

THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STUDENT VETERANS' MARITAL STATUS,  
PARENTAL STATUS, MILITARY SERVICE, PROGRAM OF STUDY AND THEIR  
PERCEIVED LEVELS OF ACADEMIC SELF-EFFICACY

by

Tyler Ray Nelson

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this quantitative predictive correlational study is to identify predictive indicators of perceived levels of academic self-efficacy for student veterans enrolled in Alabama community colleges and seeks to determine if the predictor variables of marital status, parental status, military service, and program of study have any relationship to their perceived levels of academic self-efficacy. It is noted by several studies that having low levels of academic self-efficacy is a significant contributing factor leading to student attrition. One way to mitigate this growing problem is to identify key elements that may predict a student's level of academic self-efficacy. This study uses the SELF-A as the instrument and analyzes results taken from  $N=123$  student veterans attending community college in Alabama. The students were identified through ACCS student enrollment records and were asked through email to complete the survey. This non-experimental predictive correlational study looks for relationships between several nontraditional student factors and students' perceived levels of academic self-efficacy. The study found that both marital and parental status had a significance of  $p=.000$ , indicating that both variables were significant predictors of academic self-efficacy. While no other variables were found to be significant, further research that focuses on separating the variables of health science and career technical education (CTE) within the Program of Study variable would help to determine if students who typically enroll in CTE programs are more likely to exhibit low levels of academic self-efficacy than those in health sciences and academic transfer.

*Keywords: nontraditional, self-efficacy, attrition, relationships, military, veteran*

### **Dedication**

I dedicate my dissertation to my family. This would not have been possible without the love and support that they have shown me throughout my doctoral journey. 2020 was an immensely tough year, as both my mother and father passed away. However, through it all, my wife, Amanda, and my children, Brenly and Greyson, gave me the support and push I needed to persist when I needed it the most. Additionally, as a first-generation college student, I want the rest of my family to see that anything is possible if you focus and apply yourself.

### **Acknowledgments**

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Alabama Community College System (ACCS)

Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE)

Career Technical Education (CTE)

Community College Research Center (CCRC)

General Education Development (GED)

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Input-Environment-Output (IEO)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Self-Efficacy for Learning Form Abridged (SELF-A)

Summer Bridge Programs (SBPs)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

As people grow older, their ideas and attitudes sometimes change in a way that encourages them to seek out opportunities for personal or professional growth. This is evident in the growing numbers of nontraditional students frequenting the halls within our institutions of higher learning. Nontraditional student populations include students who are working full-time, married, and those who have children. It may be possible that many of these students suffer from a low level of academic self-efficacy, which could increase their risk of dropping out of college (Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2012). If educators can predict which students will most likely have low levels of academic self-efficacy at the beginning of their collegiate journeys, they may be able to effectively mitigate some of the hardships their nontraditional students experience upon reentering school. This study examines student veterans in community colleges as an exemplar of this possibility. This chapter will discuss the background, problem statement, purpose statement, significance of the study, research questions, and definitions.

### **Background**

While more opportunities are available for nontraditional students to earn degrees, it has not necessarily translated into significantly increased numbers of degrees being awarded. In fact, According to Bailey et al. (2015), less than 40 percent of community college students earn a certificate or degree within six years of first-time enrollment, while Jacob (2018) found that only 26 percent of community college students earn an associate's or bachelor's degree within six years. According to Markel (2015), a third of all students enrolled in institutions of higher education within the United States were identified as being nontraditional students. Many nontraditional students are drawn into their local community colleges with an intrinsic desire to

better their lives. Many go on to endure great hardships in the hopes of obtaining skills that will allow them to provide a better life for their families.

Furthermore, Ellis (2019) found that nontraditional students exhibit higher levels of persistence in single courses than their traditional counterparts. However, few are prepared to endure the lengthy series of struggles that lay ahead of them. Non-completion of nontraditional student degree plans is attributed to several factors, and while struggles experienced may be similar, each person's experience is unique to them and their needs. This makes it very difficult to develop a prescribed method of dealing with low academic self-efficacy in nontraditional student populations. According to Pratt (2017), only 21 percent of students who enter one of the 1,462 community colleges in the United States will exit their schools with a degree within three years of beginning their academic careers. Furthermore, a mere 39 percent will graduate within six years of beginning their studies at a community college.

The term, nontraditional student, is a complicated term with several facets and continues to evolve. Kim (2002) mentioned that, initially, students were declared to be nontraditional strictly by their age. When the term nontraditional was first used, it was used to signify any student over the age of 24. However, the definition continues to change to include several subclassifications. Forbus et al. (2011) note that, generally, a nontraditional student is described as any student who has not followed a path of continuous education. This would include all students who did not enroll in collegiate courses immediately following their senior year of high school. This growing population of students is diverse and includes students who are attending college at different stages of their lives. Some examples of nontraditional students are students who married before enrolling in college, students who have children to tend to while enrolled in

classes, or students who failed to graduate from high school and obtained a General Education Diploma (GED).

No matter what circumstances brought about a desire to pursue a degree, many students who do not fit the traditional mold of a college student are becoming more commonplace than in previous years. This increase could be due to the need for a skilled workforce. Simmons (1995) posited that many nontraditional students are a result of the need for retraining due to an influx of displaced workers. This is especially prevalent in communities where the manufacturing industry is seen as the primary employer in an area. Brock (2010) suggested that this influx in nontraditional students is due largely to the recent increase in accessibility to college for those who would not have been able to attend otherwise. The internet has also played a crucial role in colleges' increasing the number of nontraditional student populations. Rovai (2002) identified the emergence of online learning as one of the key instances that enabled nontraditional students to reenter the world of academia. The internet and increased online course offerings provided by reputable colleges and universities have enabled people to reconnect with their education later in their lives. These opportunities have resulted in a major shift in the make-up of student populations, especially in our community colleges.

Even with all the opportunities that nontraditional students are provided to reengage with school, most struggle greatly and fail to complete their academic endeavors. Hollis (2009) mentioned that 12 million students across the United States were identified as being nontraditional, while only 16% of students enrolled in college classes were traditional college students. With such a large percentage of college students being identified as nontraditional students, colleges must focus on recognizing specific stressors that may assist in identifying certain issues that may become deterrents for nontraditional students to complete their degrees.

Specific causes for the high number of dropouts among nontraditional students are unclear. One study by Simmons (1995) suggested that a student's level of persistence is directly influenced by varying factors that are present in their background. The study found that students who exhibited certain background influencers were less likely to complete their courses than students who did not exhibit those influencers. While nontraditional students exhibit greater persistence in the short-term (Nielsen, 2015), Rovai (2002) notes that persistence is notably lower in nontraditional students than traditional students when considering the entirety of a degree plan. The study suggests that nontraditional students start strong, but eventually lose momentum as their degree plan progresses. As hardships are encountered, persistence diminishes. This could be attributed to a low sense of academic self-efficacy in nontraditional student populations. According to Bandura (1996), self-efficacy is one's confidence in their ability to accomplish something.

Self-efficacy has been measured in many instances, and it has been noted in several studies that low levels of self-efficacy in any instance are typically accompanied by poor performance. Academic self-efficacy is a student's confidence in their ability to be successful in their classes. As students with lower levels of academic self-efficacy experience negativity in their classes, their levels of academic self-efficacy continue to decrease until they quit school entirely. However, the issue runs deeper than merely experiencing a poor assessment score. Bandura (1996) stated that academic self-efficacy is affected by several extenuating variables like the students' parent's academic aspirations or their socioeconomic status. Ellis (2019) suggests that the numbers of nontraditional students entering college would increase by 50% between the years 2008 and 2019, and numbers of nontraditional student populations will likely continue to climb.

### **Problem Statement**

As mentioned by Bandura (1996), students who exhibit a low sense of academic self-efficacy are less likely to continue their academic journeys to completion. This is supported by Rovai (2002), who identified that while levels of persistence were initially high in single class studies, nontraditional students encounter hardships that negatively impact their willingness to continue. According to Ellis (2019), most students attending community colleges within the United States are, by definition, nontraditional. While research has been performed regarding students' levels of academic self-efficacy and their academic performance, other than the nontraditional student attrition model constructed by Bean & Metzner (1985), very little has been conducted that is specific to nontraditional students.

According to Ellis (2019), the problem is that nontraditional students are significantly less likely to complete their programs than are traditional students. Ellis (2019) also noted that the number of nontraditional students enrolling in college continues to rise at a rate that will soon place nontraditional student populations as the majority within community colleges. This is due largely to the fact that several factors categorize one as being a nontraditional student. With these numbers rising, educators must be able to mitigate this problem promptly to better serve their students and the community college system. Ellis (2019) suggests that further research on nontraditional academic performance is needed. Furthermore, studies focused on academic self-efficacy in nontraditional student populations are even more scarce. The problem is that the literature has not fully investigated the predictive ability of factors of parental status, military service, and program of study on academic self-efficacy for student veterans enrolled in Alabama community colleges.



### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this quantitative, non-experimental, predictive correlational study is to identify the predictive indicators of academic self-efficacy for student veterans in the Alabama Community College setting and seek to determine if the predictor variables of students' marital status, parental status, military service, and program of study have any relationship to their perceived levels of academic self-efficacy. The data gathered from this study will help to identify any relationships that exist between the predictor variables and the criterion variable of academic self-efficacy.

The predictor variable of marital status will look at whether the student is married or single. The predictor variable of parental status will look at whether the student has children or does not have children. The predictor variable of military service will look at whether the student is currently serving or discharged from the military. The final predictor variable looks at the program of study that the student has enrolled in. This could be either academic transfer or career training. The criterion variable for the study is student veteran's perceived levels of academic self-efficacy, which analyzes the levels of perceived comfort regarding academics among student veteran community college enrollees.

The study will be conducted on the student veteran population attending schools within the Alabama Community College System (ACCS). The students selected for the study will be identified through ACCS data as being student veterans. The ACCS consists of 24 community colleges with over 130 locations across the state of Alabama.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study lies in uncovering the relationship between the identified nontraditional factors within the student veteran subpopulation of nontraditional students and

their relationship to academic self-efficacy. Low academic self-efficacy contributes toward anxiety and directly influences students' academic performance (Usher et al., 2019; Legum et al., 2017). Since self-efficacy is directly related to a person's willingness to persist and finish an objective, it is important to understand the impact that one factor has on a person's self-efficacy. Additionally, this study contributes to previous research that studies the relationships between levels of persistence in nontraditional student populations.

