing 45- year- olds with 20- year- olds. He concluded that learning continued until age 45. Later research indicated learning commonly continued until about age 75 (Kidd, 1977). Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) pointed out that factors such as health, interest, energy, and opportunity could also influence adult learning. Many older students showed that they could learn as well as, if not better than, their fellow classmates. Another concern was the disparity in age and experience between older students and traditional students. This mix proved positive and enriching and added extra dimensions to the classroom (Harrington, 1977).

Currently, female students represent the majority of nontraditional students. Many of these students are single parents, who married early, began families, and, until recently, had little interest in continuing their education (Lindner & Harris, 1998). Boone (1980) pointed out that

from 1950 to 1960 female college students had more than quadrupled, and a large number of those students were women ages 30-34, and enrollment of this group increased from 21,000 to 215,000.

Polson (1993) called attention to the increase in part-time students as adult enrollment increased (to 61% of community college enrollment) and to the fact that the number of women 35 and older enrolled in college has more than doubled since 1972, with the number of part-time women students also having doubled. Adelman (1994) estimated that between 1965 and1990 the proportion of enrollment of women in community colleges increased from 20% to 38%. Adelman (1999) stated that by the early 1980s women had become the majority of nontraditional students and the percentages have increased since then. Cohen and Brawer's research in 1996 (as cited by Winter & Harris (1999) noted that females equaled males in college enrollment by 1978; by 1991 females outnumbered males (55% to 45%).

A large number of adults are not prepared for college. Many of these students are not adept in coping with the varied aspects of the academic world, do not have good study habits, and feel uncertain and insecure about this new endeavor toward self-improvement and/or developing skills for better employment opportunities (Radenbush & Kasin, 1998). A secondary and profitable result of further education for these students is better jobs when they complete their college work.

The research problem this study has addressed is what motivates female students aged 23 to 50 to return to or begin college. This study has also considered how community colleges are uniquely able to serve these students. As the composition of student bodies shifts toward these nontraditional students, there are many factors to be considered as to how their academic needs may be addressed. Many colleges with remedial and developmental programs originally targeting the poorly prepared traditional students show the majority of students enrolled as nontraditional students who did not complete high school. An increasing number are those who completed high school a long time ago and need refresher-type courses before they begin college

work. Adult students also often have schedule conflicts because of work, family responsibilities, and/or transportation problems. Also, adult students have different learning needs from those of traditional students. How are colleges meeting the special needs of these students? What services and class schedules enable these students with family and work responsibilities to meet graduation requirements?

A study of reverse transfer students by Winter and Harris (1999) whose participants were predominantly female (66.4%), and older than traditional students (30.7 the mean age) indicated a need for programs designed for working students and/or those who had family responsibilities. These nontraditional students wanted evening and weekend classes and more flexible locations (off-campus sites, on-line or distance education options for required courses) and childcare and counseling services. They wanted more information about available student services. Also, no matter how they may have performed academically in the past, these nontraditional students were determined to do well academically. They also wanted to enhance their careers, and they were also interested in general self-improvement. Cohen and Brawer 's 1996 research (as cited by Winter & Harris 1999) noted that the community college with its flexible scheduling and course locations, as well as its experience in custom-designed education was more capable of meeting the needs of these reverse transfer non-traditional students than were the traditional four-year colleges and universities.

Statement of the Problem

Because most educational philosophies and theories have been based on the learning styles of, and the teaching practices suitable for, traditional students, educators need to learn different methods and procedures to facilitate adult students whose learning styles may differ. Some educators may become quite uncomfortable, feeling they may be compromising the quality of their courses, if they alter them to meet the unique needs of adult students (Cross, 1981). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the motivation of returning students and also

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to investigate the classroom atmosphere and attitudes of their instructors. The study will also demonstrate that the community college best meets the needs of these nontraditional students and helps them to meet their goals.

Several unique aspects of the community college make it the ideal place for these women to pursue higher education. Schedules are flexible, classes are smaller, and all classes are taught by qualified instructors who are available for extra help. Tutors and special help for the students with physical handicaps and/or learning disabilities are also provided.

Research Questions

To assess the special academic needs of the nontraditional students, 30 non-traditional students were interviewed. They were asked why they had returned to college, and what types of assignments and instructions they had found most helpful. These interview participants were females aged 25-50 attending Northeast State Technical Community College in Northeast Tennessee (NSTCC). According to the literature review, some questions directly bearing on academic success, such as family support, level of motivation, and past experience and success in academics, have not been adequately studied. Questions about these facets were asked. Several programs at NSTCC involve older, nontraditional students. From informal interviews and conversations with counselors, directors, and instructors of programs designed especially for older students, such as Next Step, Fast Track, and Weekend College, other aspects of these topics emerged. Directors of these programs have selected the data from surveys that are especially pertinent to their participants and they have shared some insights.

As these nontraditional students represent increasing proportions of college enrollment, their special needs must be recognized and addressed. Adult learners bring special insights and different kinds of life experiences with them to class. Lord (2001) claimed that a mixture of nontraditional students and traditional students enriched class content because younger students valued the experiential knowledge older students shared.

The nontraditional students may undervalue their experiential knowledge, but an instructor who is alert to their insecurities about attending college and to their real fear that they may not have the ability to do the work can help them to recognize and value the successes they have experienced and build on this self-confidence to help them succeed in achieving their goals.

The following questions directed the research:

1. What are the motivating factors that persuaded nontraditional female students to return to school?

2. What are some characteristics unique to the non-traditional students?

3. How can the community college serve these students better?

Limitations

The students interviewed were females ages 23-50 currently attending NSTCC. Time and economic considerations were factors that caused the participants to be limited to this group. Also, the trust of the participants was essential, and the reputation of the interviewer as one who can be trusted to keep students' confidences was crucial to the semi-formal interviews that provided thick data and descriptions. The nature of qualitative research fosters a close involvement between researcher and research subjects. I knew nine of the respondents and may have had some preconceived ideas about them. Another factor to consider is that the interviews took place toward the end of the term, and these students had persisted to complete the term. Students who had dropped out during the term were not represented.

An additional reason for limiting the students to those at NSTCC was the support and interest administrators and counselors have expressed in this research. Some administrators have indicated that this research, supplemented by other information obtained from surveys, might serve as the basis for future in-service conferences.

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Delimitations

Many types of education may be considered as adult education, but this study focused on female adult students at NSTCC aged 23 to 50 who were enrolled in college courses leading to an associate degree. Students pursuing non-academic learning, such as crafts or skill-specific learning, have been excluded. Other students who come under specific categories, such as the homeless or disabled students with special needs, were also excluded. Students taking academic courses via the Internet, taking telecourses, or enrolled exclusively in distance education courses were not included in this study.

Definitions

For the purposes of this study, the following recurrent terms are defined.

Andragogy--Knowles & Associates (1984) took the term "andragogy" from Desan Savicevic in summer of 1967. Actually, European adult educators coined the term as a parallel to "pedagogy" to provide a label for the growing body of knowledge and technology in regard to adult learning defined as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (p. 6).

Motivation--Wlodkowski (1999) defined the term as "directing energy to accomplish a goal" (p. 3).

Nontraditional students--Bartholomew (1994) defined these students as above 18 with adult responsibilities. Sometimes these students are called "older' or "adult" students to distinguish them from students who enter college directly from high school.

Reverse transfer students--Cox & Associates (2002) defined reverse transfer students as those students who transfer from a four-year to a two-year college, noting that most do so "to learn a specific trade-related skill that potential employees also wanted." (p.12).

Stop-out--Adelman (1994) differentiated between "drop out" (dropping out of school entirely) and "stop out" as being a deliberate decision not to attend classes during a semester

when family or work obligations might be very pressing, or when the student might be facing surgery or other medical procedures.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 discusses some of the factors that are involved in teaching adult learners and presented information about the details of the study, the limitations, and the delimitations of the study.

Chapter 2 includes a review of the most pertinent literature that discussed adult education.   Characteristics and motivation of adult learners and the implications for educators of adults have been emphasized. Chapter 3 explains the methods used to obtain data and analyze the data. Chapter 4 analyzes the results of the interviews. Chapter 5 summarizes the results of the study and makes suggestions for further study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Cohen and Brawer (1989) alleged that most older adults who return to school are motivated by job-related considerations. These students often have families and feel that not only will they benefit from higher education, but their families will also be helped if they can get jobs with higher pay, and which provide more opportunities for advancement. For students who have been out of school for some time and working in low-paying, unskilled jobs, the infusion of technology into the workplace is an additional reason for returning to school. In some instances, a promotion or similar advancement in the workplace is possible only if the skills of these returning students are upgraded and updated. Although most nontraditional students return to school for work-related reasons, a few want to finish a degree that marriage and family responsibilities interrupted, and others return for personal growth and enrichment.

Motivations of Adult Learners

Houle (1961) identified three basic types of motivations affecting adult learners. He classified these learners as goal-oriented, activity-oriented, or learning-oriented, acknowledging that the categories sometimes overlapped. The goal-oriented learners tended to be very pragmatic, using available educational resources to meet a specific goal. Their educational experiences tended to be sporadic. The activity-oriented learners used their educational experiences to be part of a group, sometimes escaping from difficult family situations, and perhaps hiding their true motivations even from themselves. The learning-oriented students tended to continue their educational experiences, valuing learning almost as a religious experience. They also liked to read as a leisure activity.

A majority of non-traditional female students seemed to have been motivated by pragmatic goals to return to college. Miglietti and Strange (1998) surveyed a number of under-prepared students. Of the 156 respondents to their questionnaire, the majority were non-traditional female students, and the largest proportion applied to major in business administration. Adelman (1999) also found that more women were majoring in business and business-related courses, with the health sciences as the second most dominant choice.

Even though student motivation for returning to school for improved work opportunities is strong, business organizations are also increasingly interested in better-trained workers, and often finance programs and courses that meet their own needs. Jones (1997) pointed out that with better-trained workers, business and industry had increased their productivity. States with well-trained work forces also find it easier to attract new businesses and industries. "Community colleges are working with employers to provide training on demand in quick response to new business opportunities, routine retraining to employees moving through a multi-occupation career path, and serving as a central 'talent bank' and magnet for economic development" (p. 19).

Results of a questionnaire completed by 672 students enrolled in the distance education program of the College of Maine in fall of 1989 were reported by Killacky and Valadez (1995). They noted that 75% of the respondents were women and that the majority were between the ages of 23 and 40. They identified four basic motivational traits: (1) degree seeking; (2) information seeking; (3) participating; and (4) job enhancing. Follow-up interviews indicated that lack of time and lack of money had prevented these students from enrolling earlier. They also indicated the importance of encouragement by family, friends, and co-workers.

Speer (1996) added that modern workplaces required not only better-educated entry-level workers, but also workers who were constantly retraining and updating their knowledge. He pointed out that computer technology changed radically on a continuing basis, and while other fields may not have changed so drastically in such a short time, 10 years is a conservative

estimate of the time any current competence remains effective in any field of employment today. Spikes (1998) supported this claim by noting the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that all categories of occupation will require additional levels of education in the years 1994 to 2005: "Growth is expected to occur from a five percent level for occupations in the first category, those requiring on-the-job training to a 29 per cent in occupations that require a master's level preparation" (p. 9).

An additional indication of how important job training is in today's workplace was the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee's approval of a bill to enhance job training in 1997—the Workforce Investment Partnership Act. Mealer (1997) indicated that Tech-Prep programs providing technical training in high school followed by two years of community college training would benefit the workplace specifically.   Frazer and Stupak (2002) recommended this program especially for women because these jobs that entail technical training "generally provide higher wages and more security and growth potential than traditionally female occupations" (p. 17).

According to research by Gough (1997), "Adult education has always been oriented toward upgrading job skills, but in recent years it has moved even more strongly in that direction " (p. 412). Another aspect of the workplace affecting today's workers is that many from firms that are downsizing must seek new careers and search for new jobs. Career counseling and retraining becomes part of the life of these students. Those who are counseling and teaching such students are warned that there is a fine line between education and therapy. Educators must be careful not to cross this line (Broulmetis, 1997).

Other considerations also affect job-related education. Several inventories of desired work skills, cited by Tetreault (1997), indicated that jobs had not been lost because of the employees' lack of skill, but because workers could not get along with or communicate with other employees in fostering the teamwork so crucial to many industries today. Rose (1997) added that today's workplace also required more complex thinking by the worker, advocated

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more education that involved more than specifically job-related skills and cautioned that "we must be wary about framing education experiences because this will lead almost inexorably to the loss of both a broader perspective and of analytic ability" (p. 5).

Characteristics of Adult Students

An acknowledged leader and pioneer in adult education, Knowles & Associates (1984) identified several characteristics of adult learners. Knowles explained them as follows:

> Regarding the concept of the learner. He characterized adults as self-directed, yet regressing to the role of dependency when re-entering school. The adult has an internal conflict because s/he also resents being treated as a child. 2. Regarding the role of the learner's experience. The varieties of experiences provide rich resources within courses. Experiences can also be negative, however, and the adult may be reluctant to overcome prejudices and biases. 3. Regarding readiness to learn. This readiness is induced by role models, career planning, and diagnostic assessment to set goals. 4. Regarding orientation to learning. The adult learner appreciates learning organized around life-situations with relevance made clear-- a life-centered, task-centered, or problem-centered orientation to learning.   5. Regarding motivation to learn. Intrinsic motivation of self-actualization, desire for a better quality of life and greater self-confidence seem to be more powerful than external motivations. (pp. 10-12)

Even though adult learners may be motivated to return to school primarily because of work-related issues, they also differ in other ways from traditional students because of their life experiences, their different goals, and their family responsibilities.   Their work and family responsibilities require adult learners to handle these demands on their time. Time and task management are crucial to the success of adult students, but many writers about adult students have focused primarily on the development of better learning skills and techniques. Merriam and Cafferella (1999) claimed that Knowles and others who had developed theories of andragogy had based much of their work on assumptions about adult learners. They also asserted that many models and theories of andragogy were applicable to learners of any age. After praising Knowles for his contributions to andragogy, Henschike (1998) stressed the essential attitude of

caring for the learner as a valuable and unique person and helping him or her to accomplish his or her goals.

Not only do adult students have more responsibilities than traditional students, but they also may have a higher commitment and a greater desire to learn; nevertheless, many have low academic skills or competence. Adult students who dropped out of school or completed their high school years when work demanded few if any technical skills may need remedial and/or developmental courses before they can begin college-level work. They also may need basic technical courses. Adult students often feel uncertain and unsure of themselves as they return to the academic environment, and they need positive personal contacts. Many are intrinsically motivated, so they have their own measures of success and are not dependent on grades or assessments of others (Ludman, 1997).

