

CONTINUOUS ENROLLMENT EXPERIENCES OF NONTRADITIONAL CAREER AND
TECHNICAL EDUCATION STUDENTS AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by

NaTunya Johnson

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

This transcendental phenomenological study described the continuous enrollment experiences of nontraditional career and technical education (CTE) students at the community college. The focus was on understanding the collegiate experience to decrease students' chances of dropping out of college and contribute to the retention scholarship in higher education. The theory guiding this study was Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition. It explains how background, academic, environmental, psychological outcomes, and social integration affect student retention. The design of this study was grounded in transcendental phenomenological research that explored the continuous enrollment phenomenon from the personal lived experiences of CTE community college students. A sample of 17 students from Lake County Community College participated in face-to-face interviews and focus groups on describing and making meaning of negative and positive experiences as they persisted in their college studies. An emphasis on document analysis was also a part of the data collection strategy to ensure data triangulation. To examine all aspects of the experiences shared by nontraditional CTE students, this study employed inductive data analysis that focused on common aspects of student courses, school withdrawal reports, student attendance reports, student appeals, and graduation reports. These artifacts were used to uncover relevant insights into understanding and ultimately increasing student retention. Ten themes emerged in the results of the research: positive attitudes; progress acknowledgment; self-improvement, career motivations; balancing college with family life; having to maintain work commitments; engaging instructors; concerned advisors; flexible course offerings; and smaller classroom settings.

Keywords: career and technical education, community college, nontraditional, retention.

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NaTunya Johnson

2021

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my intelligent and beautiful daughter Nadya. I hope this body of work is a testament that you can achieve anything in this world with hard work, determination, and, most of all, perseverance. As you go forth to pursue your dreams and accomplish your goals, always remember "the race is not given to the swift... but to those who endure to the end" (Ecclesiastes 9:11).

~ Love Mommy

Acknowledgments

As I reflect on my doctoral journey from entry to completion, I acknowledge that God has not brought me this far to leave me. Although I have encountered trials along the way, I count those trials as joy, yielding to God, believing that He is using it for my maturity.

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4, NIV).

I would like to thank my husband, Michael, and my daughter, Nadya, for their continued patience and unwavering love during this process. I am always thankful for the constant support of my family, friends, and faculty of Liberty University.

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List of Abbreviations

Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE)

Career and Technical Education (CTE)

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Lake County Community College (LCCC)

National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity (NAPE)

National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES)

United States Department of Education (USDE)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

For over a century, community colleges have offered educational opportunities and job training programs to meet the needs of the local communities and the demands of society. Currently, the U.S. community college system encompasses more than 1,160 community colleges educating over 100 million students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017). Lower tuition fees and open access continue to play a significant role in students enrolling in these two-year higher learning institutions. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2017), over 50% of the students currently enrolled are nontraditional students, adult learners over the age of 24. As the enrollment of nontraditional students gradually increased in U.S. colleges, the particular needs of these students challenged administrators and educators who were more familiar with teaching traditional students. Four-year colleges and universities made advancement in retaining nontraditional students better than community colleges due to them addressing the students' diverse needs.

On the contrary, nontraditional student retention at the community college level continues to decline. Today, over 50% of nontraditional students leave the community college before completing an associate degree (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). While researchers have investigated retention improvement on the university level, retention studies to improve the retention and graduation rates of the nontraditional career and technical education students on the community college level are yet to be explored. This study begins to uncover a connection through the lived experiences of nontraditional career and technical education students. The voices of these students are shared in later chapters of this dissertation to highlight the evolving phenomenon and show a concerted effort between faculty and student support

services is necessary to ensure the needs of these community college students are adequately met. This qualitative study focused on successful retention efforts based on nontraditional career and technical education community college students' perceptions. The first chapter presents the background for the problem, which forms the basis for this research study, situation to self, problem statement, and purpose statement. Additionally, this chapter identifies the study's significance, three research questions, definitions relevant to the study, and concludes with a chapter summary.

Background

Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers have sought to understand better the factors influencing retention because improving the number of students who graduate benefits students, institutions, and society. Colleges and universities are interested in this complex and reticular problem because helping students graduate also improves institutional, student, and societal outcomes. (Hlinka, 2017). Community college students encounter unique challenges that can hinder their academic progress, resulting in lower grades and persistence than students in selective four-year colleges (Bonet & Walters, 2016). Community colleges lose tuition dollars and the combined resources of instruction, housing, and support services that are spent on students lost to attrition (Rabourn, BrckaLorenz, & Shoup, 2018). “One common thread in the literature on nontraditional students is that they experience a plethora of challenges on college campuses that hinders their persistence and graduation rates” (Goings, 2016, p. 229). More importantly, unretained community college students may lose the prime opportunities that higher education offers, such as a college degree leading to secured employment.

Historical

The community college we know today has its origins in junior college. These private two-year colleges had a primary mission of providing the first two years of general collegiate study (Diener, 1986). Originally, the junior college primarily satisfied a transfer role to a four-year liberal arts degree and is believed to have originated at the University of Chicago in the 1890s, when William Harper, the university president, separated the university into an upper-division and a lower-division with the lower designated as the junior college (Witt et al., 1994). However, the most significant impact on the evolution of the junior college to the community college was during the period after World War II, which gave birth to the GI Bill of Rights. In 1944, The GI Bill provided military veterans with an opportunity for free college education (Witt et al., 1994).

The Civil Rights movement and the Baby Boomer era were also impactful on expanding community colleges because of increased access for more people in America (Diener, 1986; Witt et al., 1994). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 paved the way for increased enrollment of African Americans and other ethnic minorities to pursue their higher education dreams (Diener, 1986). Still, “the greatest period of growth” occurred when the Baby Boomers emerged onto the community colleges' campuses in the 1960s (Witt et al., 1994, 162). The community college welcomed women, ethnic and racial minorities, veterans, immigrants, the disadvantaged, the poor, and any person looking for advanced vocational training or the pursuit of an excellent educational opportunity (Diener, 1986). As junior colleges progressed, they transformed into community colleges to include vocational programs and blue-collar workers (Diener, 1986).

Today, the community college serves the most diverse array of students concerning ages, abilities, and interests of any American higher education institution. The community college is a

chance for Americans to hone their skills and cultivate their talents more comprehensively than any other educational institution (Radford, Cominole, & Skomsvold, 2015). Community college career and technical education programs may promise a better life for many people, including traditional students directly out of high school and those returning to school from the workforce as nontraditional students. Historically, high school students were the face of the American community college student; however, nontraditional students appear to have taken over the image (Radford, Cominole, & Skomsvold, 2015). According to the U.S. Department of Education, nontraditional students are more prevalent in 4-year public postsecondary institutions comprising 39% of the students than in 2-year public postsecondary institutions at (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2020). Despite this, the proportion of research on nontraditional community college students remains low (Bohl, Haak, & Shrestha, 2017; Cavote & Kopera-Frye, 2004).

Social

The demographics and the growing number of people returning to higher education are changing the traditional college and university campus (Markle, 2015; Radford, Cominole, & Skomsvold, 2015; Wyatt, 2011). The traditional student may be characteristically defined as an individual who has graduated from high school and is less than 24 years old (Bohl, Haak, & Shrestha, 2017). Typically, they have a family background with some higher education level and attend a four-year university as a full-time student (Markle, 2015; Radford, Cominole, & Skomsvold, 2015; Wyatt, 2011). On the other hand, the nontraditional student can be a person who is older than 24 years old; has returned to school; attends school part-time or full time; and is someone who is improving his or her job skills (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Others have defined the nontraditional learner as a person who does not enter postsecondary schooling

immediately after high school graduation or an individual from a low socioeconomic background (Schuetze & Slowery, 2003).

Individuals who are considered non-traditional may face diverse issues than the traditional student; however, there are positive and negative influences that affect the nontraditional student (Bohl, Haak, & Shrestha, 2017). As a positive influence, nontraditional students may be more goal-oriented, highly motivated, and independent learners (Markle, 2015). Nontraditional students may seek out resources that allow them to capitalize on opportunities that many traditional students do not seek. In other words, nontraditional learners appear to value a postsecondary education highly. According to Juszkievicz (2017), nontraditional student enrollment is highest at community colleges; however, they have the lowest completion rates than traditional students.

Theoretical

How to increase retention among college students has been researched by policymakers, states, and institutions for many years (Tinto, 2007). “As the economy continues to recover, declining community college enrollments, particularly in institutions that educate a high proportion of nontraditional students, are to be expected” (Juszkievicz, 2017, p. 9). As the number of non-traditional students majoring in career and technical education programs increases, understanding how nontraditional CTE students can be retained further research. The problem is nontraditional career and technical education students fail to complete community college courses and often withdraw before attaining a degree. In response to increasing numbers of nontraditional students, Bean and Metzner (1985) utilized existing research to frame the problem of nontraditional student attrition. Bean and Metzner (1985) improved the understanding of retention and expounded Tinto’s (1975) research attrition theory, stating that

nontraditional students were primarily affected by campus social factors. Although Tinto's (1975) model is limited with respect to nontraditional learning in the community college, the framework of this study primarily relies on Tinto's position that students are more prone to drop out of college when they are less involved with the social and academic realms of their educational backdrops, along with Bean and Metzner's (1985) position that socioeconomic and external factors influence the completion rates of nontraditional students.

Situation to Self

This research provides greater insight into student retention and has a positive impact on student outcomes and learning. Over the years, I have learned there is a direct correlation between experience and knowledge and that students gain experience from living in the world and interacting with other people (Gutek, 1995). Experiential education aims to improve the "quality of instruction and interinstitutional articulation" (Gutek, 1995, p. 482). Furthermore, experiential learning is that direct experience, knowledge, and wisdom acquired to positively make prudent decisions, confront problems, and shape lives accordingly (Gutek, 1995). The knowledge students derive from those multiple transactions delivers a firsthand account of reality, which equates to the knowledge of self and the world beyond (Moustakas, 1994). To gain this invaluable research knowledge, I spent time in the field with the students and take the time to understand their perspectives to gain firsthand information; thus, minimizing "distance" or "objective separateness" between myself and the research subjects (Guba & Lincoln, 1988, p. 94). I used direct quotes from the participant within the results section of the dissertation and collect data from students' influences, experiences, opinions, and beliefs (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldana, 2016).

Underlying philosophical assumptions and the social constructivist worldview helped shape the direction of the research with the descriptions of the individuals' experiences and perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). The ontological assumptions within this research were the realities of the nontraditional CTE students and whatever the students perceive them to be (Creswell, 2013). In terms of axiological assumptions, this research was influenced by the researcher's values and the theories and framework of Bean and Metzner (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). I characterized the research through an open discussion of values and inclusion of my interpretations and the participants' interpretations, which is critical in adding value and depth to the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldana, 2016). The epistemological assumptions presumed that what happened in this qualitative research study could be generalized to future social situations (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010). The social constructivism framework guided this study as students described their lived experiences through their unique viewpoints, ideas, and interactions with others. Accordingly, I intentionally reported and embraced how nontraditional CTE students view their experiences differently using multiple forms of evidence (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). I uncovered the truth through various perspectives, including personal views, to support the development of themes and sub-themes when analyzing career and technical research data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldana, 2016).

I allowed the methodological procedures of qualitative research to guide the research by describing narrative details rather than generalizations. I continually revised questions while “using inductive logic, studies the topic within its context, and uses an emerging design” (Creswell, 2013, p. 21). My research was a product of the environment it came from, so I used facts to look at the natural setting and scrutinize the details before determining the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Problem Statement

Nontraditional students are underserved in higher education, and campus leaders have been inadequate in responding to their needs, supporting their goals, and engaging their collegiate experience; consequently, institutions have missed opportunities to adapt higher education practices to nontraditional student needs (Mertes & Jankoviak, 2016; Rabourn, BrckaLorenz, & Shoup, 2018). Student retention theories exist for student pursuance of four-year or professional degrees. However, those theories are not necessarily applicable to students who pursue career and technical education (CTE) degrees (Mendoza, Suarez, & Bustamante, 2015). Current studies provide inadequate theoretical models, with the insufficient conceptualization of the longitudinal processes that lead non-traditional students to the point of dropping out (Mendoza, Suarez, & Bustamante, 2015). As the USA experiences rapid growth of non-traditional adult students in higher education, educators and institutions increasingly ought to look beyond the traditional youth-centric educational models to better address adult learning needs. To date, no research built upon the core principles of adult learning has been conducted examining the learning experiences of adult students enrolled in a disciplinary course (Chen, 2014, p. 406). Similarly, as the number of nontraditional students majoring in career and technical education programs increases, understanding the collegiate experiences of these students warrants further research to decrease the chances of them dropping out of college (Bohl, Haak & Shrestha, 2017; Mendoza, Suarez, & Bustamante, 2015). In Fall 2011, only 28% of first-time, full-time community college students who began their pursuit of a certificate or associate's degree attained the credentialing (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2016).

The problem of this study is that nontraditional community college students have a higher risk of failing to complete career and technical education programs due to complex and diverse life experiences. Understanding why students choose to remain in college or choose to leave college is essential to educators and administrators who want to ensure student success, especially as community college leaders ponder programs and services to promote student persistence (Kimbark, Peters, & Richardson, 2017). There is little research giving a voice to career and technical education nontraditional community college students; thus, the participants' stories in this study contribute to the body of literature covering retention in the community college.

Purpose Statement

This transcendental phenomenological study sought to describe the continuous enrollment experiences of nontraditional career and technical education community college students. Continuous enrollment is generally defined as the conclusion of one school year and consecutive enrollment in the next school year until degree completion (Seidman, 2018). The theory guiding this study is Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition. It explains how background, academic, environmental, psychological outcomes, and social integration affect student retention.

Significance of the Study

Understanding how nontraditional career and technical education students are distinct may be the key to creating practical approaches for college educators and administrators to improve retention and other outcomes for career and technical education students (Kimbark, Peters, & Richardson, 2017). The added financial responsibilities of nontraditional students and their necessarily more varied attendance patterns mean that a system predicated on a model

intended for traditional students sometimes may not be of much use to college leaders. Consequently, the current phenomenological study explored the complex life circumstances and needed personalized assistance of nontraditional students, making them different from traditional students.

I attempted to become immersed in the meaning and the world of the nontraditional community college student. Also, I delved into the meaning of retention from the viewpoint of nontraditional CTE students who have lived through the experience. This study may provide institutions of higher learning practical suggestions such as flexible schedules, personal, academic advisement, and project-based learning. The study may also provide a blueprint for embracing the nontraditional student's complete self by understanding their challenges in feeling academically and interpersonally validated while pursuing a college degree. My goal is to provide research to assist in developing collegiate programs to promote student success in high-risk populations, such as nontraditional career and technical education students.

This research's theoretical framework surrounds Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition, which explores how background, academic, environmental, psychological outcomes, and social integration affect undergraduate student retention (Bean & Metzner, 1985). I adapted the current study to the Bean and Metzner's (1985) theoretical framework to better understand retention among nontraditional students. Theoretically, I investigated entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until an integrated vision of the cores attains a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). I used a phenomenological paradigm on the lived meaning of the researched participants' experience to explore the perceptions of

nontraditional CTE students regarding how they have maintained continuous enrollment. I documented life experiences to explain which environmental and academic factors influence non-traditional students to stay enrolled or choose to withdraw from career and technical education programs.

Research Questions

Creswell (2013) recommended purposefully open-ended central research questions aligned with the focus of the research study. One central research question and two sub-questions guided this qualitative phenomenological research study on the continuous enrollment experiences of nontraditional career and technical education students at a Mississippi community college. The first question focused on the experiences which were meaningful while enrolled at the community college. The second question was used to understand the environmental factors that contributed to their staying enrolled in school. The third question centered on the academic factors that positively or negatively influenced their continuous enrollment. This research study sought to answer the following research questions:

Central Research Question

What experiences do nontraditional career and technical education students describe as having a meaningful influence on their continuous enrollment at the community college? This question was used to request feedback from the participants because retention research observed for traditional students may not be equally valid for all students. More specifically, this question was designed to understand life experiences that lead to attrition and those that directly impact the retention of nontraditional career and technical education graduates (Seidman, 2018; Tinto, 1975, 1998, 2006, 2013, 2017).

Sub-question One

How do non-traditional career and technical students perceive that environmental factors influence their continuous enrollment at the community college? Researchers have previously identified environmental factors affecting college student success, frequently focusing on retention (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Seidman, 2018, Tinto, 2017). However, participants' unique experiences can offer fresh insight into this existing literature body surrounding the phenomenon. This question aims to explore the interplay between college retention, persistence, and completion of a degree, along with environmental factors.

Sub-question Two

In what ways do non-traditional career and technical students perceive that academic factors impact their continuous enrollment at the community college? Suppose community colleges are concerned about the academic success of students. In that case, administrators may need to focus on specific groups with lower retention rates, such as non-traditional students from career and technical education programs (Fitzgerald & Singmaster, 2017; Hirschy, Bremer, & Castellano, 2011; Rabourn, BrckaLorenz, & Shoup, 2018). According to Tinto (2017), a lack of academic success can impact student retention; thus, this question will provide insight as to whether nontraditional CTE students experience this lack of foundational success as an influence in their academic studies.

Definitions

The following key terms surrounding the unique experiences of the population and the phenomenon of retention were used throughout this research study:

1. *Academic Success* – The “academic achievement, satisfaction, acquisition of skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of learning objectives, and career success” (York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015, p. 5).
2. *Attrition* – A student fails to enroll at an institution consecutively (Seidman, 2012, 2018).
3. *Career and Technical Education* - An alternative way of referring to vocational education. It is the name of choice for lobby groups such as the Association for Career and Technical Education (Hirschy, Bremer, & Castellano, 2011).
4. *Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act* - A federal law initially passed in 1988 and renewed in 2006 that lays down the requirements for federal aid to state vocational education. According to Friedel (2011), the act “addresses the needs of both the economy and to improve access to vocational education to special needs populations” (p. 42).
5. *Community College* - A community college is a two-year institution of higher education that offers a variety of educational program offerings such as college credit degrees, certificate programs, vocational or technical training, and workforce training (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).
6. *Continuous Enrollment*- For this study, continuous enrollment is defined as the conclusion of one school year and consecutive enrollment in the next school year until degree completion (Seidman, 2012, 2018). A student enrolls each semester until graduation.
7. *Dropout* - A dropout is considered to be any student who enrolls at an institution one semester but does not enroll the next semester and has not completed his or her formally declared program of study (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

8. *Nontraditional Student* - According to the National Center for Education Statistics, this is a large, heterogeneous population of adult students over the age of 24, who often have family and work responsibilities as well as other life circumstances that can interfere with successful completion of educational objectives (Radford, Cominole, & Skomsvold, 2015).
9. *Persistence* – A student’s desire to stay enrolled in college from admission through degree completion (Seidman, 2012, 2018). The broadest definition of persistence, on the other hand, means to hold firmly and steadfastly to some purpose and undertaking despite obstacles (Davies, 1970). According to Clark (1986), persistence highlights the behavior of the learners to complete a program with an expected outcome.
10. *Retention* - The focus of keeping students in educational settings; helping students persist in higher education settings from admission through graduation (Seidman, 2012, 2018). Retention generally refers to the continued enrollment of students until graduation. Although retention and persistence are complementary in meaning, there are variances that should be noted. Clark (1986) clarifies that the term persistence denotes continued active participation by students in specific educational activities. Retention refers to the holding power of the educational program or sponsoring institution or agency; this term emphasizes the program's role in participant behavior.
11. *Traditional Student*- A student under age 24 who enters college directly from high school takes courses on a continuous full-time basis. Generally, traditional students are financially dependent on others, do not have spouses or families, consider the college career to be their primary responsibility, and if employed, are so only on a part-time basis (Brock, 2010).
12. *Vocational Education* – “The Perkins Act defines vocational-technical education as organized educational programs offering sequences of courses directly related to preparing individuals for

paid or unpaid employment in current or emerging occupations requiring other than a baccalaureate or advanced degree. Programs include competency-based applied learning which contributes to an individual's academic knowledge, higher-order reasoning, problem-solving skills, and the occupational-specific skills necessary for economic independence as a productive and contributing member of society" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, para. 1).

13. *Withdrawal* - Withdrawal from college courses or higher education institutions altogether (Seidman, 2012, 2018).

Summary

The phenomenon of retention is relevant to college educators and leaders but may be most relevant to students concerned with success in career and technical education. In the community college setting, career and technical education students choose between several specialized study tracks such as healthcare, business, engineering, and construction (Hirschy, Bremer, & Castellano, 2011). The pursuit of traditional college degrees is being replaced with the desire to learn a trade, hone a skill, or even start a business (Boettcher, 2017). With the rising costs of tuition at four-year colleges and universities, along with few guarantees of job placement after graduation, students seem to be moving more towards non-traditional education (Rabourn, BrckaLorenz, & Shoup, 2018). Nontraditional education may offer experience and certifications that allowed them to have specific jobs and, in some cases, higher salaries than university graduates. The problem is nontraditional career and technical education students fail to complete community college courses and often withdraw prior to attaining a degree. The problem that informed this research is nontraditional students' higher risk of attrition in career and technical education programs due to complex, diverse life experiences. Understanding why students choose to remain in college or choose to leave college is essential to all stakeholders

because each wants to ensure student success (Kimbark, Peters, & Richardson, 2017). This qualitative phenomenological study describes the continuous enrollment experiences of nontraditional career and technical education community college students. Hence, this research generated information to minimize the disconnect between community colleges and nontraditional students who yearn to obtain a degree in technical education. As the number of non-traditional students majoring in career and technical education programs increases, understanding how nontraditional CTE students can be retained warrants further research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Efforts to improve student retention are critical to day-to-day operations; consequently, college student retention is an important research topic in higher education. Subsequently, various studies have been piloted to examine the relationships between college retention, persistence, and completion of a degree along with other influences, including student socioeconomic background and institutional and environmental factors (Bass & Ballard, 2012; Bonett & Walters, 2016; Cundall, 2013; Fike, 2008; Kimbark, Peters, & Richardson, 2017; Mendoza, Malcome, & Parish, 2015). While most investigations have focused on traditional full-time younger students, recently, researchers are trending toward studies focusing on diverse subgroups of college students such as adult learners, nontraditional students, and online learners (Markle, 2015; Rabourn, BrckaLorenz, & Shoup, 2018, Rotar, 2017; Travers, 2016). Retention studies on these specific groups may have increased because of the growing college enrollment of diverse populations. An in-depth review of the research was conducted to identify studies to explore the perceptions of nontraditional career and technical education students regarding how they have maintained continuous enrollment despite barriers and risk factors at a community college located in Mississippi.