According to Pratt (2017), there are 1462 community colleges in the United States, and the student populations within those institutions of higher education are experiencing a significant increase in their numbers of nontraditional student enrollees. As this population continues to increase, educators must seek out issues within this sect of students to combat nontraditional student attrition. Ellis (2019) and Quiggins et al. (2016) posit that students are far less likely to continue their academic journeys when they exhibit low levels of persistence and that it has been found that low levels of persistence coincide with negative experiences to include poor academic performance and negative feedback on classwork. It stands to reason that early identification of low academic self-efficacy may allow college administrators to formulate an intervention plan to ensure the success of nontraditional students before their persistence diminishes, and they drop-out of their program of study. The problem is that many nontraditional students fail to persist in the community college environment (Beer & Lawson, 2017; Bailey et al., 2015; Stovall, 2000), and even fewer matriculate into the four-year college and university systems.

### **Research Question**

**RQ1:** How accurately can academic self-efficacy be predicted by the linear combination of predictor variables (marital status, parental status, military service, and program of study) among student veterans enrolled in the Alabama Community College System?

### **Definitions**

1. *Academic Self-Efficacy*- A person's perceived belief that they can achieve an academic goal. (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2007)
2. *Nontraditional Student* – A broad term that identifies students who are identified as being over the age of 24, financially independent, and has family or work responsibilities. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).
3. *Resilience* - The act of continuing toward the completion of a task after experiencing initial or lasting hardship while doing so (Rovai, 2003).
4. *Self-Efficacy* –One's perceived ability to accomplish a given task (Bandura, 1977).
5. *Student Veteran* – Any student who is a current or former member of the active military, Reserves, or National Guard (Vacchi & Berger, 2014)

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

Chapter two reviews the literature associated with academic self-efficacy and nontraditional student populations. The chapter provides a brief historical summary of the models used to predict both academic self-efficacy as well as student attrition. While the topic of nontraditional student attrition has been a topic of much research, there is a noticeable gap in the literature. Many variables categorize one as being a nontraditional student. Unfortunately, there is a scant amount of literature and research that focuses on identifying reliable predictor variables of low levels of academic self-efficacy within non-traditional student populations. This chapter will discuss the theoretical framework, student attrition models, and literature that is centralized around community colleges, non-traditional students, and the current research being conducted on this student population.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Some of the most important places in academia are our community colleges. These places of higher learning encourage students and help to build up their communities by promoting a culture of lifelong learning. Community college campuses invite a diverse student population and encourage students to take the road less traveled. Many students who attend community colleges are first-generation college students and are looking for a means of improving the quality of life for their families. Community colleges offer a plethora of methods for accomplishing this. Most community colleges are open-enrollment and offer remedial courses for those who either have not recently graduated high school or need additional assistance reaching the standards required to attend introductory English and math courses. Additionally,

several community colleges provide access to technical education classes that help students learn marketable skills that directly lead to employment opportunities.

These offerings can be enticing for non-traditional students, as these colleges promote a clear means to an end for many who are pressured by the need to enter the workforce quickly. Because of this, it does not come as a surprise that most students attending community colleges are identified as being non-traditional students (Kim, 2002). Students are identified as non-traditional if they meet a specific criterion. Kim (2002) explained that non-traditional students are identified through one of the three methods, age-criterion, background characteristics, and at-risk behaviors. The age criterion identifies a non-traditional student as one who is 25 years of age or older. Nontraditional students can also be identified by their background characteristics and at-risk behaviors. These characteristics and behaviors include: Being completely independent of parental support, part-time student status, students without high school diplomas, single parents, low-income status, students who are employed full-time, and first-generation college students.

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

The act of learning and all the processes involved can be complex and difficult to fully understand; however, several theories have arisen that attempt to explain how humans, among other animals, accomplish this feat. According to Bandura et al. (1996), humans learn through their exposure to the environment that surrounds them. This theory is noted as the Social Cognitive Theory and theorizes how learning takes place and influences every facet of human life. Bandura et al. (1996) posited that learning takes place when a person observes the actions of another person and does not experience a negative association with the learned action. The theory suggests that three factors contribute to learning: attention, memory, and motivation.

Essentially, learning requires focus, the ability to commit materials to memory, and having a desire to learn the concept before any genuine learning will occur. If either of these factors is missing, the concept being taught will not be learned adequately, or in some cases, not at all. One branch of this theory suggests that a student's confidence to accomplish the task being demanded of them is a critical component of a student's determination to continue through after one has encountered a challenging situation. Confidence is a critical motivator for people when unforeseen challenges present themselves.

Self-efficacy is a term described by Bandura (1977) as being one's perceived ability or confidence to succeed when attempting a task. A person's level of self-efficacy is governed by several factors and can be encouraged or discouraged based on one's observations and experiences. This can be observed today, as many people follow in a family member's footsteps regarding the profession they pursue. This is because it is what they have observed to be successful and since they have confidence that they can succeed in the aforementioned profession, they exhibit increased motivation to face the challenges of attaining that goal more readily than one who is entering into a profession where they have no personal experiences with the profession.

### **Self-Efficacy**

According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy is a key contributor to success or failure. Bandura (1994) noted that self-efficacy is a trait that is especially important for students attending school, or in any instance where one would need to demonstrate their competencies in a specific situation. This is a stressful experience, especially when a student is unsure of his or her full understanding of the materials covered in a classroom (Jinks & Morgan, 1999). While

this is true for all students, it is especially true for those who take taken a nontraditional path toward higher education. Fortunately, self-efficacy is a trait that can be improved upon.

Bandura & Barbaranelli (1996) revealed that as a person becomes more comfortable with a topic, their levels of self-efficacy rise. This was first demonstrated through an experiment conducted by Albert Bandura in 1977, where the self-efficacy of a person with a fear of snakes would attend daily hour-long sessions during which they would handle non-venomous snakes. Gradually, the subject began to handle the snakes more frequently and ultimately overcame their fear of snakes. This experiment has been replicated, as Rovai (2003) argued that as students gain familiarity with an academic program, they begin to experience less anxiety throughout courses in a similar subject.

Time, it seems, is pivotal in generating comfort and self-efficacy toward any area. As people become more comfortable in their surroundings, they exhibit a higher level of self-efficacy in the area. While time is essential in gaining a higher level of self-efficacy, it also requires that the student experience some success during the time associated with the activity with which they have a low level of self-efficacy (Komarraju et al., 2011; Dunlap, 2005; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1988). Rovai (2003) suggested that students also need to experience small victories to increase their level of self-efficacy. This is akin to a student achieving an acceptable grade on an assignment after initially struggling to understand the assessed concept. This victory helps to motivate the student toward continuing to face these challenges in hopes of receiving the same fulfilling reward and sense of accomplishment they experienced in the initial encounter. According to Legum et al. (2017), the same idea conveys self-efficacy.

Legum et al. (2017) argued that a student's level of academic self-efficacy is directly related to their academic performance. Furthermore, the article revealed that nontraditional students who have had more experiences in the academic arena were more likely to exhibit higher levels of self-efficacy. Unfortunately, as mentioned by Brock (2010), the reality of the situation lies in the realization that many nontraditional students encounter stumbling blocks early in their academic careers; and as a result, are more likely to drop out of their courses, or school, entirely before their level of academic self-efficacy can improve.

### **Student Attrition**

Student attrition has been a prevalent issue for colleges and universities for decades (Chen et al., 2020). The significance of the issue has caused many professionals in the field to delve into the problem and study its cause in hopes of identifying a remedy for the problem. According to Cabrera et al. (1993), only two models present frameworks that focus on decisions related to college departure. One of the most cited models of student attrition is the Bean and Metzner Model (1987). The Bean and Metzner Model was influenced by both the Input, Environment, Output (IEO) model presented by Astin (1984) and Tinto's model. Tinto (1975) presented a model for student integration through socialization that illustrated specific factors that hold significant influence over a student's decision to drop out of college.

The Bean and Metzner Model focuses greatly on behavioral intentions that are influenced by several factors that include their background, environmental, and academic variables. The Bean and Metzner Model suggested that student motivation, academic ability, and societal factors are key factors toward influencing a student's decision to leave a school. According to Sandler (2000), Tinto's model focused on goal and institution commitment. Goal commitment is how dedicated a student is to his or her personal goals. This could be their desire to attain a



higher position within a company or their intrinsic desire to have a degree. Institutional commitment refers to how dedicated a student is to a certain institution. One example of this is a student's desire to stay at one institution because of their community involvement with the school. This could be through athletics or intramural sports. However, this is depicted as a fine balance, and if any of these factors greatly outweigh the other, it typically results in a student's decision to leave the institution.

Building upon Tinto (1975), Bean and Metzner (1987) constructed a model that was specifically aligned to address problems with attrition among nontraditional student populations. While Tinto's model focused heavily on the social factors that contribute to student attrition, it does not consider the effects of external social obligations that are experienced by nontraditional student populations. According to Sandler (2000), nontraditional students face social obligations that are more demanding than the obligations traditional students face while in school. Nontraditional students are typically full-time employees or have family obligations outside of the academic institution.

### **Related Literature**

Nontraditional students are becoming more prevalent within the halls of higher education institutions. Educators must develop a better, more holistic understanding of nontraditional students to address the academic needs of this learning community. Warden & Myers (2017) argue that students who are identified as being nontraditional possess qualities that are not as prevalent within traditional student groups. If additional qualities exist, why do nontraditional student populations suffer from high attrition rates? Educators typically assess one's academic performance by considering a student's grade point average (GPA).

Unfortunately, nontraditional students routinely exhibit hardships in attaining and maintaining a high GPA. Warden & Myers (2017) posit that many factors contribute to a low GPA in nontraditional student populations. Warden & Myers (2017) conducted a study that analyzed the effects of certain variables on a student's GPA. The study analyzed the differences between traditional and nontraditional students' academic performance and sought to find variables that directly correlated with students' GPAs.

### **Popular Student Attrition Models**

Many attrition models consider the factors of student input, environment, and output. Input is different for every student. Some examples of input are the student's background, their passions, and interests (Johnson et al., 2013). Environmental factors consider elements that students can engage in within the college context. Some examples of environmental factors are a student's home life, their relationships with faculty and peers, their participation in intermural activities, athletics, and other social arrangements.

Astin's (1984) IEO model posits that the input variable is one that can alter either environment or output directly. According to Astin (1984), certain inputs like GPA or attitude can directly affect the output of a student. Astin (1984) provides an example that a student's GPA may directly affect a student's outcome to graduate from college, even if the students are struggling with negative environmental factors. Additionally, the input can also be altered by the environment, which could also affect the output of a student. Astin (1984) posited that a student could initially exhibit some hesitation to become engaged in their academic studies, but through social interaction and engagement within the environment, the student could become intrinsically motivated to increase their focus on degree completion.

