THE TRADITIONAL STUDENT MYTH: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY ON THE
EXPERIENCES OF TRADITIONAL STUDENTS WITH NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT
CHARACTERISTICS

by

Stephani L. Greytak

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this multiple case study was to describe the perceptions of institutional support and services of traditional-age students with nontraditional characteristics at Kansas universities. The central research question for this study was “How do traditional students with nontraditional characteristics experience institutional support and services?” The study was guided by organizational learning theory (Argyris & Schöen, 1974). Research was conducted at two four-year universities in the state of Kansas and involved 10 students ages 18 – 24 enrolled or recently enrolled in college, who identified with at least one nontraditional characteristic. Data were collected using semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, focus groups and institutional records. Purposive sampling was utilized to recruit student participants in April to May 2020, when many institutions had closed or converted to online learning due to the Covid 19 pandemic. Data analysis was completed utilizing a number of case study method strategies, primarily cross-case analysis. The themes were termed “support is mainly aligned for traditional freshmen students”, “support for nontraditional students is based on accommodations”, “academic advisors are not helpful”, “surveys are not geared towards academic services”, and “major changes are rarely seen”. The results of the study confirmed that traditional students with nontraditional features had concerns around scheduling and academic advising. The implications of this research include a broader institutional awareness of students and their needs to more adequately support them, as well as a need for discontinuation of the terms “traditional” and “nontraditional” in institutional vernacular. Future research needs to include students at smaller institutions and institutions in other areas.

Keywords: traditional, nontraditional, higher education, organizational learning, support services, persistence, retention, Covid
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation first and foremost to my incredible husband, Larry, and amazing children, Dante’ and Kayley. I cannot thank you enough for your love, support and encouragement. I love you all so very much! Also, to my mom, sister, aunts, uncles, and extended family. Your ongoing support and positivity held me up when I truly needed it.

A special dedication to my dad, my grandpa, and my grandma…I love and miss you all so very much. You were all so quick to tell me how proud you were of me, and I know you are all smiling and celebrating with me now.
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My deep thanks and appreciation to Dr. Duryea for your guidance and support throughout this process. Thanks to Dr. Swezey and Dr. Milacci for providing incredible feedback and direction to get me headed in the right direction.

I want to thank my tribe…my humans…Julia, Alisha, Shonell, Lara, Becca, and Caleb. So much laughter and more than a few tears, but you were there for it all, and I thank you and look forward to many more memories with you.

Gone both in body but not in spirit, I thank Mrs. Allen, my Fourth-Grade teacher, who saw an insecure little girl and invested time and energy to build her up and Dr. Rappoport, who believed in the timid undergraduate’s research, and spent countless hours mentoring her. Thanks also to my academic advisor who told me, in what I now believe was a reverse psychology ploy, that I was not graduate school material. I promptly scheduled my GRE test and have never looked back.

As a first-generation college student, much of my educational and professional journey has been incredibly blessed. So often I would feel adrift or unsure and be reminded in big and small ways that the Lord had set me on this path for a reason and He knew what he was doing. So many people were placed in my life at exactly a time when I needed them. So many amazing areas I was given to work in and placed in professional opportunities I would have never dreamed of. I look back and know now, as I sometimes did not, that those things were of His design. I am so thankful for Him and everyone who has been woven into my tapestry and am excited for the rest of His plan.
Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.............................................................................................................................. 3
Dedication................................................................................................................................. 4
Acknowledgments .................................................................................................................. 5
List of Tables .............................................................................................................................. 11
List of Figures .......................................................................................................................... 11
List of Abbreviations .............................................................................................................. 12
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................... 13
  Overview................................................................................................................................. 13
  Background ............................................................................................................................. 14
    Historical Context ................................................................................................................ 14
    Social Context ...................................................................................................................... 15
    Theoretical Context ............................................................................................................ 16
  Situation to Self ....................................................................................................................... 18
  Problem Statement ............................................................................................................... 20
  Purpose Statement ................................................................................................................ 21
  Significance of the Study ...................................................................................................... 22
  Empirical Significance ......................................................................................................... 22
  Practical Significance .......................................................................................................... 22
  Theoretical Significance ...................................................................................................... 23
  Research Questions .............................................................................................................. 23
  Definitions ............................................................................................................................. 25
  Summary ............................................................................................................................... 27
# CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

- **Overview** .......................................................... 28
- **Theoretical Framework** ......................................... 29
- **Related Literature** .................................................. 36
  - *History of Student Support and Services in Higher Education* ............ 36
  - *Student Identification* ............................................... 40
  - *Meeting Student Needs* ............................................. 42
  - *Impact of Nontraditional and Traditional Language* .......................... 45
  - *Institutional Barriers* .................................................. 46
  - *Nontraditional Student Financial Needs* .................................... 53
  - *Nontraditional Student Parents* ....................................... 55
  - *Researching the Experiences of College Students* ............................ 57
- **Summary** ............................................................. 64

# CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

- **Overview** .......................................................... 67
- **Design** ................................................................ 68
- **Research Questions** ............................................... 69
- **Setting** ............................................................... 69
- **Participants** .......................................................... 70
- **Procedures** .......................................................... 72
- **Researcher’s Role** ................................................... 74
- **Data Collection** ...................................................... 75
  - *Interviews* .............................................................. 76
Focus Groups........................................................................................................79

Document Analysis................................................................................................80

Data Analysis...........................................................................................................81

Trustworthiness.........................................................................................................82

Credibility..................................................................................................................83

Dependability and Confirmability.............................................................................83

Transferability............................................................................................................83

Ethical Considerations.............................................................................................84

Summary....................................................................................................................84

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS.....................................................................................86

Overview....................................................................................................................86

Participants.................................................................................................................86

Allison..........................................................................................................................87

Abby............................................................................................................................88

Andy............................................................................................................................89

Ashley.........................................................................................................................89

Adam...........................................................................................................................90

Brooke..........................................................................................................................91

Bailey............................................................................................................................92

Bill.................................................................................................................................92

Ben...............................................................................................................................93

Blair...............................................................................................................................93

Results.........................................................................................................................94
Within-Case Synthesis ................................................................................. 94
Cross-Case Synthesis .................................................................................. 102
Theme Development .................................................................................... 103
Support for Non-Traditional Students Is Based on Accommodations .......... 105
Support Is Mainly Aligned for Traditional Freshmen Students ................. 109
Surveys Are Not Geared Towards Academic Services ............................... 114
Major Changes Are Rarely Seen .................................................................. 117
Research Question Responses ..................................................................... 118
Research Question 1 .................................................................................... 119
Research Question 2 .................................................................................... 120
Research Question 3 .................................................................................... 122
Summary ...................................................................................................... 122
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION ..................................................................... 124
Overview ...................................................................................................... 124
Summary of Findings ................................................................................... 124
Discussion .................................................................................................... 130
Theoretical Foundations .............................................................................. 131
Empirical Foundations .............................................................................. 133
Implications ................................................................................................ 136
Theoretical Implications ............................................................................. 137
Empirical Implications .............................................................................. 138
Practical Implications ................................................................................. 138
Delimitations and Limitations .................................................................... 139
List of Tables

Table 1. Characteristics of reviewed research.................................................................58
Table 2. Themes and Codes from Institution Alpha............................................................97
Table 3. Themes and Codes from Institution Bravo.........................................................101

List of Figures

Figure 1. Nontraditional Characteristics Identified by Participants.....................................87
List of Abbreviations

Full Time Enrollment (FTE)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

In recent years, institutions of higher education have experienced a significant growth in
numbers of undergraduate students, swelling from approximately 17.5 million in 2013 to a
projected growth of nearly 24 million by 2022 (Hussar & Bailey, 2014, 2016; National Center
for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016). Since 2011, at least 74% of undergraduate students
possessed at least one of the characteristics used to identify nontraditional students, nearly 28%
claimed at least one dependent and approximately 90% were married or in a significant
partnership (NCES, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). These numbers are anticipated
to continue to increase, closing the margin between nontraditional and traditional students at a
rapid pace (Hussar & Bailey, 2017).

The U.S. Department of Education (2015) claimed that the following characteristics are
indicators of nontraditional student status: being financially independent, having one or more
dependent, being a single caregiver, not having a high school diploma, delays enrollment into
postsecondary education, having full-time employment, or enrolling part-time. Recent research
has expanded the identified characteristics of nontraditional students in ways that makes the label
of nontraditional very fluid. As a result, establishing a definition of a traditional student for use
of this research seemed simpler to establish. A review of research found 35 out of 45 projects
identifying age as the main criteria, with under age 25 the most frequently utilized for the
traditional student, in addition to attending college immediately after high school graduation
(Baum & Flores, 2011; Chung, 2012; Collier, 2015; Fry, 2011; Gast, 2013; Kim et al., 2010; Lee,
2009; Munro, 2011; NODA, 2017; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013; Wang, 2014;
Yang, 1997). Using the criteria of being under 25 years of age and attending college immediately
after high school graduation (Bohl et al., 2017; Choy, 2002; Soares et al., 2017), this study sought to discover the perceptions of institutional support and services of traditional-age students with nontraditional characteristics at Kansas universities. This chapter provides background information on traditional and nontraditional students and persistence concerns for nontraditional students, and then introduces the purpose and problem statements, the significance of the study, research questions, and essential definitions.

**Background**

The purpose of this multiple case study was to describe the perceptions of institutional support and services of traditional-age students with nontraditional characteristics at Kansas universities. This study was designed to address a gap in the educational research; specifically, that this population’s experiences of student support and services are poorly understood. Addressing the gap in current research has consequences for both students and institutions, as well as providing insight into opportunities for improvements.

**Historical Context**

While no specific date is generally recognized for when the term nontraditional was officially accepted in higher education vernacular, the term nontraditional began appearing with regularity in early 1980 (Cross, 1991). Additional work in the 1980s on lifelong learning continued to incorporate the term in the reporting on adult students and their position in higher education as nontraditional students (Ross-Gordon, 2011). While most of the research during the 1980s and 1990s used age as the only factor to distinguish nontraditional from traditional students, other research on lifelong learning during the 1980s also used the term nontraditional but included various other characteristics, such as employment, enrollment status and age. Initially Horn and Carroll (1996) and subsequently Choy (2002) provided characteristics
delineating the difference between the traditional student and nontraditional student. According to Choy (2002), nontraditional students typically manifest one or more of the following characteristics: are 24 years of age or older, delays enrollment, are part-time students, work full-time, are financially independent, have dependents other than a spouse, are a single parent, or have a GED or some other high school certification.

The recent expansion of research now includes the following indicators of nontraditional students: having first generation college student status (Collier, 2015; Wang, 2014), having minority racial-ethnic group status (Fry, 2011), being low income and disabled (Chung, 2012; Lee, 2009; Munro, 2011; Yang, 1997), being immigrants or children of immigrants (Baum & Flores, 2011), and being military or military connected (Gast, 2013; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013). An intensive amount of research has been completed involving nontraditional students looking at factors involving the type of institution (Markle, 2015; Osam et al., 2017) and student residence (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). This supplements research conducted on residency (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011), nontraditional student barriers (Markle, 2015), and the characteristics relevant researchers believe make a student nontraditional (Chung et al., 2017).

**Social Context**

Considering that the large majority of students in higher education are identified as nontraditional, more than 71% (MacDonald, 2018; NCES, 2017), the traditional student who possesses none of the characteristics of a nontraditional student is in the minority (Bohl et al., 2017; Choy, 2002; NCES, 2016; Soares et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). In addition to the growing nontraditional student population, anticipated to rise from the 12 million counted in 2013 to 14 million students by 2024 (NCES, 2016), there is increasing concern about the persistence rates of students with nontraditional characteristics, as
nearly 67% do not obtain a degree (Garcia, 2015; NCES, 2016; Shapiro et al., 2016; Tremblay et al., 2012). Soares (2013) suggested that students identifying with at least two nontraditional characteristics have an overall completion rate of less than 15%.

Nontraditional students are challenged to balance their adult and academic obligations in a way the true traditional student is not (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Employment is one of the common nontraditional student characteristics, challenging 82% of students to coordinate work, class and study schedules (Erisman & Steele, 2012; Ross-Gordon, 2011). As many of their adult obligations cannot be altered, institutional support and flexibility become supremely important to the nontraditional student in facilitating their persistence (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Lane et al., 2012; Markle, 2015). Despite the increase in nontraditional student population numbers and the high risk of reduced persistence of these students, institutions of higher education have not embraced a model designed to meet the needs of the modern nontraditional student (Choy, 2002; Colvin, 2013; Fragoso et al., 2013; NCES, 2016). Recent research (Chen, 2014; O’Bannon, 2012; Soares, 2013) cautions against the institutional practice of offering course schedules and academic and student support services that only target true traditional students, who are dwindling in number.

**Theoretical Context**

This process of understanding the student experience and promoting institutional self-evaluation for improvement aligns with organizational learning theory (Argyris & Schön, 1978), which serves as the conceptual framework of this proposed research. Organizational learning theory, developed by Argyris and Schön (1974), states that organizations learn when stored understandings and information are called into question. Argyris and Schön (1974) proposed that part of organizational learning involves the identification and correction of error. In institutions
of higher education, the error of designating students as traditional and nontraditional increases the likelihood of student stereotyping which prevents institutions from fully understanding and meeting students’ needs (Levin et al., 2017; Miller & Bell, 2016).

In considering how organizations learn from such errors, or for the purposes of this study, Argyris and Schön (1974) identified single-loop learning as one method. Single-loop learning addresses issues and errors and any problems that result from them but ultimately ignores the root of the problem (Argyris & Schön, 1974). If a gap between students’ needs and actual support and services provided by an institution were to be revealed, a single-loop learning reaction of an administration would be to focus on locating inefficiencies and contend with those inefficiencies and other low-level issues. The institutional organization might look for an alternate internal strategy, perhaps offering extended advising hours or weekend courses.

For institutions engaged in the ongoing search for improvement, double-loop learning can assist in disengaging in dysfunctional behaviors and get to the root of the problem (Argyris & Schön, 1978). The double-loop learning process of organizational learning theory involves scrutinizing organizational practices to potentially reveal those practices which need modification and working to ensure the necessary modifications are made. This might mean evaluating how the institution provides all student support and services and examine the extent to which this serves the institution values and overall student success and make necessary changes. The double loop, referred to by Senge (1990) as “generative learning,” is an essential part of a true learning organization and requires that the administration of an organization develop an understanding of the underlying issues instead of reflexively reaching for an internal, paradigm-driven solution. An institution engaged in double-loop learning may survey students, collect data and use it to correct the error of student designations of nontraditional and traditional, referring
simply to the entire student population as “student,” each with unique needs to be considered and supported. This process of organizational learning, as it relates to the institutional understanding of the experience of traditional students with nontraditional student characteristics, may promote institutional change in order to better meet student needs and potentially improve persistence and retention.

**Situation to Self**

The significance of the situation to self in my research developed from my triangular roles as a nontraditional student, the parent of a nontraditional student, and an administrator in higher education. Each of these roles has a connection to the application of the terms traditional and nontraditional, as well as the experience of a nontraditional student. I value understanding what the needs and obstacles are for my children, as well as the students I serve, so that I might offer support and make modifications at an institution to maximize their likelihood of success.

As an administrator in higher education, working with students with nontraditional characteristics is very familiar to me. Interviewing students with these characteristics will allow me to develop a better understanding of the support and institutional services needed, as well as the policies that need to be in place to provide them. It will also allow me to improve on my listening and interviewing skills.

As a student, I am determined to succeed despite the personal obstacles I may encounter. I have no doubt that my students feel the same, though I suspect my maturity, personal and professional experience, and network of family and friends are not resources they may have available to them. Until recently, I was stable in my employment while enrolled in my program and know this may not be the case for nontraditional students. My children are grown, so I do not have the pressure of attempting to care for children and find childcare, as some nontraditional
students struggle with.

As the researcher, I also believe that the nontraditional student encounters a number of significant stressors that are reflective of their nontraditional status, stressors which traditional students have little to no experience with. Role conflict would certainly be representative of one of those stressors, adding tension between that of their expected student role and their roles required of them unrelated to their academic studies, including being a parent and/or employee (usually in a preexisting career or professional field). These roles often conflict with the time and effort needed to be successful academically. Results from this study have been used to generate recommendations to institutional administrations that can be used toward correcting ways in which existing practices potentially provide additional obstacles and negatively impact student persistence.

As the researcher, my ontological assumption was that there is a disparity in the perceived experiences of traditional and nontraditional students, just as I personally observed as a nontraditional student. I believe these differences include specifically identifiable barriers such as familial and parental obligations that bind them to household and child or caregiver responsibilities, fiscal obligations that come with financial independence from parents or caregivers, and employment obligations that are a result of having fiscal obligations and financial independence. My axiological assumption was that my experiences as a nontraditional student, in addition to my research of the nontraditional topic and professional experiences, placed me in a unique position to conduct this topic of study. With an awareness that these were my experiences and not necessarily the experiences of others, I positioned myself in the study (Creswell, 2013) with the ability to value and understand participant experiences. My philosophical assumption heading into this research was epistemological or establishing how participants came to
understand what they believe about a reality (Creswell, 2013). Previous experiences can help establish an explanation of an individual’s processing of an experience to form a belief. Development of knowledge and understanding in a study is based upon participant contribution and involvement. This assumption is guided by a constructivism paradigm (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell (2013), constructivism involves a dually constructed reality between the researcher and the participants, each with views which have been formulated by their individual experiences. The participants and I have had unique experiences in relation to institutional support and services, as well as the definition of traditional and nontraditional students, depending on our roles and circumstances. Patterns and meaning will be identified using interviews and data analysis instead of starting with a specific theory and working to prove it. The theoretical concept for this study developed after all the data was gathered and analyzed. As researcher, I worked to remove my personal biases and relied on the evidence collected from participant data to avoid impacting the study with my individual beliefs. In addition to data gathered from surveys and institutional documents, open-ended questions were developed and utilized to understand participant perspectives.

**Problem Statement**

The problem that this study was designed to address is that no identifiable research has been done to elucidate how traditional students with nontraditional characteristics perceive institutional support and services. Recent research speaks to the feeling of nontraditional students feeling a lack of academic and interpersonal support (MacDonald, 2018; Witkowsky et al., 2016), and has consistently and clearly identified the characteristics of nontraditional students and their growing numbers in 21st century postsecondary institutions (NCES, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). This growing body of recent research fails to identify that a
significant number of traditional students are nontraditional and considers how these students perceive institutional support and services related (Langrehr et al., 2015). The number of traditional students who are actually nontraditional according to established criteria, and the lack of institutional understanding of their unique needs, creates a misalignment between actual student needs and the existing academic and support services designed to meet their needs. This proposed research was designed to resolve this gap in the literature.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this multiple case study was to describe the perceptions of institutional support and services of traditional-age students with nontraditional characteristics at Kansas universities. Traditional students were generally defined by age, 18 to 24, and enrollment in college immediately after high school graduation. Nontraditional student characteristics were defined using Choy’s (2002) seven established criteria: delayed enrollment, financial independence, full-time employment while enrolled, the care of dependents, single parents, and GED or certificate of completion recipient and the expanded nontraditional umbrella characteristics of being a first generation college student, a member of a minority racial-ethnic group, low income or disabled, and immigrant or child of an immigrant, and military or military connected.

The theory guiding this study is organizational learning theory developed by Argyris and Schön (1974), which states that organizations learn when stored understandings and information are called into question. For Argyris and Schön (1978), learning involves the identification and correction of errors. When errors are detected, the reflexive reaction for many people is to search for another strategy that will function within the situational parameters and governing variables (known as single-loop learning; Argyris & Schön, 1974).
Significance of the Study

The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the intended contributions the study will make, theoretically and empirically to the existing base of research and knowledge, and the practical significance it will have for institutions and students of higher education. The intention of this multiple case study was to describe the perceptions of institutional support and services of traditional-age students with nontraditional characteristics at Kansas universities. This proposed study was designed to address a gap in the educational research; specifically, that this population’s experiences of student support and services are poorly understood.

Empirical Significance

Results from this qualitative, multiple-case study may lend empirical significance to the academic literature by addressing a gap in the literature pertaining to the perspectives of traditional students with nontraditional characteristics concerning institutional support and services. No previous studies have been conducted with this particular demographic. Thus, the unique experiences of traditional students with nontraditional characteristics are not well understood and cannot be assumed to be identical to more classically traditional students (Levin et al., 2017; Trowler, 2015; Witkowsky et al., 2016).

Practical Significance

The consequence of not understanding the needs of this particular population is that students who feel unsupported by institutions may not persist in their educations (Tinto, 2017; Wardley et al., 2013). Recent research reflects as many as 67% of students with nontraditional characteristics may fail to graduate and those with at least two nontraditional characteristics may have less than a 15% chance at completion (Garcia, 2015; NCES, 2016 Shapiro et al., 2016; Soares, 2015; Tremblay et al., 2012). These students may then leave college with school loans to
contend with and no degree (Fain, 2012). Further, they will less be likely to earn a higher income over their lifetime and potentially face unemployment in the context of rising emphasis on credentials (Ma et al., 2016).