The perception of nontraditional students persisting from matriculation to graduation is especially crucial in this economic time (Boettcher, 2017; Bonet & Walters, 2016), but scholarly literature is unidirectional and void of studies regarding the career and technical education college student perspective. This chapter provides an overview of the existing literature about the study. The first section discussed the theories selected as a framework and how they relate to the central phenomenon. The second section synthesized the recent literature about the history

of community colleges, followed by studies on nontraditional career and technical education. Finally, the review considered studies regarding the issues and barriers faced by nontraditional career and technical education community college students with a focus on student retention. After reviewing the literature, a gap in the literature emerged and provided a focused area to warrant this study.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this research on continuous enrollment relies on Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition, which explores how background, academic, environmental, psychological outcomes, and social integration affect student retention. Studies surrounding the theory of student departure has been affirmed and adjusted over the years (Tinto, 1975; 1998; 2006; 2013). According to Henry and Smith (1994), "the most popular theoretical models explaining factors that influence student success and persistence include those proposed by Spady (1970); Tinto (1975); Pascarella (1980); Pascarella, Duby, and Iverson (1983); and Bean and Metzher (1985)" (p. 27). "All of these models of student success and persistence offer explanations for the attrition and retention behaviors of traditional college-age students. They rely heavily upon constructs such as socialization to assist in explaining student attrition. Bean and Metzner (1985) conceptualized their model to include the non-traditional college student" (Henry & Smith, 1994, p. 27). The previous models may not be entirely appropriate for explaining the retention of the nontraditional career and technical students enrolled at a Mississippi community college, which is the focus of this study; thus, Bean and Metzner's framework (1985) was selected and adapted for use.

The theoretical models of the dropout process, developed before the creation of online learning, defined non-traditional part-time commuter students age 25 and older, a population

ignored by previous social integration models of student retention. Spady (1970), Tinto (1975), and Pascarella (1980) addressed the more significant influence of the external environment while acknowledging the academic and background integration variables that impact retention for non-traditional students. The variables in the model were chosen for their predictive ability and include academic performance, high school GPA, college goals, intent to leave, and environmental factors.

Recognizing the contributions of the Tinto model in showing the correlation among student and environmental variables yet identifying the model's limitations when applied to forecast the withdrawal decision of students in community colleges, Bean and Metzner (1985) established a conceptual model to describe retention of nontraditional students. In this study, the Bean and Metzner model is a better fit because the model takes into account how a person fits into the environment as well as Tinto's conceptual schema and identifies the unique relationship of nontraditional students within the setting of the community college.

Although Tinto's model included how social interaction affected student retention, Bean and Metzner (1985) model differed from Tinto's original model because it included environmental factors such as spending time with family or running out of money. Community college interaction leads the student to develop a set of internal attitudes and external attitudes. Academic capabilities, such as grade point average, institutional fit and loyalty are a resulting set of outcomes that are particularly important in determining a student's plans to remain enrolled, as well as continuous enrollment. Bean and Metzner (1985) developed a model of student retention for nontraditional students, which reduced the emphasis on social integration factors since older, working, and commuting nontraditional students spend less time on campus than do traditional, residential students.

Previous research substantially contributes to improving and understanding the interactive processes that shape student persistence behavior (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Pascarella, 1980; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). Organizational efforts derived from an improved understanding of the interaction between students and the educational environment may increase the retention of students in postsecondary career and technical education programs; consequently, credible retention strategies can be derived to decrease student attrition. Up until now, the Tinto (1998) model may have the most considerable influence on understanding student retention; thus, it is logical to begin the current investigation of continuous enrollment with it.

Tinto's Model of Student Integration

Tinto (1998) stated that “involvement matters,” and when students are socially and academically involved, the more likely they are to persist (p. 167). Moreover, the more they see “those interactions as positive and themselves as integrated into the institution,” the more likely they persisted (Tinto, 1998, p. 167). Still, integration is less important for students at community colleges because these students are more likely to be working adults and may find their validation and social lives elsewhere. Although adults still may value integration and relate with peers and faculty, the level to which this factor may impact retention may not be higher than that of younger students. Accordingly, the Tinto Model is mainly supportive in explaining the departure of traditional students at four-year institutions but has been less useful in explaining the departure of adult students or those at two-year colleges (Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 2006; Tinto, 2013).

Although Tinto's theory is widely recognized; however, some researchers doubt its generalizability to community colleges (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Tierney, 1993). Milem and Berger (1997) declare Tinto's theory gives valuable insight into student

involvement concerning persistence in community colleges but expanding student involvement to include environmental factors may increase persistence rates. Nonetheless, the Tinto model outlines how learning communities at colleges and university institutions can affect student integration (Tinto, 1998). Tinto's student integration model is the most significant and most accepted because the research provided the foundation from which other models were developed and adapted to understand retention trends (Davidson & Wilson, 2013).

Even though the level to which Tinto's model applies to examine student retention at two-year community college is unknowns, the model can serve as a basis and as a key point for further exploration of retention rates. The limited amounts of literature relating to retention at two-year colleges, theories, models, and other research studies relating to them also be explored to fill gaps in the literature and add to the cohesiveness of this vital problem of keeping students enrolled and persisting to graduation. The main difference between Tinto's (1975) model of student attrition for traditional students and the Bean and Metzner (1985) model developed for nontraditional students was the relative unimportance of social integration for nontraditional students.

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Bean and Metzner's Conceptual Model

The second theory of attrition identifies with the research of Bean and Metzner. Bean and Metzner (1985) explored nontraditional student attrition of adults over the age of 25 who may be full-time workers and other nontraditional students. In contrast to Tinto's model, their research findings describe a student that is less influenced by social integration and place more significance on the utility of the education being received, as well as a more significant influence on encouragement from friends, employers, and family members (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Bean and Metzner's 1985 Non-traditional Undergraduate Student Attrition Model is meaningful to this research study because of its direct use of factors associated with a student's external environment to predict their intent to persist in college. Bean and Metzner Conceptual Model posited that favorable academic variables also lead to persistence. Positive environmental variables compensate for lack of academic support, also leading to persistence; however, weak environmental variables overshadow positive academic variables in the decision to leave (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Academic outcomes can provide compensatory effects, though these effects lessened the perception of satisfaction, low goal commitment, and high-stress levels (Bean & Metzner, 1985). For each variable in the model, the authors discussed the direct or indirect impact on retention. They also provided numerous references for results (often mixed) of previous retention studies performed at residential and commuter colleges.

Many of these environmental factors are not related to traditional college students but are related to non-traditional ones (Aljohani, 2016). The literature indicates that the rise in non-traditional student enrollments warrants a conceptual model of retention that enabled community colleges to retain and better the needs of nontraditional students because nontraditional students are more affected by their external environment than are traditional students. Social integration variables, for instance, are associated more with traditional college students (Aljohani, 2016). Bean and Metzner (1985) recognized that previous research on student retention addressed only the traditional four-year students' issues. The attrition process of traditional students and nontraditional students is different because external environment variables affect the nontraditional students, whereas the social integration variables affect the traditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Responding to increasing numbers of nontraditional students, Bean and Metzner (1985) utilized existing research to frame the problem of nontraditional student attrition; by doing so, they improved what stakeholders understood about retention by expounding upon Tinto's research model. The Bean and Metzner's theory posits that non-traditional students experience an environmental pressure that includes more interaction with external environmental factors and less interaction with the members or activities of the environments of their academic institutions (Aljohani, 2016). Thus, the model gives more importance to external factors than to institutional socialization factors. "The conceptual framework of the model is based on four sets of variables: academic performance, intent to leave, background and defined variables and, most importantly, environmental variables" (Aljohani, 2016, p. 10). First, students' academic performance; the model hypothesizes that students with lower academic performance are more likely to drop out of school. Second, students' intention to leave is influenced more by psychological outcomes

than by academic variables. Third, students' achievements and educational goals, among other variables from other categories, are the background and defining variables expected to influence student persistence. Finally, according to the model, student attrition is most directly affected by environmental variables such as finance, working hours, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and the opportunity to transfer (Aljohani, 2016, p.10).

Bean and Metzner (1985) attempted to explain the commuter or community college student experience across different educational programs in community colleges. Bean and Metzner's modifications to Tinto's theory may be more applicable because adults are more likely to be pursuing postsecondary education, gain sufficient skills for professional advancement, or train for a new job. Perhaps adults can be more focused on achieving their goals, such as finishing the program or gaining the skills needed; therefore, learning may be more important than the social aspects of college.

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Hirschy, Bremer, and Castellano (2011) state, "community college vocational programs hold the promise of a better life for many people, including both students directly out of high school and those who are returning to school from the workforce." The authors thoroughly examine the characteristics of students in Career and Technical (CTE) programs and differentiate CTE students from those in academic transfer programs. The research outlines some theoretical models of student retention to ascertain their relevance for understanding the persistence decisions of students in CTE programs while also offering a conceptual model of student success focused on the CTE student population (Hirschy et al., 2011).

The authors clearly describe the background characteristics and unique educational paths of CTE students; furthermore, the authors strongly recommend creating effective approaches to improve retention and other outcomes. Hence, the researchers propose establishing the career integration variable, promoting the collection and tracking of student learning goals, and expanding traditional student success measures to reflect the experiences of CTE students (Hirschy et al., 2011). The information in this analysis is useful; ultimately, the conceptual model is most advantageous to community college faculty members and administrators, as they review and design programs and policies to promote CTE student success.

The researcher expands on theoretical models to understand, explain, and predict phenomena of CTE success in the community college; for, educators often seek competent, effective ways to direct their limited resources to help students succeed at their educational goals. Thus, assessing the applicability and utility of the persistence models discussed in this article may offer community college leaders guidance as they design retention interventions and assess student success (Hirschy et al., 2011).

Academic integration, involving the success in learning and interaction with faculty and staff, is also essential, in addition to finding the time and money to pursue educational goals (Lundberg, 2014). Even if academic integration is positive but environmental factors such as time and money are negative, the positive effects of academic integration suppress the negative (Choitz, 2011; Bean & Metzner, 1985). According to Wyatt's (2011) study of community college students, integration was more important to younger students 17 years old to 24 years old than older students over 25 years old study. Study skills essential to academic success were the most critical predictor of attrition for older students, and cognitive and personal development and goal commitment were significant for persistence for all groups (Wyatt, 2011). The framework developed by Bean and Metzner (1985) appeared to be particularly well suited for developing a theoretical model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition in career and technical education programs. Furthermore, any number of pre-and early-matriculation variables could be useful in predicting future retention.

Related Literature

Student retention rate has been a significant concern for institutions of higher learning since the inception of formal education years ago. In general, every student does not complete their program of study. Although nontraditional community college students fail to graduate for

different reasons, some choose to voluntarily withdraw from college. As a result, the image of the college is affected in ways relating to their financial plans and academic reputation. The need for strategies and methods based on the findings of the research are needed to resolve this critical issue. Life experiences can shape the nontraditional student's experience in community college, but in some cases, nontraditional students face academic challenges when they pursue higher education. Possibly, if students can take their personal experiences and make them work for their benefit, those experiences may produce successful outcomes in community college. The related literature review synthesized research on the significance of the community college in its preparation of nontraditional students to improve their chances for success in college and the workforce.

The Significance of the Community College

America's first community college is commonly thought to be Illinois's Joliet Junior College, founded in 1901 to prepare students for four-year universities (Sanburn, 2017). Other community colleges followed; however, their mission progressed following the Great Depression. Instead of providing degrees in the liberal arts, many two-year colleges became job-training hubs, producing nurses, teachers, police officers, dentists, and pilots (Sanburn, 2017). In comparison to four-year colleges, two-year colleges attract more women, minorities, and lower-income students and tend to be in rural towns and small cities. After the Great Recession, the vocational approach became the favored model.

Community colleges nationwide educate approximately 40% of all undergraduates in the U.S.; however, they are also facing a decline in enrollment and tightened budgets (Sanburn, 2017). Even as state officials hold community colleges as the answer to bridging America's yawning blue-collar skills gap, many are not equipped to deliver on the promise. According to

Sanburn (2017), many community college students drop out of their first year, and 40% do not graduate. While more than 80% of community college students attempt a bachelor's degree, only 14% are successful in their attainment after six years (Sanburn, 2017).

Community colleges can prepare students to be significant contributors to their communities by providing learning experiences beneficial to both the students and society (Chase, 2017; Lynch, 2016). College programs in many communities can also connect cultural, social, psychological, economic, political, environmental, and technological elements (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Travers, 2016; Windham, Reh fuss, Williams, Pugh, & Tincher-Ladner, 2014). According to Hanson (2006), community colleges ensure that American citizens took advantage of the democratic system by improving their lives through education and contributing to state and national economies.

The community college is a sanctuary where residents across local municipalities can join together to pursue higher education because it is conveniently located and accessible to students who want to acquire training and skills (Chase, 2017). Most community colleges are committed to serving citizens through an open-access admissions policy, an all-inclusive education program, and lifelong learning (Van der Sluis, May, Locke, & Hill, 2013). As open-door institutions, community colleges enroll a much more diverse set of students than four-year colleges and universities (Ma & Baum, 2016; Van der Sluis et al., 2013).

The value of certificates and associate's degrees has never been more apparent. Currently, \$36,000 is the median salary for a person with only a high school diploma. The wage gap is projected to increase as automation alters America's workforce, requiring critical skills in the fields of math, technology, engineering, and science. Fields that once required a little more than manual dexterity are going to be obsolete. "This year, 48% of small businesses reported that

they could not find qualified job applicants to fill open positions, according to the National Federation of Independent Business. Recognizing the need, states across the country have taken steps to make community colleges more accessible” (Sanburn, 2017, p. 46).

Community College Open Enrollment Policy

Most community colleges are committed to serving citizens through an open-access admissions policy, an all-inclusive education program, and lifelong learning (Van der Sluis, May, Locke, & Hill, 2013). Serving academically underprepared students is an essential objective of community colleges, but the practice is not without drawbacks. According to Bailey et al. (2004), the community college access mission promotes “low tuition, convenient location, flexible scheduling, an open-door admissions policy, programs and services” intended to support students who may have “various socioeconomic and academic barriers inhibiting postsecondary success” (p.73). One of the community college's attractive features may be the open enrollment policy, giving students who may have done poorly in high school a new start.

If community colleges were not accessible, many of these students might not have higher education opportunities.

While access to community colleges is an essential first step for students' wide diversity, they must also be studious after enrolling. Unfortunately, many students may never complete a degree. The revolving door can be costly in terms of human resources and money. The student who drops out may experience psychological loss, disappointment, and decreased earning power, whereas the institution experiences decreased students and loss of credibility (Bailey et al., 2004). Adverse outcomes of the open enrollment policy include enrichment courses offered for credit are being used in place of academic courses, resulting in increased retention and student satisfaction, but not in the mastery of academic skills (Bailey et al., 2004).

Career and Technical Education

Trump (2018) stated the following:

Vocational-Technical Education Week reminds us to consider how we can help all Americans achieve the American Dream by providing opportunities for all citizens to secure employment, success, and fulfillment. American strength and prosperity genuinely rely upon the educational advancement opportunities we make available to our Nation's youth. (p. 1)

In its early years, vocational education bears a resemblance to the current apprenticeship programs where college students learn from skilled workers in the community. The increasing need for skilled workers birthed new legislation. Around 1917, the United States government accredited the importance of vocational skills training to sign the Smith-Hughes Act (Martin, 2010). The Smith-Hughes Act permitted rural schools to provide academic and vocational programs in the same facility (Martin, 2010). Primarily, vocational programs were mainly the states' responsibility; however, the Smith-Hughes Act provided the federal provision of vocational education, which established Career and Technical Education (Martin, 2010). The 1920's growth of community college programs progressed because of an increase in Americans' needs (Fatherree, 2010). The Great Depression warranted two-year postsecondary institutions' creation to satisfy the American workforce's needs (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). Often referred to as community and junior colleges, these two-year institutions provide academic and career, and technical programs (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). The U.S. Department of Education (2016) defines Career and Technical Education as an educational pathway that combines academic and technical knowledge to prepare students for the working world (Hirschy, Bremer, & Castellano, 2011). According to Gordon (2014), the nineteenth-

century community colleges equipped individuals to work by providing internship opportunities or through the merger of vocational and academic training.

Today, 5.9 million American jobs are unfilled, and more than 350,000 of them are in manufacturing. Our Nation needs skilled workers to fill these roles, but postsecondary education's cost continues to rise. Simultaneously, many colleges and universities fail to adequately equip students with skills that align with the jobs in demand. Businesses large and small routinely observe that they cannot find qualified applicants to fill their vacancies. Vocational-technical schools help students explore their passions and enter the workforce with the necessary competencies to secure well-paying, family-sustaining jobs. (Trump, 2018, p. 1)

Although the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act was the foundation for vocational education, apprehensions arose over certain groups' segregation. Consequently, the Vocational Education Act of 1963 prepared a skilled workforce irrespective of an individual's incapacity or economic status (Gordon, 2014; Peterson, Rabe, & Wong, 1986). While laws were in place to educate and shape the labor force, many schools continued to discriminate against females (Corbett, Hill, & St. Rose, 2008). As a result, further regulations to deter discrimination in education were formed. For instance, Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 positions "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance" (U.S. Department of Justice (n.d.) Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972, 20 USC Section 1681, p. 943). The extent of Title IX ranges far beyond Career and Technical Education and ensures students the right to enroll in college regardless of gender, race, or

disabilities. The conversion of Career and Technical Education continues with the Carl D. Perkins Act of 1984.

Carl D. Perkins Act of 1984

The Carl D. Perkins Act of 1984, referred to as the Perkins Act, focuses on the revolution of females in conventionally male-dominated programs. The Carl D. Perkins Act of 1984 was rewritten in 1998 and 2006 to establish funding for vocational education programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). The Perkins Act currently mandates educational institutions to provide opportunities to educate nontraditional college students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Throughout the years, the name and program purpose of CTE has evolved from vocational education to the current, career, and technical education (Brand, Valent, & Browning, 2013). The Perkins Act implementation introduced the term CTE and substituted the term vocational education.

Any postsecondary educational institutions that receive Perkins funds must adhere to six standards or indicators to measure the CTE program's performance and the student. The credential and certification attainment standards evaluate technical skill attainment, student retention, placement, nontraditional participation, and nontraditional completion based on the percentage of performance level attainment. Perkins necessitates failing schools to reach acceptable performance levels to complete improvement strategies (National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity [NAPE], 2006). Community colleges currently use the same performance levels to gauge program enrollment and to measure CTE program success. In 2018, President Trump authorized Congress to revise and improve the Perkins Career and Technical Education program by making it easier for colleges to collaborate with businesses in the community while offering more internships and skills-based training programs (Trump, 2018). Additionally, the

Federal Work-Study programs were redesigned to assist the lower-income students in obtaining more “meaningful workplace experiences” in hopes that this combination prepares “the workforce of today for both the challenges and developments of tomorrow” (Trump, 2018, p. 1).

The Community College Student

The community college demographics include students entering from high school to current workforce participants attempting to improve technical skills (Colatrella, 2014). Community colleges set themselves apart from other higher learning institutions by offering technical programs that replicate the local community’s needs (Hagedorn & Purnamasari, 2012). The need then generates employed students equipped to contribute to the local and global economy (Hagedorn & Purnamasari, 2012). Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2014) predicted that more than 64% of all jobs in the economy would require postsecondary education and technical skills training by 2020. At the start of 2020, Blumenstyk (2020) asked the Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) at Georgetown University to verify or update these numbers. Although the data needed to verify these percentages can be nuanced and complicated, Nicole Smith, chief economist at CEW, indicated that 70% of all workers in the U.S. were in a job that requires postsecondary education. The Technical careers offered by CTE programs in the community and technical colleges across the United States then play a crucial role in revitalizing the economy (Schindelheim, 2017). According to Cohen and Brawer (2008), Providing Career and Technical Education continued to be an essential role of the community college. Furthermore, completing a community college degree represents a pathway to financial security for the student and the economy (National Science Foundation, 2012).

Community colleges function in designated districts to guarantee that all students have the opportunity to attend school in their local community. In the early years, the community

college's primary focus was to offer courses to satisfy matriculation requirements on the university level (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004). Nonetheless, the community college's focus altered due to the country becoming more involved in a more skilled workforce (Karable, 1989). At that point, community colleges became a training and development hub for individuals seeking to satisfy the local community and global need for specialized careers (Maguire, Starobin, Laanan, & Friedel, 2012; Starobin & Laanan, 2008).

Communities need varying degrees of human and social capital; therefore, the community colleges fill an exclusive scholastic void that contributes to the investment in and development of human and social capital in communities in the United States and worldwide (Chase, 2017; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). American community colleges' continued success rests on the mission and purpose of offering open access to affordable higher education regardless of fluctuations in the economy (Chase, 2017). Community colleges can train technicians for jobs in cutting-edge fields and grant associate degrees that allow students to complete the outstanding two years of their higher education at a four-year institution (Moschetti, & Hudley, 2015). The community college also represents the American-made opportunity for diverse individuals to develop and cultivate their talents and skills more thoroughly than any other educational institution (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2013). While the gap in economic security between college graduates and those with only a high school diploma widens, community colleges can be the gateway for the underrepresented and the working class.

The community college and its faculty may serve the broadest range of student ages, abilities, and interests of any institution in American higher education; thus, retention and graduation rates may be necessary for various reasons (Radford, Cominole, Skomsvold, 2015). From the college's perspective, students' retention is necessary for financial solidity and to

sustain academic programs. Public policymakers are promoting accountability, and one particular area of interest is student retention leading to graduation or transfer (Millea, Wills, Elder, & Molina, 2018; Ren & Li, 2013). Additionally, graduation rates to measure institutional effectiveness with the ultimate goal of students having valuable experience in college as they complete their academic goals to ultimately enter the workforce (Millea et al., 2018).

The Nontraditional Community College Student

At the higher education level, traditional learners are characteristically described as students who are 24 years old or younger (Wyatt, 2011). Likewise, the traditional community college student is typically defined as an individual who has graduated from high school (Wyatt, 2011). Traditional learners typically enter higher education after graduation from high school, and many traditional students continue to have parental financial support (Schreiner, 2013). In contrast, nontraditional students are typically age 25 or above, and many have commitments outside of education, such as work and family responsibilities (Bass & Ballard, 2012).

On the other hand, nontraditional students must balance work, school, and family, making traditional higher education scheduling nearly impossible to accommodate, creating the choice to attend community college a seemingly easy one to select (Duggan & Pickering, 2008; Rotar, 2017). Nontraditional students can enter the community college with different ethnicities, social backgrounds, learning styles, communication styles, ways of thinking, and motivational cues. The same reasons that draw in nontraditional students may be the same reasons that prevent non-traditional students from being retained

Choitz (2011) maintained that yesterday's traditional student replaces today's nontraditional student. The percentage of nontraditional students that community colleges enroll each year continues to escalate; yet, the percentage retained decreases (U.S. Department of

Education, 2015). Research can expose the need to retain the nontraditional students enrolled at community colleges (Choitz, 2011). The burden relies on college leaders and administration to increase graduation rates or risk a decrease in state and federal funding; therefore, nontraditional students must be retained (Choitz, 2011).