### ***Tinto's Model***

Tinto's model has been a basis for several studies concerning student retention and attrition in the past and has given way to advances in the understanding of why students leave school prematurely. Although it is a springboard for many studies, it is not without its flaws. Vacchi & Berger (2014) notes that Tinto's model is severely flawed, with the work applying best to homogenous traditional student populations, while Metz (2004) notes the lack of empirical validity of many of the propositions within Tinto's (1993) model. While several problems existed that made the model problematic, it was one of the only models available that aimed to predict student attrition.

Still, several studies overcame the problematic nature of Tinto's theory when adapting the theory to nontraditional student experiences (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1987; Cabrera, et al., 1993; Braxton et al., 1997). Furthermore, Tinto's theory (1975, 1993) is centrally focused on the traditional student population and struggles to consider nontraditional students, such as student veterans, in the model. To truly understand the causes of nontraditional student attrition, a new model that considers these variables must be considered.

### ***Bean and Metzner's Model***

In response to the shortcomings of Tinto's model regarding nontraditional students, Bean & Metzner (1987) developed what is now known as Bean and Metzner's Conceptual Model for Nontraditional Student Attrition. The significance of the Bean and Metzner model arises in how it defines nontraditional students and what is most important for nontraditional student success. In this model, nontraditional students are defined by several factors, and not simply their age. This is essential because several factors could make students nontraditional, but by Tinto's model, they would still be identified as traditional students. The NCES (2020) states that age,

specifically 24-years-old and older, is typically used to identify nontraditional students; however, additional factors also contribute toward one being categorized as nontraditional. Nontraditional students are also identified by attendance, employment, dependent status, marital status, and if the student entered college with a GED.

It would be unfair to suggest that a student with dependent children does not experience more external hardship and conflict than a traditional student with no dependent children. Additionally, Vacchi & Berger (2014) also states that the Bean and Metzner model is more appropriate for nontraditional student studies as it places more emphasis on external factors that contribute toward a student's decision to quit school. It is essential to understand that nontraditional students typically have more commitments outside of their academic studies than traditional students, and many of these commitments outweigh their academic commitments, thus contributing to their decisions to continue or quit attending school.

### **Community College**

Grubbs (2020) explains that community colleges aim to fill specific needs within their local communities. Each colleges' mission varies depending upon factors that directly affect their local economies. The colleges' focus on the local need is a deviation from standardized instructional offerings provided by most four-year institutions. This deviation is evident in many community colleges offering career technical education (CTE) and workforce development programs. While programs of study vary among community colleges, most typically offer similar degree plans that aim to address the needs of their local communities. Although many traditional and nontraditional students attending community colleges focus on transferring to a four-year institution, several students choose a more direct career pathway offered in other programs (Hu et al., 2018).

Many options are currently available for those seeking higher education, but why is it a necessity at all? Everyone has unique needs and different ambitions for themselves. Some students strive to become college graduates, while some simply want to make a better life for themselves and their families (Selingo, 2013). Because of this, EACC provides students with three programs of study that each include a core of academic requirements. The three programs offered at EACC include academic, healthcare, and technical education. According to the Community College Research Center (2020), 80 percent of community college students indicate that they intend to transfer to a four-year university. For many community colleges, this is noted as the academic transfer program of study, which typically draws many traditional students who enroll immediately following their senior year of high school. Other programs of study are career-technical education (CTE) programs. These programs focus on the goal of training students to become skilled in high-demand careers that require technical skills.

For many, a bachelor's degree from a prestigious research university is the golden standard. Fortunately, EACC is near a large research university as well as two smaller four-year universities, which provide several transfer options to students. Because of this, the most popular degree program at EACC is the academic program. The academic program offers an associate degree in general studies that are commonly used as a means of transferring to a four-year university. Additionally, EACC offers several scholarships and transfer options for traditional and nontraditional students. Academic offering includes common academic courses of math, English, literature, science, and social science.

Research indicates that one's choices regarding program selection reflect their confidence in their ability (Baldwin, 2011; Flink & Leonard, 2018; Hatch, 2018, Cook et al., 2016). According to Baldwin (2011), students who typically choose a pathway other than the traditional

academic degree plan are perceived by their peers and teachers to do so because of a low level of confidence in their academic ability. This notion is echoed in the way secondary educators promote technical career pathways to their students. There is a perceived negative stigma regarding both technical education and a student's pursuance of a technical degree. Baldwin (2011) states that over the past 30 years, a stigma has developed among educators and students that technical education was a path for those who could not achieve high marks in an academic environment. This has led to a large disparity between the number of students enrolled in technical programs and those enrolled in academic programs. Baldwin iterates that this is largely due to the career technical program's focus on students with special needs. While there has been a large push to include all students in career and technical education, simply choosing a technical program over an academic program does not necessarily indicate a low level of academic self-efficacy.

EACC is located centrally to a robust collection of manufacturing industries. The technical program at EACC focus on preparing students for careers in technical fields. The technical program offers an associate degree in heating and air-conditioning, automotive service, plastic injection molding, machine shop technology, industrial maintenance, industrial electricity, additive manufacturing, and cosmetology. The competitive pay and upward mobility within these companies make this an attractive option for many nontraditional students.

Furthermore, the healthcare program is a very popular option for students at EACC, and it offers associates degrees for registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, radiological technicians, and emergency medical technicians. While the healthcare program deviates from the academic norm, it is one of the programs outside of traditional academia that allows for continued education beyond earning an associate degree. Many students who graduate from

EACC's registered nursing program go on to earn a bachelor's and Master of Nursing from local four-year institutions. The availability of a pathway to additional degrees and increased earning potential makes this program very popular among incoming students.

### **Nontraditional Students**

The term nontraditional is used somewhat ambiguously when referring to nontraditional student populations. This becomes apparent as different entities utilize this term in various ways to identify their specific population of interest. One instance of this is the way the Perkins V indicators present nontraditional student populations regarding federal funding for CTE programs. The Association for Career and Technical Education (2018) notes that nontraditional students are defined in this law as being students enrolled in CTE programs that are not considered traditional to their gender. This was revisited in 2018 and passed as a means of increasing the number of females within trades that are typically filled with males. While increasing the numbers of females in high-skilled high-wage professions is important, several more variables define nontraditional students.

As noted by the NCES (2020), nontraditional students can be 24 years old or older, employed, part-time students, married, have children, or enter college with a GED rather than a high school diploma. A combination of factors, in addition to gender, comes into play when labeling a student as being nontraditional. Essentially, these students have additional struggles to deal with while facing the difficulties faced by traditional students. The challenges that nontraditional students face presents several issues that contribute to attrition.

### ***Perceived Disadvantages***

Markle (2015) conducted a study that focused on nontraditional students and the differences between them and their traditional counterparts. It is sometimes assumed that life

challenges better prepare a student for college and that students who enter college at an older age do so with the advantage of increased maturity and focus. According to Markle (2015), this could not be farther from the truth. The study revealed that the nontraditional students participating in the study felt as though their obligations outside of school detracted from their ability to spend quality time studying or reading assigned texts. Markle (2015) continued by acknowledging that many of the professors of nontraditional students did not treat them as adults, but rather treated and spoke to them just as they would their traditional students.

Additionally, Markle (2015) expanded on this by saying that the professors approached their nontraditional students with the attitudes that reflected that nontraditional students should make school and academics their full focus and ultimately place their families on the back burner until they have completed their academic studies. This causes a serious issue, as these issues caused the nontraditional students within the study to withdraw from the classroom and harbor a sense of solidarity and eliminates and sense of community among traditional and nontraditional students.

The study concluded that many nontraditional students perceived their status of being a nontraditional student as being a severe disadvantage, which held significant ramifications concerning the students' desire to continue their studies. Markle (2015) noted that 63% of nontraditional students in the study considered withdrawing from their academic studies. Markle (2015) revealed that one reason given for their desire to drop out was that the scheduling and advising systems used in higher education were constructed more with traditional students in mind. Compounding this issue was that many of their employers were unwilling to work around their demanding class schedules, increasing the amounts of stress that nontraditional students endured.



It is time that colleges and universities acknowledge the hardships faced by nontraditional students and work diligently toward resolving these issues and making the dream of attaining a degree later in life a more attainable goal for those who choose to embark on this journey. Academic institutions must work proactively to address the needs of nontraditional students to ensure their success in the classroom. Only then will colleges and universities be able to combat the epidemic of nontraditional student attrition.

### *Changing Dynamics*

Nontraditional student attrition has become a prolific issue in higher education. Over the years, the demographics of academic institutions have changed dramatically. Hollis (2009) noted that only 16% of all college students within the United States are considered traditional college students. Nontraditional students are becoming more common, and as a result, it is necessary to acknowledge that the methods of instruction and attrition mitigation we have used in the past must be altered to match the current dynamics of our institutions of higher education.

This notion is expanded upon in a study by Walker & Okpala (2017) in which they stated that the various issues faced by nontraditional students are augmented by a lack of understanding concerning higher education policies and procedures, which are compounded by students' obligations that are external to their academic studies. Unfortunately, many colleges push their recruiters to increase enrollment without considering the populations' needs, thus resulting in an influx of students without an established support structure to facilitate their diverse student populations. Many community colleges recognize these challenges and have begun to implement directives that are meant to alleviate or combat stressors for their nontraditional student population (Lang & Kneisley, 2005; Walker & Okpala, 2017). One issue that hinders

nontraditional populations is inaccessibility. Community colleges have worked to remove this barrier through the implementation of an open-enrollment system.

### *Increased Access*

The ACCS (2020) noted that more than 168,000 students enroll in their community colleges statewide each year. This is due to several factors that help increase availability to students across the state of Alabama. Pratt (2017) and Zerquera et al. (2016) note that while the open-enrollment system has increased enrollment into our community colleges, it has been to the detriment of our nontraditional students, as many enter into these institutions with a vision of a brighter future, and ultimately conclude their journey prematurely and leave without bettering their situations in any way. Pratt (2017) continues by arguing that students are coming into these institutions underprepared for their classes and are in serious need of remediation and support from their instructors.

However, educators in all academic institutions must receive our students where they are and elevate them to the prescribed level of education they have committed to. Additionally, the issue of funding is also associated with higher rates of nontraditional student attrition. Ultimately, the field of higher education relies heavily upon federal dollars to fund the daily operations of their institutions (Strickland, 2017). Pratt (2017) urged that federal money is negatively affected by attrition rates. Since most students attending community colleges are nontraditional, and many students dropping out of college are nontraditional, addressing nontraditional student attrition becomes an immediate concern for community colleges across the nation.