Trueman and Hartley (1996) asserted that adults tended to develop better study habits than did younger students, thus making better use of time-management strategies. Adult students seemed to grasp the idea that time-management has components both of management and organization and of the time one must allot to a given assignment or task. Most traditional students did not realize how much time any given academic task would require for satisfactory completion.

Although adult students may not be as sure of themselves academically as traditional students are, they have a greater sense of their own identity. Justice (1997) claimed they frequently had clearer goals, and some wanted more personal growth and new experiences that education can provide as well as increased employment opportunities. They also had established cognitive styles developed to deal with their multiple roles and responsibilities. They were more focused, with a greater sense of the purpose and direction of their learning. Also they were able to see beyond the immediate and specific requirements of assignments to their ultimate purpose and value.

McCormick (1995) added that adult students also had indicated that their goals were directly related to their employment goals. Most adult learners have very little interest in typical college activities or clubs unless these clubs are affiliated with the professional organizations in their chosen careers. McCormick also pointed out that surveys completed by various community colleges indicated little interest in any kind of sport, drama, music club, and student government organization.

Polson (1993) noted also that life experiences, another characteristic of adult students, could contribute positively to the learning process, or if they were negative and demeaning, could be barriers to learning that must be overcome. Adults also may have had prejudices and biases that would cause them to resist and resent any attempts to challenge these biases.

Culross (1996) claimed that adult learners and traditional students were becoming more alike. Students from both groups were more likely to attend college part-time and have work responsibilities. Each group was also taking fewer hours because many of them have had to work for necessities, and they often took more than four years to complete any degree. He added that both groups of students also realized that remedial education was cheaper than lost productivity or being by-passed for advancement on their jobs; they also realized that the local community colleges were the best sources of any remediation or upgrading of skills they needed.

Earlier in this review of the literature, the weaknesses of learning theories applied exclusively toward adult learners were indicated. A survey of adult learners and graduate programs in education at the University of Alabama reported by Evans and Miller (1990) indicated that adult learners in all disciplines shared certain common characteristics. Most of the adults surveyed disliked courses that seemed unrelated to their needs, and they liked best learning that had personal meaning and allowed them to participate in the learning experience. Perhaps the characteristic that most clearly defined the successful adult learner was that the adult participants viewed themselves "as self-directed individuals capable of managing their own lives" (Evans & Miller, p. 10). The returning students were older, had many different life experiences, and often

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had family and work responsibilities; therefore, educators should be aware that the instructional methods and practices must change to meet the needs of these nontraditional students. Chapman (1999) alleged adults wanted more participatory educational experience, so she developed a relationship with community agencies that allowed students to incorporate a supervised field experience with a campus-based seminar that integrated theory and practice.

Implications for Adult Education and the Community College

Parnell (1985) identified the three major educational acts that had expanded educational opportunities in the United States as the establishment of the land-grant colleges in the 1860s, the establishment of the G.I. Bill in the mid-1940s, and the encouragement of community colleges by the Truman Commission in 1946. According to Eaton (1994); "Many observers of the two-year college see the post-World War II period as pivotal in its (two-year college) transition from junior college to community college status" (p. 27). The increasing needs for both occupational education and for an educated adult population greatly influenced the programs of the community college.

O'Banion (1989) stated that the 1960s were driven by innovations and that "the community college was poised to respond to the societal demand for increased participation in higher learning" (p. 4). He posited that the spirit of innovation was revived in the late 1980s because increasing numbers of under prepared students had entered the community colleges near them. He noted also that older adults such as displaced homemakers and single parents had received increased attention from community colleges.

Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) also supported the community college in its efforts to reach everyone with a variety of subjects and methods. "More than any other institution, the community college exemplifies the ideal of lifelong learning. " (p. 161). Kuh and Whitt (1988) asserted that community colleges had a tradition of fostering adult education and community development as an integral part of their mission. Korim (1981) urged community colleges to deal

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with "open admissions aggressively and creatively." (p. 14). Witt (1994) also pointed out that the open-door policy advocated by community colleges had been called "a revolving door" by critics of that policy. They advocated more assistance for students with an "emphasis upon orientation, testing, counseling, advisement, student activities" (p. 232). With more help in these areas unprepared students are more likely to succeed.

Griffith and Conner (1994) expressed concern that the open door of the community college may be slowly closing as students are asked to prove they can benefit from college courses before enrolling in them and allowed a shorter time to prove themselves. They feared that the "most democratic achievement of American higher education." (p. xiii) will be undermined because community colleges have been community centers, and they respond to the educational needs of their surroundings. They offer additional chances to complete their education to those who need them, and they accommodate part-time students with work and family responsibilities, as well as students who take a few classes, then drop out or "stop out" to return again to meet additional or different needs. They also expressed concern that the high tuition and overcrowding of four-year colleges had caused students who were better prepared academically to turn to community colleges. The less academically prepared and uncertain students were being squeezed out. They urged community colleges to remain true to their mission of serving the less-prepared students with lower incomes. They expressed fear that community colleges would be tempted to concentrate more on successful students, especially as funding was becoming increasingly tied to quantitative measures of success, thus reducing remedial funding.

Adult learners represent a significant percentage of college students. An estimate by Bash (2003) placed them at approximately 47% of a college's undergraduates. Today's emphasis on lifelong learning has led to a transformation of the academic world. Most schools have begun making changes to accommodate their adult learners. These adult learners may bring new experiences to the classroom based on their working life. Many need to master technology, not

only because of an increased use of technology-based learning programs, but also because technology dominates almost every workplace, even those unrelated or peripherally related to technology. Upgraded skills are directly related to job security. These nontraditional students need different teaching styles with varied learner centered approaches. They benefit most from collaboration, use of experience, and accelerated learning assessment.

Knoell and McIntyre (1974) identified women whose formal education had been interrupted for a variety of reasons as "a group with whom community college planners should be concerned" (p. 77). In this group were educated women who wanted or needed to reenter the work force and undereducated women who need job training to become self-sufficient and women who took courses for self-fulfillment. They also noted an increasing trend toward part-time students and enrollment largely in occupational courses or courses that provided job-related skills such as communications, personnel psychology, or business correspondence. These courses could be taken to retain or obtain jobs or to upgrade job skills to qualify for advancement. Adelman (1994) also alleged that adult women students were more likely to have "continual use" stop-outs. They might enroll for fall term and then stop out winter term, returning for summer term, and dropping out in the next fall term. They may not have enrolled in any classes when family or work obligations were excessively demanding. He also stated that women who entered college later in life were more likely to make incidental use of educational experiences to meet a particular goal and less likely to earn a degree. Adelman found these women were more likely to earn certificates in secretarial, health, or nursing fields. A few adult female students used the community college as a stepping-stone from one stage to another, as a testing ground for academic pursuits.

Clowes and Hawthorne (1995) pointed out the decline in the transfer function of the community college and its increasing horizontal integration with businesses, industry, and government, and its increasing vocational orientation. They alleged that the community college

was "evolving in its primary functions and its relations to other aspects of postsecondary education" (p. 7).

Sanchez and Laanan (1998) analyzed an extensive study of leavers and completers in the 1992-1993 academic years at California community colleges. The sample consisted of 700,564 students who were ages 25 and over. Data indicated that degree completers had the highest percentage of increased earnings, although older students did not realize as large gains as did younger students. The researchers posited that perhaps older students were making more money when they entered college, but they did determine "that there is a positive relationship between gains and educational attainment level, regardless of age" (p. 80).

Although adult female students may be highly motivated to return to college, their dropout rate is very high. The successful attainment of their academic goals is greatly enhanced by a supportive, accepting classroom climate. Wlodkowski (1999) stated: "Numerous social science theories and their related research have shown at least four motivational conditions to be substantially enhancing of adult motivation to learn—inclusion, attitude, meaning and competencies" (p. 69). He explained inclusion as an environment where adults are "respected by and connected to one another" (p. 69).

Bartholomew (1994) also found that high dropout rates were closely related to the social environment of the classroom. Students who were closely affiliated with other students were less likely to drop out. She found that teachers tended to view the classroom more positively than did the students. She also noted that adult female students were slower to graduate and more likely to attend part time and to have several "stop-outs." Coe, Rubenzahl and Slater (1984) also spoke of the high anxiety of returning adults and suggested a special college orientation for adults. At Mercy College in Dobbs Ferry, New York, Knowles acted as a facilitator and modeled andragogical techniques. Coe et al., pointed out that adults had family as their initial concerns, but that the families had adjusted after school had become part of their routine. They suggested

that homework time should be shared with children and that students should discuss courses with family and friends.

Alfred (1999) claimed that dropouts or "stop-outs" in the community college should not be cause for undue concern. He pointed out that many community college students completed degrees several years after they first enrolled, largely because pressures of work or family force them to enroll only part-time, to drop out or to "stop-out" for one or more terms. He also noted that degree completion was not usually the only objective of a community college student and reminded those who measured the effectiveness of a community college by the number of full-time students and the degrees completed, that the community college existed to serve students he characterized as part-time, with frequent drop outs or "stop outs."

Witt (1994) also noted that part-time enrollment in community colleges nearly tripled between 1970 and 1990, and that by 1990 the average age of the community college student had increased to 28. He asserted that community colleges "have become the primary choice of racial minorities, women, and older students" (p. 271).

Even though adults have had more life experiences and responsibilities, both adult and the traditional students who were just beginning college were at transition stages. Adult learners may have had expertise in certain areas and felt confident in courses relevant to these fields; however, in courses that presented material new to them, many adult students displayed the same fears and lack of confidence as did beginning traditional students. Some adults who had few positive experiences in previous educational endeavors might feel as uncertain and insecure as the traditional freshman. Educators should not assume adults had more self-confidence than their younger classmates (Arbuckle & Gale, 1996). Mulliken, Traeder and Arnold (1985), after leading a project focusing on reentering students, emphasized the importance of faculty attitudes as affecting retention and academic success of the returning students. Miglietti and Strange (1998) found that nontraditional students in very basic remedial courses initially preferred an instructor-centered course, but as they gained more confidence during the course of the term they

began to learn more from learner-centered activities and felt a greater sense of accomplishment from being more involved. Instructors of nontraditional students should become more flexible and varied in their teaching methods. The beginning nontraditional student seemed to need more direct teaching, then gradually wanted to become more involved and more self-directed as the course advanced.

Wagschal (1997) noted also that adult students had a wider age difference among themselves than did the traditional students. The life experiences might differ wider among these students, ranging in age from late 20s to 50. Instructors could find themselves actually teaching two generations of older students. The oldest group in middle age (40 to 50) perhaps had well-established careers and responsible jobs. Their motivation for additional education may be to upgrade skills or qualify for promotion. Younger adult students might be working at several low-paying jobs and could have little confidence in a career or meaningful job awaiting them upon graduation. Older students were often eager to do "anything" for an "A" including extra reading, reports, etc., but younger students often resented the outside reports and readings required in a college-level course. Wagschal added that younger students' expectations seemed to be lower, both of themselves as students and of their future choices. Older students seemed to have more life experiences in common and found it easier to bond with one another. Younger students did not seem to share so many common experiences or goals.

When nontraditional students entered a college class, instructors often did not have access to prior learning assessment records such as recent high school transcripts, ACT or SAT test scores, but some type of prior learning assessment could be very helpful to the faculty. Dagavarian (1993) suggested some adult students might be even more knowledgeable in a given area than the faculty member. Teaching methods would need to change from instruction to facilitation and enhancement of knowledge for both students and instructors. Students might have more practical and current knowledge, especially in business and technical areas, although they could have an insufficient theoretical background. Obviously, theoretical knowledge would

be helpful to students in changing circumstances, and current technical knowledge would be quite valuable to the instructor, broadening the perspectives of each of them. Both students and faculty could benefit from cross-disciplinary awareness and from their communication as equals, learning from each other.

Dagavarian (1993) concluded: "Faculty who possess a sensitivity to the needs of adult learners, and who are able to apply the appropriate criteria to the assessment of experiential learning are highly valued in progressive institutions " (p. 6).

Cohen and Associates (1971) also alleged that two-year college students were less likely to be concerned with personal and intellectual development, and more concerned with programs or courses that helped them to reach higher income levels. The authors said that as students they were more influenced by practical considerations, than by intellectual or social ones.

Tice (1997) supported the idea that adult students were usually more self-directed than younger students and they appreciate acknowledgment of their preexisting competencies. One controversial area in adult education is whether or not to grant credit for experiential learning, especially if that credit is to be used toward a college degree. Bash (2003) urged that adult students be allowed to construct portfolios detailing their experiential activities in the areas of general education that they believe had met the objectives and requirements of each course. Tice posited that the student gained power and the instructor lost power in this type of situation as they approached the portfolio more as equals, rather than in clearly defined roles of student and teacher. Parsons (1998) contended that measures and guidelines must be constructed so that students who have better negotiating skills, not necessarily better experiential portfolios, did not gain an unfair advantage over shy or retiring students who may have been better qualified to gain credit for the course. These criteria could also identify the mastery of material and actual learning that may have been involved in the life experience.

Brookfield (1995) acknowledged that while teachers of adults should recognize, value, and use the experiential knowledge of their adult students, the adult students still needed further

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education. Experiences should be subjected to critical analysis. Adults had more cognitive flexibility so they could challenge assumptions that underlie approved curricula. New knowledge may be connected to experiences as adult educators lead their students to indulge in critically analyzing and reformulating experiences.

Brown (2002) reported on a case study involving portfolio development. Eight adults attending Barry's School of Adult and Continuing Education (ACE) earning nontraditional undergraduate degrees developed a portfolio divided into five sections. The first section was about their motivations for attending college. The next section reported on their college-level-equivalent learning in detail. Next was an autobiographical essay that focused on their academic experiences, and the final section required them to document their learning experiences with samples of work completed. This portfolio requirement helped the students to develop their communication and organizational skills. It also increased the students' awareness of what, how, and why they learned.

One criticism of adult education is that it focuses excessively on work-related skills. Cohen and Brawer (1989) agreed that adult learners needed to know more than work-related skills. Adult learners should understand the interaction between people and institutions, the way social issues affect their lives. Cohen and Brawer also challenged the claim that the primary purpose for general education courses was personal enrichment, and in contradistinction, asserted that those courses should teach adult students how to think critically, examine issues, and learn how various leaders used their power. Then the educated adult herself could challenge or support leadership from her own position of strength, thus empowering herself.

Backes (1997) detailed time problems that many adults experienced. He asked instructors to be more aware of the demands on their adult students' time. He suggested strict adherence to a schedule of assignments and class meetings. Group assignments necessitating out-of-class meetings often presented a problem. He suggested that class time should be allocated for such assignments and added that a minimum of outside homework should be required.