Nontraditional students in community colleges can bring with them characteristics that negatively impact student learning. Much research exists to define the characteristics that make nontraditional students unsuccessful in higher education (Duggan & Pickering, 2008; Fike & Fike, 2008; Jesnek, 2012). Research indicates that nontraditional students who are most often negatively impacted in higher education have numerous external commitments outside of education and are underprepared for college, creating barriers in a college learning environment (Bohl, Haak, & Shrestha, 2017). These same barriers can create an environment that makes higher education appealing to many nontraditional community college students. Bohl, Haak, and Shrestha (2017) noted that most community college students are adult or nontraditional students 24 years of age or older and represent the new community colleges' clientele. Rabourn, BrckaLorenz, and Shoup (2018) further explicated that community college students are more likely than four-year institutional students to be older, part-time students from lower-income households may have dependent children and be first-generation college students. While external personal characteristics associated with many nontraditional students are a leading contributor to the retention problem, community colleges' measure of success should not solely base on students passing courses, obtaining certifications, or completing degrees (Kimbark, Peters, & Richardson, 2017). Many nontraditional students in community colleges intend to learn and not just obtain a degree or certification (Hlinka, 2017).

To numerous nontraditional students, success may rest on enrolling in school and deciding whether the quest for higher education is the correct personal choice (Bohl, Haak & Shrestha, 2017; Choitz, 2011; Duggan & Pickering, 2008). Education in community colleges opens doors in higher education for many nontraditional students who would otherwise not have an opportunity to study (Windham, Reh fuss, Williams, Pugh, & Tincher-Ladner, 2014). “Too many education-policy experts, the poor graduation and job-placement rates at most community colleges are the result of asking under-resourced schools to serve under-resourced students in the community. Students frequently work part or full time to pay tuition, plus many are single parents. Too many colleges lack robust counseling or career-services offices “to keep students on track, let alone affordable on-campus childcare” (Sanburn, 2017, p. 46). Rather than basing success on overcoming the negatives, maybe success in community college education should be based on the opportunities higher education has provided to many nontraditional students.

The married student. Married students are nontraditional students who may be accountable for children's care and have family responsibilities before enrolling in college; however, those responsibilities still exist after enrollment. The burden to provide for families and concentrate on assignments can be overwhelming. Especially for women, they often can be overloaded with a disproportionate burden of household tasks and caregiver responsibilities when enrolled in college. When community colleges offer programs in several formats, such as evening and weekend programs, distance learning, and specialized programs such as career pathways, it permits married students to pursue formal educational training or degree programs with minimal interruption of their lives.

The working student. Work schedules and family responsibilities may prevent some adult students from attending college full-time. As a result, community colleges may attempt to

increase enrollment and retention rates by offering courses and times and formats convenient to students. Some examples of non-traditional delivery of courses include independent learning, open learning, contract programs, satellite classrooms, and distance learning centers (Heider, 2015; Rotar, 2017; Travers, 2016). Programs that successfully address workers' educational needs enhance their performance abilities and application of knowledge and skills to real-life situations faced daily. Educational programs for nontraditional community college students must move beyond merely teaching technical procedures and providing information; they must help adult workers build their critical, collaborative, integrative, and reflective skills (Bohl, Haak, & Shrestha, 2017; Fitzgerald & Singmaster, 2017; Kimbark, Peters, & Richardson, 2017; Markle, 2015; Rabourn, BrckaLorenz & Shoup, 2018). Because of the importance of work in their lives, many nontraditional students are most likely to pursue a vocational or career and technical education track (Cundall, 2013).

The online student. Adult learners may choose to participate in distance or online education programs as a matter of convenience. Technology has changed enormously during adult students' lives and can create problems for non-computer savvy adults (Jesnek, 2012; Rotar, 2017; Shea & Bidijerano, 2014; Travers, 2016). Without proper support for adult students, distance education courses may become problematic for them. For online learning to be engaging, educational leaders must shift from a teacher-centered learning environment to a student-centered learning environment; moreover, the online classroom depends on student interaction, engagement, and dialogue (Rotar, 2017; Shea & Bidijerano, 2014; Travers, 2016). These social and online dimensions remind adult students that they are working with people and can help alleviate the dissonance inherent in online learning (Rotar, 2017). Students must connect to the college and other students in all program formats if an increase in retention

is to occur (Rotar, 2017; Travers, 2016). In response to changing demographics, community colleges must become flexible in trying new ideas and course delivery methods to attract and retain nontraditional students (Fitzgerald & Singmaster, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

The commuter student. The commuter student population can be a diverse group composed of full-time students who reside with their parents, part-time students who reside in off-campus apartments, students with children at home, and students who work on a full-time basis. Typically, commuter students ride bikes, walk, drive to campus, or take public transportation to attend classes (Johnson& Pritchard, 1989). They may attend classes and then go home or to work, rarely spending additional time outside of the classroom on campus. Thus, the support of parents, spouses, and friends is significant to the nontraditional student's success (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Consequently, frequent contact with commuter students outside the classroom can be difficult to obtain; besides, commuters often have limited face-to-face contact with faculty and staff (Johnson& Pritchard, 1989). Therefore, commuter students must attempt to meet with faculty members outside of their official office hours. Forming relationships with administrators and faculty can be difficult for commuters because of these limited interactions outside of the classroom. Commuter students may rarely have the chance to participate in social clubs and recreational activities due to prior commitments off-campus.

Commuters are also concerned with transportation issues and limited parking availability on most campuses, which increases the difficulty of finding parking spaces (Johnson& Pritchard, 1989). Further, commuters often must arrange their course schedules to attend classes in large blocks of time, reducing the hours spent on campus. Because of the limited amount of time

spent on campus each day, commuter students have limited knowledge of the college's status, such as campus policies and procedures, the location of buildings, functions of university departments, and current events (Johnson & Pritchard, 1989). Tinto (1987) indicated that students who have high interaction with their university's academic and social systems are more likely to persist and be successful in college. Because commuter students spend less time on campus and limited time forming relationships with other students, staff, and faculty, they may have fewer opportunities to engage in quality face-to-face interactions. Thus, commuters are less likely to make a strong commitment to the college or its programs and have a higher chance of dropping out of college.

The developmental student. According to Kozeracki (2006), “Widespread institutional support for developmental education programs—as manifested inconsistent administrative support, sufficient financial resources, and pervasive faculty involvement—can help improve the outcomes of students who are most in need of the assistance and support that community colleges are willing and able to provide” (p. 72). Nontraditional students may be required to take developmental English, reading, and math courses if they are at risk of academic failure. Some nontraditional students enter college at academic levels below their peers and are less likely to persist than other students (Jaafar, Toce, & Polnariev, 2016; Moss, Kelcey, & Showers, 2014). Developmental assessments performed before entrance into college and after students complete general education coursework may provide insight into students who could be at risk of failure (Moss, Kelcey, & Showers, 2014; Scheiner, 2013). If nontraditional students cannot understand the material taught thoroughly, mastery of that material may become discouraging, and the probability of academic failure increases. Understanding student success in career and technical

education programs in 2-year colleges deserves focused attention as these students may have high drop-out rates.

Collins (2010) clearly stated, researchers are conflicted with “whether or not developmental education helps academically underprepared students enter and be successful in college-credit courses, transfer to 4-year institutions, earn credentials, complete degrees, and earn family-supporting wages in the workforce.” He further addressed the conflicting perspectives, examines opinions regarding the rigor of developmental education, and gave a thorough review of research strengths and weaknesses while suggesting several types of evidence to point college administrators and policymakers to better strategies and approaches.

However, to serve underprepared CTE students, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers must collaborate to develop educational programs and student services which promote success in college. According to Collins (2010), “success measures such as completion of developmental education requirements or gatekeeper courses, persistence, transfer, and graduation are all useful indicators of effectiveness.” However, we must go beyond those measures and find innovative ways to prepare all higher education students. Many CTE students fail to make normal progress in reading, mathematics, and writing; each year, the gap widens between their performance and students' achievements. Many reasons contribute to the failure to achieve average progress. As a possible solution, Collins (2010) suggests, “participation and input from all constituents should be elicited, evaluated for strengths and limitations, and applied appropriately”; moreover, they must “work together to identify and implement programs and services which promote student success in college.”

Student Success at Community Colleges

Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers all agree that maintaining a robust workforce and remaining internationally competitive requires the United States to have a qualified workforce, one that can fill jobs requiring certification, postsecondary career, and technical education, and training, or in many cases, a college degree (Boettcher, 2017; Gordon, 2017). Unfortunately, approximately 42% of first-year students in community colleges are underprepared academically for college courses (Moss, Kelcey, & Showers, 2014). A student's lack of preparedness in conjunction with other issues can negatively affect learning, impact attrition, and hinder college degree programs' completion. "Across the nation, community college, which educate about 40% of all undergraduates in the U.S., are facing declining enrollment and tightened budgets" (Sanburn, 2017, p. 46). Government officials proclaim community colleges provide the solution to bridging America's gaping blue-collar-skills gap, unfortunately, many community colleges are not equipped to deliver on the promise. "Less than 40% of community college students graduate, and many drop out in their first year. While more than 80% of two-year students say they want a bachelor's degree, only 14% get one after six years" (Sanburn, 2017, p. 46). Community colleges can educate adult, or nontraditional, students who come to campus academically unprepared. The students may often lack a formal education for some years; thus, academic placement tests may determine if students can handle curriculum courses or if additional assistance is needed with necessary skills (Jaafar, Toce, & Polnariiev, 2016). Subsequently, developmental courses in math, English, and reading may be required for students (Jaafar, Toce, & Polnariiev, 2016). Knowing students need developmental courses may lead college students to doubt their ability to perform at passing levels in curriculum courses and may discourage them from enrolling (Moss, Kelcey, & Showers, 2014). Although

community colleges have student services to assist with cultural issues, students hesitate to take advantage of them and instead suffer in silence to avoid the stigma associated with support services (Moss, Kelcey, & Showers, 2014).

When community college students decide to enroll in a program, the next steps may involve affording program tuition and seeking means to pay for them. Community college tuition is typically inexpensive in comparison to tuition at universities and 4-year colleges. The vast majority of adult or nontraditional students are considered independent regarding financial aid eligibility (Chase, 2017). Unfortunately, full-time working adult students may not be eligible for financial aid because financial need is the determining factor for federal aid.

According to Shea and Bidjerano (2014), student certification and degree completion at community colleges were 20 % lower than 4-year colleges, with students in community college completing a program of study within six years. Consequently, the low rates of completion of community college degree programs have raised questions about the federal government's efforts towards increasing access to higher education for non-traditional students through community colleges (Shea & Bidjerano, 2014). The increasing rates of enrollment compared to the amount of money spent per student coupled with low completion rates primarily raises concern in higher education about the effectiveness of community college degree programs and the seeming negative impacts on nontraditional students (Shea & Bidjerano, 2014).

Career and Technical Education Community College Students

An important caveat about student retention theories is that they have been developed primarily for students who pursue 4-year or professional degrees, mainly in the United States, and are not necessarily applicable to students who pursue technical degrees, particularly in countries outside of the United States (Tinto, 2012). To understand how conventional theories of

student retention apply to students in technical careers in U.S. community colleges, Smith, Baldwin, and Schmidt (2015) found that academic integration takes precedence over social integration, given the limited opportunities for these students to engage socially. Nevertheless, academic integration can take a social form, and social integration has academic utility. In this regard, Lundberg (2014) discussed the interconnectedness of the two forms of integration. For example, interactions with faculty in the classroom become a socio-academic integration mechanism through one-on-one exchanges that reinforce students' sense of belonging and self-efficacy.

An additional aspect of students' integration into technical careers may be the need for activities outside of the classroom related to career goals. Given the importance of skill application in occupational programs, including 2-year career and technical education, students seek direct practical links to their intended vocation (Draper, Oltean-Dumbrava, Kara-Zaitri, & Newbury, 2014; Hirschy, Bremer, & Castellano, 2011). According to Hirschy et al. (2011), this resulted in a need for career integration in addition to the structural and normative integration commonly used in 4-year or professional degrees. Some researchers define career integration as the level of commitment to a specific type of job and the degree of fit that students experience with career-related activities in or outside the classroom and on or off-campus (Bohl, Haak, & Shrestha, 2017). As can be seen, in technical education, clinical practicums, internships, job shadowing, and employment in a career-related position may be significant for the integration and, thus, retention of students.

Retention Issues Faced by Nontraditional Career and Technical Education Students

Understanding how nontraditional career and technical education students are distinct is essential to creating practical approaches to improve retention and other career and technical

education students (Jaafar, Toce, & Polnariev, 2016; Mertes, & Jankoviak, 2016). According to Lynch (2016), delivering CTE in one “community may not be logistically feasible or effective in serving students in another area.” Thus, local choices about program design should be made using the insights of CTE professionals in those schools (p. 12).

Nontraditional CTE students interested in pursuing training, certificate, or degree programs may often face numerous barriers such as lack of finances and lack of academic preparation, cultural issues, social issues, and constant family responsibilities. While planning programs, community college administrators could provide accurate identification of barriers for target groups and reduce barriers and meet adult students' needs (Chase, 2017; Duggan & Pickering, 2008; Lundberg, 2014; Mertez & Jankoviak, 2016). When community colleges meet nontraditional CTE students' needs, the outcome may increase student enrollment and retention rates. Although some nontraditional CTE students choose to begin postsecondary studies at community colleges, there is also an emerging pattern of these students returning to community colleges to complete programs or learn new skills (Boettcher, 2017; Fitzgerald & Singmaster, 2017; Hlinka, 2017; Lynch, 2016). Community colleges serve most nontraditional students interested in upgrading skills or changing careers (Boettcher, 2017; Fitzgerald & Singmaster, 2017; Hlinka, 2017; Lynch, 2016).

The barriers that deter students from enrolling in college can be the same barriers that prevent them from remaining in programs until completion. Schmid and Abell (2003) posit that study patterns and student involvement put community college students at risk of not finishing a program or attaining a degree. Other barriers include late entry, part-time enrollment, full-time work, financial independence, dependents, single parenthood, and community college attendance without a high school diploma. These risk factors are shared characteristics of adult students,

which may assume that adult students are destined to drop out of college. Nontraditional CTE students may leave programs before completion due to those factors, including academic failure, social isolation, and family responsibilities.

The literature states that many nontraditional career and technical education students enroll in higher education institutions to obtain additional certification and training (Mendoza, Malcolm, & Parish, 2015). Thus, many non-traditional career and technical education students are not only degree-seeking but information-seeking to advance in their respective careers (Van der Horst, Klehe, & Van der Heijden, 2017). Of course, this can be perceived negatively by faculty who think that attendance in a college or university program should always have the goal of obtaining a degree. Although obtaining a degree is essential, community colleges can help provide career pathways for nontraditional students looking to gain employment or industry workers seeking to advance.

With career and technical degrees, community colleges can provide skills and training for differing needs customizable to their respective communities. Community colleges are change agents for many individuals in the pursuit of the American dream (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Ren & Li, 2013); thus, these two-year schools need to become flexible in teaching nontraditional career and technical education students through less traditional methods in order to increase retention (Van der Sluis, May, Locke, & Hill, 2013). Community and technical colleges provide economic viability in a country suffering from the effects of a global pandemic that will continue to have ramifications into the future: “Vocational-technical schools prepare Americans for careers in critical sectors of our economy, including manufacturing, construction, and technology fields. These industries are essential to our Nation's prosperity and security, as well as to our success in the competitive global marketplace” (Trump, 2018, p.1).

Summary

The public community college's primary responsibility in America is to guarantee open access to the many citizens who desire an improved quality of life and live out the American dream. Various students come to the two-year college hampered with predictors of failure in their endeavors. Students may be underachievers, middle to low income, and require a supportive collegiate environment to succeed. State community college systems that recognize the realities of the student populations they seek to serve, with appropriate planning, can position the campuses to improve the likelihood of student persistence and success. Practicing educators and administrators have studied educational theoreticians to solve the challenges faced in managing higher learning institutions; thus, it is appropriate that educational practices begin with the functional theory. Community college systems and their constituent campuses interested in improving student success and persistence are encouraged to examine the available tested theory, engage in process planning, and activate new programs and procedures designed to improve the chances of student success.

Higher education is “vital to maintaining our competitive position in an increasingly knowledge-dependent world economy” (Bowen, 2011, p. 144) while also adequately preparing individuals for upward social mobility. Moreover, human capital investment in receiving some education beyond high school includes community colleges, technical schools, and trade schools that may contribute to the education of the workforce and sustainability of the economy (Bušíková, 2013; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). While higher education can be a change agent for individuals from diverse backgrounds, everyone is not suited to enroll in a university (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Thus, a community college degree is measured as an essential and valuable means of economic and social advancement (Belfield & Bailey, 2011). For this

reason, increasing retention among nontraditional community college students has been the topic of educational research (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Rabourn, BrckaLorenz, & Shoup, 2018; Snyder & Cudney, 2017; Travers, 2016).

Nontraditional CTE students face many barriers threatening enrollment and retention efforts in community college programs. Academic, financial, social, cultural, and personal issues may hinder adult students from completing training or associate degrees. It is the community colleges' responsibility to reduce or eliminate institutional barriers and assist students in overcoming barriers in their lives. Reducing student and institutional barriers increases enrollment and retention numbers, thus preparing students to enter the workforce. Community college students may face an obstacle course of personal and academic challenges on the path to a degree. The transformed interest in community colleges is essential for changing these vital institutions into pathways to the technical and computer skills that serve as the foundation for vibrant economies (Boettcher, 2017). As the number of non-traditional students majoring in career and technical education programs at community colleges increases, understanding how nontraditional career and technical education students can be retained warrants further research.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The current research of continuous enrollment of nontraditional career and technical education students can help community college administrators plan curricula and programs, decrease barriers, and meet students' needs, thus increasing student enrollment and retention rates. This research attempted to reveal the nontraditional career and technical education students' experiences and perceptions concerning the continuous enrollment phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). The contents of Chapter Three include the research methodology to be used in this phenomenological qualitative study. The first section of the chapter describes the research design, followed by the three research questions to guide the study. The third section identifies the study's proposed site, and the fourth section details how the participants were selected. Section five identifies the researcher's role, which is followed by data collection methods in section six. This study's data collection methods included face-to-face interviews, focus groups, and career technical education program documentation analysis. These methods provided information helpful in answering the research questions. Data were analyzed using Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition in section seven. The information to be gathered and analyzed helped uncover the truth through various viewpoints, including personal views, to support the development of themes and sub-themes during data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Chapter Three concluded with a discussion of the trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and a summary of this research study.

Design

The qualitative design of this study was grounded in phenomenological research exploring the phenomenon of continuous student enrollment. The research attempted to provide a multifaceted yet comprehensive conceptual understanding, which helped increase students' retention. More specifically, the research seeks to provide a more thorough understanding of the students majoring in career and technical education programs at a community college. According to Patton (2015), "Quantitative inquiry requires converting concepts into operationalized measurable variables. Qualitative inquiry leaves concepts open for exploration and illumination in the field" (p. 361). Therefore, a qualitative methodology is better suited than a quantitative methodology because a qualitative approach revolves around a particular phenomenon's life experiences and distills those individual lessons into an essential concept (Creswell, 2013). In the current research, a phenomenological approach may be able to provide an intricate and comprehensive conceptual understanding of retention issues of students, which cannot be explained by utilizing quantitative research methods

Moreover, this phenomenological study intended to understand the student's perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of a particular situation. Moustakas (1994) posited that a phenomenology study is concerned with totality and investigative entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until an integrated vision of the cores of a phenomenon or experience is attained. The researchers became immersed inside the meaning and the world of the nontraditional community college student, and by applying the qualitative, phenomenological design, the story should directly unfold through the participant's perspective (Moustakas, 1994). Utilizing the phenomenological approach in a qualitative research study reiterates that its primary objective and essence are to explore the background of the research

participants and allow them to narrate the research findings through those experiences (Moustakas, 1994). In summary, qualitative phenomenological researchers can focus their attention on various aspects of the data while providing a framework to conduct their analysis (Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2016).

Although the theories of a phenomenological design can give qualitative researchers different viewpoints from which to examine complicated problems and social issues, transcendental phenomenology adds depth and dimension when studying human experiences, problems, and issues through qualitative research (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2013). Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is a philosophical approach to qualitative research methodology in quest of a more profound understanding of human experience (Moustakas, 1994). When the research applies the transcendental phenomenological approach, the researcher sets aside preconceived ideas and allows the true meaning of phenomena to naturally emerge (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Questions

The following central research question and guiding questions formed the basis for this transcendental phenomenological study.

Central Research Question

What experiences do nontraditional career and technical education students describe as having a meaningful influence on their continuous enrollment at the community college?

Sub-question One

How do non-traditional career and technical students perceive that environmental factors influence their continuous enrollment at the community college?

Sub-question Two

In what ways do non-traditional career and technical students perceive that academic factors impact their continuous enrollment at the community college?

Setting

The site for this study was at Lake County Community College (LCCC). Lake County Community College is a comprehensive public institution located in a southern state serving three counties. LCCC has three main campuses across three counties: Lake, French, and Dawson counties. The Dawson county campus is the largest, and the French county campus is the smallest. LCCC was selected for this research study because it currently offers multiple career technical and education degrees and has a high nontraditional student population enrolled in traditional, online, and hybrid CTE programs. LCCC satisfied the “criterion” sample and contained the most “individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon being explored and can articulate their lived experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p. 150).

LCCC provides innovative educational and cultural opportunities to its students through campus-based and online programs. LCCC seeks to prepare its career and technical education students for productive employment and lifelong learning by offering an Associate of Applied Science degree, technical certificates, and career certificates, as well as workforce training. The curriculum at LCCC consists of Academic Pathway Programs and Career Technical Pathway Programs. Each of these programs has directors and deans who oversee the Academic and Career Technical divisions' daily operations and reports to the Vice President. Faculty, staff, and adjuncts are under the leadership of the community college president.

LCCC, whose primary commitment is to excellence in all areas, offers affordable, equal access to higher education in an attractive, secure, multi-campus environment. To

protect the site's anonymity, I used the pseudonym Lake County Community College. LCCC is a medium, public community college located within Lake County, serving three counties in a southern state. To protect the counties' anonymity, I also used the pseudonyms Lake, French, and Dawson counties.

Participants

For this research study, 22 potential participants were identified using the Demographic Criteria for Participation Selection Nontraditional Career and Technical Education Student Form (see Appendix A). Of the 22 invited, 17 agreed to participate and submitted signed consent forms. Of the 17 participants, 15 students were female, and two were male, and the average age of the participants was approximately 38 years, the oldest being 74 and the youngest 24. The participants were also required to have been enrolled at the institution for at least one whole year and stayed enrolled at least until the time of the interview.