Fortunately, much research has been performed concerning nontraditional students and what factors contribute to their success and failures in higher education. Through this research,

we have discovered several factors that negatively impact nontraditional students. Markel (2015) conducted a study that focused on nontraditional students at the university level and discovered that nontraditional students who have confidence that they will reach graduation were significantly more likely to persevere through the difficulties they face throughout their academic journeys. Likewise, Stajkovic et al. (2018) stated that academic self-efficacy is a student's confidence in their ability to be successful academically. This indicates that increasing academic self-efficacy will directly result in a decrease in nontraditional student attrition. While there has been a plethora of research conducted that supports this, there is little regarding identifying variables that would predict nontraditional students who are more likely to struggle academically than other nontraditional enrollees.

Nontraditional students are not all the same. There is an extreme amount of diversity within this student population that several subgroups could be, and have been, constructed to categorize these students into more manageable numbers. Legum et al. (2017) explained that the needs of nontraditional students are diverse and that each student had a different story, a different internal locus of control, and a different experience in life. Some are single parents, rushing home from work to care for their children before heading to evening classes to better their family's situation, or recently discharged veterans who enlisted in the service immediately following high school and retired at 38 years old and have just enrolled in classes for the first time in 20 years. Assuming a blanket approach to remedying these issues has not been effective because it assumes that all students are the same and experience the same struggles. Inconveniently for academic institutions, this is untrue, and doing such does little to help better serve the student.

One method for effectively addressing this conundrum is to formulate a set of predictor variables that help administrators in higher education identify students who are more likely to struggle in their academic classes than others and proactively construct a plan of action that puts the student in a position to be successful in their classes. Immediately identifying students who exhibit certain qualities and constructing a pathway to success that is unique to the student is an essential step in approaching the current issue of nontraditional student attrition. Although many barriers have been removed that hinder nontraditional students from entering college, attrition issues persist.

### ***A Persistence Problem***

Markel (2015) defines persistence as a student's continued pursuance of an academic goal. A student's persistence is gauged by their enrollment in subsequent courses after a semester. Studies have noted that persistence among nontraditional students is drastically low when compared to traditional college students (Dale et al., 2018; Markel, 2015; Quimby & O'Brien, 2004). When looking at graduation rates, Markel (2015) stated that 64% of the traditional student population graduate with a degree within six years. Unfortunately, only 20% of the nontraditional student population between the ages of 24 and 29 graduated within the same six-year span. Progressively worsening, only 16% of students 30 and older graduated in six years. The problem with nontraditional student attrition is becoming increasingly more troublesome, as students are entering into college at later ages, thus increasing the total population of nontraditional students. Markel (2015) posited that in ten years, students 24-30 years old are expected to grow by 28 percent, and those 30 and older are expected to increase by 22%. Comparatively, the traditional student population is only expected to grow by 12% in that same ten-year period (Markel, 2015).

Sharma & Nasa (2014) argued that academic self-efficacy plays a significant role in encouraging persistence among nontraditional students concerning making decisions related to their personal and professional lives. Ultimately, self-efficacy is one's confidence in their ability to succeed in each task and to maintain that success. Sharma & Nasa (2014) opine that academic self-efficacy is fostered early on in a student's academic career. However, if low levels of academic self-efficacy are cultivated in the foundational stages, it will likely lead to poor academic performance later in life, especially upon entering into a transitional phase like college or university, where all of the norms are shifted. According to Sharma & Nasa (2014), several factors affect a person's level of academic self-efficacy, even factors outside of an academic setting. Additionally, Fisher & Oyserman (2017) note that one's perceived difficulty or ease in completing a task is a significant influencer in promoting continued persistence. These factors could be emotional or physical in nature, or they could be environmental, which include homelife and personal relationships. All these elements contribute to one's academic self-efficacy.

Academic self-efficacy has been an issue for nontraditional students for years, and as more nontraditional students are frequenting the halls of higher education institutions, it has become an issue of importance for administrators in community colleges and universities around the world (Lee et al., 2012; Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011). Community colleges around the country have taken notice of an increase in nontraditional student enrollment. The number of enrolled nontraditional students increases exponentially when considering how many displaced or dislocated workers are thrust back into the world of academia after years of working in their industry and suddenly find themselves unemployed. This was exemplified in Simmon's (1995)

report that focused on the retention of nontraditional students who were attending community colleges because of being dislocated and displaced from their previous employer.

The issue described by Simmons (1995) was that student attrition among nontraditional students who enrolled after being displaced from their previous employer was exceptionally high. Ultimately, the study concluded that nontraditional students are an eclectic group, coming from different walks of life. Every one of these student experiences is unique to them, and many have not experienced a classroom or the challenges and demands that accompany academia in several years. However, Simmons (1995) argued that this trend of attrition could be combated. The study noted that students who saw no relevance in the coursework were likely to become disengaged and experience anxiety that ultimately led to their decision to drop out of the courses, while those who saw relevance were able to persevere through their initial struggles and work toward completing their academic goals.

### ***Multiple Variables***

When looking at variables that may contribute to low levels of academic self-efficacy in students, it is important to understand that some variables hold more significance than many educators tend to realize. Warden & Myers (2017) posited that non-intellective variables such as the need for cognition, academic procrastination, grit, academic locus of control, academic motivation, and academic self-efficacy have less influence on the academic performance of nontraditional students than traditional students. Additionally, the study revealed that nontraditional students exhibited more intrinsic values than their traditional counterparts. The study conducted by Warden & Myers (2017) revealed that nontraditional students held higher levels of intrinsic motivation and were more likely to push through individual hardships than traditional students. While traditional students were more adept in the academic setting, they

were less likely to push through the hardships they encountered. While these qualities are important, they did not accurately correlate or predict students' GPAs.

The importance of the study conducted by Warden & Myers (2017) lies in the revelation of nontraditional students' levels of intrinsic motivation. This study revealed that while there may be a disparity in student GPAs, nontraditional students possess qualities that allow them to become successful students within our academic institutions. Consequently, our nontraditional students have the potential to become some of the best students to walk the halls of our institutions of higher education. Being able to accurately predict areas of hardship would assist in allowing educators to work to mitigate nontraditional student attrition.

### ***Student Engagement***

One factor that directly affects student success is engagement within the classroom. Student engagement is a struggle faced by educators at all levels of academia. This is especially true at middle and high school levels. Evidence gathered from studies suggests that student engagement directly correlates with student attrition (Anderson et al., 2019; Dixson et al., 2016). Students who are disengaged throughout the learning process are less likely to graduate from high school. Anderson et al. (2019) also noted that the trend begins in middle school and continues into high school and beyond. Claro et al. (2016) suggest that this can be combated by fostering the development of a growth mindset in students. A growth mindset embraces the idea that new methods can be used to accomplish tasks rather than relying solely on the tried-and-true methods (Dweck, 2008). While efforts have been made to increase student engagement, little has been revealed that effectively combats student disengagement.

The study conducted by Anderson et al. (2019) posited that disengagement was a reaction to low levels of academic self-efficacy. The study specifically observed academic self-efficacy

and perceived control and the effects of each as a causal factor of student motivation and, subsequently, the students' academic performance. Anderson et al. (2019) urged that if a student is intrinsically motivated, they will perform adequately in their studies, or they will actively work to increase their skill in areas where they are deficient. This directly correlates with self-efficacy, as if a student is motivated, they will, in turn, spend more time in the discipline in which they are deficit and increased time and experience in an area works to increase one's self-efficacy (Bowman et al., 2019). Unfortunately, increasing intrinsic motivation is not a feat that is easily accomplished. This requires that the student determines that the subject being taught is indeed relevant to his or her life in some fashion. Anderson et al. (2019) suggested that while building relevance directly leads to increased levels of intense motivation among students, it would be exceptionally difficult to apply to every student simultaneously.

Disengagement is a growing concern within community colleges as well. Walker & Okpala (2017) mentioned that many students fail their classes at the community college level because they exhibit apathetic behavior toward their academic studies. It was suggested that this might be due to the rigor, or lack thereof, associated with students' elementary and secondary classes. As new legislation is proposed to accommodate students who have failed multiple subjects, it ultimately leads to a diminished curriculum that caters to underperforming students. This ultimately leads to apathetic behavior because it is suggested that they cannot fail these courses prescribed to them in their elementary and high schools. To address this foundational issue, one must consider working to increase academic self-efficacy within these students.

### ***Attendance Problems***

One problem that remains for many nontraditional students is that it is sometimes easier to quit than to admit failure. For this reason, many students simply quit coming to their classes



rather than face the challenges and demands of their classes. It becomes a vicious cycle for many nontraditional students that ultimately leads to the end of their academic ventures and results in workers entering or reentering the workforce without any new marketable skills. The identification of predictor variables would allow institutions to incorporate intervention strategies proactively rather than reactively and address issues of low academic self-efficacy before it becomes a student's reason for not returning to their classes and ultimately dropping out of school.

Dungs et al. (2017) have identified that attendance is a significant problem among nontraditional students in post-secondary education. This study also referred to the importance of academic self-efficacy in determining a student's overall success in college. According to Dungs et al. (2017), one factor that seems to help mitigate excessive absenteeism and cultivate academic self-efficacy is inclusion in extracurricular and co-curricular activities in school. The study found that students who suffer from low levels of academic self-efficacy saw that level increase over the semester after becoming involved in activities outside of the classroom, yet still revolving around the school.

If administrators could identify, through accurate predictors, students who were predisposed to having low levels of academic self-efficacy, the school could create school-sponsored groups that worked to get nontraditional students involved in activities beyond their classrooms in hopes that it would help build their academic self-efficacy, thus helping to mitigate nontraditional student attrition by encouraging attendance. Unfortunately, the problem that is often presented is that it is difficult to identify students who may be more likely to struggle with their academics, especially regarding nontraditional students who are entering college at a different point in their lives and not directly after graduating from high school.

### *Students with Dependent Children*

One adage that is commonly noted is that the apple does not fall far from the tree, which insinuates that one's child will typically follow in their parent's footsteps. Supporting this notion, Augustine et al. (2018) noted that typically, children of parents who do not achieve higher education forgo the pursuance of a college degree as well. However, many see the value of a college degree as they enter the workforce and want to obtain a degree to help them and their families have a better life. The introduction of online and distance learning has helped many students with dependent children decide to enroll in classes and pursue a degree. However, the decision to continue one's education does not come without hardships and sacrifices.

Unfortunately, the more nontraditional attributes a student has, the less likely they are to complete their degree programs. Cox & Sallee (2018) state that nontraditional students are identified by different attributes, and the more nontraditional attributes one has, the more at-risk the student is at not persisting in their academic studies. Cox & Sallee (2018) opine that elements of neoliberalism have worked their way into the community college realm of postsecondary education and are a primary factor leading to nontraditional students' failure to persist. The study conducted by Cox & Sallee (2018) noted that by adopting the marketing and competitive principles of a neoliberal mindset, colleges within the United States and Canada have become more focused on the monetary value of student enrollment.