Theoretical Significance

In particular, this study holds theoretical significance for postsecondary institutions, as it will yield data that allow them to evaluate the adequacy of their student and academic support and services (Langrehr et al., 2015). Data results and subsequent evaluative actions of this nature could lead to changes that may improve student persistence (MacDonald, 2018). Additionally, results would provide information about the practice of using the terms traditional and nontraditional in reference to students, which may prompt institutional administration to reconsider the use of these terms (Chen, 2014). The outcome of this study has the potential to benefit advisors, educators, enrollment departments, and anyone else directly connected to students, especially those motivated to develop a more nuanced understanding of who students are and what they need to persist in their educations. By better understanding the experiences of traditional students with nontraditional characteristics, institutional administration will be better informed and more able to adjust their assumptions of student needs. This multiple case study will provide the information necessary for administration to develop and provide support and services in a way that has the potential to improve the experiences of traditional students with nontraditional characteristics.

Research Questions

There is extensive existing literature on nontraditional students, each more recent publication documenting novel characteristics that make students nontraditional, such as first-generation students or immigrant students (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Pelletier, 2010;
Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2007). Since 2011, at least 74% of undergraduate students possessed at least one of the characteristics used to identify nontraditional students (NCES, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The U.S. Department of Education (2015) claimed that the following characteristics are indicators of nontraditional student status: being financially independent, having one or more dependent, being a single caregiver, not having a high school diploma, delays enrollment into postsecondary education, having full-time employment, or enrolling part-time.

Recent research has expanded the identified characteristics of nontraditional students in ways that makes the label of nontraditional very fluid, working to establish a definition of a traditional student seemed simpler to establish. A review of research found 35 out of 45 projects identifying age as the main criteria, with under age 25 the most frequently utilized for the traditional student, in addition to attending college immediately after high school graduation (Baum & Flores, 2011; Chung, 2012; Collier, 2015; Fry, 2011; Gast, 2013; Kim et al., 2010; Lee, 2009; Munro, 2011; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013; Wang, 2014; Yang, 1997). Using the criteria of being under 25 years of age, attending college immediately after high school graduation, and being currently or recently enrolled (Bohl et al., 2017; Choy, 2002; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Soares et al., 2017), the following research questions were developed to address the gap in the research on the experiences of the traditional student with nontraditional characteristics and their perceptions of the adequacy of institutional student support and services.

The number of traditional students who are actually nontraditional according to established criteria, and the lack of institutional understanding of their unique needs, creates a misalignment between actual student needs and the existing academic and support services designed to meet their needs. The unique experiences of traditional students with nontraditional
characteristics are not well understood and cannot be assumed to be identical to more classically traditional students (Levin et al., 2017; Trowler, 2015; Witkowsky et al., 2016). Therefore, Research Question 1 works to discover the lived experiences of traditional students with nontraditional characteristics and whether they feel the support and services provided by the institution were adequate given their unique needs and growing numbers (Choy, 2002; NCES, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

**Research Question 1:** How do traditional students with nontraditional characteristics perceive institutional support and services offered by Kansas universities?

Research Questions 2 and 3 work to discern whether a process of generative learning is already in place at the institution and how the institution and students perceive the process (Senge, 1990).

**Research Question 2:** How do Kansas universities receive, evaluate and implement into practice student input as part of the institutional process of change and improvement?

**Research Question 3:** How do traditional students with nontraditional characteristics perceive institutional practices of student input at Kansas universities?

**Definitions**

1. *Academic* – Refers to those factors associated with taking courses for vocational, avocational, certification, or other serviceable reasons (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

2. *Credit for prior learning* – When an institution through a test or other examination provides academic credit to students based on their knowledge gained from professional, independent or other type of study and training (Hittepole, 2019).

3. *External strategy* – Evaluation and response which considers all stakeholders perspective to get to the root of the existing issue (Schön, 1996).
4. *Internal strategy* – Evaluation and response which considers only the organization or institutional perspective, addressing the symptoms of the issue and ignoring the root cause (Schön, 1996).

5. *Nontraditional student* – A nontraditional student is a student attempting to complete a postsecondary degree who possesses one or more of the following characteristics: is under 25 years of age, has delayed enrollment into college, enrolled as a part-time student, is considered financially independent, works full-time while enrolled in college, is responsible for dependents other than a spouse, or is a single parent while enrolled in college, is a first generation college student, a member of a minority racial–ethnic group, low income or disabled, an immigrant or the child of an immigrant, or military or military connected (Choy, 2002).

6. *Organizational learning* – For the purpose of this study, organizational learning occurs when actors within an organization inquire on behalf of that organization toward the aim of improving performance or outcomes (Bauman, 2005; Schön, 1996). Actors engaged in organizational learning consider both the dispositions and practices of institutions and their members. Organizational learning encompasses a number of theories and concepts to aid organizations in facilitating improvement efforts (Bensimon, 2005). Specifically, within higher education, organizational learning has been identified as a promising lens through which to facilitate change, but is underutilized (Bauman, 2005; Bensimon, 2005; Kezar, 2001).

7. *Student services* – Organizations at many colleges and universities compose a diverse set of functional areas that provide student services and academic support (Long, 2012).
8. **Student support** – Academic and nonacademic student supports are designed to facilitate student success (Karp, 2016).

9. **Traditional student** – Student under age 25 and attending college immediately after high school graduation (Chen, 2017)

**Summary**

This qualitative multiple-case study was designed to describe the experiences of traditional students with nontraditional student characteristics of student support and services. The purpose of this study was to fill a gap in the research, specifically that the experiences of this population are insufficiently understood. The practical significance of this research lies in its potential to inform the ongoing culture and practice of institutions, such as their existing perceptions of traditional and nontraditional students, as well as how academic and student support services might be revised to better meet all student needs and improve student persistence. The multiple-case study approach was selected because of its capability to allow access to the experiences of this demographic of students.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The experience of the nontraditional student is a well-researched phenomenon in higher education (Hussar & Bailey, 2014; NCES, 2016; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2007). Many institutions of higher education have attempted to market specifically to this demographic. Far more have spent tens of thousands of dollars trying to capture them for enrollment, retain them to completion, and used data that indicates that nontraditional students are an ever-changing population in order to improve their existing practices (Tomlinson, 2016).

The history of higher education in US provides a good deal of insight into how the traditional structure embraced by most institutions came to exist and why the continued existence of that same structure presents a number of problems, including that the college demographic has been steadily changing since 2006 (Anderson, 2016). Enrollment of traditional students has increased, but researchers predict that the nontraditional population of students will increase faster (Anderson, 2016). The nontraditional student population currently accounts for more than 71% of all students enrolled in institutions of higher education (MacDonald, 2018; NCES, 2017). As of 2013, more than 12 million nontraditional students were enrolled in higher education, and this number is expected to increase by 14% by the year 2024, which will yield 14 million students (NCES, 2016).

This rapidly-growing student demographic faces a number of risk factors that potentially limit their potential for academic persistence, including, but not limited to part-time enrollment, dependent and employment obligations, financial debt, experiencing a break from structured education, being a first general college student or from low socioeconomic background (Kasworm, 2014). This study seeks to contribute to the existing literature regarding what
traditional and nontraditional students need from institutions of higher education. This improved understanding can be used to guide administrations in higher education to adapt effectively to the rapidly expanding demographic of nontraditional students in a way that promotes increased success for everyone.

In this chapter, a review of organizational learning literature is initially presented, as this is the theoretical framework of this research. Related literature is then discussed, including a history of developing a traditional institutional structure in higher education and the practice of identifying traditional and nontraditional students. Finally, the theoretical and practical problems associated with the terms traditional and nontraditional are reviewed, as well as how the characteristics of students shape their particular education needs. This review, especially the areas of the literature that need more research, was used to inform the data collection design and analysis as they related to the research questions.

**Theoretical Framework**

The process of understanding institutional support and services as perceived by traditional students with nontraditional characteristics is aligned with Argyris and Schön’s (1978) theory of organizational learning. Argyris and Schön (1974) initially suggested that learning requires the detection and correction of error. Their concept of learning followed an intricate formula incorporating general human cognitive processes and principles of problem solving, referring to the theories that we use to explain our experiences and evaluate future events based on our personal set of assumptions. Argyris and Schön (1974) proposed that theories of practice were theories put into action, or as stated by Serrat (2017),

the ability of an organization to gain insight and understanding from experience and experimentation, observation, analysis and a willingness to examine successes and
failures. Consequently, organizations can learn through individuals who provide input to them; and at the same time, individual learning in organizations is facilitated or constrained by the learning. (p. 3)

In 1978, Argyris and Schönp provided an additional model of how learning occurs. Reflecting back on their theories of action and practice, they proposed that learned actions and practices are very much a part of the individual or institution in the case of this study and may conflict with how practice is explained or rationalized. Argyris and Schönp (1978) referred to this reflexive way of learning as single-loop learning, in that an individual may see that their behavior did not resolve an issue and adjust their actions without addressing their underlying assumptions about the situation. Generally, when institutions use a single-loop process, they seek to correct practices, procedures and mechanisms already in place without examining the beliefs or assumptions underlying these practices. As such, these practices and policies have often been long institutionalized and rarely exposed fully to input from stakeholders for evaluation and improvement.

The double-loop process of learning theory (Schönp, 1996) combines the single-loop learning with consideration of the root cause of the issue, allowing for adjustments in attitude, belief, and behaviors to ensure holistic and consistent results (Bauman, 2005). A holistic result refers to the consideration and evaluation of the error, the root of the problem and addressing the problem as a whole, using data and stakeholder input to make organizational changes for improvement. The double loop, also referred to by Senge (1990) as “generative learning,” occurs in a true learning organization and requires that the leadership of an organization work to obtain full comprehension of the underlying issue instead of reflexively implementing an internal strategy which considers only the organization or institutional perspective. This double-loop
learning is evident where a sequence of evaluations of organizational performance occurs, based on internal and external data, occurring with stakeholders outside the organization or institution, surveying for any weaknesses, constructing solutions and assessing for effectiveness (Serrat, 2017). In other words, the double-loop process involves reaching out to all stakeholders, seeking feedback and input, and then assessing the data in terms of what is currently in place.

Double-loop learning entails circling back and considering all potential options, given all input, and requires that the learner set aside the typically reflexive options that are comfortable or known to an organization based on previous practice. In reflecting on the difference between individual learning and organization learning, Hedberg (1981) stated, “Although organizational learning occurs through individuals, it would be a mistake to conclude that organizational learning is nothing but the cumulative result of their member learning” (p.6). Just as people develop individual personalities, habits, values and beliefs, organizations establish worldview and ideologies. Individuals may come and go from the organization, leadership may change, but the organization retains mental maps, norms and culture over time (Hedberg, 1981). In order for organizations to grow and evolve to address ongoing challenges, new information must be used and potentially incorporated within an evolving culture.

In order to establish institutional effectiveness, institutions must respond to the changes in the student landscape while identifying related challenges and opportunities; in doing so, they become learning organizations. Learning organizations identify their objectives, assess their effectiveness in those areas, and establish new targets for action (Hussein et al., 2014; Young, 2018). Learning organizations monitor in an ongoing fashion their institutional environment so they can fully and consistently engage in the process of organizational learning (Kezar, 2001; Schön, 1996). It is important that institutions reach beyond the scope of single-loop learning,
which does not question the fundamental structure and function of the organization (Argyris & Schön, 1976). Double-loop learning is essential for the organization of higher education as it encourages an investigation in underlying assumptions, procedures, policies, and practices within the organization (Schön, 1996). Such organizational learning can only be achieved when institutional leadership invites input from all stakeholders, values communication, and creates a climate of ongoing learning and improvement (Volkwein, 2010; Young, 2018).

The practice of applying organizational learning theory to higher education is relatively recent (Bensimon, 2005; Bess & Dee, 2008), which has prompted concern that institutions of higher education do not learn as well as they should (Bauman, 2005; Witham & Bensimon, 2012). With a particular reflection on impact for individual needs and success institutions of higher education need to understand their consumer, otherwise known as the student. Our modern institutions are challenged to perform as organizations functioning as a learning commerce where they must utilize marketing, stay current with technology, compete for students and even develop franchise partnerships (Jarvis, 2012; Jessop, 2017). The higher education landscape is no longer a world where students have limited access, as there are any number of educational options to choose from (Iloh, 2017). There are currently more than 26,000 universities across the globe, all widely diverse in their size, mission and history (Graham, 2013).

Organizational learning as it relates to institutions of higher education is informed by knowledge derived from student perspectives, which can be utilized in double-loop learning to serve as a form of institutional organization improvement (Bauman, 2005; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2006). For institutions of higher education, organizational learning entails the application of traditional and nontraditional student labels, linguistic stereotyping, and determining how best to
provide support services to these students in a format and structure that makes sense for them (Gumport, 2001; Miller & Bell, 2016; Philpott, 2016). If functioning as an effective a learning organization entails double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978), institutions of higher education are afforded the ability to determine whether and to what degree a misalignment of institutional support services and actual student needs exists. Actively soliciting, considering and acting upon direct student feedback as it relates to their institutional support and services, allows them to more fully evaluate for solutions.

Modern organizational research reveals that decision making and strategic planning occurs along lines of authority (Chaffee & Tierney, 1988). In this type of hierarchical structure, an identified set of administrators would select a path for the institution, establishing policies and procedures, to which other members of the institution ascribed. To undergo a substantive change in this environment would require substantive legislative, board or environmental persuasion (Chaffee & Tierney, 1988). In recent decades the need for a change in this organizational decision and planning process has become apparent (Stensaker, 2015; Tierney & Lanford, 2016). A flatter and more linear decision-making process that reflects a more collaborative environment, responding to the full student demographic and diversity of needs that encourages a deeper understanding of the student needs and culture (Stensaker, 2015; Stensaker & Vabø 2013).

It is crucial to consider each nontraditional student as a unique individual student with complex needs. Every student is an adult learner who functions in an environment comprising educational professionals as well as institutional culture, policies, and practices. The supportive interactions that each student receives along his or her academic journey has the potential to influence his or her personal and academic experience, as well as his or her success (Usher &
Bryant, 2014). The institutional experience for students influences their learning (Chen, 2014), and is shaped by the significance of their other roles in life and their unique educational needs. The administration, faculty and staff at institutions can greatly impact the student experience, and potentially students’ persistence and success, by offering connections, a sense of being heard and support (Gaertner & Hart, 2013). All of this is possible through utilization of organizational learning theory as organizational learning promotes organization health, improvement and performance (Irvine & Kevan, 2017; Serrat, 2017).

There are a prolific number of references in literature to nontraditional students, their obstacles, their needs, and even some of their strengths (Miller & Bell, 2016). However, there are significantly fewer institutional models of academic and student support that are directly informed by student report and input or that are designed to encompass all students at the institution regardless of label or categorization (Giles, 2012). Higher education institutions, despite their longevity and reverence for tradition, are not static entities (Stensaker, 2015).

Research suggests that the few institutions who appear to provide a structure designed to meet the needs of the individual student rather than the general masses appear more appealing to the nontraditional student than the more traditionally structured institution whose services and support are largely structured around a standard work week and regular business hours (Giles, 2012). Despite this data and the increase of proportion of nontraditional students, most institutions of higher education maintain institutional models that were developed to admit, educate, transfer, retain and graduate the purely traditional student. It is essential that institutions successfully determine how best to restructure in order to support nontraditional students when they encounter inflexible policies and procedures, duplicative processes and scare resources. Institutional leadership must ultimately understand that their policy and practice must change so
that they are more effectively able to support the nontraditional students’ need to accommodate their education, employment and personal life (Soares, 2013).

While these models may have served higher education well for decades, data suggesting declining completion may indicate to institution administrations that these models need to be reconsidered (Kasworm, 2014; Soares, 2013; Tinto, 2012) Recent research speaks to the need for institutions to “close the gaps between institutional intentions and actual student experience” using organizational learning theory to provide “a framework for understanding how organizations acquire and interpret information, interpret their experience, and make choices while the literature on change provides a sharper focus on goal-directed change” (McCormick et al., 2011, p. 3). Most significant in this research was the indication that student input could be the catalyst for conversations about opportunities for improvement and institutional strengths and weaknesses in order to improve their educational experience (Dauer & Absher, 2015; McCormick et al., 2013).

Data acquired through this study will be used to help institutions understand the nontraditional student experience. Additionally, the research will result in recommendations for using research findings about nontraditional student experiences as a basis to improve institutional support and services. Organizational learning may be facilitated by the study through institutional utilization of these recommendations, which will be informed by the perceptions and experiences of a rapidly growing higher education demographic. No existing research was found to use organizational learning theory for understanding nontraditional student experiences and their potential role in the institutional improvement process; thus, this research may advance the theoretical field.
Related Literature

In this section, existing knowledge on the topic of education and nontraditional and traditional student experience is summarized and connected with the study. The elements of this related literature review include the history of higher education in America and how the traditional structure most institutions embrace came to exist, recent trends in student identification as traditional and nontraditional, the impact these identifications have on students, and institutional effectiveness. Existing research methods and approaches that have been used to study nontraditional students will also be discussed. A summary will conclude this chapter.

History of Student Support and Services in Higher Education

During the 21st century, higher education in America has evolved in many ways, including as a significant part of the economic market, reflecting approximately three percent of the gross national product (Pusser, 2002). The federal profile in the US includes more than 4,000 accredited institutions enrolling more than 15 million students and granting more than two million degrees each year (Pusser, 2006). Research institutions spend nearly 30 billion dollars per year on research and development of education, more than half coming from federal agencies (Zusman, 2005).

The provision of student services or student affairs is a topic that is garnering an increasing amount of attention and research interest as student demographics and student needs continue to diversify (Dauer & Absher, 2015; McCormick et al., 2013). As diversification increases, so does the need to consider the effectiveness of what has historically been a uniform approach to providing student services and support across the US, potentially impacting the success and completion of nontraditional students (Brubacher, 2017). The story of how the student services and affairs formed in academia developed in the US started over 300 years ago,
with the structure and practice of higher education—taking shape shortly after the birth of our
country. As colleges were established, so were the mechanisms for student support and services
designed to address student needs. An understanding of the, “history, philosophy and values”
(American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel
Administrators, 2010, p. 14), of the structure of traditional academia and student services and
affairs is important for institutions and administration to create a holistic comprehension of
nontraditional students, using history as a tool to comprehend modern demographics trends, the
history and growth on the institution, and individual student needs to develop new practice
(Kimball & Ryder, 2014).

While the British government supported the growth and export of goods from the
colonies, Britain was not largely invested in supporting education in America, even when
packaged as a seminary to save the souls of the children (Bok, 2015). Despite this adversity, the
colonists eventually produced a small number of institutions, determined that “the civil society
would thus get educated orthodox laymen as its leaders; the church would get educated orthodox
clergymen as its ministers” (Brubacher & Rudy, 2004, p. 6). As many of the early settlers
included alumni of Cambridge and Oxford, they felt that formal education was essential for their
children, while the Puritans were compelled to train clergy and provide an educated civil
leadership. Many presidents of colleges were also the faculty and the overseers of students on
campus (Lucas, 1994).

Student support and services began to take on more significance until a large period of
physical growth of higher education from 1800 to 1850, during which time over 200 institutions
of higher education were created (Brubacher, 2017). As women gained access to higher
education and enrollment rates grew, the ability of presidents and faculty to monitor students
directly decreased. Thus, a need for a different student support structure developed (Duffy, 2010; Nidiffer, 2000; Schwartz, 2010).

Beginning in 1914, colleges in the US began to be more flexible in responding to the needs of the American population, both by offering special training in military programs and by the student personnel movement, which worked to focus on the whole student education in supporting the individual needs related to academics, emotions and personal attributes, grew in popularity in the 1920s (Long, 2012). This effort generated new jobs and the first structured system to provide student support (Certis, 2014; Sartorius, 2014). This effort was also specifically designed with “an effort to increase efficiency for organizations and happiness for individuals by aligning individuals’ talents with specific jobs to higher education” (Hevel, 2016, p. 847–848). A focus developed among early student affairs administrators regarding housing, specifically the inspection of the private boarding residences off campus, and the construction of new residence halls on campus (Hevel, 2016). After completion, these residence halls quickly emerged as a new problem for student affairs administrators, as they were faced with drinking and gambling amongst the male residents (Klink, 2014; Sartorius, 2014). At the University of Kansas in the 1950s, the student affairs dean for women was working to create a female student government association, similarly aligned to the organization that already existed for men. Incorporating a residential requirement, the student government organization was developed to both present the female students with rules and help them develop organizational rules as well. The goal was to prepare them to function as civic minded, democratic citizens after graduation.

As the number of male and female students living on campus increased, student affairs administration was faced with a shortage of adults to provide students with oversight (Klink, 2014). The concept of housemother became a popular notion, and after functional training,
women across the country began to move into residence halls and Greek housing. The numbers of graduate students and student affairs administration living on campus also increased (Sartorius, 2014). Their proximity to students was a double-edged sword, leading them to develop a familiarity and warmth with students that could make it difficult to provide appropriate discipline (Schwartz, 2010).