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Some specific suggestions for adult education involved group and collaborative learning. Brougher (1997) advocated group assignments, especially in general education that did not demand specific skills, that allowed students to use their various kinds of intelligence and ways of learning for some creative thinking to meet the demands of an assigned group projects and/or reports. Bierman (1996) posited an additional method of TQM (Total Quality Management) in adult education, having noted that many businesses and industries used teams and quality management. This TQM method allowed students to make multiple attempts to complete assignments satisfactorily and to use collaborative learning. This approach also empowered students and used self-assessment. Another method involving group learning was posed by Wooden, Baptiste, and Reyes (1994), the "ORID" method. This type of teaching did not use lectures but pursued a structured questioning strategy including "Objective, Reflective, Interpretive, and Decisional" questions. This process set an objective for the focal unit of study; required students to spend time to reflect upon the material presented; then required them to interpret the content; and finally to make decisions about the application of the knowledge gained. This method expanded upon group discussion often used in adult education, and helped a group to use various levels of critical thinking to focus and synthesize learning.

To determine successful completion of a course, some type of assessment is essential. Reif (1995) suggested that adult educators use creative assessments with limitless possibilities— videos, case studies, brochures, handbooks, cognitive mapping, newsletters, articles submitted for publication, etc. He asserted, "These options are strong because they provide opportunities for higher order thinking, differential learning styles, the cooperative process, real-world (authentic) application, and the chance for the entire class to learn from the assessments" (p. 14). Fenwick and Parsons (1998) suggested that the instructor reflect on his/her experiences as students as to the types of assignments they had found most beneficial, the tests that really contributed to their learning. These personal reflections of one's own experience as a student could help instructors evaluate their own students better.

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Colleges have been places of tradition, but the boundaries between traditional and nontraditional education have been becoming less clear as the increasing options for electronic education has been forcing colleges to rethink their missions, goals, and purposes. As the campus-centric college shifts to increasingly electronic education courses, instructional and administrative infrastructure will be used in different ways. Beaudoin (2002) suggested a rethinking of the large administrative and staff personnel of the college, as educators analyze what administrators and staff will be needed to provide the best education the particular college can offer. The needs of nontraditional adult students for more flexibility in scheduling and convenience of location have become a driving force.

Newson (1998) paid tribute to the famous adult educator, Bonaro Overstreet. She was very optimistic, believing that educated adults with positive attitudes and capabilities could fix the ills of society. Even though adult educators today may not have her confidence that enlightened individuals can change the world, her ideas characterize the adult educator's role "to contribute a positive, stabilizing influence to the creation of order, rationality and opportunity" (p. 27).

My review of literature indicated that adult females returned to college primarily for work-related reasons, as they sought better jobs, or as they upgraded their skills to qualify for promotions at their current workplaces. These students had many family and work-related demands on their time and energies, so that they may have stopped out for some time, taking longer to complete their degrees than did traditional students. With financial aid provided and a climate that encouraged these students, they were more likely to remain in college, or to return to attain their goals. Their goals may often have been to earn credit for specific courses that were work-related, rather than to earn college degrees. Students who have experienced academic success in the past were also more likely to return to college. Community colleges are well-prepared to meet the special needs of these adult female students. Chapter 3 presents the

research methods employed in the study; particularly, the data collection method, the study sample and the data analysis.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Design of the Study

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research design used in this study. This description includes the selection of participants, the instrumentation methods, and data analysis for the study.

As the literature review demonstrated, nontraditional students, especially females aged 23 to 50, represent the fastest-growing segment of the student body in many colleges, especially community colleges. The overall purpose of this study was to discover what motivated these students to return to school, the characteristics of these students, and how the community college might serve these students better. Counselors, directors, and instructors of programs designed especially for older students, such as Next Step, Fast Track, and Weekend College also shared insights and information from counseling sessions, surveys, and conferences about the motivations and characteristics of these nontraditional students and how these students felt the community college could serve their needs.

The research for this study used the qualitative method of research by including and analyzing information from 30 female students aged 23-50 attending NSTCC. Inductive analysis, a basic component of qualitative research, was used to group and explore the responses to interview questions. The motivations and adult characteristics of adult female students were used to explain and describe the data from the interview questions. The students' assessments of their educational experiences also have some implications for the community college. Categories or definitive ideas arose inductively as the coding process occurred. The interviews were conducted by asking each participant the same questions. Students in technical education usually prefer brief, specific questions that allow them to expand answers if they choose to do so. Some

students gave brief responses and did not choose to elaborate, while others responded expansively. Students who provided expanded or especially insightful responses were quoted in Chapter 4. Students who merely answered briefly or whose responses added no new information were not quoted.

Five students I had not known previously seemed a bit uncomfortable, even though interviews took place in the complete privacy of my office, and the questions were informal and unthreatening. These students said they were high school dropouts or academic underachievers in the past. They seemed slightly intimidated by an instructor they had no past experience with. One student I did know was also rather terse in her responses. From previous contact, I knew she was reared in a strict religious environment that admonished her to confess her sins often and openly. She had rebelled against this situation, using silence as a weapon and a defense so that she found it difficult to respond fully in the interview, even though she volunteered and wanted to participate in the study.

Participants

Students interviewed were adult female students ages 23-50 attending NSTCC, a community college in Northeast Tennessee. The students responded frankly and they eagerly volunteered to be interviewed. Additional considerations were issues of time and money because of reduced educational budgets. When quantitative research has been done at the college to obtain data for SACS or for some grant the college is trying to obtain, the math and English classes are usually targeted, because these classes are required for graduation, yet students take the classes at different stages of their academic progress, so that the classes are representative of the student body. Six math and English instructors whose schedules were compatible with mine and who willingly agreed to help me with my research asked the female students in their classes who were ages 23 to 50 if they would be willing to be interviewed for research purposes. Several students from each class volunteered to be interviewees. After 27 interviews, I realized no

minority students were represented. I asked the instructors if any of their female students ages 23 to 50 were minorities. (In an average size class of 30 students, one student may be from a minority group.) An African-American female who met the age criterion willingly volunteered. A profile of returning female students aged 23-50 emerged. Thirty students were interviewed to ensure an adequate number of responses to validate the information obtained.

<p align="center">*Development of the Interview Guide*</p>

Qualitative research methods were used in this study in analyzing the results of interviews with 30 female students ages 23-50 attending NSTCC. Those qualitative methods allowed the interviewer to probe more deeply into underlying motivations, to find out about the student's family and academic backgrounds, and to identify some very specific problems the student may experience as she attempts to further her education. The questions used in interviewing these students were structured from themes that were dominant and repetitive in the review of the literature. Northeast State has several programs designed especially for older students, such as Next Step, Fast Track, Single Parents Program, and Weekend College. Counselors, directors, and instructors involved in these programs shared information from counseling and instructing these students, and from their research and conferences they had attended, in conversations and informal interviews. Are the female students ages 23-50 motivated to return to college for work-related consideration? Are female students who had positive academic experiences in the past most likely to return to college? Does financial aid enable and encourage these students ages 23-50 to complete their education? Does the classroom climate of encouraging and supporting faculty make a difference as to whether female students ages 23-50 remain in school? Do these female students ages 23-50 find the community college best meets their special needs.

Two female students ages 27 and 30 were randomly selected from an English class to pilot the interview questions. Each was asked to evaluate the appropriateness and thoroughness

of the questions to which they responded. Their responses were used to carefully revise the interview questions to be used in the study.

The questions were designed to find out why students returned to college—the primary motivation of each student, and a secondary motivation, if applicable; what attitudes their families had about education, especially the student's return to college; and to what extent their families supported their academic efforts. Because the literature indicated that students who had returned to college experienced positive academic experiences in the past, some questions asked about their prior academic successes. Other questions sought to find out how the community college could meet their academic needs better.

The interviews were semi-structured and informal with open-ended questions about prior education experiences, reasons for returning to school, family, and work obligations. Students were encouraged to respond fully, and, with the student's permission, responses were recorded, and after the student verified the accuracy of the responses, the tapes were erased and the transcripts were kept.

Information obtained from the interviews was inductively analyzed, providing a "thickness" of data that would not have been possible in quantitative research. For example, a student who is strongly considering dropping out may check a response that merely indicates the "last straw" among a variety of complex and multiple reasons. The female student whose abusive husband feels threatened by her attempts at further education and whose behavior is exacerbated by her college attendance would not be likely to express her fears on a quantitative survey. Also, the female student who has recently remarried and is uncertain about leaving her teen-aged daughter alone with her new stepfather is unlikely to identify her concern on such a survey. With their anonymity assured by me, these students were able to identify their true concerns and perhaps know of other female students who had dropped out because of similar problems. These students may have felt themselves at fault in these situations, felt there was a social stigma against such problems, and refuse to admit them in a quantitative survey, even

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under the category "Other reasons" with space for written responses. Counselors who work with adult female students have encountered students experiencing such life events.   In the review of the literature about high drop-out rates, some experienced researchers claimed there was more to the students' choice of dropping out than they were willing to admit. Some outlier responses may illuminate these researchers' speculations and perhaps indicate that such problems are not uncommon among female students aged 23 to 50 who return to school.

Procedures

East Tennessee State University requires approval by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) before any research procedures can be conducted. After the dissertation committee approved the prospectus, the permission of the Institutional Review Board was secured before the interviews were conducted. The interviews were typed just after each interview, and the student was asked to verify her responses as indicated on the typed copy to ascertain that there had been no distortions or misinterpretations. Member checking was a component of each interview. Three students remembered additional academic honors and five students amplified their initial responses about returning to school. A college professor with extensive experience in qualitative research provided valuable help and suggestions related to grouping and analyzing responses.

Data Analysis

To aid in analyzing the findings, responses were grouped according to common and unusual responses to interview questions, with special needs and circumstances of some students noted. The amplified information obtained from interviews has been included. Data analysis, using constant comparative analysis procedures, indicated commonalties, trends, and general features of student responses. They have been organized into a logical framework based on item

responses. The interview information and the review of the literature assertions have been
compared.

Ethical Considerations

The anonymity of respondents was protected by referring to them by pseudonyms rather
than by any initials or other means that might possibly allow them to be identified by any reader.
Confidentiality was respected by erasing the tapes after each student verified the interview
information. At no time will anyone other than myself be able to identify the respondents.
Interview records and other materials will be stored at my home for at least 10 years.

The information obtained from the interviews should be especially beneficial to the focal
college as these adult female students continue to represent the largest portion of the student
body. The special needs of these students should be taken into account by those who recruit
students, those who administer financial aid programs, and those who schedule classes. Faculty
at community colleges could also benefit from some special professional development programs
and activities that make them more aware of the special needs and the potential of these students.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the motivations and identify the characteristics of female students ages 23-50 pursuing further education at NSTCC. The fact that these students are becoming the most dominant group in higher education also has implications for community colleges. The study specifically explored the reasons the women returned to college and how their past academic experiences, their family backgrounds, and current family situations influenced their decisions. What characteristics, if any, distinguished these students from younger traditional students? Their attitudes about their college experience will hopefully lead to changes in the way community colleges do business.

Data were collected through interviews with 30 female students, ages 23-50, who were attending Northeast State Technical Community College. The students' participation in the study was entirely voluntary. The participants were volunteers from required classes in English and math. I read the participants a statement assuring them of anonymity by assigning pseudonyms before their answers were transcribed for analysis. I erased tapes as soon as the students verified the accuracy of their responses, adding any information if they wanted to expand further on a particular topic. The students signed a form giving permission to use the information they provided. I recorded the interviews in my office as I conducted the interviews in an informal semi-structured manner in complete privacy.

Twenty-two of the women returned to school for job-related reasons. Their work experiences, however, differed widely. Thirteen were seeking to leave low-paying jobs. Four had good jobs, but found the work too stressful, too physically demanding, or were disappointed in their initial career choices. Two wanted advancements or options that they thought would

open if they had more education. Two of them wanted jobs for altruistic reasons—to help others. Only one respondent said money per se was her major motivation.

As the interviews proceeded, 19 women admitted they had always wanted to attend college, but received little or no encouragement at home. For many of them, the job-related reasons seem an acceptable, legitimate reason their families can accept and approve, but the women really always wanted to go to college.

Family backgrounds and current circumstances varied widely also. For 14 of them, their families of birth had been, and continued to be, indifferent or negative toward their college attendance. Although several women were divorced, single parents, 14 of the women were married and had families who were very supportive of their goals.

Motivations

Students responded to four questions about their motivations to return to school. They were asked why they returned to school, their primary motivation, additional factors affecting their return, the difficulty of their decision to return, and if they had developed any additional goals as they progressed.   The primary motivations were usually job-related. Thirteen of the women wanted better jobs or careers in general. The others were more specific.

Twenty-three of the students were relatively at ease in their interviews. Two were extremely nervous and seemed ill at ease. Seven were extremely personable and very articulate. These women had worked or were currently working in very responsible jobs and were obviously quite self-confident.

Job-related Motivations

Information from the literature review, and from conversations with colleagues who work with nontraditional students, indicated most of the women would have returned to school for job-related reasons. The desire for better jobs that paid better would dominate, especially careers in

business and/or medical fields. To an extent, the responses verified this information; however, interest in the work and altruistic motives were factors for six of the women.

Wendy hesitantly entered the office. She was thin, almost gaunt, with blond hair, dyed non-professionally. Wendy gave me the impression of someone who was overwhelmed by responsibility. She said, "I have three kids. I tried being a restaurant manager, but the hours were too hard. It's not worth it. I want a career." Florence had more self-confidence and was a little better groomed, wearing make up. She, too, was a single parent, and stated, "I needed a better way to support myself and my son."

Abby worked in law enforcement. She was dressed neatly in a dark pantsuit. Her make-up was understated, but the impression she made was of someone who was usually in control of herself and at ease in any situation. She said, "I felt I was smart. I was not living up to my potential. A degree broadens opportunities." Wilma was also confident in her manner. She, too, wanted to advance her career. She is an LPN working toward being an RN.

When I probed further about additional reasons for their return to school, several respondents amplified their first responses. Abby, who had advanced in her police department, realized she was no longer limited to one city department but could expand her options. Nona, a computer whiz and very self-confident, said:

> I have about 80 hours from several colleges, but the business and office subjects did not transfer. My husband was in the military and we moved a lot, so I have hours from Pellissippi State, University of Texas, University of New Mexico, and Florida Institute of Technology. I can't make money setting up computers in small offices because I don't have a degree.