I used purposeful sampling to select the sites and specific individuals for rich information (Patton, 2015). Purposeful sampling gave a reason for the data, enhances quality assurance, and allowed the researcher to select participants based on specific criteria (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). In a qualitative study, a sample size of 12 is large enough to give voice to the nontraditional career and technical education students represented in the study (Patton, 2015). Students' sample came from completed Demographic Criteria for Participation Selection Nontraditional Career and Technical Education Student Forms collected through Student Support Services located at Lake County Community College. LCCC permits the use of educational records for research purposes with the student's consent; thus, an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix B) was obtained by the researcher to prevent violations of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. The following pseudonyms were also used to protect the identity of the

research participants and to ensure the anonymity of responses: Nora, Sage, Tess, Mandell, Avis, Laura, Eden, Mari, Zora, Elsa, Gabi, Zara, Kenzi, Nyla, Havyn, Jace, and Ivey. Table 1 lists demographic information for each research participant.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Number	Participant	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Campus/County
1	Nora	female	25	Asian	Dawson
2	Sage	female	54	Black	Lake
3	Tess	female	53	Black	French
4	Mandell	male	55	Black	Dawson
5	Avis	female	24	Black	Lake
6	Laura	female	35	Black	French
7	Eden	female	74	Black	Dawson
8	Mari	female	34	Black	Lake
9	Zora	female	26	White	French
10	Elsa	female	26	White	Dawson
11	Gabi	female	30	White	Lake
12	Zara	female	28	Black	French
13	Kenzi	female	28	White	Dawson
14	Nyla	female	31	White	Lake
15	Havyn	female	34	Black	French
16	Jace	male	66	Black	Dawson
17	Ivey	female	24	Black	Lake

Note. The names listed are pseudonyms

Procedures

Upon approval from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board, I obtained a listing of prospective participants from LCCC Student Support Services using the Demographic Criteria for Participation Selection Nontraditional Career and Technical Education Student Form (see Appendix A). The student demographic form ensured the research participants meet the criteria during sample selection. Prospective participants were the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix B) via email. Once the participant returned the consent form, the researcher contacted the participants via e-mail and telephone to schedule their interviews and arrange for receipt of the Interview Guide (see Appendix E).

Atkinson (2017) noted, “Interviews and focus groups are the most prevalent qualitative methods used by scholars who operate from ontological positions focused on social construction and the negotiation of meaning” (p. 69). A semi-structured interview style was employed, which offers structure and flexibility to investigate the continuous enrollment phenomenon (Atkinson, 2017; Patton, 2015). The researcher provided the interview questions before the scheduled meeting to allow the research participants’ an opportunity to resonate with the questions to add quality and depth to the research participants’ responses. An interview guide ensured consistency across participant interviews and the organization of data collected for the research analysis phase (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Additionally, uniformity-guided interviews were used to “aid in a constant comparative process that is typically utilized in grounded theory and thematic analyses” (Atkinson, 2017, p.70). After agreeing to take part in the study, participants emailed the researcher with a convenient time to be interviewed. All interviews were scheduled according to the participants’ availability, and the sessions were recorded via Zoom audio with the consent of each research participant.

In comparison to individual interviews, the focus groups may provide a broader insight into retention within the community college (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Thus, I employed focus group interviews as a quick and convenient way to collect data from several students simultaneously while explicitly using group interaction as part of the method (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). This research consisted of two focus groups, with seven students in each group possessing common characteristics that relate to the focus group topic (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007).

Students were selected from the Demographic Criteria for Participation Selection Nontraditional Career and Technical Education Student Form (see Appendix A). Segmented samples emphasized homogeneity in focus groups' composition (Krueger & 2014; Patton, 2015). Homogeneity allowed for more free-flowing discussions among students within groups and facilitated analyses that examine differences in perspective between groups (Krueger & 2014; Patton, 2015). Thus, I chose nontraditional CTE students to capitalize on the shared experiences of the participants. Subsequently, homogeneous focus groups of career and technical education nontraditional students were formed to increase communication and dialogue among research participants to produce research data. Previously interviewed participants were invited to participate in the focus groups. As the facilitator, I used a Focus Group Guide (see Appendix F) to support the two focus groups' reliability, ensuring that both groups were conducted in the same manner. With the consent of each participant, I recorded the responses of the focus groups using Zoom audio.

I opened each session with the introductory script. Although most of the questions were memorized, I read some of the focus group questions for verification. As

the conversation flowed among the participants, I occasionally paused and allowed each participant to finish their thoughts. To achieve an open dialogue atmosphere, I encouraged participants to talk to one another: asking questions, exchanging stories, and commenting on each other's experiences and points of view. At the end of the discussion, I closed the sessions using the text from the script. As the interviewer, I formed a nurturing and non-judgmental environment that invited different points of view and perceptions and dialogue without forcing focus group participants to reach a consensus on the topic of discussion (Krueger, 2014). This research focused on obtaining detailed information about the participants' opinions, perceptions, and personal and group feelings.

In addition to the interviews and focus groups, I examined existing and historical resources such as student withdrawal reports corroborating the reasons for withdrawing from school. Additional data analysis included student attendance reports, student appeals, graduation reports, and student evaluation reports to produce scientific data provided by LCCC. Personal document analysis attempted to reveal student perceptions into understanding and ultimately increasing the retention of career and technical education nontraditional students. I concurrently reviewed the personal and program documentation, interview data, and focus group data. The use of historical resources and personal documentation increased the trustworthiness of the research study through triangulation.

The Researcher's Role

In this qualitative study, my role as a researcher was an instrument of data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Data collected from the students was facilitated through the researcher, the human instrument; thus, to achieve this role, readers needed to know about me. My interest in the subject of continuous enrollment of nontraditional career and technical

education students stemmed from my own experience of teaching these students for over ten years. This study took into account existing research and developed it further to highlight and give voice to nontraditional students' experiences in the under-represented field of career and technical education.

I was committed to taking the current research on the phenomenon of retention to develop it further and find an edge to work on. I used the transcendental phenomenological methodology to explore students' lived experiences through personal accounts of their enrollment in the community college. I reported multiple realities from nontraditional career and technical education students' perspectives by exploring multiple forms of evidence from different students' experiences through social constructivism. I provided an understanding of the realm in which nontraditional career and technical education nontraditional students live and work and the development of multiple meanings.

I am committed to helping career and technical education students explore and prepare to enter the workforce in accounting, medical office technology, billing and coding, and business management technology by using hands-on teaching techniques to help students learn and develop career-specific skills. I believe that my personal experience as a Business Technology instructor in the career and technical education division played a beneficial role and helped me understand and aware of the significance of these students' experiences. Also, serving as the District Department Chair and student advisor to 113 students aided in developing my data collection methods by providing insight into proper and effective research and interview questions.

Methodological, philosophical assumptions guided this research “using inductive logic, studies the topic within its context, and uses an emerging design” (Creswell, 2013, p. 21). As the

researcher, I described and outlined any biases and assumptions and my qualifications to conduct the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Patton, 2015). Underlying philosophical assumptions and constructivist worldview helped shape the research direction (Saldana, 2016). More importantly, I acknowledged and described my entering beliefs and personal biases, which allow readers to appreciate their positions (Patton, 2015). Those biases were bracketed as I describe the personal experiences while using validity procedures through my own researcher's lens (Moustakas, 1994). I collected data from students' influences, experiences, opinions, and beliefs. I had no authority over the students in this research. I spent time with the student and took the time to understand their perspective and value their voices and experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Then, social, cultural, and historical forces shaped the researcher's interpretation by incorporating reflexivity into a narrative account (Moustakas, 1994). Community college educators and administrators may use these conclusions from this research to develop institutional programs to meet the specific needs of nontraditional career and technical education students to retain them to graduation.

Data Collection

In this research, phenomenology was committed to the students' descriptions of experiences rather than explanations or analyses (Moustakas, 1994). Data gathered provided comprehensive descriptions mainly through spoken or written language instead of numbers (Patton, 2015; Polkinghome, 2005). Researchers relied on the students' perspectives to reveal insight into their motivations to remain enrolled in college. Also, researchers used various methods, such as conducting interviews, facilitating focus groups, and reading reports to narrow the idea and bring significant meaning to the research (Yin, 2014). In phenomenological studies, researchers often develop into a single idea and conduct many interviews with universal

themes to build a sufficient data collection to look for emerging issues and to use other participants to confirm the findings (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015; Saldana, 2016; Yin, 2014).

Researchers can understand phenomenological research more by doing it because there is a distinct difference between comprehending intellectual phenomenology and understanding it from the inside (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological research method can be structured using sequential steps, following the direction, the experience indicates a discovery-oriented approach (Moustakas, 1994). The data collection process of research starts with describing the student's situation experienced in daily life and comes from reflexive thought (Patton, 2015). Patton (2015) explained that reflexivity "reminds the qualitative inquirer to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and economic origins of one's perspective and voice as well as the perspective and voices of those one interviews and those to whom one reports" (p. 70). The participants' descriptions are obtained and then documented by the researchers, who must set aside any preconceived thoughts, conceptions, or judgments (Moustakas, 1994).

Document management can be "overwhelming before the process of analysis has even started"; consequently, "researchers should work through their vast collection of data in three steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing" (Atkinson, 2017, p. 94). I collected data at specific points in time and compared it to changes in knowledge, attitudes, behavior, and patterns (Patton, 2015); hence, accurate records of all data were collected. According to Patton (2015), research data is an essential part of the research and evaluation process. So clear and detailed records of all the data were in the form of semi-structured face-to-face interviews, focus groups, and CTE program document analysis. Collecting data from three different strategies allowed me to

triangulate the information received from participants, thus achieving authenticity and dependability in the research process (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; O’Leary, 2014).

According to Flick (1992), triangulation encompasses at least two perspectives of an issue that allows the researcher to remove biases by applying another viewpoint to validate the study. Denzin (1978) denoted that data triangulation utilizes data collected from people outside of the original participant group. Besides semi-structured interviews, I conducted a second set of focus interviews involving nontraditional career and technical students. I then reviewed the interview transcripts, discovered themes, and determined if the themes are like those from the face-to-face interviews. This perspective allowed me to validate the findings (Creswell, 2013). Each validation perspective offers a strategy for potential ethical concerns that may arise while “conducting the study, at the beginning of the study, during the data collection, in data analysis, in reporting the data, and publishing a study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 57).

For this study, I utilized member checking, clarification of researcher bias, detailed, thick description, and triangulation to determine authenticity, which is the qualitative researcher’s validity (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; O’Leary, 2014). To establish authenticity (validity in qualitative research), I used member checking to ensure accuracy in data reporting. Member checking allows the research participants the opportunity to review the collected data before it becomes part of the final manuscript (Merriam, 2002) and to ensure the accuracy of transcribed information. Research participants reviewed the data summary to determine if the researcher captured the experience and views truthfully (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). If the accounts were not accurate, I revised and documented a more realistic account of the participant’s response (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Member checking can assist researchers in monitoring their actions and ensures findings are reliable. The

review process provides credibility as it allows the participant the opportunity to validate the summarized transcribed data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), “member checking is the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314) as it allows the participant the chance to reply to the researcher’s interpretative version of their words.

The research literature suggested using reflexivity to eliminate or at least minimize researcher bias and preconceived ideas about the study (Berger, 2015). Reflexivity in qualitative research involves taking a subjective view of one’s role in the research and recognizing personal views may affect the review process (Berger, 2015). Phenomenological research includes the procedure of bracketing the researcher’s prior assumptions about the research subject to eliminate potential bias (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). In the research assessments, I did not minimize the research participant’s uniqueness (Berger, 2015).

Denzin (1989) describes rich, thick description as a method of adding details to an account of a situation that provides readers with enough information that mentally transports them to the occurrence. Integrating detailed, thick descriptions into the research adds validity and allows the researcher to detail participants' emotions and bring to life their interactions in the topic of a research study (Denzin, 1989). I included vivid and graphic research elements to add credibility to the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Semi-Structured Face-to-Face Interviews

Interviews were used to gather information from the research participants. Interview protocols consisted of questions focused on specific topics of interest to gain more information about the research participants. More specifically, semi-structured interviews were structured

conversations involving a pre-determined set of questions to obtain qualitative information (Babbie, 2016). According to Smith (2008), semi-structured interviews were most appropriate when understanding the participant's perspective. Unlike structured interview questions, semi-structured interviews did not bind me to predefined questions, which allowed me the opportunity to establish a connection with the research participant (Smith, 2008). The interview was the primary data collection method, where the research participants' descriptions are explored, highlighted, and probed using reflections, explanations, and requests for examples and feedback (Patton, 2015). From a phenomenological point of view, meaning must be an outcome of the researcher's collaboration and the participant rather than merely the interpretation of the researcher, who may have different contextual reasons influencing the descriptions (Moustakas, 1994).

The recorded interview was intended to understand the phenomenon of continuous enrollment by exploring the lived experiences of nontraditional career and technical education students facing barriers and risks of being retained at a community college. Each participant's response was recorded by hand and electronically. Each response was kept confidential and was not be published in the dissertation manuscript or any other publications. Any references to the research participants were in the form of pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities. I used an iPhone audio recording device to document the approximate one-hour, semi-structured interview with the participant's permission. Each participant selected an alias to document her responses. The use of audio recorders increased the interviews' reliability and allowed the researcher to review the transcribed data while listening to the recorded interviews.

If, at any point, the participant did not wish to answer any of the interview questions or wished to no longer participate in the interview, the recording stopped, and the interview

terminated immediately. The interview lasted approximately one hour, depending on the response time of each participant. I ensured the setting was quiet and free from background noise to increase each audible recording's clarity. Then, I transcribed the interviews that were done face-to-face.

During the face-to-face interviews, I used the Interview Guide (see Appendix E) to employ probing, opinion, and meaningful questions intended to understand the participants' perspectives. The interview guide was developed based on the theoretical foundations in phenomenology and from an extensive review of current and historical literature and semi-structured interview questions to create themes that emerge during the interviews (Patton, 2015). Field notes were taken and transcribed into Microsoft Word during the face-to-face interviews and focus groups on ensuring accuracy and completeness as I listened to the question responses, documented observations, and recorded fragments of speech (Patton, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Semi-Structured Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. Describe any experiences that you have had which positively influenced your continued enrollment at the community college.
2. Describe what aspects of the experience made it positive.
3. Describe any experiences that you have had, which negatively influenced your continued enrollment at the community college.
4. Describe what aspects of the experience made it negative.
5. Describe the experiences that were harder to overcome.
6. Describe the experiences that were easier to overcome.
7. Describe any positive experiences you feel were created exclusively by you.

8. Describe any positive experiences you feel were created by someone other than you.
9. Describe any negative experiences you feel were created exclusively by you.
10. Describe any negative experiences you feel were created by someone other than you.
11. Please share anything that we have not covered concerning your college experience.

Open-ended questions one through eleven were designed to gather rich textual information from the underserved nontraditional students in higher education (Kimbark, Peters, & Richardson, 2017; Mertes & Jankoviak, 2016; Rabourn, BrckaLorenz, & Shoup, 2018). Students informally described their experiences that positively and negatively influenced their continued enrollment at the community college. This information seized the opportunity to adopt higher education practices to meet the needs of nontraditional students.

Academic integration, involving the success in learning and interaction with faculty and staff, is essential to nontraditional student success in college, in addition to finding the time and money to pursue educational goals (Lundberg, 2014). Questions two, six, and eight focused on if academic integration is positive, whereas questions three, four, and five focused on environmental factors such as time and money are negative. Research indicated that nontraditional students who are most often negatively impacted in higher education have numerous external commitments outside of education and are underprepared for college, creating barriers in the college learning environment (Bohl, Haak, & Shrestha, 2017). According to Choitz (2011) and Bean and Metzner (1985), academic integration's positive effects may suppress the negative.

More specifically, questions seven through ten allowed the students to further open up about positive and negative experiences with the ability to freely relay whether those experiences were created by them or someone else. Questions seven through ten also allowed students to

share their experiences with “little constraint from the researcher” (Atkinson, 2017, p. 73). Each question was designed to determine the significant influence on encouragement from possible friends, employers, and family members (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Work schedules and family responsibilities may have prevented some adult students from attending college full-time. As a result, community colleges attempted to increase enrollment and retention rates by offering courses and times and formats convenient to students (Heider, 2015; Rotar, 2017; Travers, 2016).

Throughout the interview, follow-up questions were used as needed when the researcher requires more clarification of the participant responses and uncovered rich descriptive responses on the research participants' personal experiences (Patton, 2015). Question eleven allowed the participant to “elaborate and converse with little prompting” while adding more to the personal narrative (Atkinson, 2017, p. 73). Information gathered during semi-structured interviews moved the research process from general topics to more specific insights (Patton, 2015). “Essentially, participants should have the ability to relay stories to researchers that encapsulate their understanding about the subject at hand” (Atkinson, 2017, p. 73). I adjusted the questions as necessary for each participant using terms that participants can understand, given their knowledge, language skills, cultural background, age, and gender (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Focus Groups

Focus groups typically consist of a small group of four to 12 people to explore research participants' attitudes, feelings, ideas, and perceptions in a non-threatening setting (Morgan & Spanish, 1984). Focus groups often meet with a trained researcher or moderator for one to two hours, discussing selected topics encouraged by group

interactions (Morgan & Spanish, 1984). Researchers who employ focus groups usually conduct them in conjunction with other qualitative methods. Morgan and Spanish (1984) proclaimed focus groups not only give researchers access to certain kinds of qualitative phenomena that are poorly studied with other methods but also represent an essential tool for “breaking down narrow methodological barriers” (p. 254). The use of focus groups in this study was comprised of nontraditional career and technical education students brought together by the researcher to gain a consensus view and information about the issue of retention.

Semi-Structured Open-Ended Focus Group Questions

1. Discuss with the group three words that describe your feelings about attending college.
2. What does a quality college education mean to you?
3. When you first enrolled, what did you hope to get out of your college experience?
4. Describe your experiences and the skills obtained while enrolled as a nontraditional career and technical education student.
5. Describe what you find appealing about your experience at the community college.
6. Describe what you find frustrating about your experience at the community college.
7. Describe how the college could improve your community college experience and make it more appealing.
8. Describe the ways your college experience has prepared you to be a responsible and contributing member of your community.
9. Please share anything that I have not covered concerning your college experience.

I examined how students think and why they think that way using systematic analysis of the discussions. As the focus group researcher and facilitator, I attempted to fully engage the students to get their honest feedback using Question one. Question number one attempted to

obtain the overall attitude in which students have about college. I made them feel relaxed and comfortable in their surroundings to open up and talk more with questions two and three. Question number two was designed to assess what constitutes a quality education from the perspective of the student. Question three focused on the student's preconceived ideas about college. I needed to facilitate an open environment for research because I did not want the students to retreat and risk not getting the input needed. The researcher “should be prepared to interject throughout the focus group and give opportunities to more silent participants to speak up” (Atkinson, 2017, p. 76).

Question four sought specific types of knowledge, skills, and experiences to gain from the student's college experience. In the community college setting, career, and technical education, students choose between several specialized study tracks such as healthcare, business, engineering, and construction (Hirschy, Bremer, & Castellano, 2011). Questions five and six hopefully awoke both their severe and creative sides offering what appeals and frustrates them as college students. Although community colleges have student services to assist with cultural issues, students hesitate to take advantage of them and instead suffer in silence to avoid the stigma associated with support services (Moss, Kelcey, & Showers, 2014). Question seven expounded on how the college could improve the overall college experience. Question eight sought to know what specific skills learned in college are essential in the professional world. The community college is a sanctuary where residents across local municipalities can pursue higher education because it is conveniently located and accessible to students who want to acquire training and skills (Chase, 2017). Perhaps adults could be more focused on achieving their goals, such as finishing the program or gaining the skills needed; therefore, learning may be more important than college's social aspects.

Question nine allowed students to add comments during the focus group discussion. After the focus group discussion, I identified and provided clues and insights and patterns and trends in perceptions. Using the Zoom audio recording, the focus group notes were written, recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to “provide a richer understanding of the role of such actions in intersubjective meaning-making, interpretive processes, and the social construction of reality” (Atkinson, 2017, p. 81).

CTE Program Documentation Analysis

Document analysis, a logical method in qualitative research, is a systematic technique for studying or assessing printed and electronic research material (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Document analysis was beneficial when blended with other qualitative research methods to produce triangulation because sound qualitative research includes multiple evidence sources (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2014). Convergence and corroboration using multiple data sources such as documents, interviews, artifacts, and reports served as research evidence to increase credibility (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2014). By examining information collected through various research methods, I supported triangulation findings and minimized potential biases that may exist in a single research study (Patton, 2015).

Document analysis in this research included examining and interpreting data to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Existing and historical documents contained text, words, graphs, and images prerecorded without a researcher’s interposition. Document analysis included course and school withdrawal reports, attendance cutout reports, student appeals, and graduation reports to produce scientific data and discover relevant insight into understanding and ultimately increase the retention of career and technical education nontraditional students.

Course and school withdrawal report. The withdrawal reports occasionally provided supporting documentation to substantiate the reason for withdrawing from school. Possible reasons for withdrawal include extreme hardship, absenteeism, and extended hospitalization due to an injury, illness, or disease. Thus, supporting information on the withdrawal request may provide insight into the factors causing students to leave college precipitately.

Attendance cutout report. The attendance cutout report provided the last absence recorded by the instructor. At that point, the student is cut out and is automatically withdrawn from a course. When a student is cut out of a course or school and desires to be considered for reinstatement, he or she must present a written request for reinstatement along with documentation for absences.

Student appeal. When a student receives a cutout for excessive absenteeism, the student can request reinstatement. If a student disagrees with the ruling concerning his/her request for reinstatement, the student may initiate the Appeals. If the student desires to petition the decision, they must write an appeal letter to the appropriate department within three (3) school days of the decision. The student's appeal was forwarded to the Appeals Committee comprising three (3) LCCC employees (administrators, professional staff, and instructors). If the student is not satisfied with the outcome of the decision of the Appeals Committee, they may petition higher to the community college President. The student must send their request to appeal via email to the President within three (3) school days of the Appeals Committee's decision.

Graduation report. Meeting the requirements for CTE graduation is the responsibility of the student. Lake County Community College awards the following degrees and certificates for CTE: Technical Certificate, Advanced Technical Certificate, Career Certificate, Certificate of

Graduation, and Associate of Applied Science Degree (AAS). The Technical Certificate is awarded to students who complete the prescribed coursework (minimum of 30 semester hours) for a Technical Program. The Advanced Technical Certificate is awarded to CTE students who complete the prescribed coursework (minimum of 45 semester hours) for a Technical Program. The Associate of Applied Science Degree is awarded to CTE students who complete the prescribed coursework (minimum of 60 semester hours) for a Technical Program. Granting a few programs offer the possibility of university transfer upon completion of the AAS. The technical programs' design is to provide CTE graduates with the technical skills required to enter the labor force and compete at a level of a semi-professional or technician.