The student affairs movement continued to develop through the 1960s, with a growing focus on career and vocational advising (Certis, 2014). From an institutional standpoint, all of a student’s individual characteristics, including demographic details, health information, and any psychological records, were merged with any campus records and became part of the overall student record, which faculty and staff would refer to in order to advise the student in the most appropriate way, toward a relevant field of study or career best suited to them (Schwartz, 2010). Institutional staff began to track students who left the institution to collect data on the student characteristics that would enable them to know which students would be admitted and most likely to succeed (Certis, 2014). This tracking led them to see students left higher education due to low GPAs, financial burdens, and an inability to assimilate to college life, all foreshadowing research to be conducted decades later by Vincent Tinto in 1993.

The duties of student affairs staff in the 1970s began to expand yet again, including services for financial aid, intramural activities, Greek life, and student orientations (Schwartz, 2010). These staff members continued to handle student disciplinary issues but were granted oversight over academic progress, health issues, scholarships, and on-campus employment (Miller & Bell, 2016). Individuals in this role were often tasked with working to support the students ill-prepared for college life (Klink, 2014).

Nearly 50 years ago, it was noted that little attention had been given to this history in the
development of the student affairs profession (Rhatigan, 1974, p. 11). This is concerning for a number of reasons. Primarily the awareness of the related history has the ability to provide institutional administration with the insight of their predecessors’ progress and shortfall. Secondly, the simple awareness of “accomplishments across all campuses, over time, could provide a better view of the profession’s worth to higher education and the students it purports to serve” (Rhatigan, 1974, p. 11).

**Student Identification**

Until the last decade, there was little consistency in the research regarding use of the terms “university” and “professor,” particularly between different countries (Teichler, 2014). The terms professor and university have since found consistent use and universal definition, while other terminology remains inconsistently defined. In particular, the use of the terms “traditional” and “nontraditional” to describe students in research began to accelerate after the 1970s. However, the field of higher education research still struggles to define traditional and nontraditional students. Schuetze (2014) noted, “The flood has not lifted all the boats . . . it is still a problem and a challenge at present” (p. 47) to describe the difficulty of agreeing upon a universally defined categorization.

In the most common definition of traditional and nontraditional, nontraditional students typically manifest one or more of the following characteristics: is 24 years of age or older, delays enrollment, enrolls part-time, works full time, is financially independent, has dependents other than a spouse, is a single parent, and has a GED or some other high school certification (Choy, 2002; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Efforts to expand the categorization of nontraditional students in recent research have included characteristics such as: first generation college student (Collier, 2015; Wang, 2014), member of a minority racial-ethnic group (Fry, 2011), low income and
disabled (Chung, 2012; Lee, 2009; Munro, 2011; Yang, 1997), immigrant and/or a child of an immigrant (Baum & Flores, 2011), and military or military connected (Gast, 2013; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013). A number of researchers have applied other labels to nontraditional students, such as adult learners, post-traditional learners, first-time students, and returning students. Despite the advantages of these terms, nontraditional and traditional appear the most frequently in the literature (Choy, 2002; Horn & Carroll, 1996; O’Bannon, 2012; Soares et al., 2017; Tilley, 2014).

If all of these identifiers of nontraditional students are accepted, it would seem that the only generally acceptable practice in research and in institutional application is to identify a traditional student by the variable of age, which is typically regarded as spanning 18 to 24 years of age (Bohl et al., 2017; Choy, 2002; Soares et al., 2017). Unfortunately, at least 74% of all students labeled as traditional by this age categorization will possess at least one nontraditional characteristic (NCES, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Aside from age identification, the characterization of a student is fluid and subject to change. Institutions of higher education and various publications continue to refer to nontraditional students by a variety of titles and descriptions (Bohl et al., 2017; Choy, 2002; Soares et al., 2017), with stakeholders ultimately uncertain of how best to categorize them.

It would seem reasonable to believe that a student who did not fall into the very narrow definition of traditional characteristics, by institutional practice and research categorization, might feel at odds, as if they did not quite fit the institutional mold (Steven, 2014; Vaccaro, 2015; Witkowsky et al., 2016). This terminological ambiguity may actually be presenting higher education administrations with an opportunity to consider all academic learners as simply a body of students instead of developing a more nuanced perspective of their individual traits (Caruth,
2014). A clearer comprehension of student characteristics might allow institutions to better address student needs (Perna, 2010; Slotnick et al., 2005; Watt & Wagner, 2016).

Failure to acknowledge the confusion caused by the inconsistency in the definition of nontraditional potentially stands in the way of some students given the projection of 15% completion rates for nontraditional students (Barnett, 2013; Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Donaldson et al., 2004; Soares, 2013), causes disregard for the complexity of other students (Kasworm, 2014; Merriam & Bierema, 2013), and ignores the reality of the ever growing number of nontraditional students as a body (Hussar & Bailey, 2014; NCES, 2016, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Despite the growing need in industry for graduates, completion rates in many areas of the nation are falling and those who do graduate are overburdened and debt-ridden, which some consider to be the equivalent of educational malpractice (Jaschik, 2015; McFarland et al., 2018)

Meeting Student Needs

From the moment they look to recruit new students, institutions overlook the fact that students have individualized needs, goals and desires, much different from the student demographic of twenty years ago (Jinkens, 2009). As a result, nontraditional students face a number of obstacles before they are even enrolled. Colvin (2013) stated very clearly that “within the halls of academia there is also a new layer to old barriers” (p. 21) beyond the ageist perspectives and antiquated manner in which higher education has defined and justified its existence. Nontraditional students are frequently met with application processes, placement expectations, new student orientations and schedules for all of these that are designed with the traditional student in mind (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2016). When provided an opportunity, students will generally share about their experiences and what they find beneficial
or lacking. Nontraditional students commonly identify institutional barriers as problematic (Hunter-Johnson, 2017). More specifically, these barriers occur in application, admission, and enrollment processes, course and schedule availability and flexibility, access to support in a variety of areas of need, or even a willingness to put students in touch with possible resources (Hunter-Johnson, 2017).

Understanding that students are largely nontraditional and have a wide range of needs different from the traditional student will allow institutions to tailor their support and services appropriately (Cotton et al., 2017). Working to provide a diverse campus environment with solutions to barriers experienced by nontraditional students will enrich all student lives (Gaertner & Hart, 2013). Developing an awareness of the breadth of nontraditional student characteristics should eliminate any assumptions that all students should complete their academic journey in a similar amount of time, all able and willing to use the same resources successfully (Irvine & Kevan, 2017).

Historically, institutions of higher education have structured many of their academic and support services in such a way so as to support the traditional student, which diverges from the academic and student service availability and support that nontraditional students require (O’Bannon, 2012; Soares, 2013). In very recent years academic advising has received increased attention (Scott, 2014). Specifically, the Higher Learning Commission has revised its accreditation criterion to include more specific language that evaluates student services effectiveness, which includes the academic advising process. For institutions hoping to accommodate increasingly diverse student populations, this component of academic and student support is more critical than ever (Gordon et al., 2011). The responsibilities of the advising role should include supporting students with course selection, planning and enrollment, as well as
with individual support and resource referral. Some innovative institutions have begun referring to their advisors as academic coaches to better reflect the supportive role they play (Cook, 2009; Gordon, 2004; Grites, 1979).

A carefully structured and intentional academic advising practice should be an important part of an institution’s retention and completion strategy for all students, but particularly for nontraditional students. Failing to evaluate the effectiveness of an institution’s advising program sends an impactful message to both staff and students about the importance of the role and function in the student’s academic process (Cuseo et al., 2016). The student affairs or student services structure should also undergo structural and functional change in the face of growing enrollment and changing student demographics (Tull & Kuk, 2012). This support should be one that can meet the needs of online and face-to-face students. The role of student affairs would cover the fostering of student life, student government, health and wellness, and the growing variety of needs presented by diverse learners (Cabellon & Junco, 2015; Mercer et al., 2016).

Nontraditional student characteristics may involve factors that prevent them from conforming to the fixed schedules of an institution, so it is important that the institutional programs, services and staff find a way to adjust to the students. For example, an increasing number of students are working at least part time. In 1993, approximately 46% of traditional students were employed part-time, while those numbers have increased steadily to nearly 80% in 2007 (Chen, 2017; Mercer et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998; Perna, 2010). Reasons for the increasing numbers of nontraditional students can be attributed to a number of factors but one reason can certainly be attributed to the fact that these students need to remain employed and retain an income that allows them to establish a decent living for themselves and those they support (Hout, 2012). According to Iloh (2017), the criteria that nontraditional students are
aligned with, of immediate post-high school enrollment, part-time enrollment, full time employment, being financially independent or having dependents, are the very same motivators for returning to school and institutional obstacles at the same time.

One of the first needs nontraditional students identify with are flexibility in programming and a variety in course days and times, as well as different program lengths. Institutions that offer evening and weekend courses, online courses, accelerated programs, and credit for prior learning are all options that nontraditional students find appealing in order to accommodate work or caretaking/parenting responsibilities (Hittepole, 2019). Allowing adult students to attend programs part-time as an option to full-time without academic penalties are something many schools do not offer. A flexible option for transfer credits and life experience credits, or when an institution through a test or other examination provides academic credit to students based on their knowledge gained from professional, independent or other type of study and training, are also options that nontraditional students consider when selecting an institution (Donnelly-Smith, 2011). These options may involve changes in institutional policies, but they would not be unusual, as many similar such policies already exist (Chen, 2017).

**Impact of Nontraditional and Traditional Language**

The way in which institutions reference students inevitably has consequences. Gumport (2001) purported that the language used to discuss higher education reflects our thoughts and lends to the construction of reality. This is true of the language administrations use to talk about students in higher education, which influences their understanding of who students are and thus how to construct academic and student services (Vignare et al., 2017). The vernacular of traditional and nontraditional in referring to students is a broadly accepted practice in higher education accompanied by little reflection on how antiquated and inapplicable the terms have
become (Dauer & Absher, 2015). The terms, frequently applied to delineate students along the lines of age alone (Bean & Metzner, 1985), are used with ignorance of who students actually are and what they need from institutions of higher education to be successful (Cotton et al., 2017).

The word traditional has a central role in the value system of many institutions, for example: the tradition of admission, the tradition of convocation, the tradition of benediction. It is likely that the term nontraditional has a negative connotation in the context of higher education, as it, by definition, speaks to something that breaks from or is dissimilar to tradition.

It is important that the ways that institutional administration, faculty, and staff perceive and refer to students not marginalize and lead to false assumptions about these students (Trowler, 2015). Research regarding assumptions held about nontraditional students vary. Some research suggests that these students are perceived to be less successful and less engaged than traditional students, while other research indicates that nontraditional students are perceived to be more engaged and more serious than traditional students (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Given the conflicting data and ambiguity in definition, policymakers, institutional administrators and even students themselves must work toward a consistent and accurate characterization of who nontraditional students truly are. This new terminology should not marginalize and underrepresent anyone. The current label of nontraditional is insufficient as it does not represent certain students in the growing demographic in higher education. Helping all students with any nontraditional characteristic be successful will require institutional leaders to be innovative (Soares, 2013; Soares et al., 2016).

**Institutional Barriers**

Modern students, and particularly nontraditional students, need to be able to learn on the move, due to employment, military service, and other external obligations. Therefore, education
and academic services and support should be as adaptive, flexible, and responsive as possible. Institutions must become willing to embrace their student body as a single but highly diverse unit, instead of placing students into misleading categories, in order to redevelop useful policies and structures (Markle, 2015; Pfordresher, 2016).

Considering the growing nontraditional student population, and the possibility that a percentage of students currently considered traditional may be in fact also nontraditional, it may be time for the labels of traditional and nontraditional to be dispelled with. Additionally, institutions would arguably benefit from reevaluating their efforts to meet the needs of nontraditional students with the same resources and structures that were developed for traditional college students (O’Bannon, 2012; Soares, 2013). Recent research (Chen, 2014) cautions institutions of higher education to prepare for the influx of nontraditional students by acknowledging their unique experiences and differences or risk being outpaced by nontraditional student growth.

One indication of the loyalty of higher education administration to the belief that institutions should primarily appeal to traditional students is reflected in their types of fiscal expenditures. In 2014, institutions of higher education spent more than 12 billion dollars on construction, nearly 80% of which was new construction. For the structures finished between 2014 and 2015, approximately 60% were buildings related to support of the traditional age student, such as dorms and athletic programs and facilities (Johnson, 2019; Mullin et al., 2015). This disparity in investment despite the growing nontraditional student changes was addressed as early as 1997 in a reverberating prediction made by Peter Drucker, when he stated:

Thirty years from now the big university campuses will be relics. Universities won’t survive. It’s as large a change as when we first got the printed book. Do you realize that
the cost of higher education has risen as fast as the cost of health care? And for the middle-class family, college education for their children is as much of a necessity as is medical care—without it the kids have no future. Such totally uncontrollable expenditures, without any visible improvement in either the content or the quality of education, means that the system is rapidly becoming untenable. Higher education is in deep crisis. (p. 127)

Drucker’s prediction was delivered before the global arrival of the internet and the most significant period of growth of nontraditional students, yet there is still almost a decade left in his timeframe (Johnson, 2019). It would seem that his perception has gained support in recent research and in legislation, as revealed by the ever-growing number of campus buildings and improvement, which are believed to be one of the largest costs for institutions nationwide (Marshall, 2018). While most institutions engage in a strategic or master planning process to forecast these improvements, it is not uncommon for leadership and even boards and donors to want to leave a legacy in some fashion at the institution, and for many that comes in the form of new buildings or remodels (Johnson, 2019). These expansions and improvements, though supported by institutional leaders and their boards of trustees, are most often connected to reflect a level of prestige as opposed to reducing institutional barriers or meeting known student need (Selingo, 2013). The perpetual drive for improved institutional reputation, often at the detriment of the student, and what could and should be benign cooperation between institutions has been referred to as a cost disease (Bowen, 2012).

Another challenge to the traditional structure and investment of our institutions is directed at the term of academic year. This academic timeframe has been adopted by nearly 95% of institutions in the US so that students could work part-time jobs, study abroad or participate in
internships over the summer (Gordon, 2016). This calendar structure, which also includes breaks for Thanksgiving, Christmas, spring break and a few other single holidays, allots to only slightly around three fourths of a full calendar year. Not only is this academic calendar potentially worth reviewing from a nontraditional student support standpoint, it certainly bears consideration from an institutional facility use standpoint, which has a direct cost-bearing on all students (Johnson, 2019).

Historical opportunities for nontraditional students to engage with institutions first became available as an informal public gathering. Benjamin Franklin created the 10 JUNTO club circa 1727, which met during the evening and discussed moral, political and philosophical topics (Grattan, 1959). Lyceums became popular for nontraditional student learners around 1826, thanks to the efforts of Josiah Holbrooke, who was dedicated to providing an academic community designed to encourage education and adult learning. These gatherings were also held in public meeting spaces and covered a wide variety of topics, such as science, math and educational methods. Lyceums were considered one of the earliest contributors to formal adult education in the U.S. (Grattan, 1959; Rohfeld, 1990).

Nontraditional education also transpired via mail communication channels. John H. Vincent founded the Chautauqua Assembly in 1808, where all communication between educators and students occurred via mail. The Chautauqua Assembly eventually developed into a series of programs with a variety of subject to choose from, such as science, arts and humanities (Grattan, 1959; Rohfeld, 1990). One of the teachers of the Chautauqua Assembly ultimately became president of the University of Chicago and developed a Division of University Extension, which offered correspondence credit courses until 1959 (Grattan, 1959; Rohfeld, 1990).

Nontraditional student involvement and education continued to expand during the 1800s.
Many institutions added vocational courses in the 1800s and Timothy Clarkson began a mechanics society, which eventually led to the Boston Mechanics Institution in 1826, and a significant number of scientific lectures for nontraditional students (Grattan, 1959). In the late 1800s and early 1900s, nontraditional students began to see offerings for night and weekend classes on campus at the actual institutions, allowing them to gain an education while continuing to work and maintain their household (Ross-Gordon et al., 2017). In 1926 the first recognized professional organization for nontraditional students was established called the American Association for Adult Education (Ross-Gordon et al., 2017). Nontraditional student opportunities expanded significantly after the end of World War I when the nation experienced a significant increase in the demand for technically skilled workers (Rohfeld, 1990). Though still not mainstreamed into institutional processes and procedures, the economic demand for their technical abilities and capabilities led to an expansion of educational opportunities, particularly in the shape of night courses (Rohfeld, 1990).

The first of its kind established just before 1900, the People’s Institute was created specifically as a labor focused college designed to provide educational opportunities for the nontraditional learner. The National University Extension Division, an organization also designed for nontraditional students, helped to provide an accepted set of standards that would regulate academic courses for these students. The standards spoke to the number hours of instruction, the rigor of content and the equality of instructors as the ones on campus. In addition, nontraditional students were expected to complete final exams to reflect subject mastery before they would be given credit for the course equal to that given on the institutional campus (Rohfeld, 1990).

With advancements in technology, education for nontraditional students also began to
advance. The American Council on Education and Federal Communications Commission set aside nearly 250 channels specifically dedicated for educational purposes and more than 60 of those channels were in operation by the early 1960s (Rohfeld, 1990). Institutions began to realize the advantages of combining these channels with already in existence correspondence courses and would then link, either on campus tests or assessment, or correspondence assessment (Rohfeld, 1990). When awarded $10 million dollars by the Annenberg Foundation, the Annenberg Project was created in 1981, bringing nontraditional education to a completely different level. Not only were these courses available to nontraditional students who might be working and raising families, they were also available to students with disabilities, or who did not have access to higher education (Rohfeld, 1990). These courses were available as early as 1984 and covered physical science through the humanities. Begun with the use to television broadcasting, videocassette recordings were eventually available, and ultimately via the Internet as well.

Though a significant period of accessibility to higher education occurred between 1960 and 1980, when a large number of junior colleges were established, the majority of institutional majors, courses, student clubs, organizations and events are still planned and implemented based on the concept of a model traditional student, without consideration of the experiences and needs of the collective nontraditional student body (Strayhorn, 2015). The first step to resolving this issue with success is to acknowledge it. As the nontraditional student demographic continues to grow, one of the most impactful things an institution can do to is to admit that, as Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) stated, “our college campuses are no longer predominately populated by the students described” as traditional in most research” (p. 152). It is not sufficient to use buildings, organizations, programs and groups developed for traditional students and direct them at
nontraditional students, expecting them to have a positive impact (Capps, 2012).

Much of the recent work successfully done at institutions today, focused on nontraditional enrollment and retention are successful because they were developed specifically with the nontraditional student in mind, with their input and feedback. While we know nontraditional students will not and cannot engage in the same way as their truly traditional counterparts, we also know from research that Tinto (2012) found a significant relationship between the academic and social integration with a student and their institution and their likelihood to persist to graduation. Even more specifically, the interactive experiences that students have with all levels of the institutional community can greatly impact their feeling of positivity and dedication to their academic process (Tinto, 2012). When the student perceives a positive interactive experience, their potential to say committed to the institution and their academic process is increased and the reverse tends to be true with a negative perception (Tinto, 2017).

The research is consistent in emphasizing the importance of the consistent support of nontraditional students (Chen, 2017; Trowler, 2015). The significance of support is so important that it is spoken to specifically in terms of support from faculty, advisors, student colleagues, institutional staff and services. All aspects of these support venues potentially contribute to nontraditional student success through empathy for individual circumstances, resources to meet student needs, appreciating the importance of the student’s role, and understanding the institution’s role in meeting gaps in the student experience (Chen, 2017; Hayter & Cahoy, 2018).

If an institution is to rely on data for effectiveness and organization learning, their efforts may be hampered by the data collection practices of the federal government, which should be considered an external stakeholder in the double-loop process. The current practice of data
collection does not include information about all students, only those enrolled full-time and those attending college as freshman for the first time. These numbers exclude part-time students, who constitute approximately 38% of the student population (Ross-Gordon, 2011). The data also fails to include the 37% of students who transfer to other institutions. Not including this demographic means that institutions lose input from a stakeholder that may contribute valuable data to the double-loop organizational learning process (Cox et al., 2017). This could make it more difficult to be innovative in future planning, which requires that institutions are aware of their own students (Noel-Levitz & Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2013).

Other institutional barriers for nontraditional students may include the lack of available classes during times when they are not working or have childcare, the lack of access to faculty outside of regular business hours, limited access to advisors at convenient times and who are trained in credit for prior learning. The time constraints and financial obligations of the nontraditional student are frequently in direct conflict with the business hour model of the institution, and their familial and employment obligations are often in conflict with their academic responsibilities. Nontraditional students also struggle with financial demands without family support, but still find a way to meet their institutional financial obligations in addition to their other adult expenses (Warshaw & Hearn, 2018). An institution who cannot find a way to understand the situation and individual circumstances of their nontraditional students are not only providing barriers to their students, they are a barrier to their own growth.