Many respondents wanted to pursue careers in areas that required degrees. Ann told me, "I enjoy psychology. I always wanted to be a social worker, but I didn't pursue it." Gina added, "I always wanted to work in the medical field and you can't get a good job without a college education." Flora, thin, nervous, and intense, told me early in the interview that her mother was a drug addict. She said, "I always wanted to be in nursing. I've worked in a nursing home. I'd like to help people, make a difference. Drug rehab especially interests me." Patty, very self-

confident and poised, replied, "I work at the heart center in medical records. I want to get in the cardiovascular program, to be an echo tech."

As these women progressed in their education, several developed additional goals. Abby responded:

> Initially, I just wanted the associate's degree for promotion. Now, after some assignments in training, such as sexual harassment, risk management, hostage negotiations, other issues, I am interested in the job of personnel director, and there are other job possibilities, too.

Florence stated:

> When I first came, I kinda{sic} knew what I wanted to do. Then I took the Meyer-Briggs test. I wanted to be a medical transcriptionist, but after working in the maintenance department, doing secretarial work, I really like the work. My supervisor wants to involve me this summer. There may be a job there for me in the future. I really enjoy the work.

Christy, exceptionally well-groomed for a job interview and quite self-confident, had developed further job-related goals. She reported that she wanted "to do work I enjoy, like art. To put my heart into it and enjoy my work as well as making money at it." Flora had also expanded her initial job-related goals:

> First I went into office systems. I didn't think I could be a nurse. Now I think I can do anything I put my heart and mind into. I have a desire to work. I don't want to wake up and dread coming to work.

Opal had also expanded her goals. "I've added to my goals. I want to do more—to add to my major in business management." Whitney's goals had also been increased, "Different avenues open up—a teacher, a writer, and I really like anthropology. Wider possibilities have opened." Yolanda considered "a double major in both medical and legal office management." Melinda, the minority student, very mature and very personable, whose past work experience was a very responsible job as a bank officer, had altruistic goals. She replied, "Yes, I've had a vision of operating a child care center especially for working single parents. Kids left alone tend to get in trouble with no parents at home. Training could make that possible."

Job-related reasons were the primary motivation for 22 of the women to return to school. Those quoted above expanded upon their answer. The other six merely responded, "For a better

job." Only two, however, mentioned money as a primary motivation. Nona said, " I need a degree to get the kind of money I want to earn." Dottie also admitted, "Money is very important to me." Employment in a satisfying career and a job one could enjoy was far more important. Four women realized that their earlier choices were not what they really wanted, and they were seeking qualifications in other fields. Others wanted more opportunities and more responsible positions in their place of employment. Four had really altruistic motives, wanting to go into areas of counseling, social work, child care. A better job was the major motivation, yet, within that overall category, responses differed widely. Kim, Markham, and Cangelosi (2002) did a survey comparing business majors across universities. They found that students chose their majors because of interest in the type of job and prospects for success in that field. Several were interested in starting their own business in the future. These findings showed that money per se was not as large a motivating factor as interest in the work. The students' responses also indicated that job satisfaction was most important to them.

Figure 1. Why Did You Return to School?

□14%

□30%

□56%

☐Job Related 17

■Personal Growth 9

☐Family Related
    Motivations 4

Why did you return to school?

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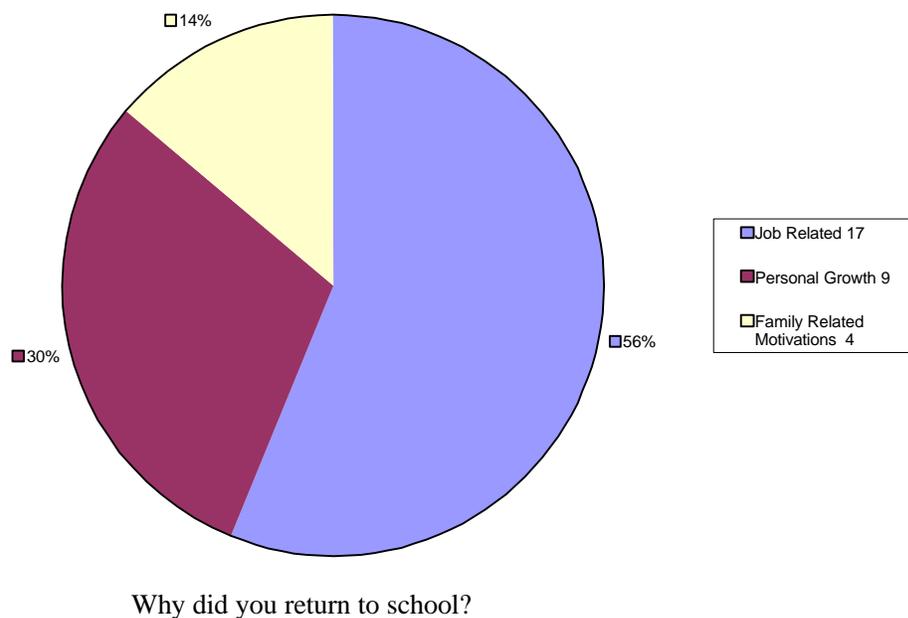
Family-Related Motivations

It was likely that job-related goals and family-related motivations would overlap in several instances. For some women, especially single parents, job-related goals and providing more for their children were combined motivations. These women were not able to give their children the advantages they desired for them unless they could obtain better jobs.

Ten of the women felt economic pressure because they were single parents and needed to provide for their children. Wendy's answer was typical. "I'm separated from my husband. My only job options are for little pay or outrageous hours."

Eight women wanted to help their husbands by increasing the family incomes, or because they realized they would be the main providers soon because their husbands were chronically ill or disabled. Tina, with long dark hair, neat appearance in a dark pantsuit, did not look her age. She currently works as a teacher's aid and has two teenagers. She informed me, "My husband is retired early with diabetes. I want to have a good job so I can care for myself." Frances, also older, told me, "My husband recently was disabled. I'll need to be the main provider." Three respondents wanted to augment family income. Heather said, "I need a good job to send my son to college." Jo Ann informed me, "I am thinking of going into medical transcription. I'd have a better chance to work at home." Rosie returned for a better job, "So my husband would not have to work out of town to support us."

Two of the women also said they wanted to be examples for their children. Thelma said, "I also want to inspire my children who are in high school now." Ellen also wanted to return "For myself. As a good example to my children."

For many of the women, a better job meant a better life for their children and, for those who were married, a way to take some financial pressures off their husbands. Only two of the married women said that they would be the main providers for their families; the others wanted the option of working at home, ensuring a college education for their children, or allowing their husbands the options of changing jobs.

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Personal-Growth-Related Motivations

Personal growth was the least important reason that the women indicated was their motivation to return. Only 11 of the women indicated personal growth served as their primary motivation. When probed for additional reasons for their return, however, seven additional women admitted they had always wanted to try college. The job-related and family-related motivations seemed to be accepted and encouraged by their families, but personal growth might not be as acceptable.

Dottie, wearing the latest fashion in a pretty dress with make-up skillfully applied and hair styled professionally, said," I went to college to feel better about myself." Gena also "felt I needed to do it for myself. I've been a housewife for the past six years." Christy impressed me with her exceptionally out-going personality. She was, to use an old Southern idiom, "full of herself." She was exceptionally well-dressed in dark suit, white blouse with jewelry and accessories to complement her outfit. She was also extremely attractive. She seemed younger than 23, but was a single parent with three children. She had a job interview scheduled later in the day. She was also quite energetic and returned … "to further my education, build self-confidence, to occupy my time, give me something to do. I like to research. I even do it on my own. I have a house full of books." Laurie stated, "For one, self-esteem. I accomplished something, even though I am a high school dropout." Tina added, "Friends close to my age have returned. If they could, I could. Their return gave me the push I needed." Heather admitted, "I wanted to go when I was younger, but nobody pushed me." Rosie said, "I was not computer-literate, and knew just handling household chores, I was falling behind in the world." Yolanda, very well-dressed, poised, with her hair styled professionally and make-up skillfully applied, told me, "I want to get a job. The kids are at school. I'm bored at home alone." Her initial job-related response was not as important as escaping from the boredom of an empty house. From past knowledge, I believed that she really does not need to work, but will work for the self-fulfillment and luxuries she desired.

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One respondent, Ellen, in her late 30s, returned primarily "for myself, and as a good example for my children." Melinda, the one black respondent, was exceptionally personable. She was well-groomed, older, with an air of self-confidence and purpose. She returned, "Mainly because I lost my job at SunTrust Bank. I had time to go back to school. I had tried off and on for several years. Now I have a chance."

Michaela's self-improvement goals also involved academic goals. She said, "The effort of accomplishment, especially math. In high school I felt I couldn't do math, even though I did well in other subjects in high school." Wendy responded:

> I'm on a mission of self-exploration, growing up, trying to develop social skills I should have developed in high school. I have the opportunity to socialize in a school environment, but I still don't socialize well in the outside world. My family was very intimidated by people in school, especially teachers.

The most unusual response came from Heather. She is an older student, active in her church and community, serving also as the bookkeeper-secretary for her husband's business. Her response was, "God told me to. He said 'Call now!' I kept putting it off."

The responses again varied widely in the area of personal growth as a motivation for return to school. The motivation for personal growth was very much a factor for 18 of these returning students. Perhaps they felt this reason would not be as acceptable to their families or their peers, but it seemed a factor underlying the other reasons for returning. When the women were asked about additional factors motivating their return, twenty-five of them provided additional information about their initial answers, many indicating that their family and job-related reasons were, in reality, the final push they needed to do something they had always wanted to do.

The findings about motivations indicated job-related motivations were clearly dominant. For some women family considerations overlapped as they sought to provide a better life for their children and/or to help their spouses with financial responsibilities. A few wanted to be examples for their children. Self-fulfillment also emerged as a very strong motivating factor, almost as dominant as job-related motivations.

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Difficulty of Decision

Twenty-one of the respondents found the decision to return easy. Only four said it was very difficult. The other five found it somewhat difficult. Personal reasons were the dominant response.

Abby found it easy because "there are no limitations on my time. The city reimburses me to an extent, depending on my grades. I have no children, so my lifestyle permitted it." Dottie admitted, "I graduated in '94 and attempted college then, but I wasn't ready. Wendy also said, "It was relatively easy after thinking about it, having it in the back of my mind for five years." Wilma didn't find it hard, "Because I'm into higher education. I've always been an achiever." Jeannie added, "I've always loved to learn and I like challenge, too." Christy said, "Easy. I just had a procrastinating problem."

Maturity was also a factor for seven of the women. Thelma declared, "Once I got into it, I got excited and it became easy. It was scary at first. I had been out of high school 26 years." Patty said, "Not hard. I always wanted to. I've just had no opportunity 'til now." Goldie added, "It wasn't difficult. I always wanted to do it." Rosie agreed it was "not very difficult. I had been thinking about it for a couple of years." Whitney said, "Not really difficult. I thought about it after high school but it took a while to get serious." Yolanda declared "Very easy. I knew what I wanted to study." Melinda declared:

> Not difficult. I've wanted to for some time. Working and taking care of a home was too demanding. My severance pay and my 401k helped me to where I could pay off bills. I'd worked for 20 years. I'd been praying about it. It opened up for me. My lay-off was a blessing in disguise.

Hannah replied, "Simple. Because I always wanted to go back to school, anyway."

Job-related and family-reasons influenced their decision to return to a lesser extent than did personal reasons, but they did influence a few decisions. Nona said, " Not very hard. I need a degree to get the kind of money I want to earn." Florence acknowledged:

On one hand it was difficult. I knew I had to do something. I had done housecleaning for six years. A couple I cleaned for knew Dr. Locke and another lady here. They guided me, showed me what to do.

Wilma replied, " I have an accounting degree. I realized I didn't like it well enough to pursue it as a four-year degree. I went into nursing and I like it." Bonnie found it easy to return because, "I had my own home health care business. It took too much time from my family, and it was unstable, not as productive as I'd have liked." Opal said, " I work in a fast food restaurant. After my divorce I knew I couldn't make it. More school was my only option." Ann spoke of returning as being:

Pretty difficult. I had a degree as a Certified Nursing Assistant making $9 an hour with benefits. The job was so physically demanding with no future in it. It didn't seem practical. It meant a change in my life, my daughter's, my husband's. The whole family had to make a team effort.

Laura also found returning "hard. With four children, married, holding down two part-time jobs." Ellen also found returning "very difficult. I had to work around work, kids, and find time to study. I'd been out of school ten years." Heather admitted, "very difficult. I have three children. My husband had just started his own business and he needed me. They also are making big sacrifices."

Bonnie explained:

Easy. When I was younger I was scared to death of the idea of college. When I saw what I had to do for my kids, as a single parent, I said to myself, "I can do this." So I took the tests and returned.

Only two women mentioned financial aid as a determining factor. Flora said, " Easy, after I realized it was easy to get back in with financial aid." Jo added, "Not too hard. Slightly difficult. Financial considerations—can we do it? Would classes be available when I can come?" Financial aid per se seemed to influence the student's decision to return less than the literature review indicated it would. Because I knew 9 of the 10 students I had some previous experience with received some type of financial aid, I wondered if students assumed financial aid would be available to them, and did not think it was worth mentioning.

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Their responses about the difficulty of returning to school were mixed. Some were compelled to do so because they really needed better jobs. Family responsibilities were also a factor.

Characteristics

After examining the motivations that caused the students to return to school, I explored their characteristics. To determine the characteristics of the returning female students ages 23 to 50, I asked them about their past academic experiences, and their families, both their families of origin—mother, father, siblings, and their current family situations.

Fraser and Stupak (2002) posited that characteristics of adult learners should be reanalyzed and updated. He defined seven general characteristics of adult learning: (1) voluntary participation, (2) adult status, (3) collaboratively determined objectives, (4) desire for performance-based objectives, (5) a measure of satisfaction, (6) appropriate adult learning environment; and (7) technical issues.

The respondents exhibited most of those characteristics to varied extents. All of them had made the decision to return to school. Many were motivated by economic, especially job-related reasons, but the final decision was made independently to return to school. Of course, all were adults with families and responsibilities. After they made the decision family members often provided help with transportation, child care, or by buying special supplies. The 14 married students spoke of the involvement and sacrifices required of the entire family. As for performance-based assessment, 17 students were quite proud of their academic progress and honors. They appreciated clear grading criteria and prompt returns of tests and other assignments. They took complete responsibility for their own performance as students. The clearest indication of their satisfaction was that all of them said they would recommend that other women in their age group return to college. Three older respondents indicated their early uncertainty and fear of feeling out of place in classes with younger students, but that uncertainty

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vanished quickly once they began attending classes. Technical issues really did not seem to play

a large part in their education, except for two who had not worked outside the home for several

years and realized they needed to learn more about computers. Most of the students were

somewhat familiar with computers so they mastered their use very quickly.