Data Analysis

According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is an analysis based on distinct methodological explorations involving a social or human problem. I constructed a complex holistic picture with words, reports detailed views of participants, and performs the study in a natural setting. To achieve this, I selected a method for data analysis congruent with the study's philosophical underpinnings; thus, qualitative data analysis was used for deciphering meaning from the data through interpretation by seeking patterns and themes (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015; Saldana, 2016). I gave a general overview of all information, followed by a detailed description from the participants, and analyzed the participants' words (Creswell, 2013). According to Atkinson (2017), the “focus of such research is often latent, or underlying meanings” (p. 84). A distinctive component of qualitative data analysis is that it progresses analytically rather than linearly (Saldana, 2016); hence, I reduced the qualitative research to particular stages to handle the in-depth process. This research's data analysis stage commenced by examining the recorded and transcribed data from interviews, focus groups, and program and

participants' written documents to fuse rich information about participants' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Once I conducted the semi-structured interviews and focus groups and acquired the written personal documents via email, I used horizontalization (*epoché*) to analyze the data (Moustakas, 1994). I used member checking, a leading respondent validation technique, to establish credibility and conformability in research results, where the participant comments served as a check on the viability (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walters, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Horizontalization entailed highlighting important statements and quotes that translated how participants experienced the phenomenon. I was universally receptive as I placed equal value on every statement and set aside all prejudice and biases (Moustakas, 1994). During this research process, I remained open and allowed the themes to naturally develop without forcing the literature review into the initial findings. Memoing was used throughout the entire process of data analysis. I recorded reflective notes about what I learned from the data, including my ideas and insights as additional data to be analyzed.

Interviews

Interviews were professionally transcribed, and research data analysis was completed using Moustakas' (1994) adaptation on the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen model. The results were interpreted through Bean and Metzner's (1985) theoretical lens model of student attrition. The phenomenological analysis using the Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method incorporated the researcher as one of the participants, and the other participants are co-researchers (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Even though there was no consensus for the correct analysis of qualitative data, I followed common steps to manually code the data using the Modification of the Stevick (1971), Colaizzi (1973), and Keen's (1975) Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121-122).

From the researcher's verbatim transcripts, I looked for noteworthy statements based on descriptive words, resemblances, and emerging themes (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I linked those statements back to the research questions, and a full description of the experience of the phenomenon was obtained. I used epoché to connect the relationship between the phenomenon and researcher using colorful language, which established truthful dissemination during the study and provided credibility (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, (2014). I re-read all written transcripts again and narrowed themes by merging themes and developing subthemes that gave depth to the personal experiences (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). I removed statements that were unrelated, repetitive, or overlapping in nature (Moustakas, 1994). Once I disregarded these statements, I grouped and labeled the invariant experiences into themes (Moustakas, 1994). The material derived from the research participants was reduced by classifying the responses by using coding (Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2016). I precoded the data by highlighting key terms I saw repeatedly or words that stood out (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Saldana, 2016). First cycle coding occurred next, where I took the sentence form answers and pulled significant statements onto a list. Following that, the words or statements with overlapping meanings were removed, and from there, themes were created with the remaining essential statements. “From the individual textural-structural descriptions of all experiences,” I “constructed a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121-122).

Focus Groups

During the focus groups' data analysis, I translated the professional interview transcripts and summarized critical ideas from the focus groups using a retrospective concept map. I chose

to conduct the retrospective concept mapping with the interview data after the interview, rather than during the interview so that each respondent had my undivided attention. As I mapped, the concepts became sufficiently clear to delineate and interpret, highlighting relationships and patterns within the research data. Additionally, I used field notes and found the big ideas by examining the student's choice of words, considering group context, and looking for consistency among groups and group members; subsequently, categories and themes should emerge from the field notes (Saldana, 2016). I re-read all written transcripts again and narrowed themes by merging themes and developing subthemes that gave depth to the personal experiences (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). I removed statements that were unrelated, repetitive, or overlapping in nature (Moustakas, 1994). Once I disregarded these statements, I grouped and labeled the invariant experiences into themes (Moustakas, 1994). Then, I wrote a detailed and comprehensive description of the lived experience, and from this, the core structure of the phenomena was framed. Validation was solicited from the participants to compare the researcher's detailed results with their lived experiences.

CTE Program Documentation Analysis

During the CTE Program Documentation Analysis, I incorporated an inductive approach, common to several qualitative data analyses (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). I examined all aspects of the experience shared by the nontraditional career and technical education students. An inductive analysis was employed to discover common ground in the student course and school withdrawal reports, attendance reports, student appeals, graduation reports, and personal documentation. I read through the data first to assign the first set of codes. Then I went through the research data line-by-line to code as much as possible (Saldana, 2016). Lastly, I categorized the codes and synthesized the information into the final coding frame (Saldana, 2016).

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, various protocols were applied to instill rigor and credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability into the research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addressing credibility, I attempted to depict the real phenomenon under direct scrutiny (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To satisfy future dependability, researchers must repeat the study; hence, in qualitative research, this criterion can be problematic (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To achieve confirmability, I took the necessary precautions to prove that findings emerge from the research data and not personal predispositions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lastly, to allow transferability, I applied enough detail of the setting for a reader to adopt an unfamiliar environment and whether the findings could justly be applied to another setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this research study, I sought to satisfy the measures of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability to address the phenomenon of continuous enrollment.

Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985) contend that ensuring credibility is one of the most significant factors in establishing trustworthiness. I used member checking, a leading respondent validation technique, to establish credibility and conformability in research results, where the participant comments served as a check on the viability (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walters, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking addressed constructivism by providing participants with the chance to engage in the conversation and add to the interpreted data after the interview (Birt et al., 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I returned the interview transcript to each respective participant to review the document to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences or during a structured interview; however, none of the participants responded to the email with their respective transcript (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability and Confirmability

Triangulation was used to support credibility; thus, face-to-face interviews, focus group data, and document analysis provided confidence that the constructs do indeed exist and are validated in more than one method of data collection (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure that the data collection methods were valid, I used interviews as the appropriate research instrument. Dependability was established when the interview and focus group question wording and implications were reviewed and audited (Saldana, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I ensured that the interview questions and focus group questions were fair, so career and technical education students did not feel led to answer in one way or another based upon biased wording.

Transferability

I applied transferability so that those reading the study can apply the information to a new setting that aligns with their college environment. Patton (2015) shared that transferability not only provides those reading the study with information that could be applied to a new situation. Transferability also proved that what occurred within the study was accurate and was not embellished by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

Due to the frequent interaction between qualitative researchers and research participants, ethical considerations were essential. Because humans were involved in different stages of this study, a formulation of specific ethical guidelines is vital. It is said that qualitative research that deals with personal and sensitive topics can pose emotional and other hazards to participants and researchers. Accordingly, clear protocols for dealing with possible threats were in place so that both parties involved in the research could use them if necessary. This research aimed to discuss the researcher's obligation and role in addition to the guidelines for conducting qualitative studies.

IRB Approval

Before the research began, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix E) was requested from Liberty University, and Institutional Research approval from Lake County Community College to obtain permission to conduct the study and collect the data. Once permission was granted, I implemented the research study (see Appendix E). The IRB approval made sure the study was not only ethical but followed the necessary guidelines to conduct safe and ethical research (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010).

Voluntary Participation

An Informed Consent Form (see Appendix B) gained the voluntary consent of each student. The study results had an interest and possible benefits to the community college; however, no incentives or compensations were offered for participation (Creswell, 2013; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010). I made sure that participants were assured both verbally and in writing

through a consent form that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time if they no longer wished to participate.

Valued Participant

I established a rapport that made the participant feel as if they are working alongside the researcher and having an honest conversation to discuss their experiences with confidence. I made sure the participants were treated in a valued way. I reminded the participants of the limits of confidentiality and reassured them that their names and any information linked to their identity were not shared (Creswell, 2013).

Confidentiality of Interview

“For qualitative researchers, maintaining respondent confidentiality while presenting rich, detailed accounts of social life presents unique challenges” (Kaiser, 2009, p. 1632). I stored the electronic data from the interviews, focus groups, data analysis, and research information transcribed on a computer where a passcode must be used to access the information (Saldana, 2016). Passcode protection made the information accessible by only the researcher and was keep confidential information away from anyone but the researcher (Patton, 2015).

Research Bias

I am employed as an instructor in the career and technical education department by the proposed institution to be studied; consequently, I did not interview any student currently being taught or had previously been taught by me. All interview and focus group questions were predetermined to decrease research interview bias, and an interview and focus group guide (see Appendix F) was used, including probing questions (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, each student was asked the same

questions in the same ordering using an entirely open-ended format (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015).

Bracketing

Bracketing assisted in eliminating researcher bias and is used to identify the researcher's assumptions, biases, and beliefs (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). In addition to acknowledging assumptions and their underpinnings, the researcher must understand the alternative approaches and keywords and be able to "articulate them in a research study or present them to an audience" (Creswell, 2013, p. 18.). I gave careful thought to the underlying research philosophy with the corresponding philosophical assumptions; otherwise, researchers may combine various research methods resulting in an incoherent research study (Patton, 2015).

Secured Data

Creswell & Poth (2018) share that data should be stored in a secure location where the researcher is attentive and aware of when and how it was used. I secured research data in a locked file cabinet in the career and technical education department and maintained a hard copy of each participant's data and transcriptions. Given (2008) states the storage of research data should be taken seriously from the beginning of the project to ensure valuable resources are kept safe and archived at the end of the project.

Summary

This research aimed to understand the collegiate experiences of nontraditional career and technical education students to decrease college chances. This study's design was grounded in phenomenological research, unfolding the phenomenon of continuous enrollment using historical narrative reports, interviews, and students' life experiences. At the same time, the constructivist

worldview manifests in phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994). The contents of Chapter Three described the research methodology to be used to conduct this study of retention. A discussion of the procedures, research design, and data analysis for the present research was highlighted in Chapter Three, detailing the significant decisions to conduct this study. Researching the perceptions and lived experiences nontraditional students described during their enrollment in career and technical education programs at a community college attempted to understand retention in higher education.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the continuous enrollment experiences of nontraditional career and technical education students at the community college and to gain a better understanding of those experiences that influenced their decisions to remain enrolled. This chapter is a report of the research findings. It includes a discussion of the collected and analyzed data and a chapter summary.

Following the Liberty University Institutional Review Board and Lake County Community College Office of Institutional Research's approval, I invited 22 nontraditional students who met the selection criteria from the target population to participate in the study. Of the 22 invited, 17 agreed to participate and submitted signed consent forms. Of the 17 participants, 15 students were female, and two were male, and the average age of the participants was approximately 38 years, the oldest being 74 and the youngest 24. Research participants were selected if they met the criteria of being a nontraditional student. The participants were also required to have been enrolled at the institution for at least one whole year and stayed enrolled at least until the time of the interview. To maintain the confidentiality of the nontraditional students interviewed, pseudonyms were assigned. Each nontraditional CTE student was given a pseudonym in place of their name to ensure the anonymity of responses. To protect the campus counties' anonymity, I used the pseudonyms Lake, French, and Dawson counties.

Participants

Nora

Nora is a 25-year-old Asian female majoring in Billing and Coding. She is financially independent enrolled as a sophomore in a Career Technical Education program. Upon

completing the medical billing program, she plans to obtain her CCS coding certification from the American Health Information Management Association to increase her earning potential. Nora said, “I want to get my first real job where I feel like I am doing something.” Nora also stated, “I am making my own money and doing something that encourages me to use the skills” acquired in college.”

Sage

Sage is a 54-year-old black female majoring in Administrative Office. She attends college on a part-time basis and has been married for over 25 years. She has three children, and two of them are currently enrolled in college along with her. The fact that she will be the third college graduate in her family fuels her motivation. Sage said, “It was hard for me to overcome balancing my school life and home life.” Sage also added, “I had to learn how to manage my household, my husband, my children, as well as being able to do my homework so that I can succeed successfully.”

Tess

Tess is a 53-year-old black female majoring in Surgical Technology. Although she has been on her current job for over 19 years, she has always dreamed of preparing patients for their surgeries, arranging medical equipment. However, most of all, assisting physicians in the operating room during surgical procedures. Tess said, “ I must improve my life and not fail at it.”

Mandell

Mandell is a 55-year-old black male who decided to enroll in the Welding program last year. He is seeking to obtain his certification in welding to earn more income because he is the head of his household, supporting five children. He also plans to seek financial support from the

local Small Business Association with hopes of opening his own business called “Omega Iron Works” in his local hometown. According to Mandell, “Having to balance being an older adult student, having a family, and having to focus there, and finding time” was also “pretty challenging.”

Avis

Avis is a 24-year-old black female attending college on a part-time basis majoring in Interior Design. She works a full-time job at a local flower shop to support her three children and her disabled father. She feels a career in interior design will allow her to use her creative skills and abilities to broaden her event planning business to maximize earning potential. Avis had to “learn how to be a student again” because she was “returning to school after sitting out for two years,” so the “college setting was hard to adjust to again.”

Laura

Laura is a 35-year-old black female majoring in Accounting Technology. She did not enroll in college within one year of completing high school because she became pregnant with her first child. She is a financially independent single mother of 17-year-old twin boys. Due to their active sports schedule and a full-time job, she attends college on a part-time basis. Laura has worked in accounting for over ten years and decided to earn an associate's degree in the area for possible advancement with her current employer. “I am proud of myself for all that I have overcome. It took a long time, but I am finished. I’m there. I’m at the end. All I got to do is go to the finish line. I’m right there,” said Laura.

Eden

Eden is a 74-year-old retired black female majoring in Administrative Office Technology. She is in good health and wants to keep her mind sharp by gaining new skills.

Despite the challenges she faces, Eden brings a wealth of life experience, wisdom, and maturity to the college classroom as a nontraditional student. “Having that family support made it very easy for her to go home and study and get her lessons ready for the next day,” said Eden.

Mari

Mari is a 34-year-old black Nursing student who works as a full-time nursing assistant at a local hospital and retail on the weekends. As a result of losing her husband two years ago, unfortunately, she is a widow with three children under 12. An associate's degree in nursing will allow her to make more money where she does not have to work a part-time job to supplement her income. Mari affirmed, “Past successes serve as a great motivator to keep pushing forward to achieve goals.”

Zora

Zora is a 26-year-old single white female majoring in Engineering Technology, taking 18 hours. She enjoys studying computer concepts about local area networks (LANs), wide area networks (WANs), and, of course, the Internet. After obtaining her associate's degree, Zora plans to use her knowledge in programming languages, operating systems, and microprocessing fundamentals to gain valuable experience for a healthcare career. Zora said, “online courses were hard to grasp initially,” but they provided an opportunity for her to “work and go to school.”

Elsa

Elsa is a 26-year-old Medical Office Technology student with a full-time job and one child. She earned her GED at the age of 17 while she was the ward of the state of Mississippi. She grew up in a local children's home due to an abusive home life from the age of five until 17. She decided to attend her local community college to set an example for her six-year-old son.

Elsa plans to transfer to Jackson State University and pursue a degree in sociology where she can help other children suffering from abuse and mental issues. Elsa said, “I have really enjoyed the campus and classrooms because of how small they are and easy to get around, but I have mostly enjoyed the teachers that I have had. They have been so good to me and accommodating with questions that I've had in the past.”

Gabi

Gabi is a 30-year old white Medical Technology student who works full-time as a customer service representative with a local insurance company. She has been employed with the company for almost seven years. Gabi has been married for five years to her high school sweetheart, and they are expecting their first child in the next month. After graduation, Gabi plans to earn her Certified Professional Coder certification (CPC) certification through the American Academy of Professional Coders (AAPC) to elevate her earning potential as a self-employed medical coder. Gabi says, “Maintaining a positive attitude when faced with challenges helps me to stay on track.” Gabi also shared, “Whenever I was having a hard time with something [my boyfriend] would just tell me not to give up, it's going to get better, you're doing this for our future.”

Zara

Zara is a 28-year old white single parent and full-time student nursing student. After graduation with her associate's degree, she plans to obtain a bachelor's degree as a registered nurse from a local university. Zara has higher education aspirations of becoming an advanced family practitioner in a mental healthcare setting to service and manages patients' health needs suffering from substance abuse. Working in this field will allow her to serve her community and understand others affected by substance abuse. Her grandparents raised Gabbi because her

parents being addicted to drugs and alcohol; thus, she has first-hand knowledge of this dreadful illness and how it affects children. Zara said, “Adopting the right mindset will go a long way when staying motivated.

Kenzi

Kenzi is a 28-year-old white female student majoring in Business Management Technology. Although she has been out of school for over ten years, she has maintained an A average for the past two semesters due to her studies' dedication. After graduation, she plans to transfer to a local university to obtain her bachelor's degree in Marketing and Mass Communications to become a news anchor. According to Kenzi, “If you keep your mind focused on accomplishing your goals, you will more than likely make the right actions to do so.”

Nyla

Nyla is a 31-year-old white female obtaining a dual degree in Medical Office Technology and Medical Billing and Coding. She is a single parent of four girls, all under the age of 9. Her employer of 5 years is sending her back to school to gain advanced coding skills. Nyla works full-time to meet her family's financial obligations while attending school. Additionally, her employer offers tuition reimbursement as an incentive for her to pursue their education, which has relieved some financial burdens. Nyla says, “Being reminded of past accomplishments inspires me when I lack motivation.”

Havyn

Havyn is a 34-year-old black female majoring in Business Management Technology to utilize the learned skills as a successful entrepreneur. She has been helping to manage and operate her family's daycare center for the past three years. Fortunately, she has been able to balance work and home life by taking advantage of the hybrid class offerings in conjunction with

a combination of online and in-person classes. Havyn shared, “Once I got pregnant with my son; I took things more seriously. It made me think about school a little more positive.”

Jace

Jace is a 66-year-old disabled black male majoring in Medical Office Technology and Billing and Coding. He is a veteran who holds a bachelor’s degree in Biology. He decided to come back to the community college to gain practical skills, which will enable him to work from home because he uses a wheelchair. Although he has struggled to balance work and family commitments while completing his degree, he feels the college has made all efforts to accommodate him during extenuating circumstances. Jace also stated the “academic advisors helped him to stay on course with his studies” while offering valuable advice about the “right courses to take to achieve graduation and career goals.”

Ivey

Ivey is a 24-year-old black female Business Management Technology student. She is a single mother of one child who motivates her to continue and finish college. She desires to finish college, hoping that she will be able to change her son’s life through her career. While she understands a range of obstacles can impede her ability to graduate on time, she plans to persevere so that her son can see her graduate from college. Ivey said, “I have to stop doubting and being hard on myself, judging myself, and doubting myself.”

Results

Data were collected and analyzed to discover nontraditional students' perceptions in overcoming the barriers and risk factors to succeed in the community college. Lake County Community College is a comprehensive public institution located in a southern state serving three counties. LCCC provides innovative educational and cultural opportunities to its students

through campus-based and online programs. LCCC, whose primary commitment is to excellence in all areas, offers affordable, equal access to higher education in an attractive, secure, multi-campus environment.

After receiving IRB approval from Liberty University, I completed the IRB application at LCCC and submitted it to the college's Vice President for Research and Development for approval. Once approval was obtained from both institutions, I began to contact research participants through email. Data were also collected and analyzed to satisfy the study's purpose to better understand what influences nontraditional students to remain enrolled to inform college policy and decision-makers to improve retention rates.

Semi-structured interviews were scheduled and conducted via Zoom from June 8, 2020, through June 19, 2020, with nontraditional career and technical education students in order to find themes related to their experiences at Lake County Community College. The range of time spent interviewing was between 15 minutes and 60 minutes. A total of 17 nontraditional students were interviewed out of the 20 that were invited to participate. Seventeen individuals were interviewed for the study because data saturation had been reached.

A semi-structured interview guide with 11 open-ended questions was used to conduct all 17 interviews (see Appendix A). The 11 research questions served as fields, 11 with specific questions outlined under each one for use during each interview. Field notes were taken during each interview and after each interview. Noteworthy statements were identified, meaning units, and ten themes were developed. The researcher wrote down quoted phrases that the nontraditional students spoke avidly about. Although this method extends the interview, it does not distract from leading the interview and allowed for immediate member checking. Table 2 identifies the data collection methods for each participant in the research.

Table 2*Participants' Participation in Data Collection Methods*

Pseudonyms	Interview	Written Documents	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2
Nora	x	x	x	
Sage	x	x	x	
Tess	x	x	x	
Mandell	x	x	x	
Avis	x	x	x	
Laura	x	x	x	
Eden	x	x	x	
Mari	x	x		x
Zora	x	x		x
Elsa	x	x		x
Gabi	x	x		x
Zara	x	x		x
Kenzi	x	x		x
Nyla	x	x		x
Havyn	x	x		
Jace	x	x		
Ivey	x	x		

Note: Participants Havyn, Jace, and Ivey did not participate in the focus groups.

The nontraditional CTE students appeared to be relaxed, patient, and yet vocal when giving their perceptions regarding each interview question. During any quiet moments, the nontraditional CTE students could take a moment to reflect on the interview guide emailed to them before the interview. Sometimes, the researcher repeated what was stated by the nontraditional CTE students to record the student responses. Student interviews were transcribed, and the researcher took field notes. Lastly, data analysis was finalized using Moustakas' (1994) version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen model. The results were interpreted through the theoretical lens of Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition.

Theme Development

This transcendental phenomenological study aimed to describe the continuous enrollment experiences of nontraditional career and technical education students at a community college in Mississippi. Data analysis was theoretically grounded in Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition, as it explains how background, academic, environmental, psychological outcomes, and social integration affect student retention. I endeavored to label each critical statement by theme and subtheme during the review of the interview and focus group transcripts by delineating the relevant meaning of the participants' responses. The research data uncovered many factors that influenced nontraditional CTE community college students' lived experiences in Mississippi.

What the participants experienced during their continuous enrollment and how the experiences evolved throughout their college enrollment was determined by the triangulated interview, focus group, and personal and program data. Although each participant had a unique perspective of his or her college experience, the identified themes resonated throughout the interview, focus group, and personal and program data. After a constant immersion in the research data and coding, ten themes emerged: (a) Positive Attitudes, (b) Progress Acknowledgement, (c) Self Improvement, (d) Career Motivation, (e) Balancing College with Family Life, (f) Having to Maintain Work Commitments, (g) Engaging Instructors, (h) Concerned Advisors, (i) Flexible Course Offerings, (j) Smaller Classroom Settings based upon the participants' responses in the interviews, written documents, and focus group. Table 3 displays the corresponding themes from the response of each research participant.

Table 3*Participant Responses by Themes*

Pseudonyms	Theme									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Nora	x	x		x			x			
Sage		x			x		x	x	x	x
Tess			x							
Mandell			x	x	x		x	x		x
Avis			x	x	x		x			
Laura	x	x	x	x		x	x	x		x
Eden	x			x	x				x	
Mari	x	x								x
Zora		x					x		x	
Elsa		x					x			x
Gabi	x		x		x		x		x	
Zara	x	x			x		x		x	
Kenzi	x						x			
Nyla		x		x		x			x	x
Havyn	x		x		x	x	x			
Jace	x	x					x	x	x	x
Ivey	x				x	x	x	x		

Note. Theme 1 = Positive Attitudes; Theme 2 = Progress Acknowledgement; Theme 3 = Self Improvement; Theme 4 = Carer Motivation; Theme 5 = Balancing College with Family Life; Theme 6 = Having to Mainintain Work Commitments; Theme 7 = Engaging Instructors; Theme 8 = Concerned Advisors; Theme 9 = Flexible Course Offerings; Theme 10 = Smaller Classroom Settings.