**Nontraditional Student Financial Needs**

One of the largest issues in higher education in the US today is the ability of students to pay for tuition, which has doubled nearly as fast as the recent national rate of inflation (CollegeBoard, 2017). This presents a potential risk to student retention and success, particularly
for nontraditional students (Denning, 2018; Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Kofoed, 2017). Recent research indicates that nontraditional students are potentially the most in need on the institutional campus, as they carry the burden of external expenses, such as dependents, childcare, and home related expenses, that true traditional students do not have (Carter, 2018; MacDonald, 2018; Prins et al., 2015). Despite their financial needs, nontraditional students tend to have little knowledge and typically little access to financial aid, experience in the process of financial aid or what to do in the absence of adequate finance resources (Ziskin et al., 2014). Dougherty and Woodland (2009) indicated that nontraditional learners are likely put at a disadvantage by federal student aid systems and local institutional aid processes, as the algorithms each use are typically based on the student’s previous years income and the their federal “ability to pay” (p. 183). This formula typically excludes nontraditional students from being eligible to receive federal or institutional aid sufficient to cover the full costs of attending college.

In recent research related to nontraditional financial aid and their understanding of the financial aid process, Chen and Hossler (2017) presented that nontraditional students working toward a two-year degree were more likely to not only extend beyond two years but drop out in their third year of studies, with the nontraditional associate degree completion time averaging just under three and a half years (Shapiro et al., 2016). This dropout rate was higher than their truly traditional student counterparts but could be positively impacted using financial aid as a tool (Chen & Hossler, 2017). In general, nontraditional students adopt a tuition averse mindset when uninformed or poorly supported with financial aid or alternative model information, opting instead to avoid indebtedness and forego education (Boatman & Evans, 2017). Nontraditional students most uncomfortable with the financial aid and alternative funding process were those
lacking in adequate information and felt unsupported by their institution in such matters (Ziskin et al., 2014).

**Nontraditional Student Parents**

For the nontraditional student with children a number of obstacles exist, including flexible availability of the courses they need and adequate childcare (Markle, 2015). According to NCES (2017), 23% of students over the age of 25 is the parent of at least one dependent. The American Association of Community Colleges (2015) reported that at least 17% of enrolled students are single parents. These students are less likely to successfully complete a degree within six years and more likely to drop out of school due to their nontraditional characteristics and institutional obstacles (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015). Students with children indicate the pressures of time management, limited form of institutional support, and various academic related stressors. Specifically, student parents feel that institutional policies are not structured for them with their specific needs (Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Robertson & Weiner, 2013). The student parent demographic is largely underrepresented in research literature as well as policies of higher education (Brooks, 2012; Moreau & Kerner, 2015), despite the growing governmental emphasis that student childcare should not be a barrier to education (Brooks, 2012).

Institutions who develop and implement policies that educate faculty and staff to the needs of the nontraditional student parent provide vital resources in helping these same students to persist (Taylor et al., 2015). From the initial contact with nontraditional student parents by admissions and enrollment staff, faculty and advisors who discuss their individual needs, essential information and resources are provided to this demographic in the form of
nontraditional student specific orientations, study groups and workshops. (Taylor et al., 2015).

Connecting students to community resources and support should be a basic service.

Despite estimates that nearly five million college students are currently parents (Chen, 2017), the number of daycare centers provided by higher education institutions has steadily diminished over the last decade (Eckerson et al., 2016). These cuts were made despite research that reflected the increased likelihood of student parents to stay in school and to graduate (Chen, 2017; Eckerson et al., 2016). Institutions should consider providing or partnering with resources to offer childcare on campus for students, which would eliminate a significant barrier for parent students and increase the probability of their engagement and persistence. According to Carlson (2015), childcare services may be one of the single most impactful for nontraditional student parents, as without it, all other support and services may not be available. Without the availability of childcare, student parents may not have the ability to meet with advisors, participate in campus events, or meet with faculty during office hours, simply leaving as soon as class is over (Mahaffey et al., 2015).

A childcare arrangement may also reduce the financial burden for students, eliminating an additional barrier (Chen, 2014, 2017). The support and connections established with advisors and faculty are positive contributions to the success of nontraditional student parents as well (Mahaffey et al., 2015). They have the ability to provide insight, knowledge, resources and an environment that allows the student to feel heard. The combination of all of these factors, when individualized for each student, positively impact the institutional experience for the student, which then positively impacts the student’s family well-being as well (Guiffrida et al., 2013; Salle et al., 2015; Wirt & Jaeger, 2014).
Researching the Experiences of College Students

This review has revealed significant differences in the life experiences of college students on the basis of many factors. Factors such as self-efficacy, resilience, persistence, emotional well-being, belongingness, engagement, and availability of support can affect the experiences of college students (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Simi & Matusitz, 2016). Factors such as these, in combination with demographic variables, can determine a students’ likelihood of academic success or degree completion. The following subsections will provide information concerning the subsects of studies included in the review that were (a) qualitative or contained qualitative elements, (b) centered on nontraditional students, and (c) centered on traditional students with nontraditional attributes (Table 1).
### Table 1

**Characteristics of Reviewed Research**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Qualitative?</th>
<th>Nontraditional attributes? (delayed enrollment, financial independence, full-time employment while enrolled, the care of dependents, single parents, GED or certificate of completion recipient, etc.)</th>
<th>Traditional w/nontraditional attributes? (traditional = &lt; 25 years old and enrollment in college immediately after high school graduation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boatman &amp; Evans, 2017</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bohl et al., 2017</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Brooks, 2012</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caruth, 2014</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chen &amp; Hossler, 2017</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chen, 2014</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Choy, 2002</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chung, 2012</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Colvin, 2013</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cox et al., 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dauer &amp; Absher, 2015</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Denning, 2018</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>Donaldson &amp; Townsend, 2007</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Donaldson et al., 2004</td>
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<td>Eckerson et al., 2016</td>
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<td>Gaertner &amp; Hart, 2013</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guiffrida et al., 2013</td>
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<td>Horn &amp; Carroll, 1996</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hunter-Johnson, 2017</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jinkens, 2009</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Kofoed, 2017</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mahaffey, 2015</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Markle, 2015</td>
<td>Mixed methods</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mercer et al., 2016</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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</table>
Many of the reviewed studies concerning college students’ experiences have been conducted using a qualitative approach. One common approach is interviewing college students in an effort to understand the experiences and perceptions of certain student populations. Jinkens (2009) interviewed nontraditional students and faculty members in order to explore the educational barriers encountered by nontraditional students in the higher education setting. Mercer et al. (2018) interviewed nontraditional college students to gather data concerning their employment status when school is in session and how they balance work with their academic responsibilities. Moreau and Kerner (2015) interviewed nontraditional students who were also parents in order to understand their academic experiences. Interviews with policy experts have also been used to validate recommendations pertaining to how the student needs of some student populations may be met more effectively, such as the research of Prins et al. (2015) concerning financial aid utilization among adult learners in rural and urban settings. Broadly speaking, such
studies have revealed the complexity of the factors affecting student life for many nontraditional students and traditional students who present nontraditional characteristics.

Other qualitative approaches that have been used include descriptive analysis of open-ended questionnaire results and narrative analysis. Bohl et al. (2017) analyzed the results of questionnaires administered to nontraditional undergraduate students in order to describe their experiences. Colvin (2013) explored the experiences of older female graduate students by analyzing the contents of diaries, narrative journals, and class papers. Through approaches such as these which produce detail-rich qualitative data, it becomes easier to deconstruct the influence of individual factors which influence student experiences.

**Nontraditional Attributes and Experiences**

A growing body of literature has centered on the experiences of nontraditional college students. To reiterate, traditional college students have historically been considered to be those under the age of 25 who enroll in college immediately after high school graduation (MacDonald, 2018). However, researchers are beginning to reconceptualize the notion of the nontraditional student in light of many other factors which can significantly influence the likelihood of student success. Jinkens (2009) and Tilley (2014) have sought to update conceptualizations of nontraditional college students in light of modern students’ diverse experiences and perceptions. Some researchers, such as O’Shea et al. (2016), have even referred to nontraditional students as synonymous with minority student populations. Others have referred to adult learners as synonymous with nontraditional students, negating other factors which can affect whether a student is considered nontraditional.

Similarly, many of the studies that were located during this review of literature related to nontraditional student populations did not define or select a conceptualization of nontraditional
student when outlining the study sample. Though existing conceptualizations of nontraditional students are often discussed towards the beginning of such research, sections of studies which detail specific sample characteristics often simply refer to participants as nontraditional students. Thus, unless the author has previously established which definition of nontraditional student is being used, or a detailed demographic breakdown of the sample is provided, it can be difficult to ascertain researchers’ conceptualizations of nontraditional student identities.

In regard to research implications and recommendations, this lack of clarity can translate to vastly different approaches to addressing nontraditional student needs and a lack of shared understanding about what groups of individuals nontraditional student research is referring to. For example, citing a statistic concerning enrollment rates of nontraditional students in the body of a literature review loses its meaning if the definition of nontraditional student used by the cited author does not agree with the definition used by the literature review’s author. Thus, when developing suggestions for research or practice based on existing literature concerning nontraditional students, it is imperative that the attributes of supporting research samples align with the student population in question.

One commonality among many studies concerning nontraditional students is an inherent deficit perspective. Nontraditional students, however they are conceptualized, are seen as less likely to succeed in comparison to traditional students (O’Shea et al., 2016). It is then seen, in most cases, as nontraditional students’ responsibility to “catch up” and acclimate to reflect the thoughts, socio-cultural dispositions, skills, and knowledge of traditional students. While expression of a deficit perspective within the context of the infrastructure and processes operationalized by higher education institutions may not be ill-intentioned, it positions nontraditional students as inherently not belonging or not being as oriented towards higher
education attainment as traditional students. Also reflective of a deficit perspective is the significant focus on barriers to academic success and negative academic outcomes among nontraditional students in existing literature (Hunter-Johnson, 2017).

Other authors have instead placed the responsibility to provide specialized support to nontraditional students on learning institutions. Alternatively, researchers have more recently began to emphasize the need for institutional support and services which can effectively serve a diverse range of student experiences and needs (Tilley, 2014). Rather than offering specialized support to niche nontraditional student populations, it is more beneficial in many cases to ensure basic student services and support are not more effective for, or tailored to, the needs of traditional students.

When considering literature focused on students who do not enroll immediately after high school and/or are over the age of 25, the commonly referred to markers of nontraditional students, the research focus seems largely centered on adult learners. While adult learners are most commonly classified based solely on their older age, they may not automatically fulfill both core criteria for nontraditional students (Prins et al., 2015). For example, an adult learner may be someone over the age of 25 who attended and graduated college immediately following high school, but later went back to school to obtain a second or graduate-level degree. This significant emphasis on adult learners within studies concerning nontraditional students may result in a research gap concerning the experiences of nontraditional students who did attend college directly following high school, but reenrolled years later for various reasons.

**Traditional Students With Nontraditional Attributes/Experiences**

A significant number of studies have been aimed at exploring the college experiences of classically defined nontraditional students whose experiences are intersectionally affected by
factors such as parenthood, race, ethnicity, military involvement or veteran status, and geographical location (Prins et al., 2015). One of the most frequently discussed traditional student populations with nontraditional attributes are student parents. Eckerson et al. (2016) conducted a state-by-state assessment of childcare options available to student parents using data from the U.S. Department of Education. Another recent study conducted by Mahaffey et al. (2015) was focused on the college experiences of mothers.

Nontraditional financial statuses and employment arrangements during enrollment have also been discussed frequently in recent literature. Many authors have cited financial and employment status as highly influential in regard to student retention and degree completion (Gaertner & Hart, 2013). Ziskin et al. (2014) also used mixed methods during their research concerning how college students pay for college, seek and utilize financial aid, and negotiate various forms of employment during enrollment. Gaertner and Hart (2013) explored the implementation of class-based affirmative action policies as a means of addressing low-income and racially diverse students’ needs alike.

Nontraditional student attributes have also been cited in relation to the learning context, or the physical context associated with the educational process. Taylor et al. (2015) conducted a pilot study of online courses intended to benefit adult learners who have difficulty accessing in-person higher education options. Similarly, Tilley (2014) conducted a comparison study of online courses administered to adult learners and students under the age of 25. The research of Prins et al. (2015) examined the differences between the academic experiences of adult learners living in rural and urban settings.

Despite the previously mentioned studies, there remains a significant lack of studies concerning traditional students who represent demographics and characteristics that result in
nontraditional student experiences. The significant ways that nontraditional student attributes can affect student experiences is well-established in existing literature. Thus, the next step is ensuring that academic discourse surrounding who nontraditional students are and how nontraditional student status affects college experiences is in alignment with which student populations truly experience college nontraditionally. It is in this way that this research study will help to fill this gap in the literature.

**Summary**

A wealth of research has been conducted on factors impacting nontraditional students, such as self-efficacy, emotional well-being, belongingness, engagement, and support systems but a great deal is still lacking in the area of institutional recognition of nontraditional student need and responsive changes (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Simi & Matusitz, 2016). Some seminal research deems the nontraditional student “appropriately cumbersome” due to the diverse nature of their individual needs compared to the existing institutional services and support (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 489; Wardley et al., 2013). Arguably, organizational learning theory could be used to address nontraditional students’ obstacles in order to develop an understanding of students’ experiences and needs and work to create a more effective environment for them (Williamson, 2013). These internal efforts would facilitate student engagement and self-efficacy (Dweck, 2002; Healey et al., 2014; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Tinto, 2017).

Importantly, while the overarching goals of the traditional institution are to educate and graduate students, the modern student is concerned with obtaining a degree regardless of which institution it is earned through (Tinto, 2017). This information suggests that institutions should reconsider potential assumptions such as nontraditional students are cumbersome or external obstacles for students are not their concern. Working to understand all students and their needs is
essential for institutions who hope to reach and retain nontraditional students, which is also a significant opportunity for institutions looking forward to sustainability and innovation (Soares, 2013; Soares et al., 2016). Considering the individual needs of nontraditional students could be essential to institutional sustainability, as recent years have proved challenging with increasing tuition, static wages, and decreased government subsidization per student. From 2004 to 2014 an average of five four-year institutions, both public and private, closed annually with the expectation of that number tripling in the near future (Gephardt, 2015).

This data, in addition to the continuing misalignment between the existing categorizations of students as traditional or nontraditional and the nuanced diversity of the entire student demographic indicates the need for a new model. One such model could involve referring to students as simply students, a single body (Caruth, 2014), recognized as the unique individuals they are with needs that are equally diverse. This change would enable the development of institutional services most facilitative of students’ success. Organizational learning is arguably the most effective mechanism to facilitate this change (Argyris & Schön, 1978). This would require gathering, evaluating, and using data from students about their experience in order to inform directions for institutional improved models of academic and student support services. The institution open to this process displays a commitment to all students they serve by providing an innovative and integrative model of social and academic support (Tinto, 1993).

The growth and diversity of the nontraditional student demographic in higher education is increasingly evident in recent years and institutions are well-advised to understand and properly support this population (Chen, 2017; Deggs, 2011; Wyatt, 2011). These efforts should include direct discourse with students to understand their personal experiences and use this to evaluate the capacity for existing academic and student support and services to address the needs of all
students (Deggs, 2011; Gast, 2013; Tinto, 1993). Further, the methods, approaches and language institutions use must not marginalize or neglect students who may not fit existing models (Chen, 2017; Giles, 2012). This type of effort and vision aligns with the proposed significance of this study in that, without the direct input from students about their experiences, institutions may struggle to provide adequate support and services, and the growing nontraditional demographic will seek those institutions who have taken measures to meet their needs.

The review of recent literature related to nontraditional students in higher education revealed many weaknesses. A primary weakness is the lack of consistency in the identification of and characteristics for nontraditional students. A second significant weakness is that traditional students are most frequently identified only by age, between 18 to 24 years old. No studies were found to examine the experiences of traditional students with nontraditional characteristics related to organizational change theory, despite acknowledgement that this demographic exists, nor recommendations for such studies.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this multiple case study was to describe the perceptions of institutional support and services of traditional-age students with nontraditional characteristics at Kansas universities. This study was designed to address a gap in the educational research; specifically, that this population’s experiences of student support and services are poorly understood, which has consequences for both the body of theoretical and empirical literature as well as practical significance. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of how this study will be conducted. It begins with a section on the design of the study and follows with a review of the research questions. Subsequently, the setting and the participants are discussed. The research procedures, the researcher’s role, and data collection are then described. The concluding sections provide the details of data analysis, efforts to maintain trustworthiness and the necessary ethical considerations for the study.

With the intent of contributing to the existing knowledge base and broaden awareness and understanding of students in higher education, this study utilizes a multiple case design to consider nontraditional student experiences with institutional support and services. While considering the potential for institutions of higher education to participate in the research, their involvement is determined by participant availability, and the study’s intended focus on four-year institutions. Institutions were requested to provide access to their documentation through their Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, as well as access to institutional administration and staff who control that documentation. Student participants are identified by referrals from institutional gatekeepers.
Design

This study followed a qualitative research approach using an instrumental multiple-case study design. The overall aim of this study was to provide an in-depth description of multiple cases, with the cases being the perceptions of multiple traditional students with nontraditional characteristics at two separate Kansas institutions. Thus, the study was best addressed with a qualitative research approach, which “consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible…[including] studying things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena, in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Lincoln et al., 2011, p.3). While quantitative research relies on numerical data and considers the relationships between variables using statistical methods, qualitative research is utilized to develop an in-depth understanding of the human experiences and perceptions, based on observation and interpretation.

Consistent with case study design, an instrumental case study is used to explore a specific issue, in context, in a bounded time frame (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). The design enables the researcher to focus on the specific case in order to develop an understanding of an overall issue (Stake, 1995). This study was designed to describe bounded cases and examine the findings in comparison across cases. Each case was individually evaluated and then compared. The use of case study in qualitative research is particularly effective when exploring a specific issue within an identified population, where the researcher is attempting to give voice to the participants. A multiple case study design allows the researcher to focus on several cases in order to explore the issue in different settings and enter the lives of the participants allowing the researcher to better understand the complexity of their experience (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2010). In addition, the multiple case study research design was chosen over the single case design because multiple
cases provide more reliability than a single case (Yin, 2009).

The researcher’s situational attentiveness, or the awareness of the environment and elements in a particular time and place, is essential to the case study in that it allows for expanded data gathering through observation in addition to interviews, document review and focus groups. Some researchers have argued that multiple case research, in particular, has the unique advantage of highlighting issues contextually while allowing for the development of experiential knowledge (Stake, 2010). The current study’s exploration of the case is the mechanism to understanding the experiential phenomena of traditional students with nontraditional characteristics associated with institutional support and services. Organizational learning theory guided the purpose of this study, supporting the instrumental nature of the study in its exploration and investigation beyond the case (Stake, 2010).

**Research Questions**

With the consideration of the student experience as the primary contributing factors of input in mind, the research questions formulated for this study are:

**Research Question 1:** How do traditional students with nontraditional characteristics perceive institutional support and services offered by Kansas universities?

**Research Question 2:** How do Kansas universities receive, evaluate and implement into practice student input as part of the institutional process of change and improvement?

**Research Question 3:** How do traditional students with nontraditional characteristics perceive institutional practices of student input at Kansas universities?

**Setting**

The sites of this research were chosen using purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990), which is sampling with a specific purpose in mind (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Site selection was purposive
in that only institutions of higher education in Kansas were considered. The rationale behind using Kansas institutions was based on the number of four-year institutions in the state, relatively close proximity to all of the institutions and subjects by the researcher, and the researcher’s familiarity with the accrediting body’s criterion for accreditation, which involves student services, assessment, planning and processes of improvement. Four-year institutions are more likely to have a larger pool of traditional students from which to obtain a sample than a two-year institution. Kansas institutions also prove more accessible for interviews and reviews of institutional documents as distance will not be an issue. The predetermined criterion for site selection was those sites enroll both traditional and nontraditional students but are largely traditional in structure, specifically in that the majority of their student support and services are offered in a traditional work week, during business hours format.

For the purpose of this study, two four-year public institutions of higher education were selected to serve as the cases to compare nontraditional student experiences pertaining to institutional support and services across sites. Inclusion criteria for the selection of each case was based on the two institutions being both the most accessible and the largest. To ensure institution anonymity, I used pseudonym designations of Alpha for the first institution of higher education, and Bravo for the second, assigned in the order their IRB approvals were received.

**Participants**

According to Stake (1995), the sampling in a case study is about selecting the cases and the sources of data that help provide an understanding of the case. In this study, purposive sampling was the method utilized to obtain participants, using specific criteria to identify the participants who may contribute the most to the deep understanding this study is designed to describe (Cohen et al., 2007; Patton, 1990). In describing purposive sampling, Patton (2015)
said,

The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information rich cases for in-depth study. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the inquiry . . . Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding. (p. 273)

Information-rich cases are also ones that can provide substantial information about the central issue and purpose of the research (Patton, 2015). Qualitative researchers typically and purposively select participants who have the potential for generating rich data that would lead to a deep understanding of the phenomena under study (Creswell, 2013). The two institutions, or cases, were selected using inclusion criterion and intended for identical participant processes so as to compare results within and across cases (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013). Data obtained from screening questionnaires was used to identify participants who met the criteria for the interview phase of the research.