The results of the study presented by Cox and Sallee (2018) indicated that nontraditional students, especially those with dependent children, were underserved at the community college level. Additionally, the study suggested that the shortcomings were financial in nature, highlighting an observation in the study that community colleges received much less funding than their four-year counterparts. This revelation is particularly troublesome, as most

nontraditional students attend community colleges. This lack of funding increases the adoption of neoliberal policies in the community college setting, thus further disenfranchising nontraditional student populations.

The number of undergraduate students with dependent children is quickly growing (Gutmann, 1980; Stiglitz, 2013). According to Crispin & Nikolaou (2019), nearly 25% of undergraduate students attending college are student parents or students with dependent children. Interestingly, student parents are also highly likely to exhibit additional nontraditional attributes. Crispin & Nikolaou (2019) conducted a study that indicated that student-parents are more likely to be minority females. Additionally, the study revealed that many student-parents were older when they began their academic studies, attending school on a part-time basis, and struggled to manage school a healthy balance between their responsibilities at home and school. Crispin & Nikolaou (2019) conducted a quantitative descriptive study of student-parents to see if any statistically significant differences could be identified in the time that student-parents and non-student-parents spent on specific activities. The statistic that revealed the most was that student-parents spent significantly less time on homework and sleep than their fellow students who were without dependent children.

For many, life and parenthood begin during, or immediately following, their time in high school. One factor that has become increasingly more prevalent in post-secondary education is the number of students attending who have dependent children. According to Cox & Sallee (2018), the accessibility of community colleges entices students who would not otherwise attend post-secondary education. Because of family obligations, students with dependent children far more likely to attend community colleges than enter a four-year university. This dynamic creates a very diverse student population among nontraditional students. Everyone's family dynamic is

unique, and there is no exception for the nontraditional students filling the classrooms of our institutions of higher education. Augustine et al. (2018) noted that parents with dependent children enter college with significantly more demands on their time than traditional college students. Many times, the obligations they have to their families outweigh the demands of their coursework, leading them to suffer academically and eventually discontinue their education.

### **Student Veterans**

With generous education benefits being provided to our servicemen and women, it is no surprise that the number of students who have veteran status makes up a significant portion of the nontraditional student population at most community colleges and universities. According to Vacchi (2018), a student veteran is “a current or former member of the Active-Duty Military, the National Guard, or Reserves regardless of deployment status, combat experience or legal status as a veteran” (p 17). Student veterans are nontraditional students because these students typically enter college later in life with more life experiences than a student entering college immediately following their high school senior year. The student veteran population is one that has significantly increased within higher education in recent years.

Eakman et al. (2019) acknowledged that student veterans face academic challenges that stem from injuries, both physical and mental, sustained during their time in service. These injuries include but are not limited to post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD), mild cases of traumatic brain injury (TBI), depression, and anxiety (Bauman, 2009; Barnard-Brak et al., 2011; Eakman et al., 2019; Sansone & Segura, 2020). Eakman et al. (2019) continued by stating that PTSD, TBI, and depression were invisible wounds that had the potential to hinder a student veteran’s academic growth and achievement. These invisible wounds are difficult to detect, and

according to Eakman et al. (2019), these issues are not likely to be disclosed by the student veteran initially.

This reluctance to disclose this information could be due to several factors; however, one thought is that student veterans feel a sense of disconnectedness in the college environment (Covert, 2002). A multiple regression study conducted by Smith et al. (2017) indicated that student-veterans were statistically more likely to experience issues fitting in than civilian students. This notion has been explored and validated through other studies. A qualitative study performed by McAndrew et al. (2019) also revealed that one of the primary issues that student-veterans face is a sustained sense of not fitting in. The study argued that cultural incongruity was a good predictor of one's ability to fit into a certain environment. McAndrew et al. (2019) define cultural incongruity as being one's ability to fit into an environment based on the person's beliefs, values, and expectations.

A deeper analysis of this illuminates why student-veterans feel a sense of disconnectedness yet perform better than their civilian counterparts. Ultimately, transferring from a completely structured environment with people who share the same ideals to a new, less structured environment with people who do not share those same values causes a rift and fosters a sense of disconnectedness between the two student populations. However, the adherence and acceptance of a structured environment is a primary reason our student-veterans succeed too frequently, especially among nontraditional student populations (Gilson et al., 2017).

Alschuler & Yarab (2018) presented a two-part study that indicated that veteran students within their university fared much better than other nontraditional students at the same university. The study conducted by Alschuler & Yarab (2018) revealed that 50% of their student veteran population were successful in completing their degree plans. Alschuler & Yarab (2018)

also noted that the student veteran population is the epitome of the term nontraditional student. Of the number of veteran students, it was noted that 47% of the student veterans in the study were married with dependent children. Additionally, many of these student veterans were employed while attending school and were much older than the 18-24 age category that ultimately defines nontraditional student status.

While it is presumed by many that student veterans will fare better academically than their civilian counterparts, a multiple regression study conducted by Eakman et al. (2019) indicates that these invisible wounds contribute toward significant academic shortcomings in student veteran populations. However, the study concluded that the factors of academic self-efficacy and instructor autonomy resulted in the levels of resiliency present by student veterans. If one of these variables is deficient, the result is poor academic performance.

The success of student veterans is largely attributed to their levels of confidence or self-efficacy, along with a hearty support system that is available to student veterans at nearly every college university. While it is inspiring that 50% of those student veterans being successful, however, a sobering fact remains that the other 50% were not successful in their academic endeavors. Early identification of these potential hardships is essential in helping student veterans overcome these obstacles and graduate with a degree that will help them further their careers in the civilian world or obtain a promotion within their military careers. However, it is important to identify if military service is a reliable predictor of academic self-efficacy or not to effectively implement an attrition mitigation plan.

### **Providing Support**

A study conducted by Sert (2018) argued that one factor that contributed greatly toward nontraditional student achievement was the implementation of a support model. While the

support is most effective if provided by parental figures, support is still effective if solicited through an external medium. School-provided support systems could be another effective method of combating nontraditional student attrition (Andreu, 2002; Ackerman & DiRamio, 2009; Wolff-Eisenberg & Braddlee, 2018). Coincidentally, Sert (2018) noted that students who had active support structures in their lives seemed to be more confident in their academic studies, thus exhibiting a higher level of academic self-efficacy than their peers who did not benefit from a support network outside of the school.

Brinthaupt & Eady (2014) conducted a study that focused on how community college and university professors treated their nontraditional students and looked to see if either group of educators treated their nontraditional students differently than their traditional students. The study revealed that while university professors refrain from differential treatment of their nontraditional students, community college instructors embrace their difference within their classrooms. It was noted that typically, community college professors see their nontraditional students as an additional source of wisdom and perspective for their traditional students. Nontraditional students are different from their traditional counterparts, and these differences can help to add additional perspectives in a lesson that may not be presented otherwise (Kulavic al., 2013). This sentiment is echoed in a study conducted by Blau & Thomas-Maddox (2014), as they mention the importance of adult learners in the modern classroom and how andragogy is necessary to adequately address the needs of adult learners.

Additionally, educators need to take notice and understand that many nontraditional students have not participated in a classroom environment for quite some time and may need additional encouragement to help them establish some confidence in their ability to step back into the role of being a student. Ideally, universities and colleges would identify the people

within their student populations who were most likely to need a support system in their lives and provide that support for them. This is already beginning to take hold in universities across the country, as many universities and colleges are forming veteran student organizations that are constructed with the desire to provide direct support to students who are entering into college after serving our country in the armed forces and many doing so with the added struggles of mental health issues (Bracke et al., 2008). These groups work to help veterans navigate the oftentimes confusing world of academia.

The veteran support group model has proven to be effective in several instances (Eakman et al., 2019; Goker, 2006; Hughes & Chen, 2011; Kees et al., 2017; Gilson et al., 2017). Additionally, Eakman et al. (2019) noted that veteran students who received support from their school's veteran's support services experienced improved academic performance, a heightened sense of community, an increased sense of self-efficacy regarding handling tasks and duties required of them to register and enroll in classes when compared to veteran students who did not participate in the veteran student support group. A sense of community is an essential ingredient in establishing and maintaining an effective learning environment. This is often due to a feeling of support that many people feel when they are surrounded by a group of their peers who have or are experienced in the hardships they are currently facing (Mastrocola & Flynn, 2017).

These groups have proven to be an effective means of helping veteran students become more self-sufficient in college and university institutions. However, student veterans make up only a small percentage of the nontraditional student population. This model is something that has the potential to generate a sense of community in a student population that previously did not experience the support that comes along with being a member of such a group. However, the first step is working to identify these students.



Furthermore, studies have identified that nonacademic barriers are a significant issue identified by nontraditional students (e.g., Lim et al., 2018; Walker & Okpala, 2017). These are problems that are presented through various means and oftentimes differ from student to student. Nontraditional student populations are diverse and consist of students from various walks of life, including (a) veterans; (b) students who are married; (c) students who have children; and (d) those who must hold jobs to support their families while attending classes. Ellis (2019) urged that the unfortunate truth is that students who are presented with these barriers, while attempting to earn a degree, are more likely to quit their efforts prematurely rather than persevere through these difficult times in hopes of bettering their situations by earning a degree. Identifying students who may experience these hardships early on is essential to combating attrition rates among nontraditional students.

A study conducted by Miller et al. (2010) focused on being able to predict which of their sophomores would be most likely to drop-out of college before entering their junior year. The results of the study indicated that students who expected to have off-campus obligations showed negative results toward persistence. This was also true for students who expected to have to complete an abundance of non-assigned reading to succeed in their classes. While this study focused on traditional students and how their perceptions of school can increase their likelihood of dropping out of college, the study also reveals that a mentoring program developed by a college can help to mitigate attrition rates among student populations.

While this study was conducted on traditional student populations, it is essential to note that most nontraditional students enter college with the understanding that they will need to maintain employment while attending classes. Additionally, most nontraditional students will live off-campus and will face struggles that most traditional students will not encounter.

However, this is a norm for nontraditional students, and much like their traditional counterparts, with proper motivation and mentoring, they can also succeed.

One response to nontraditional student attrition that has been made by the community college system is the implementation of summer bridge programs (SBPs). The study conducted by Hoops & Kutrybala (2015) revealed that the most significant growth academically was through the development of relationships between students and the faculty. Essentially, the study focuses solely on nontraditional students and reveals that relationships were a key factor in determining student success at the post-secondary level. The qualitative study indicated that 77% of the participants felt that their relationships with their teachers directly affected their academic growth throughout the semester.