Positive attitude. In addition to other things, research studies have shown that a positive attitude can have profound physical and physiological benefits for nontraditional college students (Kiernan & Lotter, 2019; Yamashita et al., 2018). This research also uncovered evidence that a positive attitude can impact nontraditional student's ability to learn and persist in college. People

are naturally resistant to change because with change comes uncertainty; thus, Eden “approaches new things with a more positive attitude.” Laura maintained a “positive attitude by staying flexible and eliminating distractions.” It is natural for students to be resistant to change because it forces them to step out of their usual routine in life. The essence of change can make the participants feel like they are losing control. However, striving to remain open-minded helped the nontraditional CTE students maintain a positive outlook towards learning; thus, increasing college success.

Mindset. This research has proven that open-mindedness can boost learning by assessing life’s prior decisions, beliefs, and mistakes. Mari said there are times when “she gets bogged down in life,” but she “redirects her mind to focus on positive things.” Gabi says, “Maintaining a positive attitude when faced with challenges helps me to stay on track.” Several students in this study stated that when they are struggling to feel positive about learning, they attempt to change to a success mindset by visualizing desired outcomes. Zara mentioned she “trains her mind to focus on conquering setbacks” instead of “worrying or doubting herself.” Establishing clear learning goals or aiming to reach those goals is an alternative way to boost personal motivation and increase personal achievement. Research shows that goal setting is empowering. According to Kenzi, “If you keep your mind focused on accomplishing your goals, you will more than likely make the right actions to do so.” Goal setting enhances self-regulation and improves persistence in various settings, from the classroom to the workplace. At times, attending college did not seem worth it for some participants because it did not fit in with the construct of their current situation. Zara said that “adopting the right mindset went a long way in helping her to stay motivated.”

Unfortunately, some nontraditional CTE students did not see or believe a college degree is attainable because of their current lifestyle. Furthermore, deficient skills or traits can hinder personal growth, as well. A daily shift of the mindset was mandatory or expected in order for a positive attitude to become part of the student's daily routine.

Negativity. Instead of focusing on negativity, the students in this study continuously reminded themselves of the “great” feeling of accomplishing life's goals. Some of the participants thought of their long-term goals and what mattered most in life. Others focused on short-term goals, like completing a course for employees to gain more workplace skills. Nonetheless, the remainder of life's rewards helped the participants in this study to stay positive and engaged in learning. Daily affirmations were one of several tools used by students. For example, Havyn added, “Sometimes, my negative attitude gets the best of me, so doing daily affirmations helps me stay positive.” Two of the students confirmed that other people help them to maintain a positive frame of mind. Nora stated, “Being around other nontraditional students that can relate to me made everyone have a positive experience.” Gabi also shared, “Whenever I was having a hard time with something [my boyfriend] would just tell me not to give up, it's going to get better, you're doing this for our future.”

Mistakes. Mistakes in life were inevitable, but mistakes were essentially vital in the participants' learning process. Once participants realized and accepted the value of making mistakes, they were able to use those mistakes to progress and develop instead of being concerned about failure whenever something goes wrong. Ivey shared, “I basically was being negative towards myself, judging from the past, kept bringing that past experience into it now and just basically just being judgmental of myself.” On the other hand, “I try to have a positive attitude about things and do not give up, do not let the setbacks deter me from what I am trying

to achieve,” shared Jace. When the participants viewed mistakes differently, they were less frustrated when things did not turn out as expected.

Progress acknowledgment. When higher learning seemed particularly difficult, focus group participants occasionally lost sight of the big picture and felt they were not making progress. During the study, some explained personal tips for maintaining a positive attitude and making progress when faced with challenges. Eden offered how important it was to “recognize your past successes to avoid future failures” and “keep going.” Zara expressed how happy she was to be able to acknowledge her progress, but Ivey, on the other hand, had to “stop doubting and being hard” on herself by “judging” and “doubting” her progress. Although her mind was saying keep “progressing forward,” Nyla was a student of excuses; however, “being reminded of past accomplishments” inspired her when she lacked motivation.

Goals. For several participants, the key to maintaining a positive attitude rested in setting specific, as well as, realistic goals. Goals were attainable if participants took smaller steps to reach them. Jace added, “I continue to go on with my goals.” Some of the participants in this study are obtaining a one-year certification then progressing to the AAS degree. Nora said she wants to “finish and get it done” because she now has a “reason.” Focus group participants claimed this approach helps them to achieve smaller and more obtainable benchmarks. Hence, students could visualize and acknowledge academic progress more clearly, which helped them maintain a positive outlook while working towards more concrete goals. For instance, Zora “made a list of her recent achievements,” whether it is “receiving an “A” on her last test or completing a project early.” Mari affirmed past successes served as a great motivator to keep pushing forward to achieve her goals.

Technical skills. Learning advanced technical skills was an essential part of job security and was at the top of personal and professional goals for several participants. Technical skills were a necessity in college due to the increased technology in the classroom and the professional world. “I was able to achieve a goal that I have wanted to achieve for a long time, that enhances my technology, my computer skills, as well as my communication skills,” added Sage. LCCC’s online community college classes offered the flexibility needed by most nontraditional CTE students; however, the same component may have required students to complete a majority of the coursework and projects online as well. Some nontraditional students were intimidated and deficient when it came to computer technology because they did not have access to a home computer. Some students in the focus group relied on the college’s computer lab or community library to complete homework assignments. Unfortunately, computer access, internet accessibility, and printing capability are limited resources available during the day and not on the weekend, so students were not able to rely on them entirely. In similar cases, nontraditional CTE students did not have any other option because they could not afford a computer on their own due to limited funds.

Still, nontraditional learners were forced to expand their technical skills while enrolled in college and increase their workplace value. In both instances, technology was frustrating to the nontraditional student, so it was not surprising the focus group appreciated the multiple ways to engage at LCCC. As one participant explained, his comfort level at LCCC increased, and his intimidation with technology decreased due to the multiple forms of campus communication via email, phone, chat, and in-person. In the past, these same students would have chosen to remain anonymous and not even reach out for help due to their ambivalence about engaging with technology. Laura gave herself “credit for the progress she has made” thus far and did not

believe she would have ever been labeled as “tech-savvy.” Students were able to choose which format they feel most comfortable with at LCCC. When I first started school, I was okay using a computer, but now I feel like I have exceeded in these skills,” said Elsa.

Self-improvement. Self-improvement for nontraditional CTE college students can not only distinguish them apart upon graduation day but may also help them lead full and more fulfilled lives. As stated by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2019), 17 million students enrolled in bachelor’s degree programs in the fall of 2017. As in this study, nontraditional CTE students were looking to complete their degree in two years or less to join the workforce as soon as possible. However, continuous enrollment encompassed receiving a final grade, certificate, or associate’s degree from the community college. College proved to be a time of self-reflection, discovery, and improvement, and those who made this a priority were happier, well-rounded, and more determined to make it to the end. They focused on self-discovery and self-improvement, and those that made them a priority were better job prospects in their field and happier and more well-rounded with a college degree. Participants in this study used personal determination and family reasons to fuel their desire to continue learning while responding to various life situations.

Personal development. In short, self-improvement went hand in hand with personal development, which equated to becoming a better version of oneself. Self-improvement and personal development encompassed dedication and contribution to specific goals, ultimately leading to personal growth. Tess said, “ I must improve my life and not fail at it.” Laura added being in college made her feel better about herself. Also, her graduation was a turning point in her life when she realized she could do anything.

Gabi finds it more rewarding to “motivate herself when faced with personal challenges.” Nontraditional CTE college students recognized the need for self-improvement and found the willpower to make the first step towards their vision. However, knowing where to start helped them successfully pursue self-improvement. Avis had to “learn how to be a student again” because she was “returning to school after sitting out for two years,” so the “college setting was hard to adjust to again.” Focusing on specific areas of improvement, such as education and finance, were common adages given in both focus groups.

Family. Although time management and the fear of failure were common obstacles that prevented participants from self-improvement, the family was the driving force behind their desire to improve their lives by attending a community college. Mandell asserted, “I’m here trying to make a better life for myself, as well as my family, including my children.” He also shared how hard it was for him to decide to go back to school but was driven in his quest for his life and his children's lives. In his personal interview, Mandell expressed “failure was not an option,” so he strived to make the “best grades” and be at the “top” of his class. Havyn shared that once she became pregnant with her son, she began to take things more seriously. The future of her unborn child made her think about school in a more positive light. Sometimes, students started strong, especially when they were excited about setting goals and improving themselves. Taking one step at a time was a better route for nontraditional CTE students because they were quickly overwhelmed due to the pressure of being responsible for improving their lives and the lives of their families. Hereafter, it was imperative nontraditional CTE students remained mindful and systematic about the path they sought for self-improvement.

Career motivations. Today’s job market demands a skilled, trained, and educated workforce, and completing an associate’s degree or certificate program has become a

prerequisite better paying occupations. As a result, LCCC offered specialized career and technical education for nontraditional students with specific career goals. Nora said, “I want to get my first real job where I feel like I'm doing something.” Nora also stated, “where I'm making my own money and doing something that encourages me to use the skills” acquired in college.” Along those same lines, Avis affirmed she wanted to “feel more like an adult” with her “own” source of income and her “own” job. Nyla said, “I'm trying to kind of make a career change here.” However, community colleges offer general education avenues, nontraditional CTE students elected to focus exclusively on their career choice and receive skills training in various allied, professional, and industrial fields.

From an emotional perspective, nontraditional learners did not approach returning to college to complete a degree with the same motivation or zeal as the traditional student. Participants in this study offered a unique perspective and worldview formed through their life experiences and knowledge. “I am proud of myself for all that I have overcome. It took a long time, but I’m finished. I’m there. I’m at the end. All I got to do is go to the finish line. I’m right there,” said Laura. A majority of the participants returned to college after trying their fate in the workforce. Unfortunately, they returned to college with negative emotions like shame, apprehension, and fear, resulting in a classroom display of “lack of self-confidence upon reentry to college.” However, students like Mandell displayed much confidence during his interview stating his “experience with the career tech has been amazing.” “Advisors provided invaluable tools from asking questions to advising on career choices,” according to Eden.

Balancing college with family life. The life of a nontraditional student entailed balancing financial and work commitments, in addition to “taking care of a family”. Consequently, students with children or other dependents did not have an abundance of time to spend in class or extra money to pay for tuition. Some participants were financially obligated to figure out how they were going to “balance the financial obligations” cover for tuition and books in excess of their financial aid while also paying rent, buying groceries, paying utility bills, and covering miscellaneous expenses when they arose. Equally noted, this experience was even more challenging for “single parents who lack the financial and emotional support” of a spouse to share the responsibility. Although LCCC and the local community offered resources for nontraditional CTE students resources, such tutoring and child care assistance were not free.

Time management and family support. Sage said, “It was hard for me to overcome balancing my school life and home life.” Sage also added, “I had to learn how to manage my household, my husband, my children, as well as being able to do my homework so that I can succeed successfully.” “Having that family support made it very easy for her to go home and study and get her lessons ready for the next day,” said Eden. Ivey said her parents “made it much easier for me because they’ll keep my kids if I want to study or if I need to go take a test.” “We make those sacrifices to do that which is better,” stated Mandell. According to Mandell, “Having to balance being an older adult student, having a family, and having to focus there, and finding time” was also “pretty challenging.”

Single parent. Ivey said, “Well, first, I had let one job go so I can solely be able to focus on school and, like I said, being a single mother too.” Ivey added, “created a system for myself that worked for me to help me better and overcome to the next step.” “Being a single parent and going to school is very difficult, but it got to be easy as I went along,” said Avis. Once Avis “got

into school and got into the school setting,” she “learned how to adapt.” Havyn also said, “I almost fell into the negative talk about me being a new mom and people telling me I could not go to school because I have a new baby.” Zara mentioned, “I have two boys, and I know that things are overwhelming right now, but they will see how hard their mom worked and where hard work can get them one day.”

Work commitments. Their life experiences molded each nontraditional CTE student’s experience at LCCC. As a result, these same participants tended to encounter particular “challenges” when they enrolled in community college; on the other hand, they came to college with the benefit of having “real-life experiences.” Those life experiences worked to their benefit, which in some cases proved beneficial in community college and life. Nyla said, “I’ve come to the point where I’m getting older, and it’s harder for me to work physically hard. I would like to use my mind instead. As mentioned above, those skills enabled students to juggle the demands of work, school, and home.

Some nontraditional CTE students had a firm grasp of money and how much it took to meet financial obligations. Other participants were caregivers or parents, so they knew how to balance and prioritize issues simultaneously. On the other hand, there were also those CTE students who required the support of faculty, advisors, and family to make it all work. Nontraditional students were challenged daily. However, this study provided some of the top challenges and practical suggestions that nontraditional CTE students in community colleges could take advantage of before enrollment. In return, new students enter college better prepared with the tools and skills needed to tackle challenges and improve their chances for success.

Engaging instructors. In this study, the nontraditional CTE students were typically older, had children, and were probably working to remain financially independent; subsequently,

they handled situations and issues in community college differently than their traditional counterparts. Thus, community college administrators and instructors needed to understand these issues to create better policies, procedures, and instructional techniques to help students matriculate until graduation. Nora stated, “In the two semesters that I have been enrolled at Holmes, I have had good teachers that have made a positive influence on my continued enrollment.” The management of obligations like childcare, finances, health issues, transportation were significant hurdles to staying in school for most of the participants. Mandell felt the engaging professors at LCCC “made a difference or made a difference for” him. Likewise, Avis also stated the different people she met and that the instructors on campus made her experience more positive.

Attentiveness. The participants in this study experienced age and school-related anxieties during their college experiences. Those same experiences accompanied feelings of doubt and low self-esteem. The smallest mistake made students react strongly because they were in college trying to improve their lives and the family's lives. However, this road to self-development came with feelings of selfishness and guilt, so Zara enrolled in classes because she heard that “CTE students could get the required attention from their teachers.” Zara also added, “My instructors made it easier to get through the course if I had any concerns.” Attentive instructors made students feel more comfortable in a college and more connected to the campus. Even more so, those who talked to their instructors when they were struggling became less disillusioned and less prone to drop out. Mandell gave credit to his instructors. He said, “I will give credit to the professors that I was fortunate enough to encounter, and they were quite observant, and they would notice that if you were struggling.” A college education was a collaborative process that seems to be a more positive experience when students and instructors communicate. Education

was an exchange of ideas, information, and perspectives; thus, the attentive instructor proved to be among the most meaningful experiences to nontraditional CTE students in this community college.

Encouragement and understanding. Encouragement and communication from instructors were essential for all students but maybe even more critical for nontraditional CTE students. Jace mentioned, “CTE instructors encouraged small group activities and discussions, as well as an expression of opinions during class.” Getting to know the instructors was particularly crucial for feeling a sense of community in college. Instructors enjoyed conversing with older and other nontraditional students, especially those highly motivated and eager to learn. Sage said, “The instructors constantly encouraged me when they saw that I was fretful, being that I’m a non-traditional student.” Sage also added that her instructors would always encourage her to learn more by pushing her towards success. Zora continued in college because her teachers positively influenced her by encouraging her to do her best, persevere, and achieve career success. Nora also stated that the instructors “did everything they could to help us understand the subject matter,” and they “taught very clearly” so as not to be misunderstood. Laura added, “The instructors were very nice to me, and they had a little more patience with me, since I had not been in school in a while, and it made me feel great.”

Communication. The nontraditional CTE student thrived in a learning environment of constant communication and timely feedback, which was useful, straightforward, and applicable. Many of these students were engaged in family and work; thus, they appreciated quick responses to emails. According to Havyn, “I loved how the teachers responded quickly to questions or emails. That was always a big help.” Ivey said, “The teachers, they became a big help for me and any questions or concerns that I had.” According to Gabi, “It created a negative experience

from someone else, especially when you're reaching out to your instructors and they don't communicate with you or respond back to you.” Faculty must set aside time to respond to emails, review submitted coursework, address student concerns, and provide continuous feedback. Kenzi said, “I've had instructors I've emailed and in boxed, and they have not responded, and that makes things difficult. Kenzi also added, “I've had instructors wait until the last minute to grade assignments that you don't know what you have in the class.” Kenzi affirmed that she needs “constant communication and clear expectations from the instructor.”

Feedback was a critical aspect of coursework that nontraditional CTE students needed to persist in college. In doing this, staff and faculty helped reduce feelings of isolation and confusion; moreover, they were able to anticipate and address questions that students may have to remain in tune with the needs of their students. Elsa added, “I received very positive feedback from my teachers, and they always helped critique my work. However, they also placed enough pressure on me, which pushed me to do better in school and with my assignments.”

Concerned advisors. Assigning nontraditional CTE students faculty mentors early in their college career, in addition to academic advisors and counselors, helped students feel insulated by their school. So, no matter what they needed, they had a place to go to for consistent and honest answers. Nontraditional students flourished faster when they knew there were people behind them to support them. At that point, they began to trust those departments; hence, follow-through is pertinent on behalf of the advisor and is paramount in gaining the learner's trust. Typically, nontraditional learners take advantage of opportunities given to them but are far less likely to ask for help, even if the support is there (Metzner, & Bean, 1987).

Sage stated that her advisors helped her “pick out the classes that she could handle and took them.” “I could always go to her and speak to her concerning my classes, and she will

always give me advice, good, sound advice, as well as, she substituted some of my classes for me,” said Sage. “I took the initiative to go to the advisors to get guidance as to what I needed to do to be successful in the classroom,” stated Mandell. Mandell shared, “there was a really special person in my life who happened to be an educator, and that person refused to give up on me and insisted that I finish this chapter.” Laura affirmed the faculty and her advisors “created positive experiences” for her. Ivey said, “Advisors helped me to get that proper resources to be able to overcome the problems I faced.” Jace said, “Well, being disabled, they went out of their way to help me on campus. Help me navigate the campus well.” Jace also shared, “I had counselors encourage me to keep going and keep looking. As they do today, they tell me to keep looking, and I might find something if I just keep looking and don't give up.” “Instructors and advisors offer guidance on goal setting and career aspirations” to students due to their “variety of knowledge and experience within career fields,” said Jace.

Flexible course offerings. Prospective nontraditional CTE students necessitated flexibility and an understanding to correlate with their existing life commitments. In this study, flexibility was equated to online or hybrid delivery formats. In the interviews with LCCC students, flexibility also meant the ability to begin and end a degree as family, work, or financial situations dictate. Administrators and faculty must know that this returning group of students has tried attending college during an earlier period of their lives. Now, college is even more critical because it represents a time for a change and, most often, better marketability when seeking jobs. As CTE programs shift to increased hybrid and online instruction, the nontraditional CTE student population's engagement is ever more important. Jace shared, “When I got the chance to

enroll in a nontraditional program, I already had a background for that. I didn't have a problem with the instructors or anything like that on campus.” Sage also added that she was “happy just to be able to concentrate on her career-technical courses.”

Attrition continues to plague CTE education; there is a shortage of integrated policies and practices that provide faculty with the necessary skills and tools to support and address nontraditional CTE student attrition. This research evaluated the issue, and several practices appeared to help students stay enrolled in the community college. Nyla said, “I would have to say the fact that the college offers online courses because I know that I would not have been able to go back to school without online courses. The flexibility in the class schedule and the instructor's availability were positive experiences for students taking hybrid courses at LCCC. Convenience, instructor availability, and online interactions were mentioned as positives for the online/hybrid course delivery formats.

On the other hand, negative quotes of technology hiccups and a sense of feeling lost and overwhelmed were also stated. Zara said, “I think it's a negative experience whenever I pick up too many online classes at once.” Zara also said, “I sometimes think, especially during a summer session, it can be even more overwhelming because things move at a faster pace because you're trying to cram 16 weeks of information into eight weeks of information.” Gabi shared, “The only complaint I've had with the community college is with one of my online classes because of scheduling for final exams. One of my exams was not able to take on the right campus, and I had to drive to a different campus to be able to take it.” Zora said, “online courses were hard to grasp initially,” but they provided an opportunity for her to “work and go to school.” Zora also added, “My having to start doing everything online, and manage my time with that many classes, and spend so much time with each class was difficult.” Online and hybrid

classes allowed her to continue to work a full-time job and work near home with her children. She said she would not have been able to stay enrolled if she could not attend college online. According to Eden, she also enjoyed the option of “online and hybrid instruction that allows access to instruction anytime from anywhere.”

Smaller classroom settings. For nontraditional CTE students, smaller classroom settings created a learner-centered environment inclusive of active learning strategies, projects, or problems, and occasionally having student instructors in a “flipped classroom.” According to Sage, “many classes had as few as 20 students,” which was a “bonus in addition to the low cost of tuition.” “I tended to learn more, and I learned faster in smaller classes,” said Nyla. Mandell also stated the “class size is smaller” compared to those he took at the university level, which made a “huge difference” in the student engagement level. The participants in this research learned better by relating the class material to their lives and the world while in a smaller classroom setting. This practical application of material made learning more impactful and meaningful for the students. Mandell stated, “I attend a community college because I did not finish then; it appears as though I am doing much better in this setting, as opposed to the university setting.”

Instructor accessibility. Nontraditional CTE students enrolled in any community college undoubtedly required support, guidance, and patience, not only in their personal lives but predominantly in their educational lives. Part of the responsibility instructors and community colleges faced in enrolling nontraditional CTE students was educating the students on how to persist and flourish and first understand what the students’ deficits and challenges were. Being accessible to students fostered a positive learning experience for the students and created a positive teaching atmosphere. According to Mandell, “in smaller CTE classes, instructors had a

chance to learn more about their students.” On the same note, “nontraditional students found their teachers to be more accessible because they can get assistance when they need it,” according to Laura.

Participants interviewed reported that academic advising and instructor relationships were vital to them. Elsa said, “I have really enjoyed the campus and classrooms because of how small they are and easy to get around, but I have mostly enjoyed the teachers that I have had. They have been so good to me and accommodating with questions that I have had in the past.” Faculty and student relationships were pivotal to nontraditional CTE success in the community college. It was even more evident that a strong rapport with the instructors created a desire for learning, leading to increased retention, persistence, and completion.

Small group discussion. Nontraditional CTE students learned best by “connecting the course material to their lives” and the world through “role-playing, discussions, projects, and using hands-on applications.” A practical application of material made learning more impactful and meaningful because adult learners learn best by being “immersed in the material.” “Not only did nontraditional CTE students learn more in smaller classes, but they also learned faster.” As a result, “the class as a whole progressed through the course modules in Canvas and material at a faster rate than in larger classes,” according to Mari.

Nontraditional students appreciated small group discussions because they provided instructors with an opportunity to get to know their students. Remembering personal details about students while taking an influential and active role in tending to their students enhanced and increased student satisfaction in the classroom. “In smaller classes, students became more confident in expressing their opinions and asking and answering questions, which also benefitted our peers,” said Jace. Jace also added, “I gave students a future look at what they

would face in the world since I was nontraditional and much older than they were. I was able to tell them of the life experiences that I have encountered.”