The study included 10 student participants, which also allowed for comparison within and across cases and sufficient data for in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2015). Five were selected from each of the two participating institutions on the basis of their responses to the provided screening questionnaires. Inclusion criteria for this research were students who are ages 18 to 24, attending college immediately after graduating from high school, currently or recently enrolled in college, and identified with at least one nontraditional student characteristic. Analyzing and comparing participant’s data for common patterns that might emerge may be particularly valuable in establishing the focal experiences and shared aspects of traditional-age students with nontraditional characteristics (Patton, 1990).

To ensure participants’ identities remain anonymous, each participant was represented by
a pseudonym assigned by the researcher. Random sampling was utilized for research participants to ensure that data was generalizable and to minimize potential for selection bias. Though the selection of the participants for the study was dependent upon on the constraint that they entered college immediately after high school and hold at least one nontraditional characteristic, their selection was randomized as the participant selection was established by the gatekeepers at the individual institutions.

**Procedures**

An application was submitted to the IRB of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, requesting to conduct the research. Approval from the IRB was necessary before any additional research steps could be taken (Stake, 1995, 2010). IRB approval was received from Liberty University along with IRB approval from two four-year public institutions of higher education that met criteria for functioning as sites for this study (see Appendix A).

Prior to data collection, the interview and focus group questions were pilot tested with KC Scholars with a sample of students who fulfilled the inclusion criteria to ensure question intent and clarity had been achieved in order to address any potential ambiguity (Stake, 1995). Pilot participants were identified and solicited by gatekeepers of KC Scholars. Potential participants were provided with a recruitment email (Appendix B) to explain the essential research information and inviting them to participate in the interview. Prior to the interview, essential questions from the screening questionnaire (see Appendix C) were asked to ensure the pilot participants’ relevance for testing the interview questions (see Appendix D). While a test focus group was not held, the researcher asked the focus group questions (see Appendix E) during the end of the pilot interviews to eliminate ambiguity and ensure the intent of the questions was realized. Data collected from the pilot participants was not included in the final
data analysis.

Once all interview and focus group questions were deemed sound, gatekeepers in the undergraduate admissions office, as well as other relevant student organization offices, at each institution operating as a site for this study were contacted for a list of potential participating students as well as institutional documents (e.g., any policy that refers to nontraditional students or any written procedure indicating identification of support services for nontraditional students) relevant to the study. Gatekeepers worked to identify potential participants to determine their eligibility to participate in the study by age and enrollment qualifications on the screening questionnaire. The screening questionnaire was used to identify the traditional students who are currently or were recently enrolled and typically identified as traditional by age (under 25) who reflect at least one nontraditional characteristic.

After obtaining potential participants’ contact information from institutional gatekeepers, the researcher sent potential student participants an email containing an introduction to the researcher as well as a link to the online screening questionnaire, which was accompanied by the consent form for participation, a general overview of the study, a description of the process for keeping participant data anonymous and secure and a disclosure of potential risks and benefits to participants. The email also included the researcher’s contact information and a request to schedule a face-to-face interview as well as notification of times and dates of focus group meetings. A sample of participants who took part in the interviews also participated in the focus group. Participants who completed the screening questionnaire and participated in the interviews received a gift card for $25. Responses to the initial screening questionnaire and demographic information were recorded into an Excel spreadsheet for all those who met the criteria and agreed to participate. They were also informed of their option to withdraw from the study at any
time without obligation or penalty (Stake, 2010). Institutional records were provided by gatekeepers to researcher via links to specific policies on the institution website and shared, public institution documents. Institutional records were recorded into an Excel spreadsheet.

**Researcher’s Role**

My interest in this research topic was grounded in having been a traditional student with nontraditional characteristics while pursuing my undergraduate degree and working as an administrator in higher education. My experience of more than 23 years in higher education, as well as my current doctoral student status, drew me to explore how understanding the way in which traditional students with nontraditional characteristics experience institutional support and services, which might lead to improvements in academic and support services. These improvements bear the potential of positively impact student success and retention, which is something I have previously experienced institutions attempt to do and fail.

This foundation of personal experience and knowledge might make it possible for personal feelings and thoughts to influence the data collection or analysis. I aimed to hold this influence in check by using the detail-rich data from the interviews and the focus groups, which allowed me to obtain a clearer and more holistic understanding of the research phenomenon (Stake, 1995). A variety of additional steps were employed to minimize the chance that my own experiences affected the results. In this qualitative study, I was the human instrument who collected and analyzed data for the study. Therefore, my individual experiences were set aside and any biases and preconceptions bracketed at the outset of the study so that my efforts were focused only on the case study participants and describe their perceived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Member checks were utilized, which involved sharing data analysis of the interview with each participant to ensure accuracy, the focus group data with the
groups to ensure accuracy, and the final research data with all participants (Creswell, 2013). In addition to member checks data were triangulated, Bryman (2008) explained triangulation as “the use of more than one method or source of data in the study of a social phenomenon so that findings may be cross-checked” (p. 700). Using the interview, documentation and focus group data in this way allowed for repetition of data findings but also the identification of points of data divergence (Stake, 1995).

In working to collect accurate and unbiased data, it was important for me to recognize the study participants as subject matter experts and my role solely as the research instrument. I endeavored to keep my experiences and perceptions detached from my analysis of the data, thus minimizing any potential influence over the analysis or outcome. I chose to work with four-year institutions in the state of Kansas, which eliminates the institution where I worked as an option. The institutional gatekeepers who agreed to participate were largely unfamiliar to me in their specific processes and procedures related to nontraditional students. In my role as researcher, I had no authority over the participating students.

**Data Collection**

I used multiple methods to collect data for this qualitative, instrumental case study (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2010). The primary purpose was to go beyond the case, highlighting the issue in context while developing experiential knowledge (Stake, 1995). This was accomplished through a series of three rigorous data collection methods that establish triangulation of data (Bryman, 2008, p. 700). This is essential in qualitative research, as each finding should have a minimum of three possible sources from which to search for primary meanings (Stake, 2010).

Interviews, focus groups, and institutional records served as the primary methods of data collection for this study. These data collection methods were used to gather information that is
relevant to addressing the central research questions. Interviews were conducted in order to gather information about participants’ experiences and perceptions of institutional support and services, institutional practices of student input, and how student input is evaluated and implemented. Focus groups were conducted in order to examine common themes, experiences, and perceptions expressed by multiple participants during the interview process to further validate the relevance of certain themes. Institutional records then provided institutional context concerning participants’ experiences and perceptions that were expressed during the interviews and focus groups; institutional records also confirmed participants’ perceptions and experiences and raised new questions concerning differences between advertised institutional support and services and their perceived availability/applicability to traditional students with nontraditional characteristics.

Interviews and focus groups with participants who elected to undergo that part of the study were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Participants were invited to request a copy of the final dissertation at the completion of the study. Collection of data and data analysis ran concurrently (Merriam, 2009), allowing for each case to be considered independently as well as analyzed for patterns that emerge across cases.

**Interviews**

A case study in qualitative research is enriched by the fact that each participant has an individual, unique story to share (Stake, 1995). I used interviews with student participants as a significant method to collect data. The choice of interview protocol was also based on the assumption that the “perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit” (Patton, 2002, p. 341). The focus of a case study should be the case, and the process of interviewing the case should be flexible and conversational as opposed to structured (Stake,
1995). With that in mind, participant interviews were conducted via web-conferencing, with open-ended questions. The format was semi-structured, which enabled potential follow-up questions and clarification and allow certain questions to be modified or expanded (Stake, 1995). Semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study as they enable the researcher to develop questions that cover the research issue and potential themes while providing flexibility during interviews. Flexibility provides advantages during interviews in that the researcher is able to relate naturally to student participants, which potentially increases their comfort level. In addition, questions can be tailored in process depending on the particulars of the interview and the participant, so additional detail and content can be explored (Merriam, 2009). Aside from the introduction, interview questions were presented in an order that was organic in the conversation.

To ensure clarity and relevance, the interview protocol was piloted among non-participants who also fit the sample criteria prior to data collection. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes each, and field notes taken throughout. All interviews were recorded and, as it was possible that the recordings might not turn out as well as anticipated, the field notes served as a mechanism to provide additional information that may not be evident apart from physical observation, and also as a backup system (Creswell, 2007). However, all precautions were taken to ensure the best recording environment, free of distractions and ambient noise. Recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher or a professional transcriptionist shortly after each interview. Participants were invited to select a quiet, comfortable environment for interviews, while emphasis will be placed on sensitivity to institutions and staff in the use of facilities or resources (Stake, 1995). The questions used to guide the interview, consistent with a semi-structured format, can be found in Appendix B.

The first three interview questions were intended to simply gather information and ideally
can function to establish rapport between the researcher and the participant (Patton, 2015). Interview Question 4 was intended to assess participants’ perceptions of their peers concerning the identification and categorization of students as traditional versus nontraditional at their college. Questions 5 and 6 were developed to discover participants’ understanding and description of the terms traditional and nontraditional. Questions 7 through 9 were developed to address the first research question, which is intended to elucidate how traditional students with nontraditional characteristics experience institutional support and services. Question 10 was developed to address the third research question concerning how traditional students with nontraditional characteristics experience institutional practices of student input. Question 11 was developed to address the second research question concerning how institutions receive, evaluate and implement into practice student input as part of the institutional process of change and improvement.

One or more follow-up interviews were held with each participant to allow an opportunity to connect and for the participant to offer more details. The final interview utilized the same questions to allow participants to share any information they had perhaps recalled since their initial interview or feel more comfortable sharing given current rapport established. While participants were strongly encouraged to participate in the follow-up interviews, their previously collected data was not disregarded if they were unavailable for a second interview. The follow-up interview involved member checking of the analysis from the first interview. Participants were given the opportunity to comment on and provide feedback pertaining to preliminary findings and interpretations. Member checking was conducted by web-conference, phone or email.
Focus Groups

The study procedures planned for two focus group opportunities, with the objective being to have all participants who were interviewed take part in the focus groups. Focus group data was intended to be analyzed and included with as few as two total participants. Focus group settings allow student participants to provide expanded description of their experiences while hearing their co-participants respond to questions. While the interview was the primary vein to “multiple realities” (Stake, 1995, p. 64), focus group interviews allowed for cross-checking for those involved in the case study research. The focus group was held after the interviews, and thus, I had already developed rapport with the participants. The standardized focus group questions are presented in Appendix E.

Focus groups may uncover additional information that participants recalled afterward or that they feel more able to speak freely about than during the interview (Yin, 2009). The first two focus group questions were intended to illicit additional general information pertaining to participants and the views expressed during the interview phase. The third focus group question was aimed at addressing the first research question by eliciting information concerning participants’ student needs and characteristics in relation to how the participating students would be categorized (traditional vs. nontraditional) by their college. The fourth focus group question was aimed at addressing the second research question concerning participants’ experiences with institutional support and services. The sixth focus group question was directed at addressing the third research question concerning student input and how colleges can harness it to contribute to institutional change and improvements. The fifth focus group question addressed the fourth research question pertaining to participants’ experiences and perceptions in relation to institutional practices of student input.
The structure of the focus group was guided using open-ended questions in a semi-structured format, encouraging participants to openly dialogue but then redirecting them to the next question when necessary. The intended size of each focus group was two to five, depending on the final participant sample size. Focus groups were held via web conferencing, in a comfortable and quiet environment. The focus group sessions were recorded (Creswell, 2013) and took no longer than an hour. Field notes were taken during the focus group session and recordings transcribed verbatim by the researcher shortly after each session.

**Document Analysis**

According to Creswell (2013), document research is a strategy utilized in qualitative data collection whereby archival data, records and other formalized documents are reviewed. This type of data is important to this study in that it will provide information about institutional practices, including use of language, at the sites of this research. I reviewed institutional records, such as policies and procedures required by accrediting bodies that directly address or involve traditional or nontraditional students, and I observed their use of the terminology. Examples of such records included but were not be limited to: (a) course scheduling policies and procedures; (b) student handbook; (c) student support and services office hours, such as help desk, ID center, bookstore, library or health center; (d) procedures or organizations referring specifically to nontraditional students (e.g., Nontraditional and Veteran Student Services); (e) student and institutional surveys, such as NSSE; and (f) strategic action plans. Participating institutions, after IRB approval, were requested to provide researcher access to these documents. The data obtained in the documents were then analyzed for evidence of nontraditional focused support and services. Further, document analysis helped to address and provide context pertaining to the third research question, as the information described in the aforementioned document types may help
to elucidate how the participating institutions receive, evaluate, and implement student input as part of the institutional process of change and improvement.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis procedures are important to articulate, as this is one of the most challenging areas of the research (Yin, 2009). Though Stake (2010) indicated that there is no specific point at which data analysis begins, there is also no clear, specific formula set forth to standardly analyze case studies, but rather a series of techniques (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009). Stake (2010) made reference to categorical aggregation, direction interpretation, correspondence, patterns and naturalistic generalization. Yin (2009), by comparison, mentions pattern matching, explanation building, logic models, and cross-case synthesis. As both theorists found value in pattern finding, that is the approach selected for this study. Creswell (2007) indicated a set of specific steps to follow in pattern finding, which will also be utilized in the data analysis of this study:

- **Memoing** – Recording researchers’ thoughts after each interview, reflecting on the communication content and context while fresh.
- **Notetaking** – Using field notes to supplement interviews, focus groups, and memos.
- **Transcription** – Transcribing the interviews verbatim.
- **Rereading** – Rereading all of the memos, field notes, and transcripts.
- **Coding** – Underlining short answers and key words from interview transcripts. Codes will be descriptive in natures and subsequently used as labels.
- **Pattern development** – Using key words and phrases, grouping them into smaller units.

These patterns provide additional internal validity to the study (Creswell, 2007). In a hermeneutic style of analysis, or a style that makes an effort to interpret and understand, that begins with data collection, I conducted analysis during interviews and focus groups, making
observations about nonverbal behavior. Using a flexible design of data collection and analysis allowed for adjustments during analysis phase and allowed the researcher to identify and focus on issues as they arose.

All interview material is considered data of equal value (Creswell, 2007). To capture the essence of the participant experience, transcripts must be read several times during the open coding phase of analysis (Creswell, 2013). When significant statements are identified in the transcripts, they were highlighted in colors that match their respective codes, with the names of the codes written in the margins to notate findings. This marginal notetaking is also referred to as memoing (Creswell, 2013). I memoed all interview and focus group transcripts. I created initial categories based on the memoing, and the transcripts were then reviewed again to identify key codes from the written memos (Creswell, 2013). The codes were then grouped or clustered into meaningful units, with themes developing (Creswell, 2013). Identifying emerging themes is necessary to consider potential meaning for the phenomenon and to develop clear and functional descriptions (Creswell, 2013). I documented this entire process in rich detail of each case (Patton, 1990), used cross-case analysis (Stake, 1995) and compared data across the participating institutions and across participants. Quality control was established through several methods: conducting multiple reviews of data during analysis, considering any rival interpretations, and remaining focused on the research target and avoiding being drawn off toward less essential information (Yin, 2013). As a measure of accuracy, a third party was asked to audit data collection analysis.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is the most regularly used qualitative research standard. It is representative of the critical evaluation that is necessary for qualitative research. Generating
trustworthy results can be accomplished through the use of several strategies (Creswell, 2013) and in meeting four criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These criteria will be addressed as follows:

**Credibility**

In this study, credibility was established through triangulation of three methods of data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985): participant interviews, the focus group and document analysis (Creswell, 2013). This is significant in increasing the study validity as it increases the accuracy of the data by collecting them from multiple sources. I also used peer review, which involves having others review the data and analysis. Peer review minimizes the change of any unintended research biases affecting research data or analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member-checking is another method that was used to enhance credibility, which is a validation strategy in which participants are invited to view the data and researcher interpretations and provide feedback (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 1995).

**Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability was established through extensive note taking throughout study and audio recording the interviews (Creswell, 2013). In addition, member-checking was conducted, as discussed in the section on credibility (Creswell, 2013). Member-checking is useful to increase dependability and confirmability. I also followed the recommendation of Lincoln and Guba (1985) and maintained an audit trail that included the electronic documentation of choices related to the research process.

**Transferability**

Transferability is when study findings are transferrable between one context and another. Transferability in this study was maximized by using thick description in the data analysis phase,
which detailed the participants’ experience (Creswell, 2013). The research terminology included basic descriptions of people, places and occurrences that participants describe, as they are their own subject matter experts (Stake, 1995). Thick descriptions were incorporated into the study results in order to allow student perceptions and institutional policy to be easily understood by the larger audience (Creswell, 2013). Triangulation, or collection of data from multiple data sources, also increased transferability (Creswell, 2013).

**Ethical Considerations**

The ethical requirements of this study were upheld first and foremost by obtaining initial IRB approval from Liberty University and each institution I engaged with. I obtained documented informed consent from participants before interviews or focus groups. With participants I shared any risks or benefits of their participation, that their involvement is voluntary, and that they may cease to participate at any time (Patton, 1990). Additionally, I maintained institution and participant anonymity (Stake, 1995). Research data has been backed up on a portable drive and this drive will be kept with audio recordings of interviews in a secure, locked location (Creswell, 2013). Physical documents from the institutions and any handwritten notes have been scanned and stored on a portable drive as well and are being kept in a secure, locked location (Creswell, 2013). All data will be kept for three years, at which point physical documents will be shredded.

**Summary**

The purpose of this multiple case study was to describe the perceptions of institutional support and services of traditional-age students with nontraditional characteristics at Kansas universities. This study was designed to address the paucity of literature on the experiences of this unique population. This study was conducted using a qualitative, multiple case study design.
Qualitative research is uniquely suited to address the purpose of the study, as it allows for increased depth in research and more detailed analysis, looking further than simple numbers and counts but documents individual experiences, feelings and behaviors. Qualitative research also encourages an open environment for participants to expand on their experiences and responses. Data from three sources were triangulated: interviews, focus groups, and institutional records. This chapter more fully detailed the study design, as well as study sites, participants, procedures, and data collection. Methods used to maximize trustworthiness and measures taken to address the ethical considerations of this study were also described.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter contains the presentation of the findings that address the purpose of this study. The purpose of this multiple case study was to describe the perceptions of institutional support and services of traditional-age students with nontraditional characteristics at Kansas universities. Two four-year public institutions of higher education were selected using inclusion criterion and intended for identical participant processes so as to compare results within and across cases (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013). This chapter includes a description of the 10 participants selected through purposive sampling and who met the inclusion criteria specifying students ages 18 to 24, attending college immediately after graduating from high school, currently or recently enrolled in college, and identified with at least one nontraditional student characteristic. Profiles for each participant are provided.

This chapter also highlights the results of the study, which were generated from interviews, focus groups, and institutional records data. The data were analyzed through pattern development until themes emerged. The themes are presented in the results section following the three research questions. Research question one was aimed to examine the experiences of traditional students with nontraditional characteristics, particularly to the support and services provided by the institution. Research Questions 2 and 3 were aimed to investigate the current situation of generative learning in the institution and how the students thought of the situation.

Participants

Five students from each of two four-year public higher education institutions in Kansas were selected purposively. The purposive sampling was utilized in recruiting student participants in April to May 2020, when many institutions had closed or converted to online learning due to
the Covid 19 pandemic. The participants of this study consisted of 10 students who were between the ages of 18 – 24, attended college immediately after graduating from high school, were currently enrolled or enrolled in college within the last year, and identified with at least one nontraditional student characteristic. Five participants were selected from Institution Alpha and five were selected from Institution Bravo. Descriptions of the participants are provided in the following subsections. The chart below reflects participant responses as they identified to nontraditional student characteristics overall.

**Figure 1**

*Nontraditional Characteristics Identified by Participants*

**Allison**

Allison is a senior student from Institution Alpha. She is expecting to graduate in December 2020 with a degree in animal science specializing in veterinary medicine. The participant chose the degree to pursue a career in animal science biotechnology, which the participant perceived as a “huge industry” in Kansas. Allison started college in the fall semester of 2017 immediately after high school graduation. She defined a traditional student as:
I would say a traditional student would be not taking any time off between high school, so going straight from high school to college. Typically, the 17-, 18-year-old just starting college. Traditional student probably would graduate in four years and not take any time off. Potentially live in the dorms their first year.

While Allison immediately went to college after high school graduation and is in the age range of 18 to 24, Allison identified nontraditional characteristics of jobs. Allison shared:

Right now, I have a full-time job and then I also work every other weekend at a part-time job. And then during school I work about 35 hours a week, so I don’t hit that 40 mark and take away from my financial aid. I’d say I’m a pretty traditional student but there might be some nontraditional tendencies.

Abby

Abby is a senior in Institution Alpha. Before enrolling in Institution Alpha, she wanted to enlist in the military; however, her parents urged her to pursue post-secondary education. Abby perceived that Institution Alpha offered “the best of both worlds” through the Air Force ROTC program. Yet, the participant suffered an injury that did not allow her to pursue the ROTC program. Instead, Abby is taking a degree in “agricultural communications and journalism with a minor in animal science.”