These students had been proactive in seeking help they needed in all areas—financial aid,

tutoring, special helps in the Center for Disabled Students, and counseling. Two mentioned a

former employer and a neighbor who provided help and encouragement because they had

recognized the capabilities of the students.

Past Academic Experiences

The information about returning female students alleged that most of these students had

positive academic experiences in their past (Knoell & McIntyre, 1974). Counselors and directors

of programs targeting adult learners have verified this assertion. Adverse circumstances, not

their lack of ability, caused them to delay completing their education. Other factors were lack of

family interest and/or encouragement, and the students' own lack of interest and immaturity.

Seventeen students interviewed had some type of academic honors, awards, recognition, or high

test scores in their past. Because these students were interviewed near the end of the term, they

would seem to represent the persisting high achievers in this group. Academic success may also

have influenced their decision to volunteer to be interviewed.

Honors, Awards, Test Scores

Abby made 27 on the ACT. Florence told me, "My name was in the local paper my

senior year in high school for my 4.0 average." Wilma admitted:

> I didn't realize the need for more education in high school. In the 7th and 8th grades I was
> named the most outstanding student. We moved to Erwin, TN from Marietta, GA and I
> was really ahead of the other students. I got my accounting degree. I kept a 3.4 average
> and I worked 60 hours a week. It came easy. Nursing, though, is very hard. I'm older,
> but a lot of it is pure memorization like anatomy.

Flora, whose mother was a drug addict, stated:

> I graduated in the top of my eighth grade class. I was 7th of 91. If I'd been able to continue I'd have been in the top 10. I was forced to drop out my senior year. I took the GED.

Laurie admitted, "I am a high school dropout. I took advanced algebra, was a cheer leader and was voted the class beauty. I got pregnant, dropped out, and married. I was doing well."

Summer stated "I graduated with an honors diploma from Sullivan South." Thelma said, "I was in the top seventh of my class. I was fifth in my graduating class." Jo Ann said, "I was on the honor roll at Texas State Institute." Frances declared, "I got a certificate in high school from health occupations. I was in the career program in high school." Patty said, "I was in the Phi Theta Kappa at Bluefield College, and I am in the comparable society here. I also went to Southwest Virginia Community College in Richland."

Heather remembered, "I was a valedictorian in elementary school graduation. I also won an art award." Opal said, "In high school I won several awards in cosmetology and in phys. ed. I did not apply myself to other classes." Rosie stated, "I have a cosmetology license. I got high grades and honors." Michaela recalled, "I won a lot of spelling bees." Whitney said, "My sophomore year I won a county-wide language arts competition. I won second place for a poem and an essay." Yolanda boasted, "I had the highest average in Bible class for a year."

Melinda, the minority student, responded expansively:

> The honor roll in high school sometimes. A cheerleader. I played basketball. I graduated from a small town in Georgia. We were still mostly segregated and limited in what the school could offer. I ran track. We were not allowed to have much. I went to Valdosta Vocational Tech for a year, then dropped out. I needed to be adult, see the world, get a job. I had an opportunity in high school to get a scholarship to a good university. I can't think of the name. My counselor got one for me. It was too far from home so I just didn't take it. I graduated in the top 20. I was ranked 11th in a graduating class of 134.

Most of the women had positive academic experiences in their past schooling. Two who had dropped out of school because of family circumstances had been good students in their early school years. These students seemed to represent the most capable students in their particular

classes and areas of study. They were, for the most part, determined to make high grades, and

they would drop classes that they felt might require too much time and work for them to earn an

"A" or "B". Often, when they had to drop several classes, sometimes, only keeping one class,

they would keep their hardest class because, for the first time, they were doing well in that class.

Michaela's response typified their attitudes. She said, "The effort of accomplishment, especially

math. In high school, I felt I couldn't do math, even though I did well in other subjects in high

school."

Figure 2. Tell Me About Your Past Academic experiences? Any Outstanding Awards or Other
Successes You Experienced?
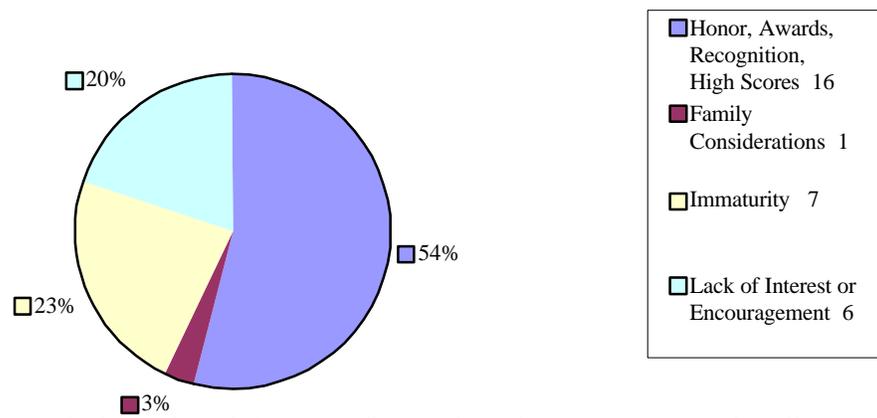
Tell me about your past academic experiences? Any outstanding awards or other successes you experienced?

Family Attitudes/Problems

Many of these students did not pursue further education after high school or did not even

finish high school because of their families' attitudes and/or problems. There seemed to be a

lack of interest in education, and education was not valued by their families. Often within the

same family, there would be widely disparate attitudes. The family would feel a certain

resentment as if the students were trying to be better than their families, yet, also exhibit pride in the student's efforts and achievements. The women who admitted they had not been good students in high school said their families felt they would not do well in college. The majority of these women admitted they were immature and indifferent in high school, but these women had to work hard to change family attitudes.

Abby said, "There was a lack of direction. My parents did not have college degrees, so they didn't push education. My parents were going through a divorce and they were dealing with their own problems." Wendy stated:

> I quit high school, got a GED at age 23. My grades were extremely low. My family moved when I was in Middle School. I went from straight A's and B's to F's. I could do the work. I just didn't see school as important. My family didn't push school.

Flora admitted, "I had some real family problems. My mother is a drug addict. I was forced to drop out my senior year. I took my GED." Heather explained, "We moved from Ohio. It was different academically. Nobody pushed me."

Lack of Maturity

Some women seemed to have been too hesitant or too immature to begin college work after high school. Five had experienced adverse circumstances and obtained a GED (General Education Diploma), instead of completing high school. Many were not interested in academic pursuits earlier. Many married very young and had children when they were very young. Only when they faced the realities of the current job market did some of these late-maturing women realize the value of a college education.

Dottie said, "I didn't want to be in high school. DB (Dobyns-Bennett) is really large and impersonal. It was too easy to skip, not turn in homework. I was satisfied with the Cs I could get like that." Ann admitted, "I was in the bottom 10% of my high school class. Now I have a 4.0 GPA. It wasn't intrinsic then." Wilma added, "I didn't realize the need for more education in high school."

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Christy acknowledged, "I was lazy in high school. I was smart, though, and I knew I could do it. I got my GED, had a child at age 18." Cathy said, "I got my GED. We moved from Virginia and I moved to a much larger school. It was just too much for me." Ellen admitted, "I got a GED. I quit my junior year. I got in with the wrong group, and there was peer pressure. It was my own fault. No one else made me do it." Heather said, "As a teenager I didn't care. I wanted to be running around." Hannah said, "I was mostly a B student. I could have done better."

For some of these women who had achieved early academic honors, family circumstances changed, they lost interest in high school, and/or were not encouraged to excel academically. Abby, Wendy, Flora, Heather, and Melinda experienced a combination of these circumstances, with Flora's drug-addicted mother perhaps being the most detrimental factor any student interviewed had described.

Some of the students found large high schools too impersonal and overwhelming. In contrast, Jeannie, partially deaf and having a mild anxiety disorder, responded, "I had a kinda bad high school experience. I didn't have the help I needed for my disabilities at that small school."

Many respondents indicated their families of origin did not value education and did not encourage them to pursue higher education. Family attitudes, especially supportive children and or spouses, continue to be a factor in the students' academic experiences.

Current Family Support/Lack of Support

Abby's husband was very supportive. Her dad and twin sister were also supportive, but most family members reportedly were not really interested. Seventeen of the women's husbands and/or children were very supportive. In some instances the time demands of higher education caused mixed feelings. Flora's family was very supportive, at first, but, "It's diminishing some now. We forgot about the time needed for housework." Laura added, "My husband gets

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somewhat aggravated. He is a clean socks freak and well….He's still basically supportive, though. He puts sticky notes on my books or where I'll see them with 'I love you.'"

Very young children did not resent time away from them. Dottie said, "My daughter is too young to resent it. She loves going to see Mamaw and Papaw." Summer added, "My four-year-old wants to come with me." High school age children were, for the most part, very encouraging. Heather said, "My kids think it's cool. They 'help' me with homework. They don't like it, though, when I can't go on field trips."

Children in grades 1-6 had more mixed feelings. They didn't like it because their moms couldn't volunteer at school as they had often done in the past. Cathy said, "My children wish for more time with me. We all get burnt out with my work and school schedule." Ellen stated, "My kids complain, saying I never have time to do this or that they want to do. I'm up late, usually about 1pm." Hannah added, "You know I've got kids? Like tonight, I've got to study for a test, not go to their baseball game, but I've been to two games this week."

Sometimes family attitudes change as the student progressed and showed serious commitment to the work. Ann said, "In the beginning the entire family was not sure how I would do. Now they see I'm taking it seriously. They support me completely." Christy acknowledged:

> There are mixed feelings. Some, my mom especially, think I should work full time. I want more. They are proud of me, though, and they brag about me when they see my good grades. My dad is more understanding. He was in the military and he has a wider view of the world.

Rosie admitted, "It was difficult for my boys and husband to adjust. They didn't like the time it took until now. They know I'm close to graduation. High grades prevented me dropping out."

Melinda, who had worked full time at a very demanding, responsible job, actually found she had more time for her family now:

> I'm home by 1:30 and I don't have my first class until my daughter is in school. I worked 8-5 or sometimes later. My husband goes in early, then is home for 3-4 hours before he returns. We have more time alone. We can have private discussions, that sometimes get pretty heated, when our daughter is in school.

Resentment/Support

Students were asked if anyone had expressed extreme resentment or offered extra support for their college attendance. Seven respondents experienced neither. Seven women found their husbands extra supportive; however, two ex-husbands had resented their attempts at college. Parents and grandparents, especially, were very supportive. Opal received special encouragement from her mother. "She helps me with lunch money. She bought my nice new book bag and helps buy supplies I need."

Families showed mixed feelings in several instances. Ann explained:

The family, especially our parents, get annoyed when I go on and on about school work. They feel like I'm trying to be above them. None of them has a college education. My dad, though, has never been so proud. He had a very humble childhood, and neither my sister nor my brother even tried college.

Flora said, "There's no real resentment, but there's a lack of complete understanding." Ellen added, "Some of the family resent my education. They tell me, "Even with an education, there's no good jobs around here." Rosie seems to have experienced the most unusual and unexpected type of resentment. She replied, "My oldest son resents that I held a 4.0 GPA and got awards. He felt overshadowed by my awards. If he got one, I had one. His successes didn't get all the attention."

Family attitudes continued to vary widely, but indifference to education and a lack of stress on the importance of education seemed dominant ideas. Even when there was resentment, it seemed to arise from jealousy. Initial doubts about the student's success were overcome by the student's high grades and honors. Often, families offered more support when the student showed positive signs of academic accomplishment, or when the student got nearer to a degree, especially one in career-related areas. I had the impression that education, for itself, was still not valued, only as a means to a better job.

The last area I explored involved the implications for the community college. I asked the students about the difficulty of their decision to return and any problems they might have had

relevant to child-care, transportation, and/or work scheduling. I also asked them about their specific academic preferences in methods of instruction, assignments, and classes.

Problems: Transportation, Child Care, Work Scheduling

Because NSTCC is a commuter school and many students live 20 or more miles from school, transportation could be a big problem. Child care for the younger respondents with babies and small children might be a problem. Neither transportation nor child care was a big problem. Only one student, however, had experienced transportation problems. The greatest problem was in the area of work-scheduling for the women who held jobs. Sixteen of the respondents said they had experienced no problems in any of these areas.

Most of these women have children, but only five had experienced real child care problems. Wendy said, "I've had to stay home with a sick child." Jeannie also found, "Child care is kind of difficult, especially when breaks, like spring breaks, come at different times. I don't have any family here." Jo Ann has problems with "child care on snow days. There's no one to watch them then, or when I have a sick child." Heather stated, "Sometimes I am late because of a sick child, mostly problems involving kids, but I take care of it. I have an alternate plan B all the time."

Most problems in this area were related to the days public schools were not holding classes or to sick children. Provisions for child care per se did not seem to be a problem.

The problem affecting most of the students was work scheduling. Summer said, "I quit work. It was too hard to work and go full time." Cathy stated, "Work scheduling. I've had to work more hours. I've had to drop all but one class." Goldie said, "Not until now. I quit my job because of school demands." Ellen said:

> Now I have problems with my work scheduling. I work for Fairfield Marketing. They
> have reneged on their promise to work my schedule here around their schedule. They say
> others are asking for the same privilege. They just don't want me to advance. They
> know I'll leave the company." Hannah added, "Work scheduling. I drive a school bus
> and my supervisor wants us to come to all the meetings now, which is very inconvenient.

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Employment Support / Lack of Support

Only one of the students I interviewed was receiving any compensation from an employer, although two were upgrading their medical skills and had been encouraged to do so by their employers. Thirteen women did not work, including the two formerly mentioned who had quit their jobs because of time demands. Only one, Abby, the policewoman, received any compensation from her employer. "The city provides reimbursement of 90% every term, up to $500, but you have to keep up your grades to get it."

Four respondents were work-study students at NSTCC. They had the easiest times scheduling their work. Nona responded, "I have flexible hours and can have time off to study for tests or work on large assignments." Florence said, "I work about 8-10 hours a week on the work study program. Yes, oh yes, I get support!" She added, "My supervisor is very flexible, very supportive." Michaela said, "I can do my research. My supervisor even helps with it."

Thelma worked as a teacher's aid in an elementary school. "The teachers I work for support me. The principal helped me with algebra." Cathy worked for Kingsport City Schools in the after-school program. "I am the lead teacher of 3rd grade—a teacher's aide.. I work with a reading class for troubled children and slow readers. The time at work is really determined by the hours of the program."

The six women who worked in academic settings received a great deal of support and encouragement from fellow workers and supervisors. Two women who worked in other places also found their employers supportive. Flora said, "Yes. At Burlington Coat Factory I can work around my schedule." I found it somewhat surprising that a retail store would be so supportive. Patty, who worked in medical records, and wanted to advance to cardiovascular work, also said her fellow workers and supervisors "support my efforts to advance."