Research Question Responses

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology research study was to allow nontraditional career technical and education students to describe their continuous enrollment experiences while attending a community college. CTE students could have their voices heard when responding to research questions through one-on-one interviews, a focus group, and document analysis. Each student described their college experiences in detail to each research question.

Central Research Question

The central research question for this transcendental phenomenology answered by nontraditional CTE students was: What experiences do nontraditional career and technical education students describe as having a meaningful influence on their continuous enrollment at the community college? In this study, nontraditional career and technical education students described having a positive attitude, acknowledging one’s progress, focusing on self-improvement, and working towards a career had a meaningful influence on their continuous enrollment at the community college. Table 4 displays the results of responses to the central research question in the study.

Table 4*Responses to Central Research Question*

Themes	Number of Responses	% of Total
Positive Attitudes	10	58.85%
Progress Acknowledgement	9	52.94%
Self Improvement	6	35.29%
Career Motivations	6	35.29%

Note. Table 4 displays the results of 31 responses to the central research question.

Positive attitudes. According to this research study, 58.85% of the students in this study proclaimed keeping a positive mindset made it easier for them to achieve their goals. Based on the results of this research, participants shared “they are challenged to make it to graduation successfully” and had “trouble adjusting to college life,” therefore confirming Tinto’s (1975) student integration. Gabi said, “Maintaining a positive attitude when faced with challenges helps me to stay on track. Zara said, “Adopting the right mindset will go a long way when staying motivated.” Participants who lacked perseverance described their experiences as “stressful and overwhelming,” which was consistent with Tinto’s model.

Progress acknowledgment. Although Tinto’s (1975) student integration model focused on the importance of students being motivated in college, this study illustrated the importance and advantages of students being optimistic about the future and believing that they can be successful in their future academic terms, despite how bad their current academic status might seem. Of course, being positive did not mean “everything will turn out as planned”; therefore, focusing on one’s progress and self-improvement was vital due to life’s setbacks. Mari affirmed,

“Past successes serve as a great motivator to keep pushing forward to achieve goals.” Laura gave herself “credit for the progress she has made” thus far. Eden proclaimed, “It is important to “recognize your past successes to avoid future failures.” In this study, 52.94% of the nontraditional CTE students acknowledged the progress made and how they learned from their mistakes and maintained a positive outlook.

Self-improvement. The mind of nontraditional CTE students tended to sabotage their self-improvement; subsequently, 35.29% of the students in this study concentrated on doing their best as a college student despite their circumstances. Havyn shared, “Once I got pregnant with my son, I took things more seriously. It made me think about school a little more positive.” Avis had to “learn how to be a student again” because she was “returning to school after 20 years,” so the “college setting was hard to adjust to again.” Laura said that “being in college made her feel better about herself.” Those valuable lessons learned and the keen wisdom obtained during the process propelled the students forward. According to several participants, self-improvement was a central focus as they matriculated through college and became much closer to having a “meaningful and rewarding career.”

Career motivations. The current analysis showed that 35.29% of the nontraditional CTE students were motivated to have a rewarding career after obtaining a certification or degree from the community college. The students in this study strived for advancement and exhibited college resilience with persistence as the primary component. Students “adapted” to changing academic and environmental conditions to overcome career and college barriers. It was imperative that CTE students “believed in themselves because they needed to achieve for themselves and their families.” They were willing to “make sacrifices and take reasonable risks” to do so. “We make those sacrifices to do that which is better,” stated Mandell. “I’m proud of myself for all that I

have overcome. It took a long time, but I'm finished. I'm there. I'm at the end. All I got to do is go to the finish line. I'm right there," said Laura. "Advisors provided invaluable tools from asking questions to advising on career choices," according to Eden. Nyla said, "I'm trying to kind of make a career change here." Successful nontraditional CTE college students were resolute in utilizing all internal and external resources available to achieve career goals.

Sub-question One

This study's first sub-question was: How do non-traditional career and technical students perceive that environmental factors influence their continuous enrollment at the community college? In this study, nontraditional career and technical education students described balancing college with family life and having to maintain work commitments were environmental factors that influence their continuous enrollment. Table 5 displays the results of responses to sub-question one.

Table 5

Responses to Sub-question One

Themes	Number of Responses	% of Total
Balancing college with family life	8	47.06%
Having to maintain work commitments	4	23.53%

Note. Table 5 displays the results of 12 responses to sub-question one.

Balancing college with family life. In some cases, the consequence of this choice resulted in a decline in academic performance and in some cases meant “contemplating dropping out of school.” Thus, school and family life balance were crucial for the optimal academic success of CTE students. According to Mandell, “Having to balance being an older adult student, having a family, and having to focus there, and finding time” was also “pretty challenging.” Sage said, “It was hard for me to overcome balancing my school life and home life.” Sage also added, “I had to learn how to manage my household, my husband, my children, as well as being able to do my homework so that I can succeed successfully.” Gabi shared, “I guess what influenced me to keep going through school would be my boyfriend because college is kind of hard sometimes, and he's always helped me get through it.” As indicated in this study, 47.06% of the CTE students often wore many different hats: mother, father, worker, caretaker, and student.

Often the various roles conflicted with each other resulting in competing obligations. Given the many difficulties faced by nontraditional CTE students, it was natural to wonder what factors motivate them to complete their program studies while raising their children. Havyn said she has a three-month-old baby; thus, “I had learned that I'm better at doing my homework and studying while he sleeps.” This research showed that the most common motivational factor reported by nontraditional student parents is the very children whose needs make higher education challenging.

Having to maintain work commitments. The work and life experiences molded each nontraditional CTE student's experience at LCCC. As a result, these same participants tended to encounter particular “challenges” when they enrolled in community college and tried to work at the same time. 23.53% of the participants stated that having to maintain work commitments

were environmental factors that influenced their continuous enrollment. Their need to work forced them to develop multitasking skills which enabled students to juggle the demands of work, school, and home.” Finding creative and innovative ways to integrate school, family, and work-life was essential to student success in community college.

For example, several of the participants held a part-time or full-time job; thus, they were equipped with valuable skills like discipline, responsibility, and time management. Even so, participants like Ivey said, “trying to juggle, having two full-time jobs, being a mother, not having the proper resources” was difficult. Havyn proclaimed it was “hard trying to work” and “fit in time to do homework now and study.” Laura “worked and went to school” simultaneously, and sometimes instructors would “allow her to come to class five minutes late.” Laura also said that she had a “good rapport with her instructors, who “worked with her job schedule.” “They worked with me very well, so that made me feel much better at being in school,” according to Laura. Additionally, Laura said she “learned a lot being in college,” and it taught her “how to be a better employee” on her job.

Sub-question Two

The second sub-question of this study was: In what ways do non-traditional career and technical students perceive that academic factors impact their continuous enrollment at the community college? In this study, nontraditional career and technical education students described engaging instructors, concerned advisors, flexible course offerings, and smaller classroom settings were academic factors that influence their continuous enrollment. Table 6 displays the responses to sub-question two.

Table 6*Responses to Sub-question Two*

Themes	Number of Responses	% of Total
Engaging Instructors	13	76.47%
Concerned Advisors	5	29.41%
Flexible Course Offerings	7	41.18%
Smaller Classroom Settings	7	41.18%

Note. Table 6 displays the results of 32 responses to sub-question two.

Engaging instructors. Community college instructors should acknowledge and engage nontraditional CTE students in their teaching and curriculum development (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). According to the data, 76.47% of the students attested that engaging instructors were an essential factor in their persistence by teaching them skills to survive at the community college. Sage added, “My instructors would always encourage me and let me know that I can do it.” Mandell stated, “I felt the professors at the community college, they seem to be more engaging, and that to me made a difference or makes a difference for me.” Mandell also said, “I will give credit to the professors that I was fortunate enough to encounter, and they were quite observant, and they would notice that if you were struggling.” Nontraditional CTE students require a need for content, and professional disciplines are connected to their lived experience. According to Knowles (1984), adult learners have independent self-concepts and can direct their learning through rich life experiences, changing social roles, and immediate knowledge applications.

Concerned advisors. Similarly, 29.41% of the students proclaimed that concerned advisors have effectively learned how to reach at-risk nontraditional CTE students.

Nontraditional CTE students were easily discouraged, distracted, drained, and less focused and frequently needed support and motivation (Bonet & Walters, 2016). Sage stated that her advisors helped her “pick out the classes that she could handle and took them.” “I could always go to her and speak to her concerning my classes, and she will always give me advice, good, sound advice, as well as, she substituted some of my classes for me,” said Sage. “I took the initiative to go to the advisors to get guidance as to what I needed to do to be successful in the classroom,” stated Mandell. Laura affirmed the faculty and her advisors “created positive experiences” for her. Ivey said, “Advisors helped me to get that proper resources to be able to overcome the problems I faced.” Effective advising had a more significant impact on returning nontraditional CTE students, resulting in an increase in the community colleges' graduation and retention rates.

Flexible course offerings. Creative scheduling was a critical factor in increasing student retention and presented some innovative and alternative course offerings. 41.18% of the students in this study claimed flexible course offerings such as accelerated course terms, hybrid classes, zoom classes, and online classes helped nontraditional CTE working students minimize the possibility of outside roadblocks interfering with class attendance. Hybrid courses were popular among participants because they offered convenience to CTE students by minimizing conflicts with hectic work and children's school schedules.

Nyla said, “I would have to say the fact that the college offers online courses because I know that I would not have been able to go back to school without online courses. She also added, “Online and hybrid classes allowed me to continue to work a full-time job and live near my children. Furthermore, I wouldn't have been able to do it if I couldn't go to school online.” Flexible course offerings were necessary due to the community college's changing demographics

(Rotar, 2017). 66.13% of the nontraditional students in this research were enrolled to obtain one-year or advance certifications. In this study, students stated that colleges should continue to be flexible with their delivery methods to attract and retain nontraditional CTE students.

Smaller classroom settings. According to 41.18% of the students in this research study, smaller classroom settings were a significant benefit, which enhanced their learning experience. Mandell also stated the “class size is smaller” compared to those he took at the university level, which made a “huge difference” in the student engagement level. Elsa said, “I have enjoyed the campus and classrooms because of how small they are and easy to get around.” “In smaller classes, students become more confident in expressing their opinions and asking and answering questions, which also benefits our peers,” said Jace. “I tend to learn more, and I learn faster in smaller classes,” said Nyla. “Not only do students learn more in small classes, but they also learn faster.” As a result, “the class as a whole can progress through the course modules in Canvas and material at a faster rate than in larger classes,” according to Mari.

The concept of using smaller class sizes to boost academic achievement could solve community college retention woes. CTE classrooms include a wide variety of backgrounds, abilities, ages, cultures, learning styles, and interests; thus, creating an optimal learning situation for students of various developmental levels is crucial in increasing the retention among these students. When CTE classrooms offer opportunities for flexible grouping and collaborative learning opportunities, educators were more knowledgeable of the challenges students faced and were able to tailor their lessons to meet their student’s learning abilities and styles.

Summary

This study's research findings were collected by remaining objective and allowing factors discussed in Bean and Metzner’s (1985) student retention model to reveal naturally without any

expectations of results. During the interviews, the researcher listened to each CTE nontraditional student while remaining open to the responses (Moustakas, 1994). The research data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) variation of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen model. A reproduction of Bean and Metzner's (1985) model revealed ten themes after transcribing and analyzing the interviews. The researcher interviewed 17 nontraditional students in this qualitative phenomenological study. Individually and as a group, the participants interviewed were eager to share their experiences and voice their perceptions on what would better serve nontraditional students' needs. Three research questions guided this study and served as interview questions and probing questions, which allowed the ten themes to be identified from 17 face-to-face semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Overall, having engaging instructors, understanding advisors, flexible course offerings, smaller classroom settings, and balancing college with family life and work commitments were academic and environmental factors that positively impacted the continuous enrollment of nontraditional CTE students in the community college.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

This phenomenological study was conducted to explore continuous enrollment in nontraditional students pursuing career and technical education degrees at community colleges. The theory primarily guiding this study is Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition, as it explains how background, academic, environmental, psychological outcomes, and social integration affect student retention. Chapter Five consists of seven sections: an overview of the chapter, a concise summary of the findings, a discussion of the findings, implications, delimitations and limitations, recommendations for future research, and a summary.

Summary of Findings

Nontraditional career and technical students pursuing their associate degrees at community colleges experience many situations that impact college retention. This transcendental phenomenological study aimed to describe the continuous enrollment experiences of nontraditional career and technical education community college students. The collection of stories shared by the research participants reflected shared experiences. I organized significant statements into themes to provide insight into the essence of the data and understand what participants experienced and how they experienced it (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). The participant's stories produced 10 themes. The themes were as follows: (a) Positive Attitudes, (b) Progress Acknowledgement, (c) Self Improvement, (d) Career Motivation, (e) Balancing College with Family Life, (f) Having to Maintain Work Commitments, (g) Engaging Instructors, (h) Concerned Advisors, (i) Flexible Course Offerings, and (j) Smaller Classroom

Settings. This study's three research questions helped nontraditional CTE students maintain continuous enrollment from college entrance to graduation.

Central Research Question

The central research question addressed what experiences nontraditional career and technical education students described as having a meaningful influence on their continuous enrollment at the community college. In this study, nontraditional career and technical education students described having a positive attitude, acknowledging one's progress, focusing on self-improvement, and working towards a career had a meaningful influence on their continuous enrollment. Although attending college has more advantages than not attending college, some nontraditional career and technical students may not succeed. Community colleges with the strongest retention plans may be unable to help some students. Therefore, college administration must predict what influences place nontraditional career and technical education students in danger of attrition.

This study found that if nontraditional CTE students were to be successful in community college, they must develop and maintain positive attitudes to persist in their academic studies (Tinto, 1975). When a CTE student possessed a positive frame of mind instead of a negative one, they were more inclined to make rational and better decisions. Moreover, students could look ahead and plot a course towards degree completion, rather than just reacting to the setbacks nontraditional career and education students may have encountered in their daily lives.

Sub-question One

Sub-question number one addressed how non-traditional career and technical students perceived environmental factors influenced their continuous enrollment at the community college. In this study, nontraditional career and technical students perceived that environmental

factors such as balancing college with family life and maintaining work commitments influence their continuous enrollment at the community college. Consequently, nontraditional students did not find it easy to stay motivated in college, especially when they had busy schedules, families, and social lives. In this research, some nontraditional student parents reported that a time came in their academic career and during work production when they had to adopt a “good enough” rather than a perfect goal.

Higher education was an obvious choice for the nontraditional CTE students in this research. Their primary concern was providing a safe and enriching environment in which their children may develop. As a result, nontraditional students were more likely than traditional students to pursue higher education because higher education was the most reliable path to attaining higher income levels, greater job satisfaction and security, and better prospects (Markle, 2015). CTE students in this research prioritized academics at the expense of environmental factors, including work and family. Often the various roles conflicted with each other resulting in competing obligations. In most cases, the challenges of nontraditional student parents fell disproportionately on the female students, who were more likely to be a child’s primary caregiver for cultural and societal reasons. Thus, the CTE student had to be proficient at multitasking various factors and assessing priorities in their daily lives.

Sub-question Two

Sub-question number two addressed the ways non-traditional career and technical students perceived academic factors impacted their continuous enrollment at the community college. Non-traditional career and technical students perceived that academic factors such as engaging instructors, concerned advisors, flexible course offerings, and smaller classroom settings impacted their continuous enrollment at the community college. Some of the

nontraditional students were not only seeking an associate degree; instead, they were seeking certifications to advance in their respective careers. The community colleges served as the change agents for those participants to pursue the “American dream.”

Accordingly, the participants affirmed colleges needed to become flexible in the course offerings and share information through less traditional methods (Sanburn, 2017). Rotar (2017) suggested that nontraditional CTE students had educational deficiencies or underlying learning or physical disabilities and may be apprehensive in class to ask for assistance. This research found academic advisors played a vital role in the success of students. Consequently, they should frequently keep in contact with CTE students and respond to their needs. As noted by the CTE students in this research, good academic habits started to form when students saw that college advisors cared about their academic success. Community colleges cannot just enroll nontraditional CTE students, advise them on what courses to take, and send them off. Unknowingly, the college had formulated a system that sets the nontraditional students up for failure upon enrollment. Hence, academic advisors must routinely touch base with nontraditional students during their first year to ensure that they succeed in classes and remain on track for graduation.

According to this study, smaller class sizes may also benefit nontraditional CTE students and offer increased personalized instruction, increasing academic achievement and student retention. Smaller CTE classrooms offered opportunities for flexible grouping and collaborative learning opportunities. Then educators were familiar with the challenges of their students and could tailor their lessons to meet their students' needs. Subsequently, instructors replaced traditional grading and assessment tools with methodologies that genuinely reflected the CTE student's performance and growth. This opportunity was due to smaller class sizes, an advantage

of the community college education. Although more supplementary research is required to fully understand the effect of class size in the community college, this research showed that at-risk CTE students benefited from smaller classes than other student populations.

Discussion

The literature review in Chapter Two included Bean and Metzner's position that socioeconomic and external factors influence nontraditional students' completion rates. While their Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition focused on nontraditional graduate students, Bean and Metzner viewed attrition as a problem related to students' backgrounds, including their age, educational goals, ethnicity, and prior academic grade performance, as well as academic, psychological, and environmental variables. The relationship between this study's findings and the theoretical and empirical literature discussed in Chapter Two are considered in this section.

Empirical Literature

Literature indicates the nontraditional CTE students are attracted to the community college versus four-year colleges and universities as the pathway to financial security for the student and the economy (Moschetti, & Hudley, 2015; Schindelheim, 2017). Of particular concern to community colleges was the high attrition rates plaguing nontraditional students (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Lovell, 2014; Markle, 2015). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2016), nontraditional students had considerably lower retention and graduation rates when contrasted to their traditional counterparts. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), nontraditional students are categorized into the following characteristics:

- Delayed college attendees, instead of attending immediately after graduating high school

- Part-time instead of full-time student
- Hold full-time employment while enrolled in college
- Financially independent of family and parents
- Have children or care for dependents
- Single parent
- GED graduate

As shown in the literature and this study, nontraditional CTE students were different. However, all of the research participants fell into one or more of the same age and lifestyle categories as indicated by the National Center for Education Statistics (Duggan & Pickering, 2008; National Center for Education Statistics, 2016; Rotar, 2017). Likewise, the students in this research entered community college with different ethnicities, social backgrounds, learning styles, communication methods, discerning, and motivational prompts. The same reasons that drew in nontraditional CTE students to college were the same reasons the nontraditional CTE students faced particular challenges during enrollment in a community college (Bohl, Haak, & Shrestha, 2017; Hlinka, 2017). The CTE students' college experiences in this research were primarily shaped by who they were as college students and whom they wanted to be in their future careers (Knowles, 1984; Knowles, Holton, Swanson, & Robinson, 2020). In this study, the participant quotes, in conjunction with the personal experiences, revealed themes from one-on-one semi-structured interviews and focus groups which were correspondingly consistent with previously reviewed literature (Chen (2014); Fike & Fike, (2008); Travers, (2016). From this research, it was evident that motivational forces played an intricate role in leading nontraditional students to maintain their continued enrollment at the community college.

The participant experiences summarized in this research findings align with other experiences of nontraditional students in the career and technical education programs at community colleges (Rabourn, BrckaLorenz, & Shoup, 2018); Wyatt, 2011). According to the research, the participants believed that dropping out would be simple to do without some form of motivation. Besides having a positive attitude and self-motivation, acknowledging progress and self-improvement were key factors that had a meaningful influence on their continuous enrollment while in college. When the community college reinforced student support services in the form of academic advising and career coaching and support, the CTE students in this research responded positively as they navigated through transitional periods (Hougaard, 2013; O'Banion, 2019).

The community college also prepared students in this study with various academic and career pathways by promoting student engagement, advocating student-life opportunities, helping reach personal goals, and ultimately preparing them for success in the workforce (Chase, 2017; Lynch, 2016). The nontraditional CTE students in this research were pursuing training, certificate, or degree programs. They often faced numerous barriers such as lack of finances and lack of academic preparation, cultural issues, social issues, and constant family responsibilities. Taken together, the results of this study show that nontraditional CTE college students were not able to meet the study requirements of their programs because of job or family responsibilities, and/or because they are not equipped with the adequate motivational skills. As indicated in various literature, researchers and practitioners stress the importance of minimizing barriers and providing solutions were imperative to retaining nontraditional CTE students until college completion (Chase, 2017; Duggan & Pickering, 2008; Lundberg, 2014; Mertez & Jankoviak, 2016).

Lastly, this study focused on “practical” intervention strategies that addressed challenges “before” they negatively impacted nontraditional CTE students. Moreover, this research necessitated that community colleges “align their services” with the “needs of nontraditional CTE students” in order to reverse the trend (Allegrini, 2015; Lovell, 2014). This study confirms previous research that suggests relying solely on identifying at-risk nontraditional CTE students with poor academic performance may have fallen short of improving retention rates. Thus, this study gave an accurate evaluation of challenges faced by nontraditional CTE students, which warranted an understanding into how to address the specific needs of this population of students.

Theoretical Literature

At this stage in the research, continuous enrollment was the conclusion of one school year and consecutive enrollment in the next school year until degree completion (Seidman, 2018). The theory primarily guiding this study was Bean and Metzner’s (1985) conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition. It explained how background, academic, environmental, psychological outcomes, and social integration affected student retention. However, literature proclaimed that a “prediction of student attrition” could be enhanced by using a blend of Tinto’s (1975) Student Integration Model and Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition than either framework alone (Aljohani, 2016; Cabrera et al., 1993; Chen, 2014; Mohammadi, 1996; Pascarella, 1980; Spady, 1971).

Student retention models comprised of the theoretical retention framework established by Braxton, Bean, Pascarella, Terenzini, and Tinto, as well as others, were used to provide additional support for the foundation of this research (Bean, 1980; Bean, 2000; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton, 2000, 2013; Braxton et al., 2004; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1978; St. John & Cabrera, 2000; Tinto, 1975, 2018). According to Aljohani (2016),

“these theoretical models were the Undergraduate Dropout Process Model (Spady, 1970, 1971), the Institutional Departure Model (Tinto, 1975, 1993), the Student Attrition Model (Bean, 1980, 1982), the Student-Faculty Informal Contact Model (Pascarella, 1980), the Non-traditional Student Attrition Model (Bean & Metzner, 1985) and the Student Retention Integrated Model (Cabrera et al., 1993)” (p. 4). In addition to the previously listed student retention models, some other research studies have expanded their reach into the student retention literature of higher education; however, some of these models have not been involved in the same extensive application and examination as those studied above. Other research studies only synthesized earlier models' variables to develop new models encompassing only confirmed variables while rejecting others. One case of this type of study is Cabrera et al. (1992), which combined the well-known models of Tinto (1975, 1987) with Bean (1982, 1985). Thus, combining the frameworks of theorists, Tinto (1975) and Bean & Metzner (1985), added to this research study, theoretically.