Many approaches have been enacted to address nontraditional student issues; however, the identification of which students require these services is still in question. The identification of reliable predictive variables is essential to identify students early on who would benefit from these services. Once students have been identified, they can be introduced into these groups early on in their academic careers. Having this support, along with other targeted interventions, is crucial in working to mitigate nontraditional student attrition. Predicting what students would likely benefit from these services and methods of intervention helps colleges and universities better serve their nontraditional student populations by disaggregating the term nontraditional student and expanding it to better serve those who are most likely to experience academic hardships.

### **Improving Academic Self-Efficacy**

Many studies have concluded that academic self-efficacy is a reliable predictive factor of a person's academic success and their willingness to persist in their classes (Bandura &

Barbaranelli, 1996; Ost et al., 2018; Webster & Rivers, 2019). However, some debate has been sparked about when an assessment of academic self-efficacy is most reliable. Bong (2001) conducted a study of  $N=168$  students that spanned over two terms and looked at task value and academic self-efficacy as indicators of student motivation. Upon the conclusion of the study, Bong (2001) noted that task-specific self-efficacy items were a more reliable predictor in the first term. However, moving forward into subsequent semesters, academic self-efficacy was a more reliable predictor of student success.

In many cases, nontraditional college students are thought to be disadvantaged students who need intensive support to become successful students (Jacobs, 2004, Ghee et al., 2016). However, in many instances, this is not the case. Nontraditional students, especially those who have jobs, are more likely to persevere than traditional college students. Shillingford & Karlin (2013) conducted a study that concluded with the findings that nontraditional students who were attending school as a means of improving their pay and their quality of life were more intrinsically motivated to persevere through the challenges they face in the classroom. This makes for a more receptive student, and their levels of academic self-efficacy would increase as they became more comfortable in the academic arena.

One revelation that was found during the study conducted by Anderson et al. (2019) was that a students' academic self-efficacy was not static and fluctuated when paired with different variables. The study revealed that improvements in students' levels of academic self-efficacy directly correlated with improvements in academic performance. Furthermore, additional studies (have) noted that other factors contributed to increasing levels of academic self-efficacy (Anderson et al., 2019; Wachs et al., 2020). Anderson et al. (2019) linked poor attendance with students who suffered from low levels of academic self-efficacy. While this may at first seem

obvious, it becomes a greater problem in the post-secondary environment, as there are no truancy laws that demand students to be in their classes.

Many colleges have taken notice of their nontraditional student population growth and have established classes that focus on orienting nontraditional college students to the world of academia. However, the classes have resulted in mixed feelings among nontraditional student populations. A study conducted by Gordon (2014) centralized around the disdain that many nontraditional college students have toward orientation classes. The study found that while these classes were initiated as a means of addressing student ignorance regarding the processes involved in academia, nontraditional students perceived the class as just another class and a means for the college to increase their profit from their enrollment at the institution. It is important to understand that most nontraditional students are employed or have important obligations outside of their college classes and adding another class to their course load is oftentimes viewed in a negative light by nontraditional students.

### **Summary**

The world of academia is changing at a rapid pace. While the halls, campuses, and classrooms remain relatively unchanged, the students who fill the seats are changing. Markle (2015) mentioned that students are waiting until later in their lives to continue their educations and learn new skills. This is a fact that should be celebrated by all educators, as people are seeing the benefit of continuing their educations and adopting a philosophy of lifelong learning. This new trend demands that educators adapt and meet students where they are. One issue that looms over our institutions is that nontraditional students are more likely than their traditional counterparts to discontinue their academic ventures because of encountered hardships and challenges that the students see as being insurmountable. It is because of this that educators must

seek out measures of mitigating this trend and encouraging nontraditional students to face down these challenges and persist until they meet their goals.

Previous research indicates that nontraditional student attrition can be successfully mitigated through the implementation of various support systems (Comeford, 2016; Destin et al., 2018; Stovall, 2000). However, the target populations for these services are very specific, and while many students benefit from these support services, it leaves several students disenfranchised and in need of help and guidance throughout their academic journeys. Research supports the need to identify these students and implement targeted support strategies; however, little research has been conducted that is focused on identifying key predictor variables of academic self-efficacy. If students with low academic self-efficacy can be identified early on in their academic careers, educators can work more quickly to address their issues before their nontraditional students begin to consider withdrawing from their studies prematurely.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology for this quantitative, non-experimental, predictive correlational study regarding the factors that may influence student veterans' levels of academic self-efficacy in a community college setting. One problem plaguing community colleges across the country is nontraditional student attrition. Identifying key predictors that may influence students' levels of academic self-efficacy is essential in developing an approach to resolving problems that lead to nontraditional students quitting their academic journey prematurely. This approach helps to develop a better understanding of how these variables relate to student veterans' levels of academic self-efficacy to identify key predictors that can be addressed by colleges to mitigate the problem of nontraditional student attrition. Additionally, this chapter discusses the research question, the hypothesis, the participants, the instrument to be used, and procedures used to conduct the study.

### **Design**

For this study, a quantitative, non-experimental predictive correlational research design with a convenience sample was used. The study seeks to determine if relationships exist between the predictor variables (marital status, parental status, military service, and program of study) and academic self-efficacy, the criterion variable. According to Warner (2013), this design is most appropriate for this study because the study is looking to see if key predictive variables of marital status, parental status, military service, and program of study, or a linear combination of the variables demonstrate a correlation with the criterion variable of academic self-efficacy in student veterans. Because the sample for the study is student veterans enrolled in the ACCS, random assignment cannot be achieved. Also, all the predictor variables exist within the sample

populations outside of the study. These factors support that a non-experimental design is most appropriate for this study.

The predictor variables of the study include marital status, parental status, military service, and program of study. *Marital status* indicates whether a person is single or married (NCES, 2020). *Parental status* indicates whether the person does or does not have children. The variable *military service* seeks to determine if the student is currently serving or is separated from military service. The variable, *program of study* identifies whether the person is enrolled in an academic transfer or a career training program within the ACCS.

The ACCS offers two programs of study: Academic transfer and career training. According to the ACCS (2020), the academic transfer program focuses on academic classes that will transfer to a four-year college or university, while career training programs focus on providing training for high-wage and high-demand careers, which include health sciences and technical education pathways. The ability to identify correlations between levels of academic self-efficacy and these specific predictor variables may increase the effectiveness of decisions made by college administrative teams in combating high attrition rates in nontraditional student populations.

### **Research Question**

The research question for this study is:

**RQ1:** Can academic self-efficacy be predicted by a linear combination of predictor variables (marital status, parental status, military service, and program of study) among student veterans enrolled in the Alabama Community College System?

## Hypothesis

The null hypothesis for this study is:

**H<sub>0</sub>:** There will be no significant predictive relationship between the criterion variable *academic self-efficacy* and the linear combination of predictor variables (marital status, parental status, military service, and program of study) among student veterans enrolled in the Alabama Community College System.

## Participants and Setting

The participants for this study were drawn from a convenience sample of the student veterans enrolled in the ACCS. The sample consisted of 123 student veterans. According to Gall et al. (2009), a medium effect size medium effect supplies a statistical power of 0.7 at the 0.5 alpha level, the sample size of  $N=120$ . According to Brändle & Lengfeld (2017), nontraditional college students are students who are older than 25 upon enrolling in college, obtained a GED rather than a high school diploma, students who do not immediately enroll in college courses following their graduation from high school, are single parents, or are enrolled as part-time students. Students selected for participation in the study will be identified as student veterans through the state student enrollment database.

Because of the life experiences that student veterans have had before enrolling in college, they meet most of the criteria for being identified as nontraditional students. Participants were selected from a convenience sample taken from the ACCS student veteran database that includes every self-identified veteran enrolled in a community college within the state of Alabama. The ACCS is comprised of 24 colleges and more than 130 locations within the state of Alabama. The ACCS reports that the total number of students enrolled in the ACCS during the fall 2020



semester is 000. These student veterans were contacted via student email addresses recorded by the ACCS to complete the Google Forms survey.

### **Instrumentation**

Bandura (1977) posits that self-efficacy is one's own belief in his or her ability to accomplish a given task. The general self-efficacy scale was first constructed by Bandura (1977) as a means of identifying a person's perceived levels of self-efficacy. Bandura (1994) later sought to focus on identifying predictive variables for self-regulated learning (SRL) that can construct the self-efficacy for SRL form. As a result of the scale's versatility, it has been modified and repurposed in several studies over the years.

For this study, the instrument being used is the abridged version of the self-efficacy for learning form (SELF-A), and it is based on the Self-Efficacy Theory of Albert Bandura (1977). Zimmerman & Martinez-Ponns (1988) analyzed Bandura's General Self-Efficacy Scale and pushed to incorporate more data points in the participants' response choices, as both Zimmerman and Bandura felt that more data points made the instrument more sensitive and reliable than instruments with fewer data points. The SELF-A is a shortened version of the original SELF instrument which contained 57 items. Zimmerman, the creator of the instrument, revisited his instrument later and determined that a shorter instrument would ultimately be more effective because of the reduction in time it would take to administer the questionnaire. This spurred the creation of the 19-item instruments known as the SELF-A. According to Zimmerman & Kitsantas (2007), the purpose of the SELF-A is to assess college students perceived levels of self-efficacy in reading, note-taking, test-taking, as well as general studying. The SELF-A is appropriate to use in this study because the instrument focuses on college students' perceived levels of academic self-efficacy which is what this study is investigating.

The instrument is free to use and is available online in the public domain. According to Zimmerman & Kitsantas (2007), the instrument has a Cronbach *alpha* of 0.97, indicating a high level of reliability. The SELF-A is a 19-item questionnaire that requires the selection of a decile response presented in units of 10 as a response to each question. Responses range from 0% to 100% with answer choices presented in increments of 10%. The instrument labels 0% as “definitely cannot do it,” 30% as “probably cannot,” 50% as “maybe,” 70% as “probably can,” and 100% as “definitely can do it. The SELF-A has been used in several studies (e.g., Peters-Burton & Botov, 2016; Teng et al., 2017; King-Sears & Strogilos, 2018). The SELF-A takes approximately four minutes for the participant to complete. The instrument is scored by calculating the average of the percentages. A higher average indicates a higher level of perceived academic self-efficacy.

### **Procedures**

Before beginning the study, the researcher requested approval from the institutional review board (IRB) at Liberty University (see Appendix C). Once IRB approval was obtained, the researcher contacted the ACCS to gain permission to conduct the study (see Appendix A). Permission was requested through email correspondence from the ACCS IRB. Once the Liberty University IRB and the ACCS approved the study, the researcher sought out the assistance of ACCS to distribute the survey to students using veteran’s benefits to attend school.

Once a viable means of communicating with the sample population was established, the researcher presented the pool of potential participants with a recruitment letter that requested their assistance with this study (see Appendix B). Additionally, the informational letter outlined the importance of the study and what the researcher hopes the study will accomplish. It also included a link to the online survey. By clicking the “I agree” option, the person agrees to

participate in the study and the survey progresses to the subsequent section of the survey. 123 student veterans agreed to complete the survey.