Ellen, who previously claimed her employer had reneged on an earlier promise, said she had been supported "until now. They say others resent, or will also expect scheduling changes." Hannah, a school bus driver, also expressed complaints about recent changes:

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My supervisor is my biggest headache. He calls all these unnecessary meetings to go over what we already know. Nothing new---not about safety or anything really important. He's new on the job. He just came on the job August 2001. I think he has a real power problem.

Three of the women worked for themselves or their husbands, so they had no problem setting their own schedules.

Wilma worked as an LPN, but was taking classes to become an RN. She replied, "Yes, I have a 3rd shift job—really I have two jobs. I work at least 60 hours a week. I'm not that far from clinicals, though." Christy was interviewing for a job. She said, "I have an interview today with City Financial. Basically, I want something to fill in while I'm in school. I've done collections before, and for me that's low stress."

The women who worked in academically related jobs had the most support from co-workers and supervisors. Work study students enjoyed both support and flexible hours. The other two received much support, but their job hours were set, not flexible. The women who worked in the medical field and the policewoman also received support and encouragement from supervisors and co-workers. Self-employed women or women who worked for husbands determined their own schedules. Commercial businesses varied in their support with one business being initially supportive then reneging on promises.

Some women indicated they took fewer hours so they could balance work, family, and school demands. Several had dropped all but one class, yet, often the class they stayed in was one of the hardest for them, and they wanted to complete it while they could focus solely on it.

Figure 3. Does Your Employer Support Your Academic Activities?

Does your employer support your academic activities?
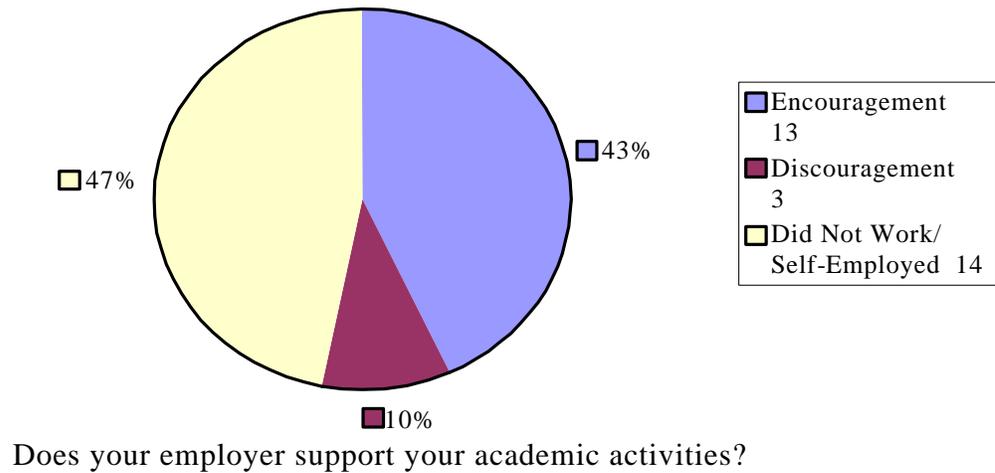
Implications For the Community College

Several years ago the NSTCC staff members directly involved in recruiting students attended several meetings about retention of students. They learned that a student decided to drop a class within the first two weeks of a term, even if the student actually dropped the class later in the course. Because of this information, one interview question asked respondents about their early weeks in class.

Early Weeks in Class

Sixteen respondents indicated strong intrinsic motivation—a determination to stay in school independent of any other influences. Florence: said, "Actually I loved it. I had no regrets. I wished I'd done it earlier. I always have believed there's a time for everything.

Maybe if I would've went right after high school, I might not have done so well…maybe."
Maturity was evidently a factor for her. Four respondents used the word 'determination.'

Academic aspects exerted a positive influence on 15 respondents. These students usually mentioned specific classes or instructors. Jeannie replied, "I had a wonderful instructor in speech especially." Bonnie admitted, "I had a fear of math. Mrs. Kennedy (Math instructor)." Christy said, "Doing well. I enjoyed my classes and my teachers. I liked being there." Flora responded, "I didn't think I'd do as well as I did. It was hard to return. I'm proud of my 3.5 average. It's not as overwhelming as I expected it would be." Summer said, "It was easier than I thought it'd be. I have very understanding teachers." Goldie stated, "My early course material in the developmental studies was like high school. I knew I could do it." Heather added, "All my instructors were awesome. It's the best decision I ever made." Michaela asserted, "Positive. I enjoy learning, seeing other students my age." Hannah said, "Because I realized there's a lot of things I was learning that was very helpful in my everyday life." Many of these students were initially intrinsically motivated, and then positive academic experiences simply reinforced their original decision.

Only one student mentioned strong family influence. Ann replied, "Because my family made such a commitment for me to come, I felt obligated because of the sacrifices everyone is making." The fact that only one respondent mentioned a strong positive family influence reinforced the ambivalence and/or indifference most families seem to feel about education.

Figure 4. How Did Your First Few Weeks in Class Influence Your Decision to Stay in School?
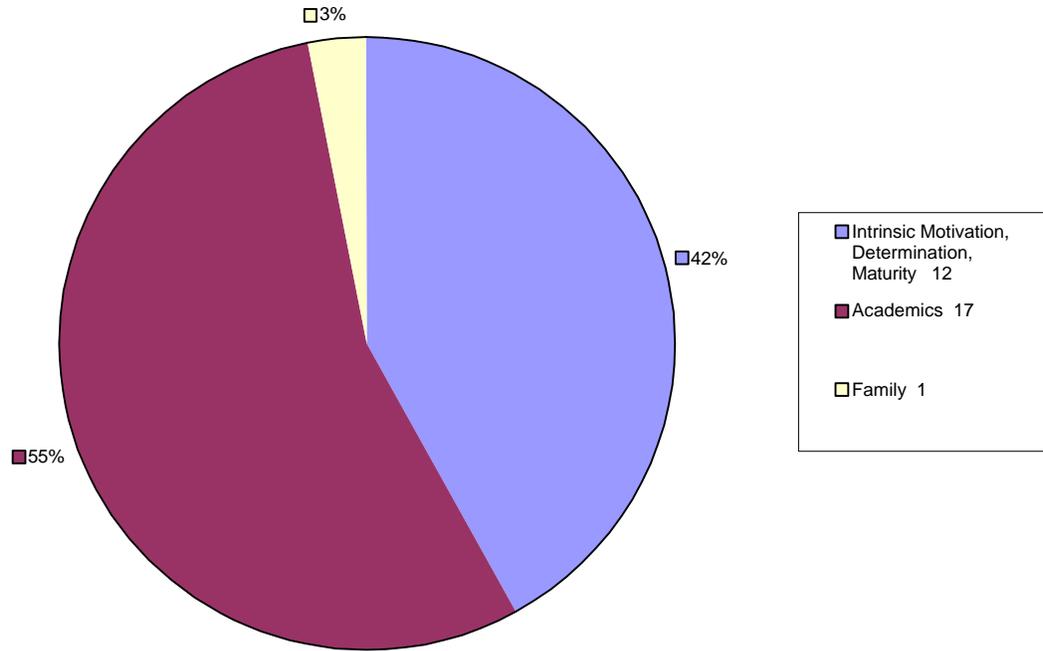
How did your first few weeks in class influence your decision to stay in school?

Person/Program Influence

Six students said no person or program influenced them. Two students mentioned the classes. Abby stated, "The way continuing education is set up. Saturday classes. Evening class schedule is very accommodating to the working person. Also, the internet classes. They are more structured. The burden is on the student. I took American literature that way." Christy added, "The accelerated classes. Fast Track, so I can finish faster."

Eight students mentioned specific classes or instructors they had found especially helpful or encouraging. Opal said, "Developmental math. Hattie Vincent—my Comp I teacher. The way she conducts her classes—her attitude encouraged me to continue." Rosie responded, "Many. Barbara Taylor in Comp I helped me open up. Silas Mervin in Math is sensational.

That helped with future math classes. Ian Allen related accounting to real life. "That's my major." Michaela said, "Speech. Ms. Dina Lindon was excellent. She built my confidence." Whitney replied, "My comp teacher. She is a good writer and she encouraged me."

Few students mentioned the importance of financial aid.   Five students indicated financial aid of some type finalized their decisions. Melinda said, "The state of Tennessee pays for displaced workers to go to school. Getting grants I don't have to pay back. That help really did it—clinched my decision."

Four students received help and encouragement from nonacademic staff—counselors, student support, special programs, or center directors. Jeannie said, …"the Center for Students with Disabilities. I have an anxiety disorder. The lady there was able to make me relax, put everything in perspective. I knew what to expect. I also have some deafness." Three students said others had helped them. One mentioned her boyfriend, currently attending NSTCC. Another mentioned a neighbor who helped her obtain grant information. Thelma stated, "I work at an elementary school as a teacher's aid. My co-workers, the teachers, everyone encouraged me. They tried to get me to return for years."

Students indicated the personnel at the college were extremely helpful to them. They provided encouragement, extra help when requested, and made students feel they could do the work. Those who had been out of school for some years were most uncertain and insecure. Even though five had quit before completing high school, they had achieved some type of academic honor while they were still in school. Other aspects of college described that could have implications for the community college were the types of assignments and methods of instruction the students preferred, as well as the scheduling of classes. Two students specifically mentioned distance education classes. Their reactions to their classes differed from enjoyment to extreme dislike. Since both classes were in the area of general education—history and mythology—the subject areas were not what caused the differences. Both students had high academic standings and were very self-confident. Kemp (2002) did a survey of distance education learners. She

found student commitment to the course was a key factor in course completion, and work commitments sometimes overwhelmed students so that they did not complete the course. The student who liked the course had a job as a police officer, and the other student was a work study student; however, the policewoman enjoys her general education courses, but the student worker does not like any course that is not related to computers or business. Another survey by Thurmond, Wambach, and Conners (2002) advocated more student involvement, timely feedback on assigned work, tests, etc. Good classroom practices are as important in web-based courses as they are in traditional classrooms. Some instructors may try to teach too many courses or too many students in the web courses.

I did not analyze the experiences in any great depth, but more adult students will likely take these classes in future so it is important that students have a favorable reaction to them.

Figure 5. Was There Any Person or Any Programs You Have Found Especially Helpful?

Was there any person or any programs you have found especially helpful?

Classes, Scheduling, Location, Electronic 3
Instructor or Advisor 8
Financial Aid 6
Staff/Counselor Student Support Program Directors 4
Neighbors, Friends, Co-Workers 3
N/A 6
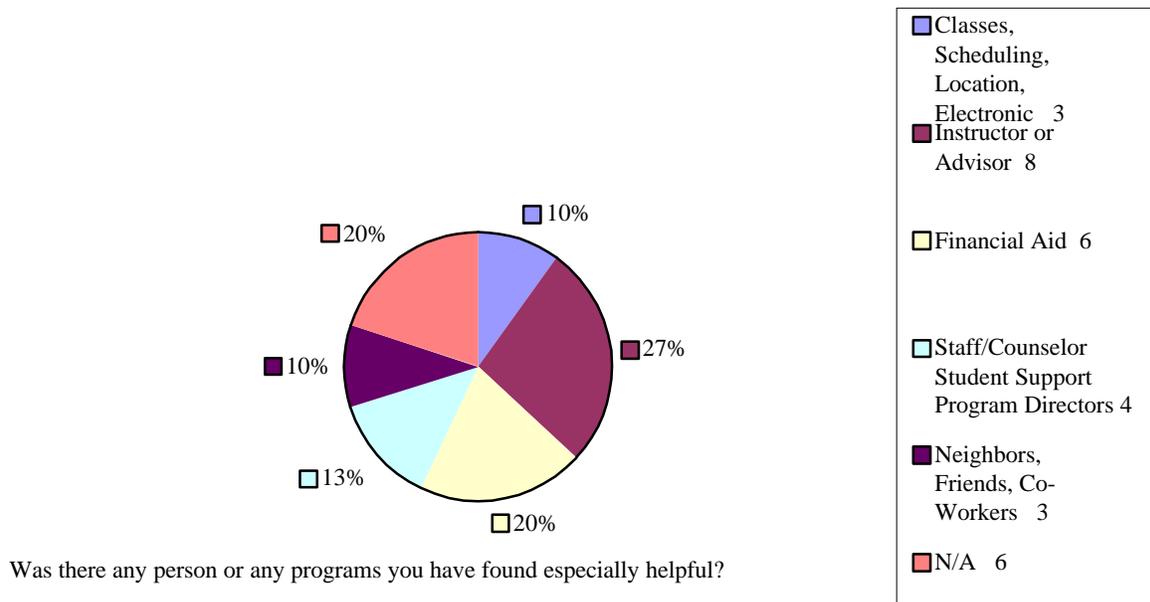
Most Helpful Types of Instruction/Assignments

Once again, answers were quite varied. Three students preferred critical thinking and problem-solving types of assignments. These students mentioned both math and anatomy classes, saying they required much self-discipline from the learner. Abby replied, "Things that challenge me mentally to evaluate or critique them. Essay tests vs. multiple choice."

Eight of the respondents expressed preference for hands-on, lab-type assignments. Wendy said, "If a teacher stands there and lectures for the whole class period, it doesn't benefit me very well."

Two students liked independent learning best. Nona stated, "Independent assignments. I don't like working in groups. I usually have to teach groups who can't do the project." Melinda declared, "Steer me in the right direction."

Three women enjoyed writing and self-expression. Somewhat surprisingly, six students liked lectures, especially informative lectures including explanations and/or examples. When study guides were also included, students found that very helpful. Four students preferred research assignments. Christy said, "I like art classes, enjoy research. I start early and work through a wide variety of books I have at home."

Types of Instruction

Three students mentioned exact expectations and structure and four students said they preferred challenging classes and instructors. Goldie replied, "More demanding teachers. I like a challenge. I don't procrastinate then."

It was interesting to note that none of the students expressed any type of resentment or negative attitude toward any academic requirement.