The participant believed that Institution Alpha was “very homey and welcoming” and “unlike some other universities” after visiting the campus a few times when she was in high school. Abby defined traditional students as “probably a middle socioeconomic class from their parents” and “transitioning into college without a gap year.” Nontraditional students were generally “older,” “married with kids,” and “coming back to school because they weren’t able to find the job they wanted with whatever kind of education that they had prior.”
Andy

Andy is a senior in Institution Alpha. Andy began taking college courses during his sophomore year in high school, which resulted in college credits when he entered Institution Alpha. He “technically entered [college] as a sophomore.” “Everyone” in Andy’s family went to college; therefore, his expectation was also to “go to college to get my degree, and to get out in the world and get a job.” Andy’s plan was to get a degree in elementary education and pursue a career as a teacher. Several relatives attended Institution Alpha, and he had been a “fan” of the institution his “whole life.”

Andy perceived that the student population was diverse in terms of race but not in age. The majority of the students were perceived to be 18 to 25 years old. The participant described traditional students as “younger” and nontraditional students as “maybe someone older. Married maybe. Maybe has kids” and “going back to school.” Andy identified as a traditional student in terms of age, but also identified nontraditional characteristics:

I was in the traditional age range for sure. And I lived on campus and stuff. I guess where I was different was, when I wasn’t in class or cheering, I was working to pay for school. Most of my friends were sleeping or partying and stuff. I worked a lot.

Ashley

Ashley is a senior pursuing a degree in social work in Institution Alpha. The participant first enrolled in a community college after graduating from high school in 2016. However, the participant decided “it wasn’t my right fit,” which resulted to enrollment in Institution Alpha in
2017. Ashley was determined to pursue tertiary education for her “future” and for her parents who she identified as “former illegal immigrants” who could not afford college for themselves.

The participant perceived that the school had several male students due to the aviation program offered. Ashley also observed several “people from the military.” Nonetheless, in terms of age, Ashley perceived that the student population was a mix of “younger” and “older” students. She described traditional students as:

I think that traditional student probably has a full-time schedule, like school-wise, so probably between like 15, 17 credit hours. Usually doesn’t work or has a part time job, either on campus or just around the local city. Usually, when I think of a traditional student, I think of just a young, White person.

On the contrary, Ashley perceived nontraditional students as “probably someone from a foreign country, an international student, I would say. Kind of someone who just like focuses more attention just on school, probably having a full-time job, maybe a family . . . I’d say probably older than 25.”

Adam

Adam graduated from Institution Alpha in May 2020 with a degree in agribusiness. He was homeschooled until his junior year in high school, during which he began taking college courses at a community college. During his senior year in high school, he attended the community college full-time and earned his associate degree. He transitioned to Institution Alpha immediately after. Adam pursued higher education after hearing his father’s advice to search for opportunities. Both of his parents were college graduates and ran a ranch. His mother went to Institution Alpha. Adam supported himself in college, stating, “The only thing my parents paid for my entire college time was my car insurance.” The participant had difficulty defining a
Brooke

Brooke is a senior in Institution Bravo majoring in graphic design under the marketing program. He took college courses in high school, but he started college during the fall semester of 2016, immediately after high school graduation. Brooke decided to attend college to make himself “more marketable” when job-seeking. He shared, “I knew that having a college degree betters your chance of finding a job after high school and when you grow up.” Both of his parents went to college as well, though he believed they “did not pressure” him to go, and that he was “self-directed.” He decided on Institution Bravo after attending a “virtual visit” of the campus. In addition, the institution offered a “good marketing program” and “good scholarships.” Brooke reasoned, “Financially it was a more reasonable choice than some of the other institutions I was looking at.” Brooke perceived that several students he met were “first generation college students” and local students “from small towns in Kansas.” Brooke described himself:

I think I’m somewhat of a traditional student because I am within the age range. I did go to school right after high school, so from the outside looking in I fit in with the college crowd. I go to classes during the day for the most part, but I do work two jobs. So I have an on campus job, which is just in between classes during the day whenever I can fit that time in. And then I have a second job off campus at a restaurant, I’m a server/bartender there. So I think in that regard, I’m more of a nontraditional student. My freshman year, I started out as more of a traditional student because I just did babysitting occasionally.
because I had some money set aside from working summers and I also had scholarships. And I still have the scholarships, but I work a lot more.

Bailey

Bailey is a junior in Institution Bravo. She began taking general education college courses during her junior year in high school, with the reason that, “I pretty much knew I was going to have to take [the courses] . . . I figured I would rather take them with a small group, with like my friends, than in big classes and for more money later.” Bailey knew that applying for a job without a college degree would be difficult, and she “kind of always had an interest in science,” which led to her decision to attend college.

Bailey selected Institution Bravo due to its proximity to her home and liking the “campus vibe” after visiting the campus. She perceived that the majority of the students in the institution were traditional in that they were “younger people” who did “not necessarily work” and “participated in lots of campus stuff.” She identified nontraditional students as “someone who has a family, maybe someone who is older, who maybe works during the day and then needs to take classes whenever they can.”

Bill

Bill is in his “fourth and hopefully final year” in Institution Bravo. He first attended college immediately after high school graduation because of “pressure” to get a “successful job and career.” However, he perceived that he did not “do so good” and left school for a few years. Bill has returned to school, and now has a daughter. The participant perceived, “I thought I had more of a reason in a plan set out, and I knew I had more concrete goals of things I wanted to accomplish.”
Bill believed that being with a “diverse group of students” helped with his college experience, citing, “A lot of the people I went to school with were older, they decided to change careers, and just all sorts of people from veterans to newly graduates like myself. It was really interesting.” He described traditional students as students with “the main goal is school,” and identified nontraditional students as:

In night classes, it was a lot of working people, people with families. It was more of a, school was necessary, but it wasn’t the only thing to them. They had other things that they had to worry about that were above education.

Ben

Ben is a senior mechanical engineering student. He started going to Institution Bravo in 2017. He decided to attend college, as he perceived it was the norm among his high school peers. He chose to attend Institution Bravo for financial reasons, “They had the Pell Grant as well as the Pell Advantage.” Ben perceived that the institution’s student population was diverse in terms of race and age, though “slightly less diverse” among students in his degree. He stated, “We had a few Asian students. In my class, there might have been myself and a couple of other, two or three other, African American students, one of which was also above the age of 24.” Ben thought that traditional students were “basically coming straight out of high school and going to college,” and nontraditional students were, “someone who’s going back to school over the age of 24, but in my sense it’s just kind of that period in life where you’re not coming straight out of [high school].”

Blair

Blair started college in 2017 and is a senior in Institution Bravo. After high school, she earned her associate degree. She decided to attend college in Institution Bravo with the reason, “I
always had a fascination with environmental sciences and [Institution Bravo] had the closest and more affordable options for me.” Blair perceived that a traditional student was, “I guess someone who has either financial aid or a scholarship goes right out of high school, has a standard four-year degree, lives in dorms or in a frat or sorority.” She defined nontraditional students as, “Probably someone who perhaps doesn’t have a high school diploma or goes part-time, works outside of school, maybe even has a family.”

**Results**

This section contains the presentation of results for this qualitative multiple case study. In order to arrive at these results, a careful analysis of all data collected from participant interviews, focus group interview and documents was conducted. Both within-case and cross-case syntheses were used to provide an explanation of the findings. Codes were developed by conducting a detailed review of the transcripts and then organized into themes that presented themselves recurringly in the cases. Participant responses were subsequently used to answer the research questions, while manual and open coding processes were utilized with participant interview transcripts, focus group transcripts and collected documents. In total, 54 codes were compared across participants and focus groups, then compared with the collected documents to discern any consistencies before developing five themes from the codes.

**Within-Case Synthesis**

Institution Alpha is one of six four-year regents institutions in the state. The university is a public land-grant research university and has multiple branch campuses. Institution Alpha recorded the second highest enrollment of any Kansas public university in 2018, with undergraduate FTE of 16,657. Institution Alpha defines non-traditional students as the following:
Non-traditional students were seeking to start or continue the pursuit of an undergraduate degree later in life rather than right after graduating high school. They include:

- Students attending part-time or work full time while enrolled
- Students who are financially independent of their parents
- Students with family dependents other than a spouse
- Students who are single parents

As indicated in the data analysis plan in Chapter Three, the data analysis proceeds to generate themes involving pattern matching. After collecting and transcribing interviews, focus group, and institutional records data from Institution Alpha, the researcher read each transcription multiple times to note general ideas about the data. Creswell (2007) referred to this step as memoing. Institutional records analyzed included information available on their website or provided student catalogs and handbooks, institution policies and procedures related to defining and supporting non-traditional students, as well as any regular surveys provided to students and how those results were utilized. The researcher then re-read all the institutional record notes and transcriptions of the interviews and the focus group to immerse in the data. After reading and re-reading the data multiple times, the researcher began coding.

To code the data from Institution Alpha, the transcription of the focus group and participant interviews were imported to the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12 (QSR International, 2020). The software was used in storing, organizing, managing, and analyzing the data. Each transcription was designated as a case by individual interviews and focus group in NVivo 12 so that the researcher could assign case attributes or characteristics. The case attributes assigned by the researcher included the institute’s name and the participants’ age range, majors, and number of years in college, as well as the years in which the participants
started college. Assigning case attributes helped the researcher observe code matrices, that is, similarities, across demographics and in the cross-case analysis that occurred later.

NVivo 12 also has a “code” feature, in which the researcher highlighted and assigned phrases or chunks of data into a small unit of meaning labeled with a descriptive title to identify the contents of the code. The codes or units of meaning were based on Argyris and Schön’s (1978) theory of organizational learning. For instance, with the concept of the double-loop process of learning in mind, the researcher was mindful of the data referring to root causes of an issue, surveying for weaknesses in Institution Alpha, as well as perceived changes. An example would be participant Allison’s statement, “I know student government sends out a lot of emails . . . with different surveys and questionnaires and things.” This chunk of text was highlighted and assigned to the code “survey from the student government.”

The researcher generated as many codes as possible to break down the data into units of meaning. In searching for meaning, patterns in the data occurred. The patterns were matched such that similar meanings were clustered together. In NVivo, clustering of codes occurred with the hierarchy feature. The clusters generated the themes. In the code “survey from the student government” above, similar codes such as “evaluating activities or courses,” and “survey from the union” were grouped together under the theme Surveys. The themes that emerged from Institution Alpha data were: “support aligned for nontraditional students” (with sub-themes access to services available for everyone and online learning program), “support aligned for traditional students” (with sub-themes “academic advising” and “housing”), “academic advisor” (with sub-theme “not helpful”), “survey” (with sub-themes “evaluating activities” and “courses”), and “have not seen major changes.” A complete list of codes and themes generated from the Institution Alpha data are presented in Table 2.
### Table 2

**Themes and Codes from Institution Alpha**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme and code</th>
<th>Contributing participants ($n$)</th>
<th>Related concepts to Argyris and Schön’s (1978) organizational learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support aligned for nontraditional students</td>
<td></td>
<td>encouraging an investigation of practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>access to services available to everyone</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>night classes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>online learning program</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flexible hours</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more affordable</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peer support</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being with other nontraditional students</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>federal TRIO program</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>small class sizes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some professors are accommodating</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAs could help</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support aligned for traditional students</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>encouraging an investigation of practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>academic advising</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>advisors used to working with traditional students</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fixed schedule during business hours</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dining</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>financial aid</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freshmen only</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning style</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>physical spaces</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduling</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not so helpful beyond freshman year</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic advisor</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>some evidence of single loop learning, the use of technology to increase access, encouraging an investigation of practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>academic advisor not helpful</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>depending on the advisor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>difficult to reach academic advisor</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>easier because of covid, meetings</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moved online</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>handling many students</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>faculty advisor more helpful</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
professors are helpful 1
support from extracurricular activities 1
Surveys 5
evidence of double loop learning, some evidence of single loop learning, active solicitation of student feedback, encouraging an investigation of practices

evaluating activities or courses 3
from the student govt 1
from the union 1
too many, not effective 1
not focused on academic services 1
required online survey 1
long, click through to get it done 1
student input not implemented 1
changes take time 1
giving out incentives in exchange for participation 1
Have not seen major changes 3
no tangible evidence of administrators’ involvement in promoting organizational effectiveness

change if majority of students shared the same feedback 1
not all professors care about feedback 1
student organizations 2
health and wellness 1
Navigating 1
not involved, more for traditional students 1
socially integrated 1

Institution Bravo is also one of six four-year regents institutions in the state. The institution is a public research university with a very large main campus, a number of satellite campuses, and medical and research centers. It recorded the highest enrollment of any Kansas public university in 2018, with undergraduate FTE being 17,602. Institution Bravo defines non-traditional students as the following:
• A student 3 or more years older than their cohort (i.e. a 21 year old freshman)
• A student who is married
• A student who has one or more dependents (adult or child)
• A student who is commuting 10 or more miles to campus
• U.S. Military Veteran

Similar pattern-matching methods were used to analyze the data collected from Institution Bravo as Institution Alpha. The researcher first transcribed the interviews, focus group, and institutional records data. Then, the researcher read the transcriptions to create memos of general patterns in the data based on the concepts from Argyris and Schön’s (1978) theory of organizational learning. In reading and re-reading the data, the researcher was attentive to key phrases or chunks of data relevant to the theory of organizational learning such as eliciting student input, implementing changes and identifying issues within Institution Bravo. For instance, in participant Blair’s statement, “I actually saw a lot of changes more around the COVID thing rather than just in any other semester,” the key term “changes” was interpreted as related to the purpose of this study; therefore, the statement was coded as “changes because of COVID situation.”

The researcher continued to code each transcription line-by-line until the data were broken down into small units of meaning. The meaning units were observed for patterns or similarities. Codes with similar meanings were grouped together into one hierarchy in NVivo 12 to develop a theme. The codes “changes because of COVID situation” and “no major changes” were observed to have similar patterns and assigned under the theme “have not seen major changes.” Nonetheless, not all themes were supported by sufficient evidence. The themes that emerged from Institution Bravo data were: “support aligned for nontraditional students” (with
sub-themes “night classes” and “some professors are accommodating”), “support aligned for traditional students” (with sub-theme “scheduling”), “academic advisor,” “survey” (with sub-themes “evaluating activities and courses” and “not focused on academic services”), and “have not seen major changes.” The codes and themes generated from Institution Bravo data are presented in Table 3.
## Table 3

**Themes and Codes from Institution Bravo**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme and code</th>
<th>Contributing participants (n)</th>
<th>Related concepts to Argyris and Schön’s (1978) organizational learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support aligned for nontraditional students</td>
<td></td>
<td>encouraging an investigation of practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>access to services available to everyone</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>counselling service</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>night classes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peer support</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being with other nontraditional students</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>federal TRIO program</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some professors are accommodating</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>but students have to miss out on class</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support aligned for traditional students</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>encouraging an investigation of practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>academic advising</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fixed schedule during business hours</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>financial aid</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freshman transition activities</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning style</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduling</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not so helpful beyond freshman year</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>working on campus is challenging</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic advisor</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>some evidence of single loop learning, the use of technology to increase access, encouraging an investigation of practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>academic advisor not helpful</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>difficult to reach academic advisor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>faculty advisor more helpful</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to pass on feedback</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>evidence of double loop learning, some evidence of single loop learning, active solicitation of student feedback, encouraging an investigation of practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evaluating activities or courses</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>from the student govt</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unsure about communication</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not focused on academic services</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>giving out incentives in exchange for</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
participation
Have not seen major changes 2 no tangible evidence of administrators’ involvement in promoting organizational effectiveness
changes only because of COVID situation 1
no major changes 1
Student government voice of the student body 1 insufficient evidence supporting the practice of double loop learning

Cross-Case Synthesis

The cross-case synthesis worked to compare the codes for each institution and discern the pattern of themes that emerged from the cases of Institution Alpha and Institution Bravo. The researcher continued to search for pattern matches in between the cases. For instance, both cases generated the themes related to support aligned for traditional students. The similar patterns in the themes from both cases were that the support for traditional students were mainly aligned for freshmen traditional students. Therefore, the major theme Support is Mainly Aligned for Traditional Freshmen Students was developed.

In searching for cross-case themes, the researcher looked for more narrow and specific patterns related to both cases rather than the broad codes and themes identified in the previous phases of analysis. The researcher also reviewed the relationships among the themes and their relationship with the research questions. In identifying cross-case themes, five major themes emerged from the data. The themes were: “support is mainly aligned for traditional freshmen students” (RQ1), “support for nontraditional students is based on accommodations” (RQ1), “academic advisors” (RQ2), “surveys are not geared towards academic services” (RQ2), and “major changes are rarely seen” (RQ3).
Theme Development

Participant interviews, the focus group interviews, and documents all contributed to theme development. Transcripts from all interviews provided 54 codes, which were then compared to the collected documents to identify any similarities. The codes are presented in Appendix G to show similarities across data sources and differences between cases. Appendix H reflects how the codes were then broken down into the major themes. The preliminary theme categories were: “support aligned for nontraditional students,” “support aligned for traditional students,” “academic advisor,” “survey,” and “have not seen major changes.” The finalized themes were termed “support is mainly aligned for traditional freshmen students” (RQ1), “support for nontraditional students is based on accommodations” (RQ1), “academic advisors are not helpful” (RQ2), “surveys are not geared towards academic services” (RQ2), and “major changes are rarely seen” (RQ3).

The theory guiding this study was organizational learning theory developed by Argyris and Schönen (1974), which states that organizations learn when stored understandings and information are called into question. The process of understanding institutional support and services as perceived by traditional students with nontraditional characteristics is also aligned with Argyris and Schönen’s (1978) theory of organizational learning. Argyris and Schönen (1974) initially suggested that learning requires the detection and correction of error. Their concept of learning followed an intricate formula incorporating general human cognitive processes and principles of problem solving, referring to the theories that we use to explain our experiences and evaluate future events based on our personal set of assumptions. Reflecting back on their theories of action and practice, they proposed that learned actions and practices are very much a part of the individual or institution in the case of this study and may conflict with how practice is
explained or rationalized. Argyris and Schön (1978) referred to this reflexive way of learning as single-loop learning, in that an individual may see that their behavior did not resolve an issue and adjust their actions without addressing their underlying assumptions about the situation. Generally, when institutions use a single-loop process, they seek to correct practices, procedures and mechanisms already in place without examining the beliefs or assumptions underlying these practices. As such, these practices and policies have often been long institutionalized and rarely exposed fully to input from stakeholders for evaluation and improvement. The double-loop process of learning theory (Schön, 1996) combines the single-loop learning with consideration of the root cause of the issue, allowing for adjustments in attitude, belief, and behaviors to ensure holistic and consistent results (Bauman, 2005).

Organizational learning as it relates to institutions of higher education is informed by knowledge derived from student perspectives, which can be utilized in double-loop learning to serve as a form of institutional organization improvement (Bauman, 2005; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2006). For institutions of higher education, organizational learning entails the application of traditional and nontraditional student labels, or linguistic stereotyping, and determining how best to provide support services to these students in a format and structure that makes sense for them (Gumport, 2001; Miller & Bell, 2016; Philpott, 2016). If functioning as an effective a learning organization entails double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978), institutions of higher education are afforded the ability to determine whether and to what degree a misalignment of institutional support services and actual student needs exists. Actively soliciting, considering and acting upon direct student feedback as it relates to their institutional support and services, allows institutions to more fully evaluate for effective solutions student support.
Five cross-case themes emerged from Institution Alpha and Institution Bravo cases. The themes were: Support Is Mainly Aligned for Traditional Freshmen Students, Support for Non-Traditional Students Is Based on Accommodations, Academic Advisors, Surveys Are Not Geared Towards Academic Services, and Major Changes Are Rarely Seen. The sub-sections below contain a description of the themes, excerpts from the data, as well as how the themes answered their corresponding research question.

**Support for Non-Traditional Students Is Based on Accommodations**

Participants from both Institutions Alpha and Bravo also perceived that support for non-traditional students existed. However, the support was mostly based on accommodations rather than concrete practices or policies. The majority of the participants reiterated that accommodations was often provided by professors. The accommodations included leniency in attendance and uploading study materials to an online platform. The participants generally believed that the accommodations were often provided by professors in the night classes or during online learning. This theme emerged to answer RQ1.

This theme emerged from Institution Alpha and Bravo participants’ perceptions of supports from the institution that were beneficial to non-traditional students. This theme answered RQ1 in that the theme was relevant to the participants’ experiences of support and services provided by the institution. Institution Alpha participants generally referenced several support and services such as night classes, peer support and the federal TRIO program applicable to the institution, the majority of the participants perceived that the services most appropriate for non-tradition students were the availability of access for everyone and the online learning program. Institution Bravo participants generally perceived that having the option to enroll in night classes was a support aligned for non-traditional students. Another support shared by
Institution Bravo participants, though not necessarily from the institution but from certain professors, was accommodations.