The SELF-A was administered through an email that contained a link to a Google Forms survey where the questionnaire is embedded. The Google Forms survey informed participants that the information within the form may be published; however, all identifying information will be excluded from the publication. One the first section of the form, the participant must acknowledge the consent form by selecting the “I agree” box that indicates that they consent to the study. The form collected survey data before collecting demographic data at the end of the survey. The questions will be presented with a percentage response ranging from 0-100 with response choices presented in increments of 10. The questionnaire remained active for 14 days and closed at midnight after the 14th day.

During the 14 days in which the questionnaire remained open, the researcher distributed reminders to participants once every four days for a total of three reminders during the period in which the questionnaire was open. Upon the closure of the questionnaire, the researcher received 123 complete surveys which ensured that the total number of received surveys met the minimum number of 120 participants. Once 123 surveys were received, the researcher sent an email to the participants and the college administrators thanking them for their participation in the study.

The Google Forms survey was set to not collect email addresses or require that students identify themselves. This ensures that student responses are indeed anonymous, and the data collected cannot be traced back to any individual student. Once the information was collected by the Google Forms survey, the researcher exported the data collected from the survey into SPSS for analysis.

According to Rovai, Baker, and Ponton (2013), it is essential to ensure that participant data security is maintained. Additionally, all data that is collected during the study were safeguarded in a password-protected folder on a domain-administered Google account. Additionally, all information was processed in SPSS using a domain-administered and password-secured workstation. As a means of increasing security, all data downloaded to the workstation was stored in a password-protected folder. All collected data was also stored on an external hard drive that is encrypted with password protection as a means of securing student data and increasing the researcher's accessibility to the data.

### **Data Analysis**

The research question asks how accurately self-efficacy can be predicted by students' parental status, military service, and programs of study for student veterans enrolled in Alabama community colleges. A multiple regression was conducted that considers the 4 predictor variables and identifies if relationships exist between the criterion and predictor variables. According to Gall et al. (2009), multiple regression is most appropriate when comparing one criterion variable against multiple predictor variables. According to Rovai et al. (2013), data for tests with multiple regressions should be screened for all possible pairs within variables. The study utilized IBM's SPSS to perform all statistical tests. Once the data was placed into SPSS, the researcher screened all data for inconsistencies, completeness, and any outliers or pairs.

Once data screening for missing or inaccurate data was completed, the researcher ensured that all assumptions were met to conduct the analysis. The researcher performed an assumption of multivariate normal distribution, and an assumption of non-multicollinearity among the predictor variables to see if there is any correlation between any of the other predictor variables. Once these assumptions were met, the researcher moved on to the multiple regressions test.

Finally, the researcher performed a multiple linear regression test to identify any relationships between the criterion variable and each of the predictor variables. According to Warner (2103), the  $F$  statistic should be reported from the results of the multiple regression test. Afterward, the researcher conducted a post hoc analysis to identify if any correlation exists within the categorical variables of marital status, parental status, military service, and program of study the null hypothesis will be rejected at a 95% confidence level, with the alpha level set at  $p < .05$ . According to Warner (2013), post hoc analysis for multiple regression tests should only be conducted on categorical variables.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

The purpose of this study was to identify variables that predict low levels of perceived academic self-efficacy in student veteran populations. Specifically, the study sought to determine if any linear combination of the predictor variables of marital status, parental status, military service, and program of study had any relationship to the criterion variable of perceived levels of academic self-efficacy among student veterans enrolled in classes within the Alabama Community College System.

### Research Question

**RQ1:** Can academic self-efficacy be predicted by a linear combination of predictor variables (i.e., marital status, parental status, military service, and program of study) among student veterans enrolled in the Alabama Community College System?

### Null Hypothesis

**H<sub>0</sub>:** There will be no significant predictive relationship between the criterion variable *academic self-efficacy* and the linear combination of predictor variables (i.e., marital status, parental status, military service, and program of study) among student veterans enrolled in the Alabama Community College System.

### Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were derived for each of the variables. The sample consisted of 123 participants. Efficacy was measured using the SELF-A (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2007). A high score means the student had a high perceived level of academic self-efficacy, whereas a low score means that the participant had a low perceived level of academic self-efficacy. Descriptive statistics can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Marital Status	123	1.00	2.00	1.4959	.50203
Parental Status	123	1.00	2.00	1.4065	.49319
Military Service	123	1.00	2.00	1.2033	.40406
Program of Study	123	1.00	2.00	1.4959	.50203
Perceived Self-Efficacy	123	0.00	10.00	6.5757	1.68070
Valid N (listwise)	123				

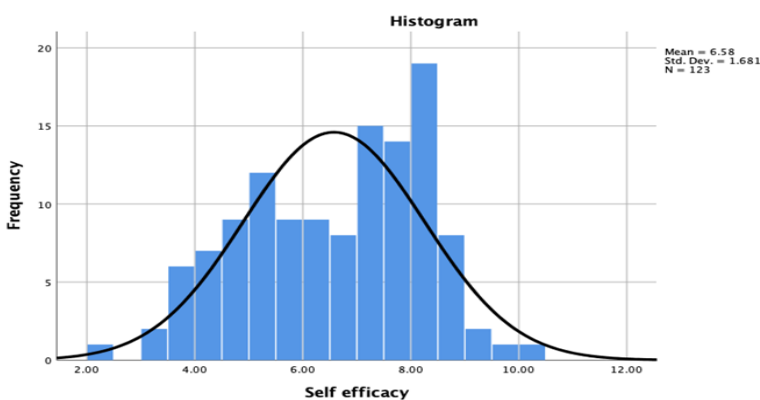
## Results

### Data Screening and Assumption Testing

The researcher sorted the data and scanned for inconsistencies on each variable. No data errors or inconsistencies were identified. Visual inspection was used to examine the criterion variables (i.e., self-efficacy) for normality. Presented in Figure 1 is a histogram for self-efficacy. Examination of Figure 1 reveals the criterion variable appears to be normally distributed, within reason. See Figure 1.

Figure 1.

### Histogram



Additionally, a Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) test was conducted to ensure the absence of multicollinearity. This test was run because if a predictor variable (x) is highly correlated with another predictor variable (x), they essentially provide the same information about the criterion variable. If the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) is too high (i.e., greater than 10), then multicollinearity is present. Acceptable values are between 1 and 5. The absence of multicollinearity was met between the variables in this study. See Table 2 collinearity statistics.

Table 2  
*Collinearity Statistics*

Model		Collinearity Statistics	
		Tolerance	VIF
1	Marital Status	.961	1.040
	Parental Status	.932	1.073
	Military Service	.948	1.055
	Program of Study	.966	1.035

a. Dependent Variable: Perceived Self-Efficacy

## Hypothesis

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to see if there was a relationship between exam scores and science self-efficacy scores of college students. The predictor variables were math exam, English exam, and science exam scores. The criterion variable was the perceived level of academic self-efficacy. The researcher rejected the null hypothesis at the 95% confidence level where  $F(4, 118) = 9.371, p = .000$ . There was a statistically significant relationship between the predictor variables (Marital Status, Parental Status, Military Service, and Program of Study) and the criterion variable (Academic Self-Efficacy). See Table 3 for regression model results.



Table 3

*Regression Model Results*

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	83.081	4	20.770	9.371	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	261.541	118	2.216		
	Total	344.622	122			

a. Dependent Variable: Perceived Self-Efficacy

b. Predictors: (Constant), Program of Study, Marital Status, Military Service, Parental Status

The model's effect size was very large where  $R = .491$ . Furthermore,  $R^2 = .241$  indicating that approximately 24% of the variance of the criterion variable can be explained by the linear combination of predictor variables. See Table 4 for the regression model summary.

Table 4

*Model Summary*

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.491 <sup>a</sup>	.241	.215	1.48877

a. Predictors: (Constant), Program of Study, Marital Status, Military Service, Parental Status

b. Dependent Variable: Perceived Self-Efficacy

Because the researcher rejected the null hypothesis, an analysis of the coefficients was required. Based on the coefficients, it was found that Marital Status and Parental Status were the best predictors of academic self-efficacy where  $p = .000$ . The model equation is:

Predicted academic self-efficacy =  $6.552 - (1.297 \times \text{marital status}) + (1.255 \times \text{parental status}) + (0 \times \text{military service}) + (.133 \times \text{program of study})$ . In this study, the predictors Military Service and Program of study were not significant. See Table 5 for coefficients.

Table 5  
Coefficients<sup>a</sup>

Model		Unstandardized		Standardized	<i>t</i>	Sig.
		<i>B</i>	Std. Error	Coefficients		
1	(Constant)	6.552	.761		8.605	.000
	Marital Status	-1.297	.274	-.387	-4.736	.000
	Parental Status	1.255	.283	.368	4.432	.000
	Military Service	.000	.343	.000	.001	.999
	Program of Study	.133	.273	.040	.486	.628

a. Dependent Variable: Perceived Self-Efficacy

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS**

### **Overview**

In this chapter, I first present a discussion on my findings, followed by the implications of my research's findings. Next, I identify the limitations of my study and conclude by proposing ideas for future research.

### **Discussion**

As the community college system continues to increase its accessibility, the number of non-traditional students will continue to grow. This makes studies like this increasingly important if the field is to help these students succeed in the academic arena. The purpose of this study was to determine if reliable predictor variables exist that would predict which demographic variables identify students with low levels of academic self-efficacy. For this study, I gathered data from student veterans attending college classes within the ACCS to determine if non-traditional students' perceived levels of academic self-efficacy could be predicted by their marital status, parental status, military service, and program of study.

The results of this study are supported by several previous studies. Ellis (2019) performed a study that centralized around barriers that non-traditional student populations face. The study confirmed that various barriers caused by life events typical for nontraditional students contributed to poor academic performance and, ultimately, decisions to drop out of college. In this study, it was discovered that both marital status and parental status were significant predictors of academic self-efficacy.

Another element that contributes to nontraditional student attrition is the absence of relationships. In a study conducted by Hoops & Kutrybala (2015), it was found that students who developed relationships within their academic environments were more likely to be successful in

their academic endeavors than those who did not engage in forming relationships within the academic setting. This notion is supported by this study's findings that marital status was a statistically significant predictor of perceived levels of academic self-efficacy. Moreover, marriage is one of the most important relationships in one's life and the effects of that relationship reverberate throughout all aspects of a person's life. In this study, people who were married exhibited higher levels of perceived academic self-efficacy than those who indicated that they were not married. Furthermore, this was the most significant predictor variable of the four, meaning that marriage was the most important factor in predicting if a person would present high or low levels of academic self-efficacy. Further solidifying this notion, those who indicated that they were not married, exhibited lower levels of academic self-efficacy.