Bean's student model was more relevant to this research study because of the existence of “external influences” in the student retention phenomenon. The findings of the statistical analysis in this study supported the inclusion of both theoretical models, which resulted in a more “comprehensive” understanding of the student attrition process (Bean, 1980; Bean, 2000; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1975). Previous literature largely contributed to developing processes and understanding the factors that shaped student persistence behavior (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Mohammadi, 1996; Pascarella, 1980; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). Mohammadi (1996) asserted two fundamental reasons that the traditional theories developed for universities should not be the basis for retention

studies in community colleges. Socio-economic and demographic factors relating to community college students differed from those relating to students attending four-year universities (Mohammadi, 1996). “External forces, particularly those related to community forces in the immediate geographical environment of the college’s service area . . .” (Mohammadi, 1996, p. 39). The theoretical models of Tinto and Spady and other past retention studies “lacked a theoretical base and have involved simple correlations between dropout and selected student or institutional characteristics, little is known about the reasons why a student was likely to leave a particular institution” (Bean, 1980, p.156).

To fully understand student attrition, “the background characteristics of students must be taken into account to understand their interactions within the environment” (Bean, 1980, p.158). The older, working, and commuting nontraditional students in this study spent less time on campus than traditional, residential students. Bean and Metzner's (1985) model of nontraditional student retention chose not to emphasize the social integration factors. The participants in this research were “less inspired by social integration.” They placed more significance on the “usefulness of the CTE education being received,” as well as a more significant influence on “encouragement from friends, employers, and family members” (Bean, 1980; Bean, 2000; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Johnson& Pritchard, 1989).

Previous research identified concise ways that practitioners could “increase retention” in college students (Pascarella, 1980; Spady, 1971; Terenzini, 1978; Tinto, 1975). Tinto noted the course expectations should be “clear and concise,” the scope of the course must be challenging, and constant student feedback is needed for student improvement (Tinto, 2009). The results of this study confirmed Tinto’s findings while supporting faculty intervention when students lack in their coursework, especially in the cases of non-productive or habitually absent students. This

research also confirmed positive results when faculty is aware of the “learning and living situations students are experiencing” (Tinto, 2009). It was not surprising to learn that commuter students have “jobs and families” that attract different social, academic, and economic issues than traditional students. However, this research confirmed the importance of educators knowing what those issues are and how inquiring about them could help nontraditional CTE students feel relevant to the course's success.

As in the literature review, this study showed nontraditional CTE students were willing to work harder than most “to have a better life for themselves and their children” (Markle, 2015). As a result, they tended to have expectations and standards of performance for themselves that are higher than average. However, high expectations became problematic even in the best of times but quickly became difficult to sustain when balancing parenting, school, work, and other obligations. Nontraditional CTE students who were optimistic that they could improve in life were more likely to progress as students than those who opted not to resolve their academic struggles. To grow personally and academically, CTE students remain confident and focus on self-improvement (Tinto, 1975).

As in this study, Tinto’s student integration model provided the foundation from which other retention models developed and adapted (Davidson & Wilson, 2013; Pascarella, 1980; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). This study provided fresh insight into Tinto’s (1975) student integration model, which centered on the importance of students staying motivated in college and being optimistic about the future despite their challenges in college. While Tinto’s model focused on the effects of social interaction on student retention, Bean and Metzner's (1985) model included environmental factors such as spending time with family or working to provide for the family. Thus, the framework developed by Bean and Metzner (1985) appeared to be

particularly well suited in this research as it created a theoretical model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition in career and technical education programs.

Implications

This research study produced findings that have theoretical, empirical, and practical implications. To better help the growing nontraditional CTE student population in community colleges, additional research is needed to focus on what works and what does not for community colleges to retain current and future nontraditional CTE students. This section addressed the research findings' implications and offers recommendations for nontraditional CTE college students seeking to graduate from a community college.

Theoretical

The theoretical implications of this research study are significant. While some have examined the application of Tinto's (1975) model in the community college setting, the results of this study suggest that the Student Integration Model is relevant at this educational level. Incorporating Tinto's (1975) theory with that of Bean and Metzner's (1985) model for nontraditional students produces a more solid foundation to address the phenomenon of retention in the community college. Thus, community colleges' implication for developing social and academic interaction opportunities among nontraditional CTE students and offering services to address environmental and external barriers is warranted.

When nontraditional CTE students felt personal ties with instructors, they were more motivated, held more responsible, and felt more devoted to the school (Metzner, & Bean, 1985). Nontraditional CTE students already have varied external motivators for doing well in college, such as setting positive examples for their children, making a better living, and achieving their own goals. However, nontraditional CTE students already have developed perceptions based on

past enrollment experiences and may lack positive internal motivation for college. Those same learners can lose the needed motivation and excitement quickly with any hindrance, regardless of how little it may seem, due to their previous emotional vulnerability. As a consequence of this potential lack of internal motivation or poor self-concept related to college, it is so incredibly valuable for instructors to provide positive, extrinsic motivation continually for these students until they begin to believe in the concept themselves. Academic trajectory is crucial in the retention of nontraditional CTE students. As indicated in this research, students are more likely to perform at a greater level when they focus on achieving their “academic goals” or believe what they are doing will lead to “graduation.”

Empirical

Regarding implications for nontraditional CTE college students, the results indicated that the participants generally described their college experiences as stressful and challenging. This is consistent with current research about nontraditional students' experiences juggling school, work, and a family (Radford et al., 2015; Snyder & Cudney, 2017). All participants in this study desired to obtain a certificate or college degree to improve their quality of life. They were deficient in the necessary skills to effectively and efficiently overcome internal and external barriers to their college success. As a result, most of them struggled with finding the right balance to minimize specific barriers. However, despite these inadequacies, 11 out of 17 participants were optimistic about their futures. College leaders and administrators can use this study's findings to help future nontraditional college students understand how to avoid the pitfalls faced by participants of this study.

Another finding of this study was concerning the importance of instructors and advisors engaging with their students to provide a sense of community and foster academic achievement. This is consistent with current research about nontraditional college students in career and technical education programs. 12 out of 17 participants in this study required engaging instructors to help them become academically successful. Likewise, 7 out of 17 participants felt concerned advisors were essential to their academic success. Once students initially receive academic support and guidance, they become more comfortable as students and learn to guide themselves during college (Knowles, 1984). This study can provide advisors and faculty with a supplementary resource, which will help them see the significance of advising and working with nontraditional students who are often distressed and need help.

Practical

The practical implications of this phenomenological research study have been grounded in supporting literature, in addition to the words and descriptions voiced by the participants concerning their continuous enrollment as a nontraditional CTE student at a community college. The findings in this research recommend that community college administrators and faculty consider a number of student concerns and comments when developing policies and procedures for applying and enhancing CTE programs. This study's conclusions indicate a need for continued professional development sessions for faculty who teach CTE classes, including subjects on varied course design and delivery, student engagement, motivational techniques, and advising skills specifically for nontraditional CTE students.

Most research subjects interviewed were nontraditional female students enrolled in community college. Hence, adult female students in other traditional programs may also encounter various obstacles and challenges, preventing them from graduating from community

college. Thus, practitioners must learn how to empathize and work with these nontraditional students, as they deal with different challenges and struggles to stay in college than their traditional counterparts. Therefore, it is meant for researchers to consider barriers and challenges among different female nontraditional student groups in future research to increase enrollment rates and decrease attrition rates.

Instructors can replace traditional grading and assessment tools with methodologies that genuinely reflect the CTE students' performance and growth. As indicated in this research, nontraditional CTE students learned best through the practical application of material and increased student engagement, making learning more impactful and meaningful. Such learning is created in smaller class sizes, an advantage of the community college education. Smaller class sizes benefited the nontraditional CTE students and offered more personalized instruction, resulting in increased academic achievement and student retention. Although more supplementary research is required to fully understand the effects of class size in the community college, this research showed that at-risk CTE students benefited from smaller classes than other student populations.

Lastly, community college practitioners in the field must adopt pedagogical techniques and support to retain nontraditional CTE students and ensure their long-term academic success. As indicated in Tinto (2009), “pedagogies of engagement, such as cooperative and problem-based learning,” are especially effective in increasing student success. Research in this regard is clear. Active involvement and engagement of CTE nontraditional students in learning and reinforcement classroom activities, especially with other CTE nontraditional students, is critical to student retention and graduation.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations

This study has delimitations that limit the scope of and provide restrictions to the phenomenon under investigation. The delimitations for participants in this study include the following: (a) participant did not enroll in college immediately after graduating from high school, (b) participant attends college on a part-time basis, (c) participant is enrolled as a student in a Career and Technical Education Program, (d) participant works full time (35+ hours or more) while enrolled in college, (e) Participant is financially independent for financial aid eligibility, (f) participant has dependents (e.g., children or others in the household) other than a spouse, (g) participant is a single parent (e.g., either married or married but separated and has dependents), (h) Participant does not have a high school diploma (e.g., either did not complete high school or received a GED or some other form of high school completion certificate). This study was limited to this particular group of participants because I intended to examine only nontraditional CTE students.

Limitations

Student retention research studies in higher education, including the theoretical models, as in other research fields, have their shortcomings and limitations. One of the limitations of this student retention study concerns generalizability. This research on student retention was conducted in the community college, and the findings were not simply generalized to other higher learning institutions. The phenomenon of diminished student retention was considered campus-specific; hence, every research case had distinctive characteristics and conditions that make it problematic to generalize its findings to other research studies (Berger, 2015).

Another limitation was the nontraditional career and technical education community college students' accessible time on campus restricted the availability of possible CTE students to interview. This research study involved a lesser number of research participants because the sample size predominantly being comprised of the nontraditional career and technical education student population. Consequently, the sample size limited the research study in addressing each disparity answered in the research. Limitations evolved from the CTE students' personal experiences, beliefs, and opinions due to the qualitative researcher designating the research as a single instrument of data collection. The research only included the responses from CTE students currently enrolled in the community college and not the perspectives of those CTE students who withdrew from the community college.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study involved researching and developing retention strategies of career and technical education nontraditional students at a community college. The vast majority of the literature used in this research was primarily from an earlier time due to the limited studies surrounding nontraditional career and technical education students. Accordingly, there is a necessity to conduct additional and current research about barriers and challenges for nontraditional CTE students to update the literature. More specifically, this study addressed the fact that more research is warranted in the study and retention strategies to retain CTE students. This study was limited to a single community college in Mississippi. Researchers in the future could replicate this study at multiple community colleges in other geographic regions across the nation. Community college administrators stretch budgets to enhance the strategies to prevent the loss of much-

needed Perkins funds. Colleges that do not retain CTE students lose tuition and Perkins dollars and the combined resources of instruction and support services are also lost as a result of attrition. Future studies could also explore the interface of gender and race on nontraditional students. Ultimately, CTE students who are not retained lose the basic opportunities that higher education offers, such as secure employment possibilities that are not considered for anyone lacking a degree.

Community college administrators know the importance of student retention; thus, making the necessary changes to increase student persistence has become a priority. The concept of student retention in community colleges is much more complex and diverse than the current research literature would indicate. A future researcher could study student experiences over one or two full semesters to gain greater insight and capture a broader range of experiences to examine and understand how perceptions change from semester to semester. Furthermore, research focused on pertinent student retention issues in community colleges that benefit all segments of education. This understanding can boost administrators and faculty members' efforts in the community college system to serve the diverse students seeking to improve their lives by attending community colleges.

Summary

Community colleges are commonly recognizable for the creativity and initiative to address issues within higher education; however, the concept of nontraditional CTE student retention continues to be a major issue in community colleges. Institutions must understand their CTE students as an essential component for quality improvement to address student retention in the community college environment. Community colleges must understand nontraditional CTE students bring more complex and varied backgrounds of life experiences and prior knowledge

and skills. The varied experiences, in conjunction with detailed educational histories, wide-ranging maturity levels, different motivations and attitudes, and precisely limited time, resources, and access to collegiate engagement, may prevent nontraditional CTE students from graduating.

It is imperative to immediately address the concerns and needs of nontraditional career and technical education students. Nontraditional CTE students face numerous challenges with specific needs that must be satisfied to feel supported in their academic programs and be successful in life. Therefore, educators should first identify the ‘at risk’ CTE students using college analytics and institutional reports to identify struggling CTE students to intervene early to improve learning. Next, community college faculty, advisors, and students must stay connected and in tune with each other throughout the educational journey. The constant and consistent engagement from instructors and available support systems better equip CTE students for success while juggling work, school, and family obligations. Lastly, community college administrators must proactively offer CTE students flexible course options and hands-on learning methods, which will help nontraditional students be present, prepared, and more confident in class.

Nontraditional career and technical education students interested in completing community college degree programs face a variety of barriers from lack of academic preparation, lack of finances, social problems, diversity issues to family responsibilities (Choitz, 2011; Duggan & Pickering, 2008; Heider, 2015; Jaafar, Toce, & Polnariev, 2016; Lynch, 2016). The current research of continuous enrollment of nontraditional career and technical education students can help community college administrators plan curricula and programs, decrease barriers, and meet students' needs, thus increasing student enrollment and retention rates. At a minimum, this research study's anecdotes can be a starting point for evaluating CTE programs

while understanding the issues and reflecting the needs of nontraditional students. The student voices in this research study will be the foundation for initiating curricular changes and innovative program design while providing an ideal platform to increase graduation rates of nontraditional students in CTE programs. In doing so, this study will be a step forward in retaining nontraditional CTE students through graduation and sustaining career and technical education programs for years to come.

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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPATION SELECTION AND DEMOGRAPHIC CRITERIA FORM

Nontraditional Career and Technical Education Student

Student Name Click or tap here to enter text.

Mobile Phone/email Click or tap here to enter text.

Participant ID # Click or tap here to enter text. (To be entered by the researcher if selected)

Gender: Click or tap here to enter text.

Age: Click or tap here to enter text. Race/Ethnicity:

☐ White ☐ Black ☐ Hispanic ☐ Native American ☐ Asian ☐ Pacific Islander

Career and Technical Education Major: Click or tap here to enter text.

Please select as many of the following (8) boxes that would describe your status:

☐ Participant did not enroll in college within one year of graduating high school.

☐ Participant attends college on a part-time basis.

☐ Participant is enrolled as a student in a Career and Technical Education Program.

☐ Participant works full time (35+ hours or more) while enrolled in college.

☐ Participant is financially independent for financial aid eligibility.

☐ Participant has dependents (e.g., children or others in the household) other than a spouse.

☐ Participant is a single parent (e.g., either married or married but separated and has dependents).

☐ Participant does not have a high school diploma (e.g., either did not complete high school or received a GED or some other form of high school completion certificate)

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

Title of the Project: Continuous Enrollment Experiences of Nontraditional Career and Technical Education Students at the Community College

Principal Investigator: NaTunya Johnson, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University.

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be Nontraditional Career and Technical Education Student enrolled for at least one semester in the community 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 this study is to describe the continuous enrollment experiences of nontraditional career and technical education students at the community college.

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 things:

1. Participate in a one-on-one, in-person or video conferencing interview that should last between 45 minutes to one hour. You will have the ability to choose your preferred method of interviewing. This interview will be audio recorded. If you do not wish to be seen on video, there is an option to call in and only give me access to the audio on your computer, phone, or other device.
2. Participate in an online small group discussion with other teachers in this study. You will be asked to join a Zoom online video conference meeting and actively participate with others for 90 minutes on a designated date. The small group discussion will be audio recorded. If you do not wish to be seen on video, there is an option to call in and only give the group access to the audio on your computer, phone, or other device.
3. Review the transcripts of your interview data and your part in the small group discussion to ensure that they are accurate. This should take about 15 minutes for you to complete.
4. I will also need to collect records related to you from the community college, but that information will be stripped of identifiers before I receive it, so I will not be able to link it to individual participants. The records include course and school withdrawal reports, attendance cutout reports, student appeals, and graduation reports

How could you or others benefit from this study?

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

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 kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms/codes. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- 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.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will receive a \$20 Amazon gift card once their interview and focus group are complete.

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 Holmes Community College. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time 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 contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

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

The researcher conducting this study is NaTunya Johnson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Jeffery Savage, [REDACTED].

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

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear Student:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of this study is to describe the continuous enrollment experiences of nontraditional career and technical education students at the community college. I am writing to invite you to consider participating in my study.

In order to participate you must meet the following criteria:

1. Must be a Nontraditional Career and Technical Education Student and enrolled at the community college for at least one semester.

Taking part in this research project is voluntary. Your name and other identifying information will be collected as part of your participation, but this information will remain confidential. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

1. Participate in a one-on-one, in-person or video-conferencing interview that should last between 45 minutes to one hour. You will have the ability to choose your preferred method of interviewing. This interview will be audio recorded. If you do not wish to be seen on video, there is an option to call in and only give me access to the audio on your computer, phone, or other device.
2. Participate in an online small group discussion with other teachers in this study. You will be asked to join a Zoom online video conference meeting and actively participate with others for 90 minutes at a designated date and time. The small group discussion will be audio recorded. If you do not wish to be seen on video, there is an option to call in and only give the group access to the audio on your computer, phone, or other device.
3. Review the transcripts of your interview data and your part in the small group discussion to ensure that they are accurate. This should take about 15 minutes for you to complete.
4. I will also need to collect records related to you from the community college, but that information will be stripped of identifiers before I receive it, so I will not be able to link it to individual participants. The records include course and school withdrawal reports, attendance cutout reports, student appeals, and graduation reports.

As a token of my appreciation for your participation, you will be compensated with a \$20 Amazon gift card once your interview and focus group are complete.

If you are selected to participate, you will receive a follow-up email with the consent document and instructions to schedule your interview. The consent document contains additional information about my study and should be signed and returned to me in order to schedule the interview.

APPENDIX D

WELCOME LETTER

Dear Student:

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study. Based on your responses to my screening questions, I would like to invite you to participate. I have attached a consent form that is required for your participation. It must be signed and returned to me before we can schedule your interview. Please print, sign, scan, and return it to me at [REDACTED], or you may type your information directly into the form, save it to your computer, and attach it to your reply email. Also, when forwarding your consent form, please let me know which method of interviewing you prefer (ZOOM online conference or in person) and what dates within the next week that you are available to meet. If you choose to meet in-person for the interview, you may return your signed consent form at that time. Thank you so much for taking the time out of your busy schedule to participate in this study. I look forward to working with you and learning from your experiences!

Best regards,

NaTunya Johnson

Doctoral Candidate and Liberty University

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thank you for taking part in this interview process. Your answers can be as long or as short as you would like. If at any time you do not wish to answer any of the questions or wish to no longer participate in the interview, please let me know and I will stop the interview. I will be taking field notes during the interview to ensure accuracy and completeness as I listen to your responses to the questions.

The interview will be approximately 1 hour. This will depend upon your response time. If you are ready, let's begin.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe any experiences that you have had which positively influenced your continued enrollment at the community college.
2. What aspects of the experience made it positive?
3. Describe any experiences that you have had which negatively influenced your continued enrollment at the community college.
4. What aspects of the experience made it negative?
5. Describe the experiences that were harder to overcome.
6. Describe the experiences that were easier to overcome.
7. Describe any positive experiences you feel were created exclusively by you.
8. Describe any positive experiences you feel were created by someone other than you.
9. Describe any negative experiences you feel were created exclusively by you.
10. Describe any negative experiences you feel were created by someone other than you.
11. Please share anything that we have not covered concerning your college experience.

APPENDIX F

FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

Thank you for taking part in this focus group. Your answers can be as long or as short as you would like. If at any time you do not wish to answer any of the questions or wish to no longer participate in the focus group, please let me know and I will stop the interview. I will be taking field notes to ensure accuracy and completeness as I listen to your responses to the questions. The focus group interview will be approximately 1 hour. This will depend upon your response time. If you are ready, let's begin.

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Discuss with the group three words that describe your feelings about attending college.
2. What does a quality college education mean to you?
3. When you first enrolled, what did you hope to get out of your college experience?
4. Describe your experiences and the skills obtained while enrolled as a nontraditional career and technical education student.
5. Describe what you find appealing about your experience at the community college.
6. Describe what you find frustrating about your experience at the community college.
7. Describe how the college could improve your community college experience and make it more appealing.
8. Describe the ways your college experience has prepared you to be a responsible and contributing member of your community.
9. Please share anything that I have not covered concerning your college experience.

APPENDIX G

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 8, 2020

Natunya Johnson
Jeffrey Savage

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY19-20-302 CONTINUOUS ENROLLMENT EXPERIENCES OF NONTRADITIONAL CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION STUDENTS AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Dear Natunya Johnson, Jeffrey Savage:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:
101(b):

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

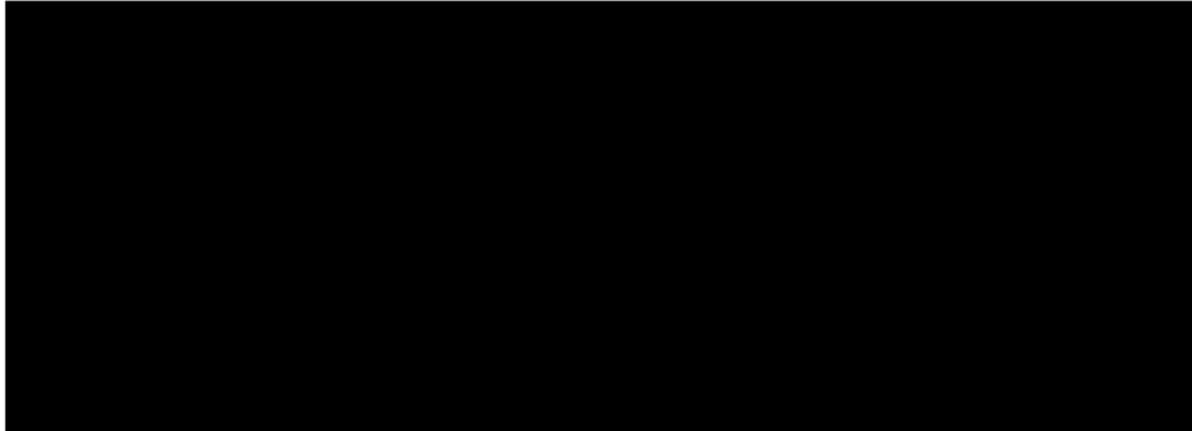
If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX H

April 16, 2020

NaTunya Johnson

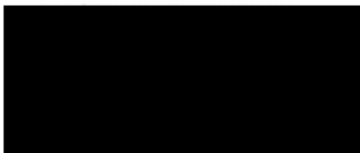


Dear Mrs. Johnson,

After reviewing your request for the proposed study, **“Continuous Enrollment Experiences of Nontraditional Career and Technical Education Students at the Community College”**, you are authorized to collect data at our institution.

I am pleased that you have chosen [REDACTED] to participate in your research. We, at [REDACTED], look forward to viewing the results and working with you in any way possible to aid in your study.

Sincerely,



Vice-President for Research and Development