Three of the five participants from Institution Alpha perceived that having access to services that were available for “everyone” was one of the supports that benefit non-traditional students and traditional students with non-traditional characteristics such as themselves. However, this benefit also included traditional students. Participant Adam perceived that both traditional and non-traditional students have “equal opportunity” to access institutional support, particularly in applying for scholarship and “campus opportunity” which the participant described as access to campus facilities and online facilities. For Ashley, both traditional and non-traditional students were supported by the “Cat’s Corner,” a supply “closet of food, shoes, clothing” where students can take the supplies “donated from the community.” Moreover, Andy described:

I would say lots of student support from advisors and teachers. Everything’s very accessible, the union. I feel it's really accessible to anyone, anything on the campus as a traditional student, but then I'm thinking a nontraditional student everything, I feel, is accessible to them as well.

The online learning program was perceived by participants Allison and Abby as an institutional support for non-traditional students. Both participants perceived that the online learning program was beneficial to students who needed more flexible learning hours than the traditional classroom lecture schedule permitted. Abby particularly mentioned students with children, “So they could do online if they wanted…because I don't know a lot of parents who just have hours and hours to come and sit in a lecture when they're parenting and stuff.” Allison referenced that the institution began recognizing the benefits of the online learning program
during the Covid-19 outbreak, as all classes shifted to online platforms. However, prior to the shift, Allison perceived:

Most of the professors, well, before COVID at least, we're not quite sure what's going to happen in the fall, but you'd have your traditional in-person lecture and then you would also have materials to do on your own time if you needed that, that were available in the canvas page that we use. A lot of professors that I have had, have also recorded their lectures and posted them for viewing if you weren't able to make it to class for some reason.

In addition, participant Abby emphasized that the online learning program benefited non-traditional students in particular due to having a more affordable learning option. Abby explained, “From what I understand, the tuition rates for online are halfway between what in-state and out-of-state students pay…from a financial standpoint, I think that that would make a lot of sense for the non-traditional students.”

Participants Bailey and Bill perceived that night classes were supportive practices of Institution Bravo targeted to non-traditional students. Bailey expressed that night classes were helpful allowing the students to have time to work during the day. Bill added that apart from being able to have time for a job, the night classes also allowed him to be acquainted with a “diverse group of students” who were generally older. The participant articulated:

I got to see a huge diverse group of students because I mostly took night classes. A lot of the people I went to school with were older, they decided to change careers, and just all sorts of people from veterans to newly graduates like myself. It was really interesting. It wasn't the traditional, whole bunch of 18, 20 somethings. It was a lot more tempered people.
Bill revealed that he was able to learn from the experiences of his cohorts. Therefore, both participants generally argued that having the option for night classes was a support for non-traditional students that was provided by the institution.

Four of the five Institution Bravo students in this study contributed to the sub-theme that some professors were accommodating to the needs of non-traditional students. Blair found convenience in “setting up appointments with professors.” Nonetheless, the participants generally emphasized that the accommodations were not provided by all the professors. Bailey stated, “I have some professors who are really good and will respond to emails in the evening and weekends but not all of them are like that.” Brooke reiterated that having a professor who provided accommodations was an “exception,” “I’d say the only exception to that is you can find a professor who can let you go during class time or something like that. Or if you work on campus, then you might be able to be excused from your job.”

However, Brooke also shared that despite accommodations, students who need to be outside the class still missed out on lessons, “That's not exactly the best option because then you would miss out on class time or not be able to complete all of the things you have to do for your work day.” Bill perceived that the accommodating professors were mostly the ones teaching night classes and were adjunct:

A lot of the time they were adjunct, and the ones, the ones that I thought were the most personable and down to earth, the ones that were willing to help people, were adjuncts that were working part time, and their time was limited. They knew our time was limited. And so together they were just good at figuring out times to figure things out.

Overall, this theme emphasized the support aligned for non-traditional students as perceived by the participants from Institution Alpha and Institution Bravo. The participants from
Institution Alpha generally believed that several support and services were available for both traditional and non-traditional students. Access to benefit from the campus services was believed to be equal for all enrolled students. However, the online learning program offered in Institution Alpha was perceived to be beneficial to non-traditional students in particular. Participant Allison perceived that the benefits were not specifically from the program, but from making learning materials available in online platforms such that students could access them at their own pace. The participants from Institution Bravo generally perceived that the institution has some support practices. One support highlighted by the participants was the option for night classes. Apart from convenience in scheduling, night classes also allowed non-traditional students to be acquainted with other non-traditional students. Night classes were also often taught by adjunct professors who were also likely to be more accommodating than full-time and/or daytime professors.

**Support Is Mainly Aligned for Traditional Freshmen Students**

In both Institutions Alpha and Bravo, the participants generally observed support aligned for traditional students. In both cases, the support was specifically geared towards the benefit of freshmen students. In terms of scheduling, academic advising, housing, tutoring, and transition, freshmen students, who were identified by the participants to be the ones fresh out of high school and were navigating their way through college, were the ones to receive the most appropriate support from the institutions. Therefore, this major theme emerged from the data to answer RQ1.

The theme highlighted the participants’ perceptions of support and services aligned for traditional students. Specifically, Institution Alpha participants generally believed that the academic advising services and housing services offered by the institution were targeted to address the needs of traditional students. All five participants from Institution Bravo generally
perceived that traditional students from Institution Bravo had more support for scheduling of classes, meetings, and academic services.

Participants Allison and Abby perceived that their academic advisors valued their inputs as students such that having them was considered a support for being a non-traditional student in Institution Alpha. Abby shared:

I also feel like my degree advisor now has been really instrumental in my success in college. So definitely the advisors within my degree program have set me up really well. They've offered mentoring, they've helped with internships which helps land a job later down the road, and they're always making sure we're on track to graduate in the amount of time that we want to graduate in.

In Allison’s experience, the academic advisor helped her figure out her academic journey to make it more time- and cost-efficient. Allison cited:

My official academic advisor…she's been very supportive. Coming into the animal science degree, I thought I was going to go to vet school and that's what I was all set up to do, all my coursework. Then I started crunching numbers and thinking that I don't want to spend another four years in college and be 300-plus thousand dollars in debt just from going to professional school. So I sent her a message and within two hours we had a meeting and she completely changed my schedule for me and helped me figure that out.

However, Allison also experienced negatives instances from previous academic advisors. The participant perceived that some academic advisors were “more comfortable” working with traditional students due to scheduling. Allison mentioned Covid-19 and the shift to online platforms, and stated, “Before COVID, there wasn’t as much flexibility to be honest in the
schedule.” Participant Adam had similar experiences with his advisor. Nonetheless, the participant was able to adopt to his own schedule.

Three participants perceived that Institution Bravo’s scheduling was more supportive of traditional students. Scheduling was defined as arranging class timetables, setting up meetings and appointments, and occupying time slots for services such as tutorials. Blair shared, “For traditional students they tend to be easier to attend [weekday afternoon classes]... most of the time I couldn't make it to those because I would do full-time work outside of that.” Brooke summarized:

So I think purely in the scheduling aspect and the timeframe the classes are offered, that's not exactly as non-traditional student friendly as it could be probably. Also because the offices are all open during the nine to five business day, and just during the work week, it might make it hard to get things done, like course schedule changes and tutoring.

In this theme, Institution Bravo participants generally perceived that scheduling was aligned more for traditional students than non-traditional students. The scheduling of classes, meetings, and academic services often fell on business hours – time during which some non-traditional students might need to be off-campus or to be reporting to their jobs.

Four of the five participants from Institution Alpha perceived that the housing services in the institution were aligned mostly for traditional students. Participants Allison and Ashley explained that the housing services were “dorms” in which the living arrangement may not be suitable for students with children. Participant Ashley stated, “Maybe they have a family and they have a house, so they're not going to live in the dorms or eat on campus, that kind of thing.”
In addition, Participant Abby believed, “Those definitely appeal to the straight out of high school and younger kids who are trying to figure out how to navigate college.” Adam perceived similarly:

I think it's important for people that are coming right out of high school more so because they're coming into a completely new environment. Maybe not so many of their friends came with them, and so they need to obviously make new friends so they're not isolated and it's just a good environment for them. It basically forces them to be social in a sense to some degree.

Generally, the academic advising and housing services were perceived to be support aligned primarily for traditional students in that they may not be best suited to help non-traditional students. In terms of academic advising, some advisors may not be used to working with non-traditional students who might need more flexible schedules for classes and meetings. Participant Allison, however, argued that with the online shift happening due to the Covid-19 lockdown, scheduling meetings with the academic advisor became easier than when meeting face-to-face. In terms of housing, the majority of the participants perceived that the living arrangements in dormitories may not be best suited for non-traditional students who had children.

**Academic Advisors**

The third major theme that emerged from both cases was that academic advisors were not helpful. Theme 3 emerged to answer RQ2 in that the students perceived the institutions to receive, evaluate and implement into practice student input as part of the institutional process of change and improvement was ineffective when going through academic advisors. The
participants generally perceived that academic advisors were more effective in supporting traditional students mostly due to their availability to meet during office hours.

The participants’ perceptions were that the academic advisors were generally not helpful in receiving, evaluating and implementing student input into practice, apart from Allison who perceived, “I think that most advisors are pretty, at least now, especially with [Covid-19] happening and we're all moving to Zoom and Google Meets, I think that advising has gotten a lot easier so you can catch someone easily.”

The participants generally perceived that the role of an academic advisor included receiving, evaluating and implementing student input and turn the input into practice. While Allison perceived that meeting academic advisors has become “a lot easier” with the use of online platforms, Abby and Andy believed that most academic advisors were only available to receive student input during “business hours.” Abby shared, “There are still advisors, but they are not as knowledgeable and not as available. You have to try and get to them during business hours or send an email, and they don’t respond very quickly.” However, the participant reiterated that her current academic advisor was helpful in using her input to provide her college career with “direction.” In Andy experience, “They're only there till five and they get there at nine. So, you don't really have a whole lot of leeway there. And you just hope they email you back if you can't go and see them.”

However, several participants argued that not all academic advisors were unhelpful. Some were “an exception” and would extend academic advising even outside of office hours. Some participants perceived that academic advisors were part of the chain of command to relay feedback from students to professors and administrators. Three participants from Institution Bravo perceived that that the academic advisor was vital to non-traditional students’ experiences
of receiving, evaluating and implementing into practice student input as part of the institutional process of change and improvement. Thus, the theme Academic advisor emerged from the data. Brooke reiterated that academic advisors were personnel who could help students relay their feedback to the administration. Brooke shared:

And so we're encouraged to go to them with our feedback and they give a general comment section about the University that we can just brain dump in and say, "Hey, it'd be great if the University did this." And then our advisor can take it to their superior, and so on up the chain of command and see if something can be changed.

Bill perceived that the academic advisors were helpful when they handled a small group of students at a time. The participant perceived that he had a “direct line of communication” with professors because of the academic advisor.

Therefore, Theme 3, Academic Advisor, was perceived as generally unhelpful by the participants in terms of the process of generative learning. Encountering a helpful advisor was by chance. Most of the advisors were only available during weekday office hours. For the participants from Institution Bravo, the academic advisors were significant in their experiences of the feedback loop within the institution. The participants generally thought that the academic advisors were middlemen between the students, professors and administrators such that they facilitated the process of generative learning in Institution Bravo.

**Surveys Are Not Geared Towards Academic Services**

Another cross-case major theme that emerged to answer RQ2 was that the surveys were not geared towards academic services. Participants from both Institutions Alpha and Bravo reported that surveys were often given out in the institutions. Surveys were administered by professors, event organizers, the student government, and the union; however, the purpose of the
surveys were mostly to evaluate activities and courses. The participants generally reiterated that surveys to elicit student feedback on services such as tutoring and library access were not often handed out.

Another action to receive, evaluate and implement student input into practice as part of the institutional process of change and improvement was the use of surveys. The participants from Institution Alpha generally perceived that surveys were abundant in the institution. Some surveys were from the student government, some from the union, while most surveys were administered after activities and courses for evaluation. The participants had conflicting perceptions about the contribution of surveys as student input, though more than half the participants believed that surveys were mostly for evaluation and not for academic services. On the other hand, all five students from Institution Bravo generally argued that the student input elicited by the institution were directed at the evaluation of activities and courses rather than academic services that might benefit non-traditional students.

Participants Andy, Ashley and Adam perceived that professors often used surveys for course evaluation. Three of the five participants from Institution Bravo shared that at the end of an activity or a course, the organizers or professors often hand out survey questionnaire for students to be able to evaluate the activities and course. Bailey shared:

Yeah, they do have surveys for every course that you take after you have finished it. They have a teacher and a class survey and lab survey, kind of whatever you're in, but they normally have surveys for after your course that you take.

Andy reported:

All of my professors would send their survey, "How was your year? What can we do different?" But they only send that at the end of the year. It's not really a middle of the
semester type thing. So at the end of the semester. But yeah, support-wise, I think, that's really all they do, they just send that survey.

Adam perceived that professors “were pretty good about asking for feedback or if you had a question in class they'd answer it as best they could.” Ashley shared that apart from professors, organizers of events, seminar and activities also collected survey responses for evaluation. Ashley stated, “Then also…after each workshop…they also have surveys and it's like, "How has this helped you? And what ways can you use this? If you have more questions, like how can we help you?" Blair shared that the surveys usually have an open-ended question at the end for students to write down their feedback. However, the participant reported, “I haven't gotten anything like that, primarily it's just the semester evaluation per classes, and I'll put little comments in there about it too, but don’t think anyone ever reads them.”

Four of the five Institution Bravo participants perceived that the surveys given to students were not about eliciting feedback on academic services that might benefit non-traditional students. Ben emphasized, “Beyond course evaluations, I don't really know how they go through that process. I guess I've seen an occasionally email, but I don't know if any of them were geared towards [academic services].” Similarly, Brooke stated, “We've had some surveys. We do professor evaluations, and so I've always been able to evaluate my advisor as a professor as well, because she does teach some of my courses, but no questions about academic services.”

In receiving, evaluating and implementing into practice student input as part of the institutional process of change and improvement, the participants generally believed that academic advisors were not helpful. Most academic advisors could not be reached outside of office hours; thus, non-traditional students may have difficulties arranging schedules with them to provide their input. The participants also generally perceived that surveys might be effective
in gathering student input, however, the surveys were usually administered at the end of an activity or a course. Furthermore, the surveys were often evaluations of the activity or course rather than of academic services and how to improve them when targeting to support non-traditional students.

**Major Changes Are Rarely Seen**

Major theme 5 emerged to answer RQ3. Traditional students with nontraditional characteristics generally perceived institutional practices of student input in Institutions Alpha and Bravo as not put into action, as the participants rarely observed major changes. According to the participants, changes in the institutions were often observed when the majority of the student population voted for the change. Moreover, changes may also be a result of a drastic cause such as the Covid-19 restrictions and lockdown, which resulted to major changes in the implementation of online learning.

The theme was related to how traditional students with nontraditional characteristics perceived institutional practices of student input at Institution Alpha. With that, three of five Institution Alpha participants perceived that they have not seen major changes in the institution that were based on their inputs as students. Ashley noted, “Not necessarily [implemented]. Just because I don't see any major changes that have needed to be made.” Ashley perceived that one change that did not benefit non-traditional students was the change in library hours, “I would say the only changes maybe are like the library hours…Some people don't use them as much, so they aren't open as long.” With regard to the student government survey, Allison shared, “The different Student Life surveys that they send out, they just send out this big results summary of it. But really, I haven't seen any change based on it, just the results of it.” From Institution Bravo Participants Bailey and Blair both perceived that no major changes related to their feedback
could be observed in the institution. Bailey shared, “I mean, I haven't seen much change happen, at least in the few things that I have heard or have written in the comments. There hasn't been a ton of change that I've personally seen happen.” In Blair’s experience, the participant also did not witness major changes during a “regular semester.” The participant specified that major changes were observed in the institution recently due to the Covid-19 restrictions. Blair expressed:

    I actually saw a lot of changes more around the COVID thing rather than just in any other semester. I really didn't see a whole lot of changes during any regular semester. Maybe it was because there weren't enough people that made those claims, I don't know. But after COVID I did see a lot more changes.

    In Theme 5, the participants from both Institutions perceived that the institution was generally not practicing the receipt, evaluation and implementation of student input as part of the institutional process of change and improvement. Comments to change elicited from students were often not observed in the institution. The changes applied that impacted the majority of the student body such as the shortened library hours, as the library was not used by many students. Furthermore, one participant observed that major changes occurred in the institution during recent times due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Research Question Responses

    Results from the cross-case analysis of Institution A and Institution B answered the research questions of this study. The research question responses are presented in this subsection. The responses are presented in the form of themes with supporting narratives and excerpts from the data. To review, the research questions that guided this study were:
**Research Question 1**

RQ1 asked, “How do traditional students with nontraditional characteristics perceive institutional support and services offered by Kansas universities?” Participants from both institutions perceived that institutional support and services were more aligned to address the needs of traditional freshmen students, although support for nontraditional students also existed. The support and services for traditional students were mostly geared toward helping new students adjust to campus life. Participants perceived support for nontraditional students was largely aimed at night and online class offerings, though some did have positive experiences with accommodating professors willing to work with them outside of class and were understanding of their need for additional support.

Findings from Institution Alpha revealed that traditional students with nontraditional characteristics perceived that the institutional support and services offered in the institute were accessible to all the students who needed them, including completely traditional students and nontraditional students. The participants emphasized that the institute provided equal opportunities for access to services. However, in general, the participants from Institution Bravo perceived that the scheduling of classes, meetings, and academic services were geared towards traditional students. The majority of the participants reported that on-campus services were only available during office hours. Additionally, participants from Institution Alpha generally perceived that academic advising and housing were more beneficial to traditional students due to the more rigid schedules of advisors and the on-campus shared living arrangements.

One participant at Alpha perceived that some advisors were more comfortable advising traditional students. Four of the five participants from Institution Alpha perceived that the institution’s housing services were aligned mostly for traditional students. Participants Allison
and Ashley explained that the housing services were “dorms” in which the living arrangement may not be suitable for students with children. Participant Ashley stated, “Maybe they have a family and they have a house, so they’re not going to live in the dorms or eat on campus, that kind of thing.” In addition, Participant Abby believed, “Those definitely appeal to the straight out of high school and younger kids who are trying to figure out how to navigate college.” The participants from Institution Alpha generally perceived that the online learning program offered in Institution Alpha was beneficial for students who needed flexible time for school (e.g., working students, students with children). Students from Institution Bravo perceived that night classes were support aligned for nontraditional students. Apart from being able to attend classes outside of working hours, the participants generally experienced that the majority of their classmates in night classes were also traditional students with nontraditional characteristics or nontraditional students. They were able to relate to and learn from their classmates. The participants also generally perceived that adjuncts in Institution Bravo, especially the ones teaching night classes and working part-time, were lenient in providing accommodations especially in attendance and consulting. In fact, support was mostly based on accommodations rather than concrete practices or policies. The accommodations included leniency in attendance and uploading study materials to an online platform. While the participants discussed the services and support available to nontraditional students, they also perceived that some services were only targeted toward the needs of traditional students.

**Research Question 2**

RQ2 asked, “How do Kansas universities receive, evaluate, and implement into practice student input as part of the institutional process of change and improvement?” A cross-case analysis of Institution Alpha and Bravo revealed that academic advisors for incoming students
were generally not helpful in receiving, evaluating, and implementing student input into practice. Most advisors were only available to meet during office hours or did not know how to address the needs of nontraditional students or traditional students with nontraditional characteristics. It was not until, and if, students had been assigned a major specific advisor that they began to feel supported. However, some participants praised advisors who help students relay their messages to their professors. Results also revealed that surveys used to get feedback from students were often related to campus activities and courses, not academic services, and thus were not relevant to nontraditional students.

The majority of participants from Institution Alpha perceived that academic advising was generally getting better as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions. The participants explained that before the distance learning imposed by the pandemic, academic advising was often conducted face-to-face and on campus. Traditional students with nontraditional characteristics were expected to follow the advisors’ office hours, which conflicted with their schedule. With the COVID-19 restrictions, meetings with academic advisors moved to online platforms with more flexible schedules. However, at Institution Bravo, academic advisors were perceived as helpful in passing students’ messages along to professors and administrators.

The majority of the participants at both institutions perceived that the method of collecting student input through surveys needed to be improved. The participants generally believed that the surveys were helpful in providing evaluation for campus activities and courses but were generally not related to for academic services. Participants related that the surveys they did receive did not ask for feedback about advising or support services.
**Research Question 3**

RQ3 asked, “How do traditional students with nontraditional characteristics perceive institutional practices of student input at Kansas universities?” The participants from both institutions have generally not seen student input result in major changes for the benefit of traditional students with nontraditional characteristics or nontraditional students. However, the participants from Institution Bravo perceived that the major changes to online learning and online activities as a result of COVID-19 restrictions were advantages to traditional students with nontraditional characteristics and nontraditional students.