The second predictor variable, Parental Status, asked if participants had children or did not have children. This was also a statistically significant predictor of academic self-efficacy. Being a parent is very demanding, especially for someone who is attempting to attend college. Markle (2015) urged that one perceived disadvantage for nontraditional college students was the need for employment to support themselves and their families while attending school. This could be compounded by the demands of raising and caring for children. Pursuing a degree is demanding and for many nontraditional students, it could become too much, caring for children and a family, working to support them, and trying to maintain academic success.

The analysis of the data revealed that both parental status and marital status were significant predictors of academic self-efficacy. Because of these results, I checked the variables together and found that running marital status and parental status together revealed that the two variables were trending toward significance. In Table 6 we see  $p=.059$  whereas  $p=.050$  would be identified as being significant. This indicates that there is a very strong relationship between the

two variables. This finding provides some insight into the struggles associated with being a single parent while attending college. This finding, while not statistically significant, highlights the need to assist single-parent college students.

Table 6  
*Coefficients<sup>a</sup>*

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Coefficients		
1	(Constant)	7.459	2.437		3.061	.003
	Marital Status	.330	.901	.102	.366	.715
	Parental Status	1.295	1.376	.380	.941	.349
	Military Service	-.046	.337	-.011	-.137	.891
	Program of Study	.218	.270	.065	.806	.422
	Marriage * Parent	-1.021	.535	-.860	-1.908	.059

a. Dependent Variable: Average

Although caring for children can be a difficult and exhausting undertaking, especially while attending college, it would be doubly so if the student were not married and was tasked with taking care of children while attending college classes. This is supported by the study conducted by Miller et al. (2010) wherein students who had obligations outside of school were statistically more likely to drop out of college than their peers who did not have any external obligations to contend with. Miller et al. (2010) posited that persistence was affected by the presence of external obligations which is in alignment with what this study found. Additionally, Crispin & Nikolaou (2019) strengthen this with their study that focused on students with parental obligations and how time is not something that many parents have to spare when they return home from work and school. As noted by Crispin & Nikolaou (2019), this leads to poor academic performance, because the time is simply not available for students with parental obligations to focus on and complete homework tasks. This is supported by this study, whereas

students who noted that they have parental responsibilities also noted a lower perceived level of academic self-efficacy. Additionally, the inverse is also true. Students without parental responsibilities fared better regarding their perceived levels of academic self-efficacy.

The variable Military Service asked if participants were separated, or currently serving as a member of the United States Armed Forces. Ultimately, this variable was not shown as a significant predictor of academic self-efficacy. However, as noted by Eakman et al., 2019; Goker, 2006; Hughes & Chen, 2011; Kees et al., 2017, veterans tend to perform better academically in an academic setting when a support structure has been constructed. As veteran education benefits continue to become more attractive, the number of veterans attending post-secondary school continues to rise. As mentioned by Eakman et al. (2019), this increase in student veteran enrollment has bolstered the rise and popularity of veteran support services and groups on campus.

While not entirely the same, in many ways these services mimic a support structure akin to the one presented by marriage. The support given, coupled with an intrinsic desire to avoid letting fellow servicemembers down, could be a crucial factor that determines the success of these student veteran support services. While veteran status may not be a reliable predictor, we do see a correlation in the literature that supports the notion of relationships being an essential element to mitigate attrition, as veterans who take part in these support services are more successful in their academic journeys than their fellow student veterans who chose not to participate in these groups (Eakman et al., 2019). The predictor variable Program of Study was also not a statistically significant predictor variable for predicting a person's perceived levels of academic self-efficacy. While some studies indicated that college students participating in CTE pathways may tend to perform poorly in their academic studies, nothing in this study indicated

that Career Technology students exhibited lower levels of academic self-efficacy than their peers who were pursuing a traditional academic pathway. However, this study used the ACCS program of study to define the Career Pathway student program which combines healthcare and CTE pathways which could lend itself to further study.

Ultimately, this study reveals that support, like the support we find within marriages, is important. It is one of the most important factors in determining if non-traditional students will persevere and finish their degree plans. Additionally, we see that these supports are not contained solely in marriage. These same benefits are reproducing within the veteran support groups that assist service members with their transition from military life back into the civilian academic world. While outside obligations can increase the risk of non-traditional student attrition, support structures successfully offset those risks. This is evident in this study in the finding that married students with children had higher levels of academic self-efficacy than those who were not married and had children.

### **Implications**

Community colleges across the United States are continuously increasing their student veteran populations. Additionally, student veteran numbers are also on the rise in the four-year college environment. With these numbers increasing substantially, educators and education administrators must work to resolve the issue of student veteran attrition which will also help to address issues associated with non-traditional student attrition. Since all student veterans are non-traditional students, this study's findings apply to both student populations. The importance of this study lies in the information it provides to help educators and administrators identify student veterans who may struggle academically when entering the community college setting. Being able to identify student veterans who are more likely to drop out of their college classes

will help administrators to implement targeted intervention strategies before these students decide to forgo the remainder of their degree plans.

Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner (2012) noted that students who have low perceived levels of academic self-efficacy are more likely to drop out of college than those with high levels of academic self-efficacy. This is supported by Bandura & Barbaranelli (1996) because in their study they directly link academic self-efficacy with academic performance. Also, it has been noted by Anderson et al. (2019) that academic self-efficacy is not static and that perceived levels of academic self-efficacy can be altered positively if the proper support is provided. If colleges can predict which students will be more likely to exhibit low perceived levels of academic self-efficacy, intervention could be initiated preemptively to help increase self-efficacy. Colleges could develop a structured support system that focuses on assisting students who are unmarried and/or have children and could help to mitigate student veteran attrition.

Since the data in this study indicate reliable predictor variables in marital and parental status, educational administrators can work to provide targeted solutions for student veterans who have children and married student veterans. Furthermore, this study's relevance also applies to other non-traditional student populations. The results of this study could also help to define predictor variables to help other non-traditional student populations.

### **Limitations**

Limitations for this study include the sample size. According to Gall et al. (2009), a medium effect supplies a statistical power of 0.7 at the 0.5 alpha level, which equates to a sample size of  $N=120$ . The sample for this study is  $N=123$  participants, which barely meets the minimum sample size of 120 participants to supply the medium effect for this study. Additionally, the students who participated in the study all came from the same community



college system. Additionally, there were only four predictor variables for the study and many other factors exist that contribute to student veteran attrition.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study presents findings that invite future research to identify additional predictor variables that could help increase the effectiveness of a community college's efforts to mitigate student veteran attrition. Many of these recommendations are due to the faults and shortcomings within this study which are listed in the Limitations section above.

1. Similar research should be conducted in other community college systems to increase the number of participants.
2. Additional research that focuses on other predictor variables that may attribute to student veteran attrition rates.
3. Further research to explore factors other than academic self-efficacy.
4. Additional studies that explore the qualitative nature of the marital and parental statuses of non-traditional students.
5. Additional studies could be conducted that explore these predictors at the university level.
6. Additional research that separates healthcare and CTE classes from the program of study variable would be helpful to see if there was a difference within the variable.
7. Additional research should be conducted that focuses on all non-traditional student populations to see if these predictors are also reliable for non-traditional students who are not student veterans.

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## Appendix A

08/21/2019

Dr. John Smith  
Dean of Student Services  
East Alabama Community College  
301 Anonymous Way, East Alabama 31333

Dear Dr. Smith,

As a graduate student in the College of Education at Liberty University, I am researching as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research project is Identifying Relationships between nontraditional students and perceived levels of academic self-efficacy. The purpose of my research is to identify problems that nontraditional students experience that lead to nontraditional student attrition.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at East Alabama Community College to recruit participants for my research as well as to access and utilize student registration data to identify nontraditional students.

Participants will be asked to select a link that will be provided to them through their student email and complete the attached survey. Participants will be presented with informed consent information before participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval.

Sincerely,

Tyler Nelson  
Graduate Student at Liberty University

## Appendix B

Dear ACCS Student:

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Liberty University doctoral candidate, Tyler Nelson. The purpose of this study is to identify how the variables of marital status, parental status, military service, and program of study relate to student veterans' perceived levels of academic self-efficacy. This study is needed to help identify key predictors that can be addressed by colleges to help mitigate nontraditional and student veteran attrition.

Should you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a web-based survey. The total time will be approximately 5 minutes. Please be advised that your participation in the survey, either in full or in part, is entirely voluntary. Additionally, you reserve the option to leave any question unanswered or to discontinue your participation in the study at any time without the risk of penalty. By following the link to the survey, you are implying your agreement to participate in this study.

Your participation will help colleges identify elements that contribute to nontraditional student attrition. Also, your participation in this study will help guide college administrators toward the implementation of intervention methods designed to help student veterans and other nontraditional students become more successful in academic settings.

There is no perceivable risk in completing this study. The results will be confidential, as no identification will be requested. Your responses will be compiled with others participating in the study and will be reported in a summary by the researcher conducting the study. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Link to survey:

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScdN5dv7L6rBclA1KAp8TFs2tSOy4VLwFtoZtOexMAyeRk0nA/viewform?usp=sf\\_link](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScdN5dv7L6rBclA1KAp8TFs2tSOy4VLwFtoZtOexMAyeRk0nA/viewform?usp=sf_link)

Sincerely,

Tyler Nelson

Tnelson45@liberty.edu

## Appendix C

### Consent

**Title of the Project:** THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STUDENT VETERANS' MARITAL STATUS, PARENTAL STATUS, MILITARY SERVICE, PROGRAM OF STUDY AND THEIR PERCEIVED LEVELS OF ACADEMIC SELF-EFFICACY

**Principal Investigator:** Tyler Nelson Liberty University Graduate Student

**Co-investigator:** David Vacchi Ph.D. Dissertation Chair

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be currently serving or a veteran of the United States Armed Service who is attending college. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to identify if a person's perceived ability to be successful in an academic setting can be predicted. The predictors for this study are marital status, parental status, military service, and chosen program of study.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following:

1. Complete a survey, which is estimated to take approximately 10 minutes.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include the meaningful addition to previous research that identifies if accurate predictor variables of perceived low levels of academic self-efficacy exist.

#### What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

#### How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be anonymous.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.

**Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Southern Union Community College. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any without affecting those relationships.

**What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please exit the survey and close your internet browser prior to submitting the survey. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Tyler Nelson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at (706)-501-8845 or [tnelson45@liberty.edu](mailto:tnelson45@liberty.edu). You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. David Vacchi, at [dvacchi@liberty.edu](mailto:dvacchi@liberty.edu).

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu)

**Your Consent**

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You can print a copy of the document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher/study team using the information provided above.