I also questioned the women about their most significant areas of accomplishment to determine what they value most from their college experience

Figure 6. Can You Identify The Types of Instruction, Assignments, etc. That Allow You to Perform Your Most Successful Academic Work?
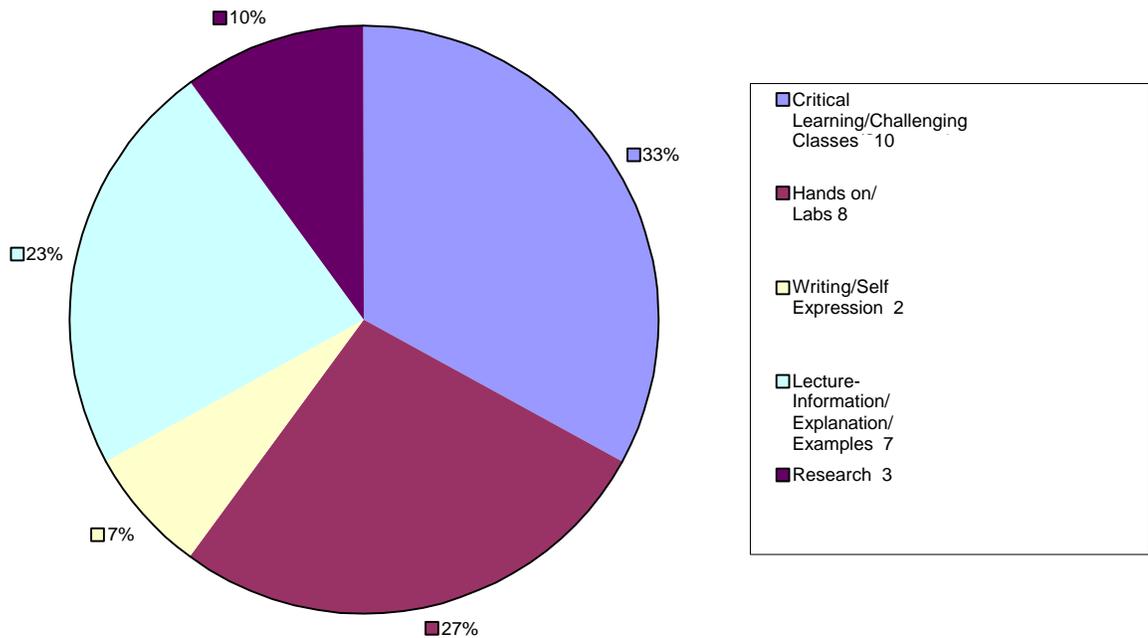
Can you identify the types of instruction, assignments, etc. that allow you to perform your most successful academic work?

Significant Experiences/Accomplishments

Three students mentioned work-related accomplishments. Abby proudly responded, "My first promotion at work. I realized there can be more to work than just work on a job. You have control over how far you can go, based on what you're willing to put into it." Melinda replied, "Some people at church. Sometimes I help with kids after school, giving them rides when a parent has a problem picking them up on time. That made me decide about child care.

Twenty-two respondents identified their most significant experience or accomplishment as academically related. Eight of these respondents named good grades, high GPAs. Dottie acknowledged, "Getting good grades kept me going. That was not my past history." Wendy

said, "Getting all As and Bs last semester. I did better than I thought I had. I did not want to know my grades at first. I was afraid to find out how bad I did."

Seven mentioned specific classes. Wilma said, "I passed anatomy. I would have took{sic} it again. I may not pass anatomy again (Anatomy II). It's very hard." Bonnie added, "I passed last semester with a B in math. Now I know I can do it. I've always had a fear of algebra. I can't believe I'm really learning it. "Hannah said:

> I was upset with math. My counselor (Barbara Eagan) told me to think about it this way. When I go on and become a social worker, my persisting and keeping on, and solving my math problems can be something I tell them about, encouraging them to keep on until they solve a problem they're having.

Often the classes the students mentioned were subjects that had given them difficulty in the past. The students were very proud that they had mastered these hard subjects. The remark made by the counselor (Barbara Eagan) seemed very simple, but this student was encouraged to persevere and overcome her problems in math because of it. Those of us who have been involved in the academic world and are comfortable in this area perhaps do not realize just how uncertain, academically inexperienced, and unprepared older students may be. This area is new to them and they are learning how to cope and succeed in it. A few words of praise and encouragement influence them more than we realize.

The other seven claimed some type of academic honor, award, or recognition was most significant. Jeannie said, "Getting into the honor society. A couple of teachers I admire. I would love to be that good at what I do." Heather stated. "The King College Scholarship. Nothing could stop me now." Rosie replied, "Being named in Who's Who, making the President's list with my 4.0 average, being a member of Phi Theta Kappa." Whitney replied. "The invitation to the honors program. It felt good to qualify."

Six students stated they had already set their goals and were not influenced by anyone else or any accomplishment. Opal declared, "I'm a finisher. I complete what I start." Half the women (15) had not changed their initial goals. Dottie replied, "My course was mapped out. I had set a goal to the end when I first started."

A commonality among these students was their determination to persist, often against great odds, such as sick children, lack of economic resources, uncooperative bosses, indifferent or ambivalent family attitudes.

Two students identified family as most significant. Ann said, "My family being supportive. Their pride and support are very motivating." Christy said:

> My uncle who's a lawyer. He took me to dinner to meet a girl who's returning to law school after her wild teenage years. I felt like he was telling me 'If she can, you can.' His interest in me—taking me to dinner to meet her, seeing the potential in me.

Figure 7. Have You Had One Significant Experience or Accomplishment That Made You Decide to Complete Your Education?
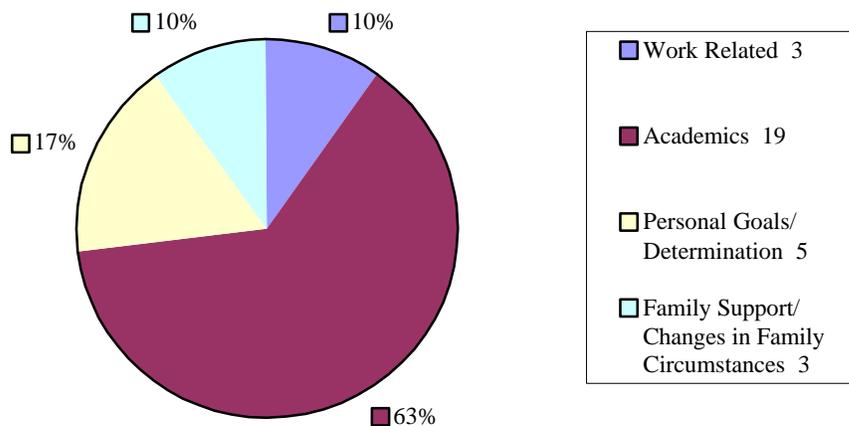
Have you had one significant experience or accomplishment that made you decide to complete your education?

Changes in Scheduling/Class Times, etc

Eighteen respondents were satisfied as things were, desired no changes. Others suggested changes in delivery, class length, better fit of classes. Nona complained, "Some classes are too long. My attention span is not up to long classes and labs. No more Internet

classes for me unless they're informative. I'm taking my mythology that way now and have to force myself to do the work." Summer said, "I wish required classes met closer together. I leave a 2 pm, back at 4:30 Tuesday. Monday and Wednesday I go from 5:30—8pm. Two days would be better.' Jo Ann stated "More morning classes would help. I could come while kids are in school." In direct contrast, Whitney wanted "More evening classes. I'm not a morning person."

Frances desired "back to back required classes. My only regret is there is less time with my family." Goldie objected that required classes were scheduled at conflicting times. Rosie replied, "Classes in sequence should be offered each term—especially the first course that students have to take before taking the more advanced ones."

Three students desired more off-campus classes. One student desired breaks at the same time as those of the city schools. Most of these replies would be just as likely from traditional students of either sex, except for those who mentioned scheduling while their children are in school, or desiring breaks scheduled in coordination with their children's school breaks. Perhaps Ann most realistically replied, "It would be nice to have classes fit together perfectly. I really don't know how Northeast could accommodate everybody at every time they wanted a class."

The suggestions about scheduling could as likely have been made by traditional students.

When I asked the women to express their feelings about returning to school and whether or not they would recommend returning to college to other women in their group, the responses were all positive.

Figure 8. Could Any Changes in Scheduling Benefit You?

◼ 13%	
☐ 7%	
☐ 10%	
◼ 17%	53% ☐

Legend:
- ☐ No Changes Desired 16
- ◼ Better Scheduling 5
- ☐ More Classes 3
- ☐ More Off Campus Classes 2
- ◼ Sequenced Classes 4
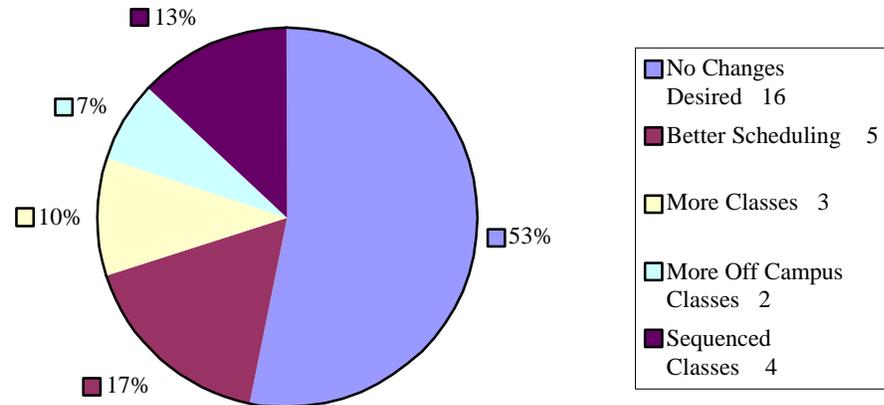
Could any changes in scheduling benefit you?

Words and Phrases to Describe Feelings About Returning to School

Seventeen women expressed feelings relevant to personal improvement: Pride, excitement, self-confidence, challenge were words they used. Perhaps Gena said it best. "Feeling better about myself, accomplishing something for myself." Dottie expressed her feelings, "You can't be truly proud of yourself without a college degree. You are a better rounded person."

Five gave academically related responses. Flora said, "Tickled to death. Going through lots. I dropped a class because I'm here to do well. I don't want C's." Opal replied, "Awesome. It changed my attitude to 'I can do this'." Michaela responded, "Achievement." Yolanda admitted, "Uncertainty at first. Now I have a drive to finish." Melinda said, "Now I see more my age here. Other doors have opened. I have found other displaced workers here."

The other responses were economic or job-related. Abby declared:

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It's a goal. My mother did not attain independence after their divorce. She relied on my father's support and fussed about her lacks. He didn't give her enough money, didn't provide enough insurance, and on and on. She could have returned to school, taken control of her financial life, become independent, self-reliant. I love being married, but if my husband left, I could manage financially.

Nona declared, "Money. I want to make money. I couldn't make more than $12 an hour for doing technical support work without a degree." Students also used terms such as "independence", "advancement". Dottie said, "Without a college degree, there are no good jobs."

Recommendations to Return

All the women, without exception, said they would encourage other women aged 23 to 50 to return to college. Eight women gave job-related reasons. Dottie repeated, "Without a college degree there are no good jobs." Nona replied, "To make more money." Florence said, "One of the best things I've ever done. The best decision. I've seen how it's benefited me. I see so many women working hard, long hours for nothing. It's given me a sense of accomplishment, basically." Tina responded, "I know women who can't feed their kids. You're vulnerable without an education." Jo replied, "Technology changes so much. You can get a better job." Patty said, "To advance in your profession, get more pay." Ellen stated, "Everyone needs to further their education for themselves to make a better life for their children." Yolanda responded, "For a better chance at a good job. It does lots for your self-esteem. You can do it. You are just as good as a man."

The other women cited reasons of self-improvement, self-esteem, self-reliance, and independence. Nine respondents expressed strong ideas about the necessity for women to be self-reliant and independent. Abby advocated "the mentality of an independent woman. Self-reliance. It's a big plus." Gena said, "If you have a degree, it shows you worked hard for it, especially if you have a family and work, too." Wilma replied, "I got my 46-year old friend to come back. She makes $49,000 a year, but I told her she needs an education to fall back on." Michaela added, "Depending on men gets you nowhere. You feel better about yourself."

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Whitney explained, "My grandma was widowed, with four boys. She eventually got financial aid, returned to school and got a good job as an executive accountant. You can't depend on men in this day and time. Try to be self-reliant."

Self -esteem and self-improvement were cited by the other respondents. Dottie replied, "You are a better rounded person." Florence added, "Because it's opened me up in ways I never expected. I expected to learn new, practical things. It's changed my perspective on the world, increased my interest in many areas." Bonnie said, "To learn to overcome fears about a subject you thought you couldn't learn." Christy added, "You never know what you can do until you try. You might surprise yourself." Laurie declared, "It's a boost to self-confidence. To improve their feelings about themselves." Thelma said,"It enriches your life." Cathy stated, "It makes you a better person. The more you know, the more self-esteem. The more secure feeling." Heather: stated, "It changes the way you think about everything." Rosie said, "Education is valuable, helpful in life, even if you don't work." Melinda responded, "Everybody needs more education the way the world works. Everything is changing. It helps your self-esteem a lot, develops higher self-esteem." Jeannie said it best. "It's an experience—how can I put this?--A woman getting her education has something no one can take away. It's hers. As Judge Judy says—she really encourages women—'Beauty fades, but dumb is forever'."

I concluded that the women in my study had very definite goals, mostly job-related, but also affected by family circumstances, and by goals of self-improvement. They might have expressed job-related goals as the primary motivation, but when questioned further, 19 admitted that self-improvement also ranked high for them. Their families, however, who seemed largely indifferent, would not accept self-improvement goals as readily as they would accept job-related goals.

If their families of origin were indifferent to education and their return, even viewing it with resentment in some circumstances, for the most part, their husbands and children were very supportive and encouraging. Twenty-two women said they would not have been as likely to

pursue their goals without this encouragement. The only exceptions noted were two ex-husbands, who seemed to resent their pursuing education.

Sixteen of these women had experienced at least some educational successes in their past academic pursuits. Two who had dropped out of high school because of adverse family circumstances were high achievers in middle school. Twelve had earned some type of academic recognition in high school, and two had academic recognition from other colleges they had attended. Ten of the women admitted they had been too immature to succeed in college earlier, and four were attending out of desperation—to get better jobs to support their children better, especially the single parents. The academic successes of these students reinforced the findings from the readings that many programs do not reach their targeted recipients—the very low income, underprivileged, poorly educated women, but rather reach the students who have experienced some type of academic success. The respondents did not really have any serious academic problems. Immaturity, lack of interest, or failure on the part of themselves and their immediate families to recognize the value of education were the factors that caused them to delay college.

The women also impressed me by their determination, their definite goals, and their seriousness of purpose. I felt that most of them would have attended college, despite any obstacles. These women needed only slight encouragement to do what they wanted to do—get a college education. Perhaps, in addition to recruiting high school students, community colleges would do well to place information in lounges at places of work, in doctor's offices, grocery stores, laundromats, public libraries, beauty salons (with their permission, of course)—any place that females ages 23-50 might frequent. These interviews indicate that women in this age group are eager to expand their options, and they are not the group most colleges are trying to reach at all.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the motivations of non-traditional female college students, ages 23-50, determine their characteristics, and to determine the implications for the community college. Thirty female students, ages 23-50, from required classes of English and math volunteered to participate in the interview.

Summary of Findings

The students were asked to respond to 15 questions suggested from the review of the literature, and from informal interviews and conversations with counselors, directors, and instructors of programs designed especially for older students, such as Next Step, Fast Track, and Weekend College. The responses of the students agreed to a large extent with the information gleaned from the review of the literature.

Motivations of Adult Learners

Twenty-two of the students returned to college for job-related reasons and 28 of the interviewees were enrolled in business degree programs, especially computer programs, or in courses for health professions. All of the women wanted a career and job security, and a minority (5) expressed altruistic reasons, such as becoming counselors or social workers, and opening a day care center. Miglietti and Strange (1998), in a survey of underprepared students, noted the majority of the students had returned to college to take business courses. Adelman (1999) also found that more women were majoring in business and business-related courses, with the health sciences as the second most dominant choice. Speer (1996) said that today's workplace demanded workers who were constantly retraining and updating their knowledge.

Several women had expanded their original, rather narrow career goals. Among the interviewees, only one was reimbursed to any extent by her employer, and the amount was dependent upon her grades. Several respondents agreed that the encouragement and influence of their co-workers had facilitated their return to college.

Adelman (1994) mentioned that employers were often ready to pay workers who returned to school and took classes that would enhance their performance in their jobs. Killacky and Valedez (1995) indicated the importance of encouragement by family, friends, and co-workers.

Although much of the literature about returning female students spoke of the single parents, widows, and divorcees who returned to college so that they could support themselves and their children better, two of the respondents were returning because their spouses were chronically ill and disabled, so they were forced to become the breadwinners of their families. The literature mentioned personal growth but did not explore it as a major factor in students' return to college. As I probed deeper into motivations, I elicited responses from many women that they had always wanted to attend college, but that their families did not consider higher education important and did not encourage them. I received a strong impression that job-related reasons were acceptable and the students could justify their return to college for that reason. Personal growth may be a greater motivation than the literature or quantitative surveys indicate. Knowles and Associates (1984) touched on this point when Knowles concluded; "Intrinsic motivation of self-actualization, desire for a better quality of life and greater self-confidence seem to be more powerful than external motivations" (p.12).

Characteristics of Adult Students

Most of the students were high achievers and had learned to manage family and work responsibilities to allow themselves adequate study time. Two single parents had dropped courses that took so much time they said they would not complete the courses with A or B grades. Students who dropped courses did so primarily because they indicated they would get

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low grades in those courses. It seemed somewhat ironic that these students would often drop a less demanding course and continue in a harder course, such as math or anatomy, because they were doing well in that particular course that was hard for them, perhaps for the first time.

Because these women must cope with so many responsibilities, time and task management became crucial to their success as students. Trueman and Hartley (1996) asserted that adults tend to develop better study habits than younger students.

The students responded to the question about the types of assignments and courses they preferred in a variety of ways. Different students preferred different types of assignments. Eight respondents preferred hands-on, lab-type assignments; two liked independent learning best; three women liked writing and self-expression; and four students preferred research assignments. Some students liked a variety of assignments, and some students majored in areas that dictated the types of assignments. Students in a business or medical career program expressed little preference.

Chapman (1999) alleged that adults wanted more participatory educational experiences. My findings indirectly supported her allegation in that eight respondents said they preferred hands-on, lab-type assignments, and the majority of the students were majoring in business or medical programs where assignments were predominantly hands-on.

The only club the students expressed any real interest in was the honor society, and many were extremely proud of being asked to be members of that society. They bragged about being on the president's list or dean's list or qualifying to take honors classes. McCormick (1995) asserted that adult students had very little interest in typical college activities or clubs unless they were affiliated with the professional organizations in their chosen careers.

The major interest of these students was high grades, and they would do whatever was needed to maintain high GPAs . When colleges indicate grade inflation is a major problem, they might do well to assess the percentage of these returning female students in their student body,

because these women are determined to get high grades, and they are more than willing to work hard for them.

Most of the students had experienced academic successes at some point in their past schooling. They might have been a bit scared or uncertain at first, but most expressed confidence in their ability to do the work. One concern of college educators is that the severely undereducated and people employed a lower level jobs are not being reached by any programs at institution of higher learning, even those that appear to target them specifically, such as providing special help for first generation college students. Counselors, instructors, and directors who work extensively with nontraditional students in such programs as Next Step, Fast Track, and Weekend College expressed concern that the gap between the educated and the uneducated is being widened by the very programs designed to eliminate this gap. Griffith and Conner (1994) expressed concern that the open door policy of the community college was slowly closing as students are asked to prove they can benefit from college.

Implications for the Community College

Several of these women had married early, and several had been too immature when they tried college the first time as traditional students. A few of the respondents had found that with work and family commitments they could only attend part time. Knoell and McIntyre (1974) expressed the idea that community college planners should be concerned with women whose formal education had been interrupted for a variety of reasons. They also noted an increasing trend in part-time students. Seventeen women had not pursued higher education because of family attitudes, adverse family circumstances, or their own lack of maturity. Three of the respondents had been forced to drop out of all but one or two classes because work or family obligations.

The majority of the respondents did plan to go on for a four-year degree and three of them were considering possible graduate work. Their goals had expanded because they were

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earning high grades and felt a real sense of accomplishment. Clowes and Hawthorne (1995) pointed out the decline in the transfer function of the community college as it increasingly became integrated with business and industry. Eleven of the respondents planned to pursue further education.

The women were persevering toward their goals, even if they had to take only one class and drop others. They were determined to stay the course. Several said "I set my goals" or "I made the decision to return." Bartholomew (1994) found that the high dropout rate typical of nontraditional female students was closely related to the social environment of the classroom. These women came from a variety of backgrounds, but the essential factor in their remaining in school was their own determination.

Many of the students indicated a certain teacher or teachers, a counselor, or a director who had influenced them in their early days of class, but none mentioned the classroom climate per se. They took responsibility for their own learning. Mulliken, Traeder, and Arnold (1985) emphasized the importance of faculty attitudes as affecting retention and academic success of returning students. Perhaps some students who are not committed and determined might be affected by this situation, but the intrinsically motivated students in my study apparently were not.

Family support was another factor that could affect the student's academic success The ages of children determined their overall support. Very young children enjoyed spending extra time with grandparents, another family member, or a favorite baby sitter. Teenagers were proud of their mother and encouraged by her school work, sometimes studying with her. The children with ambivalent feelings were children in grade or middle school who did not like the fact that their mothers had less time now to volunteer to help at school or to attend ball games or other school functions. They were proud of her yet still wanted more of her time. Coe, Rubenzahl, and Slater (1984) pointed out that adults had family as initial concerns, but that the

family adjusts after school becomes part of their routine. For the most part, my interview responses supported their viewpoint.

Because of the wide age range of the students interviewed, I found many different life experiences, differences in ages of children, in family situations, but I found little difference in attitudes toward their goals. The women were either seeking better jobs, trying to advance in their chosen fields, or, in three instances, realizing that earlier choices of careers were not fulfilling. All of the women had definite career goals, and all of them believed a college education was a step toward their goals. Wagschal (1997) noted that adult students had a wider age difference among themselves than did the traditional students. The life experiences may differ widely. Wagschal also concluded that older students found it easier to bond with one another. I found most of the students were encouraged to see older students in their classes, but they also enjoyed the age differences and found the mixture of ages representative of most college classes enriching.

Although the initial goal of most respondents was a better job, several indicated that college courses had really helped them to expand their horizons. The self-expression required in English courses, anthropology, arts and humanities courses, and research assignments in various classes were mentioned as helping them to attain a wider vision and better understanding of the larger society. Cohen and Associates (1971) posited that two-year college students were less likely to be concerned with personal and intellectual development, and more concerned with programs or courses that help them reach higher income levels. Only two respondents mentioned higher income or money itself as a motivating factor.

One criticism of adult education has been that the education focused excessively on work-related skills. Cohen and Brawer (1989) contended that more general education should teach critical thinking, and three of the respondents specifically mentioned preferring assignments that required critical thinking, and six indicated a preference for courses and assignments that involved analysis. These students did not like group assignments. In a

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commuter school schedules differ, and most adult students had work and/or family responsibilities, so it was hard to meet with group members, unless faculty allow scheduled classes to be used for group work. A common complaint is that all members do not contribute equally, and the most conscientious person does most of the work. Brougher (1997) advocated group assignments that allowed students to use various ways of learning to meet the demands of the assignment.

I found it enlightening that I did not hear one complaint about an instructor or course requirements from these respondents. If they were doing poorly in a class, they said it was because they, themselves, did not have enough background, and might need tutoring, or because the class required more time than they could, at present, devote to the class.

Conclusions

The data analysis of the interviews conducted with students revealed their commonalities, despite large age differences (23—50). All of the women had positive attitudes and had encouraged other mature women to pursue a college education. All the women wanted better jobs, but only three younger women indicated more money was a major consideration. For the other women, job satisfaction was far more important.

The children of these women ranged from babies to teenagers. All the women, however, indicated how important their children were to them and how large a part their children played in their lives. Fourteen of the women were happily married, and their husbands and children were quite supportive.

The women who admitted self-fulfillment was a motivation had, in most instances, realized that attaining more education enhanced self-esteem and personal growth. For them, self-improvement was an unexpected bonus.

These female students ages 23-50 would be an asset to any college. They were serious, self-directed students with definite goals. They wanted to learn and were eager to attain the

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goals they had set for themselves. Their most commonly acceptable goal and the one most emphasized was job-related; yet, many of them also indicated a real desire for education per se as a means of self-improvement. Because many of their families have not seen or stressed the value of higher education, the students experience indifference, ambivalence, or, in three instances, open hostility toward their attempting college.

The students usually had experienced some academic successes, so that they soon developed self-confident attitudes about success in college, even if some of them had been a bit scared or uncertain at first. They liked a variety of assignments and methods of teaching. None of them complained about required courses that were not directly pertinent to their major. Most of them would like more off-campus courses, especially if they lived close to off-campus sites. A few mentioned that required courses, especially the beginning basic courses, should be taught each term, and some complained about the wide stretch of hours between required classes. These complaints would probably just as likely be made by traditional students as well as by nontraditional students.

No organized effort, such as high school recruitment, has been made to enroll this segment of the population, women ages 23-50, in the community college. Some of these women indicated they had encouraged other women their age to enroll in college. It would take more time and effort than just going into a high school and encouraging 17-and 18- year-olds to attend college, but a concentrated effort to reach these women could be very rewarding.

Brochures, catalogs, and bulletins about the college could be placed in lounges at places of work (with permission), at grocery store counters, public and church libraries, bulletin boards at various locations, such as laundromats, day care centers, nursing homes, hospitals, fast food restaurants—anywhere these women are likely to eat, work, shop, visit, or patronize in some manner. These women had returned to school because they were highly motivated intrinsically. They required only a slight bit of encouragement to return. They served as good examples in class in that they took responsibility for their own learning. They were determined, high

achievers, with very positive attitudes about higher education, thrilled to be a part of it--an asset to any college, and the community college should make a concerted effort to reach them.

Recommendations for Further Study or Investigation

These students had experienced various types of academic success in their past schooling. After quickly overcoming some initial fears and uncertainties, they expressed confidence in their ability to do the work. All of them said they would recommend returning to college to other women their age. The readings and the counselors who work in programs targeting older students support the assertions that the really low-skilled, impoverished older adults who are the focus of many government educational programs do not enter college. Peer group and family attitudes and pressures discourage them from doing so. While I was seeking pertinent articles for literature review, some articles I browsed, but did not use, focused on adult literacy. Perhaps members of this targeted group could not read well enough to further their education and would not admit their problem. A colleague who worked with these programs and who had done extensive research, including many interviews, told me that when schools had scheduled classes in their neighborhood churches, community centers, or other familiar places these students had been more likely to enroll in college classes. That theory certainly could be investigated, and perhaps, if it could be verified, more of the really poor and uneducated could begin to benefit.

Another area that could be investigated further is the motivations of the older female student. Although it is true that most of them said they were motivated to return to school for job-related reasons, only two of them mentioned more money specifically. Most of them wanted more satisfying work that they could enjoy, and several mentioned teaching, social work, counseling, or other work that they know does not pay a high salary. Some, already employed and relatively well-paid, did not want to continue in work they did not really enjoy. The factor of job satisfaction merits further study.

In the academic area it was true that many students were in business or medical programs, but I found a great interest in their general education requirements. Contrary to the literature, students did not resent having to take those courses but found them enriching and said they appreciated having their worlds expanded by courses in these areas. It might be enlightening to explore just how large a role self-improvement and personal growth truly motivate these students.

These students were self-directed and intrinsically motivated to return to school. They did express appreciation toward teachers, counselors, directors, and others who were willing to give them a few minutes of extra time, to answer their questions, and to encourage them in various ways. Some instances, such as the counselor who encouraged a student having a hard time in math by telling her she could use her experience to encourage her clients to persevere in hard situations when she became a social worker, may seem somewhat simplistic and obvious, but we must remind ourselves that these students do not have strong academic backgrounds, for the most part, despite some earlier successes, and any encouragement means so much to them. Some studies about students who continue might indicate they benefited from just such attention. The part that academic personnel play in the retention of these students merits further investigation.

An interesting companion study might be made of 30 males ages 23-50 who have returned to school. Comparison of the data found might furnish some new insights about gender differences and commonalities.

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APPENDIX

Student Questionnaire

1. Why did you return to school?

2. Was there one factor, or several, that caused you to decide to return?

3. Was the decision to return a hard or an easy one? Explain.

4. How did your first few weeks in class influence your decision to stay in school?

5. Was there any person or any programs you have found especially helpful?

6. Tell me about your past academic experiences? Any outstanding awards or other successes you experienced.

7. Can you identify the types of instruction, assignments, etc. that allow you to perform your most successful academic work?

8. Have you had problems with transportation, childcare, work scheduling, etc. that may have adversely affected your academic performance? If so, would you tell me about the problem and how it affected your schoolwork?

9. How does your family feel about your return to school? Have attitudes changed as family members realize just how demanding academic work really is?

10. Has any family member expressed either resentment or provided additional support for your goals?

11. Have you developed any goals in addition to, or replacing, your initial motivation to return to school as you have progressed?

12. Are you currently employed? If so, does your employer support your academic activities? In what way?

13. Have you had one significant experience or accomplishment that made you decide to complete your education?

14. Could any changes in scheduling benefit you? Explain

15. What one word or phrase would you use to describe your feelings about returning to school? Would you, or do you, encourage other women ages 25-50 to return? Why or why not?

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