**Summary**

This chapter contained the presentation of data and findings in order to describe the perceptions of institutional support and services of traditional-age students with nontraditional characteristics at Kansas universities using a multiple case study. The study was comprised of two cases: Institution Alpha and Institution Bravo, the two public higher education institutions in Kansas. Five traditional students with nontraditional characteristics were purposively selected from each institution. The purposive sampling utilized in recruiting student participants was conducted between April and May 2020, when many institutions had closed or converted to online learning due to the Covid 19 pandemic. There was some reflection of the Covid environment in participant responses. The participants contributed their experiences and perceptions of institutional support and services offered by their institutions, as well as practices of student input in relation to the process of change through the semi-structured interviews and focus groups. In addition, documents from both institutions were collected.

In identifying patterns among the data, the researcher generated five preliminary themes for both Institutions Alpha and Bravo. The preliminary theme categories were: “support aligned
for nontraditional students,” “support aligned for traditional students,” “academic advisor, survey,” and “have not seen major changes.” The finalized themes were termed “support is mainly aligned for traditional freshmen students” (RQ1), “support for nontraditional students is based on accommodations” (RQ1), “academic advisors are not helpful” (RQ2), “surveys are not geared towards academic services” (RQ2), and “major changes are rarely seen” (RQ3). The discussion of the themes in relation to the theoretical framework and existing literature will be presented in the next chapter. The next chapter also includes the implications, recommendations, limitations, and conclusions of this study.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The objective of this multiple case study was to generate a description of the perceptions of institutional support and services of traditional-age students with nontraditional characteristics at Kansas universities. This objective stems from the problem that no identifiable research has been done to elucidate how traditional students with nontraditional characteristics perceive institutional support and services. The contents of this chapter constitute six sections: (a) an overview of the chapter, (b) a summary of the findings, (c) a discussion of the findings and the implications in light of the relevant literature and theory, (d) an explanation of research implications (methodological and practical), (e) an outline of the study delimitations and limitations, and (f) recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

The findings attached to RQ1’s first theme indicated that traditional students with nontraditional characteristics perceived institutional support and services offered by Kansas Universities as sufficient for achieving their educational goals. Particularly, this student faction felt that these institutions provided access to services such as night classes, the federal TRIO program, and peer support, which were appropriately available for both traditional and nontraditional students. However, respondents from Institution Alpha were quick to point out that although these services were available for both student factions, Kansas universities’ systems were designed in such a manner as to favor nontraditional students. An explanation for this outcome is found in the work of Carlson (2015), who opined that the commercial orientation of most modern-day universities has led them to focus on effecting better services to the nontraditional group given that students in this category pay more for educational services.
Notably, this would explain why the traditional students with nontraditional features indicated that services such as online night classes were designed in favor of nontraditional students. Despite this chief difference in institutional support, the findings also indicated that the institutions had ensured sufficient access to online learning programs, which seems to have been triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, these findings strongly suggest that traditional students with nontraditional characteristics perceive institutional support and services offered by Kansas universities as being sufficient to provide the support they need for the attainment of their educational objectives.

RQ1’s second theme, institutional support related to housing and advising services, was supported by statements from respondents from Institution Alpha, who felt that these academic services were better suited to address the needs of traditional students. From such a perspective, it is evident that traditional students with nontraditional characteristics perceive institutional support and services offered by Kansas universities as biased in favor of the classical traditional student without equal emphasis on the needs of their nontraditional counterparts. Moreover, four of the five participants from Institution Alpha perceived that the institution’s housing services were aligned mostly for traditional students. Notably, these findings answered RQ1 by emphasizing that the academic advising and housing services were perceived to be designed primarily for traditional students in that they may not be best suited for nontraditional students.

The findings coded in Theme 3 for RQ2 demonstrated that the students generally perceived some form of generative learning in place at Institution Alpha in relation to academic advising. On the other hand, participants from Institution Alpha perceived that the academic advisors were generally not helpful in receiving, evaluating, and implementing student input into practice. Respondents’ opinions differed when it came to the usefulness of the institution’s
support services for traditional students with nontraditional features. Brooke and Bill from Institution Beta indicated that the academic advising support system did not favor students in this group because most academic advisors were only available to receive student input during business hours. Conversely, Blair felt that although the advisors were only available during business hours, the challenge of availability had been lessened by platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet. From the sentiments of Brooke, it was also clear that the academic advisor’s availability was not the only problem. According to this respondent, the knowledge levels of the advisors were still lacking. These findings answer RQ2 in that they point toward difficulties among Kansas universities in relation to receiving, evaluating and implementing student input as part of the institutional process of change and improvement.

As evident from the findings coded as Theme 4 on the survey, the Alpha and Bravo participants generally perceived that surveys were abundant in the institution. However, the findings also revealed conflicting perceptions regarding the contribution of surveys as student input, though more than half of the participants believed that surveys were mostly for evaluation and not for academic services. Whereas Bill indicated that the surveys sent by the professors at the end of the year were insufficient for evaluating activities and course progress without further measures, Ben opined that some professors at Kansas universities used methods of evaluation beyond the annual surveys, incorporating regular class feedback systems. Notably, Ben’s response concurred with that provided by Bayley that the professors’ evaluation of courses and activities encompassed regular workshop surveys. However, Bayley also noted that the survey mechanisms used by the institutions at Kansas universities sought to determine ways in which the professors could be of more help. One chief similarity among respondents from Institution Alpha was that the academic advisors could not be reached outside of office hours, making it
challenging for nontraditional students to rearrange their schedules in alignment with the availability of their advisors. These findings answer RQ2 in that they indicate how Kansas universities evaluate and implement student input as part of the institutional process of change and improvement partly favor traditional students with nontraditional features.

The findings coded as Theme 5 on support aligned for nontraditional students indicated that offering night classes was one supportive practice of Institution Bravo targeted to nontraditional students. Particularly, respondents Ava and Adam felt that the classes were a helpful way for them to become acquainted with a “diverse group of students,” allowing them to learn from the experiences of their cohorts. On the other hand, Allie found convenience in “setting up appointments with professors.” Nonetheless, Ava indicated that nontraditional students often found it challenging to reach some of their professors through e-mails in the evening and on weekends. On a similar note, Alex believed that despite the time-related accommodations by most professors, students who needed to be outside the class still missed out on lessons. Such findings are expedient in answering RQ1 since Institution Bravo participants generally perceived that the adjunct professors were also likely to be more accommodating than full-time and/or daytime professors.

The findings coded as Theme 2 for RQ2 on support aligned for traditional students indicated that when it came to scheduling (arranging class timetables, setting up meetings and appointments, and occupying time slots for services such as tutorials), traditional students were advantaged compared to nontraditional students. This is because the academic services provided by Kansas universities often fell within business hours, a time during which some nontraditional students might need to be off-campus or at their jobs. These findings help answer RQ2 by
highlighting scheduling challenges related to receiving, evaluating, and implementing student input as part of the institutional process of change and improvement.

The findings coded as Theme 3 for RQ2, which covered academic advising, revealed that the academic advisor was vital to the institution’s ability to receiving, evaluating, and implementing into practice student input as part of the process of change and improvement. According to respondent Alex, professors in these universities encouraged their students to provide feedback that was submitted hierarchically to higher authorities. Additionally, Adam perceived that the academic advisors were helpful when they handled a small group of students at a time. These findings help answer RQ2 since Institution Bravo participants generally thought that the academic Advisors were middlemen between the students, professors, and administrators such that they facilitated the process of generative learning.

The findings coded as Theme 4 for RQ2 indicated that all the respondents from Institution Bravo perceived that the institution used surveys to get feedback from students. Nonetheless, the respondents from this institution perceived the student input solicited by Kansas universities as being focused on activity and course evaluation and leaving out academic services, which are highly beneficial to nontraditional students. Additionally, Allie reported that although the course and activity surveys were available, the professors seldom spent time reading them. Emphasizing the same concerns, Arthur questioned the process through which the surveys are subjected to evaluation. Alex also stated that the surveys seldom encompassed questions on academic services offered to nontraditional students. The findings under this theme are useful for answering RQ2 in that they address the nature of surveys and their effectiveness in aiding Kansas universities in evaluating and implementing into practice student input as part of the institutional process of change and improvement.
RQ3’s Theme 5 findings regarding changes observed by the participants indicated that the participants from Institution Bravo perceived that the institution was generally not practicing the receipt, evaluation, and implementation of student input as part of the institutional process of change and improvement. Ava and Allie both perceived that no major changes related to their feedback could be observed in the institution. However, these two participants noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had triggered notable changes in relation to the underlying theme. In this case, the findings facilitate the acquisition of answers to RQ3 by providing the perceptions of traditional students with nontraditional characteristics concerning student input at Kansas universities.

The cross-case themes drawn from both Institution Alpha and Institution Bravo elicited interesting thematic findings. For instance, in both cases, support was specifically geared toward the benefit of freshmen based on scheduling, academic advising, housing, tutoring, and transition. Such information is critical for answering RQ1 since it provides insight into the perceptions of traditional students with nontraditional characteristics concerning the support and services offered by Kansas universities. Additionally, findings on the cross-theme of surveys and academic services indicated that although the surveys were common in both institutions, the purpose of the surveys was mostly to evaluate activities and courses, while surveys to elicit student feedback on services such as tutoring and library access were not often handed out. These findings are fundamental for answering RQ2 since they shed light on how Kansas universities receive, evaluate, and implement into practice student input as part of the institutional process of change and improvement. Findings on the cross-theme concerning the observation of major changes by respondents from the two institutions indicated that traditional students with nontraditional features generally perceived that student input did not translate into
action, as the participants rarely observed major changes. Such findings are essential for answering RQ3 given that they provide comprehensive insight into how the student faction under study perceives institutional practices of using student input at Kansas universities before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion

The results of the current study indicated that traditional students with nontraditional features had concerns around scheduling and academic advising because these two academic services were specifically geared toward the benefit of traditional freshmen students. Such findings corroborate information available in the existing literature. Commenting on the phenomenon, Baptista (2013) argued that since academic advising and scheduling often take place during office hours and working days, they are better suited for traditional freshmen students based on the fact that these students usually have greater flexibility and commitment. This implies that although traditional students with nontraditional features may desire to benefit from academic advising, their inability to align their schedule with that of the advisors is likely to minimize the benefits they receive from such services. Supporting this assertion, Capps (2012) posited that the embodiment of nontraditional features in the lives of traditional students suggests that the some of the nontraditional students in question will be spending part of their time working as stipulated by the precept of financial independence. From such a perspective, it is logical to argue that traditional students will benefit more from the aforementioned services given that they are unlikely to engage in income-generating activities (Dougherty & Woodland, 2009; Garcia, 2015). In such a case, their commitment levels culminate into schedule flexibility, which is not as common among traditional students with nontraditional characteristics.
Theoretical Foundations

Organizational change theory can also be used to explain why the findings of the study revealed that Kansas universities’ support services favor traditional students more than the student group under study. According to this model, when organizational learning takes place in the form of the single-loop framework, organizations can address specific service delivery errors but often ignore the root of the problem (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Such a perspective strongly implies that although Kansas universities may have attempted to address the needs of traditional students with nontraditional characteristics through scheduling and academic advising, their inability to attend to the root cause of the issues from this student group perspective has created scheduling and student support challenges (Anderson, 2016). Consequently, the systems of service provision at the universities, in relation to academic advising, do not align with the critical scheduling component. This would explain why the findings indicated that the respondents from Institution Alpha perceived the academic support services as being more beneficial to traditional students. However, Giles (2012) and Hussein et al. (2014) contradicted the perspective availed by the organizational change theory arguing that education institutions have not created the scheduling problem owing to their inability to find alternative methods that would suit the student faction under study but because of staffing issues.

Notably, the findings of the current study corroborate this assertion given that three out of the five Institution Alpha respondents argued that the gravity of the scheduling issue in relation to academic advising had lessened due to the influences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, this point of view does not negate the principal point of focus provided by the organizational change theory that Kansas universities have been unable to provide necessary academic services to traditional students with nontraditional features because of their reluctance
in identifying the root cause of the scheduling challenge. This explains why Iloh (2017) and Jessop (2017) asserted that in the absence of the COVID19 pandemic, freshmen traditional students with nontraditional characteristics benefited most from being detached from income-earning responsibilities. Thus, even if organizational learning at these institutions were to take into account the fact that most nontraditional students work over 35 hours each week, they would be unable to elicit the same academic advising and scheduling benefits among the student group under study as is the case with the traditional freshmen student.

According to the findings generated by the current study, the academic success of traditional students with nontraditional features has been immensely hindered by the fact that the integration of academic services and housing has been achieved by Kansas universities in such a manner that specifically addresses the academic needs of students. Whereas the students under study have been desiring to enjoy equal benefits with their traditional counterparts, Guiffrida et al (2013) argued that such a feat would be impossible given that housing developments were never meant to attend to the needs of nontraditional students. Since traditional students have remained the majority in education institutions for centuries, it would be logical to argue that the construction of extra campus residences and private boarding residences off-campus was only designed to improve the academic performance of traditional students by fostering their ability to attend tutoring sessions (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). This would explain why the respondents in the study felt that the housing services only advanced academic achievements for traditional students given that many nontraditional students may only attend classes part-time and would have little use for housing within the campus. Further, even if they were to enjoy the services of private residential areas, scheduling for classes would still be a major issue owing to the amount of time they spend working.
Empirical Foundations

The findings that the focus of housing services towards traditional students disqualifies traditional students with nontraditional features from enjoying the same tutorship benefits and academic success substantiates assertions found in the existing literature. For instance, Eckerson et. al. (2016) asserted that although housing services were meant to improve the ability of students to improve their performance by attending tutorial classes from the vicinity of their institutions, the same services could not generate a similar benefit for nontraditional students given that over 48% of this student group is comprised of individuals with family responsibilities. Furthermore, current studies uphold these sentiments revealing that three of Institution Alpha respondents experienced scheduling issues and were concerned with the unavailability of their tutors after “business hours.” Whereas the findings did not attach the reason for the scheduling issues to family issues, Wang (2014) and Tinto (2017) indicated that over 21% of nontraditional students in modern-day universities were mothers with children, work, and household duties to attend to. Given such a perspective, it is clear that even if Kansas universities worked to improve housing services to augment the availability of the students under study for tutorial classes, they would not be able to measure up to the academic achievements of their traditional counterparts due to the multitude of responsibilities. Nonetheless, the findings of the current study do provide a novel way of looking at the tutorship and academic performance issue. For instance, the findings highlighted that respondents were more comfortable with night classes despite the challenge of professor unavailability. This implies that although improving housing services for traditional students with nontraditional features may not change their academic performance, changes to the availability of professors outside of classes may generate
improvement in academic performance even if the housing issue remains unaddressed (Mahaffey et al., 2015).

The findings of the study have indicated that traditional students with nontraditional characteristics in Kansas universities have been discontented with the surveys meant to evaluate activities and courses. Whereas such data is paramount for making the necessary changes in the academic outcomes of the student group under study, it is as well important to note that the results affirmed the findings of existing literature. According to Robertson and Weiner (2013) and Prins, Kassab, and Campbell (2015), modern-day universities have realized the necessity of surveys in generating positive student academic outcomes but have ignored the need to focus on elements such as tutoring and access to academic services. Notably, the findings of the current study upheld this assertion indicating that the surveys for courses and activities engaged in during learning and workshops were too shallow to assure effective engagements by Kansas universities as it relates to process change and improvement. Commenting on the prevalence of the phenomenon, O’Bannon (2012) observed that in over 63% of modern-day universities, students suffered poor academic results because the institutions failed to pay attention to the details that would generate sufficient evaluation and implementation of service and process change enhancements.

This implies that Kansas universities may need to place more value on the element of student input as it concerns service delivery augmentations. Moreau and Kerner (2015) and Irvine and Kevan (2017) opined that higher education institutions should focus more on nontraditional students given the need to improve how surveys as student inputs are used to generate satisfactory institutional service delivery changes in light of the challenges faced by this particular demographic. Notably, the findings have also indicated that some of the respondents
were unsure whether their professors spend time to read their feedback. Thus, it also makes sense that the potential need for Kansas universities to improve on such vital matters as academics, support services, tutoring and library access stems from lack of utilization and acknowledgement as they relate to using surveys as student input (Hussar & Bailey, 2014; Bowen, 2013) to generate better levels of academic services.

Theories have also been put forward to explain the correlation between the feedback of traditional students with nontraditional characteristics with augmented tutorial and library access services. For instance, the organizational learning theory guiding the current study states that organizations learn when stored understandings and information are called into question. According to Argyris and Schöön (1974) and Hedberg (1981), this lack of internalizing new data implies that organizational learning for Kansas universities should focus on the identification and correction of errors if the surveys administered to the student group under study are to be effectively used in designing mechanisms for receiving, evaluating, and implementing into practice student input as part of the institutional process of change and improvement. The findings of the study validate the applicability of this theory given that respondents indicated the perceived laxity in reviewing submitted student surveys, which in the opinion of Gordon (2004) and Mercer et al. (2016) suggests that Kansas universities have not yet identified the lack of commitment among staff members as an error that deserves to be corrected. Thus, from the perspective provided by this theory, the perceptions of traditional students with nontraditional characteristics in Kansas universities concerning the deployment of their survey responses should serve a foundational role in helping correct the use of student input as a means of generating better evaluation and implementation standards.
The findings of the study generated a novel view on how the input of traditional students with nontraditional characteristics should be applied to enhance the institutional practices at Kansas universities in the post–COVID-19 era. Particularly, this is because respondents from Institutions Alpha and Bravo indicated that although academic advisors were reluctant to adjust their schedules to provide flexibility, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a new era in which some advisors’ and professors’ ability and willingness to be flexible in their schedules have become apparent. This strongly implies that the current study brings a unique contribution to the field of research. Notably, the novel contribution stems from the fact that although previous studies have looked into the issue of the input of students with nontraditional characteristics as it relates to the augmentation of learning experiences for this student group, none has considered the fact that schedule flexibility alterations can be achieved for students and lecturers simultaneously (Fragoso et al., 2013). Affirming the possibilities of this change taking place, Argyris and Schön (1974) posited that organizational learning, when imposed and mandatorily affected by circumstances, can generate student, professor, and institutional changes.

**Implications**

This multiple case study was intended to develop a deep understanding of how traditional students with nontraditional characteristics experience institutional support and services. The results of the study provide theoretical implications involving institutions of higher education and organizational learning theory (Argyris & Schön, 1978), which this study was guided by. The empirical implication of this study is the gap in the current body of research that it fills. Practical implications for stakeholders involve a better understanding of students, their
unmet needs and eliminating “traditional” and “nontraditional” linguistic assignments to students.

**Theoretical Implications**

The theoretical implications of this study for postsecondary institutions are that it will yield data that allow them to evaluate the adequacy of their student and academic support and services (Langrehr et al., 2015). Data results and subsequent responsive evaluative actions could lead to changes that may improve student persistence (MacDonald, 2018). Additionally, given participants own confusion about the terms and how and whether they applied to them, the data provides information about the practice of using the terms traditional and nontraditional in reference to students, which may prompt institutional administration to reconsider the use of these terms (Chen, 2014). The results of this study have the potential to benefit advisors, educators, admission and enrollment processes, and anyone else directly connected to students, especially those motivated to develop a more refined understanding of who students are and what they need to persist in their educations. This multiple case study provides the information necessary for institutional administration to develop and provide support and services in a way that has the potential to improve the experiences of traditional students with nontraditional characteristics, given the shared experiences of the study participants.

Generally, the theoretical implications of this study on the literature on the experiences of traditional students with nontraditional student characteristics are threefold. The study contributes (a) to the accurate understanding of how traditional students with nontraditional characteristics perceive institutional support and services offered by institutions of higher education, (b) to the approaches deployed by higher education institutes concerning receiving, evaluating, and implementing into practice student input as part of the institutional process of
change and improvement, and (c) to comprehensive information regarding how traditional
students with nontraditional characteristics perceive institutional practices of student input.

Empirical Implications

The results from this qualitative, multiple-case study will lend empirical significance to the academic literature by addressing a gap in the literature pertaining to the perspectives of traditional students with nontraditional characteristics concerning institutional support and services. Given that no previous studies have been conducted with this particular demographic, the unique experiences of traditional students with nontraditional characteristics are not well understood and cannot be assumed to be identical to more classically traditional students (Levin et al., 2017; Trowler, 2015; Witkowsky et al., 2016). The empirical implications of this study stem from the fact that the study has generated a novel perspective on the input of traditional students with nontraditional features that should be applied to enhance institutional practices at Kansas universities in the post–COVID-19 era. Consequently, the study is projected to encourage a merge between existing literature evidence on the input of the student faction under study and data on student and professor/academic advisor flexibility as well as scheduling patterns by both parties in the post–COVID-19 era to determine the best approaches for augmenting learning experiences for traditional students with nontraditional features.

Practical Implications

Practical implications of not understanding the needs of this particular population are that students who feel unsupported by institutions may not persist in their educations (Tinto, 2017; Wardley et al., 2013). Recent research reflects as many as 67% of students with nontraditional characteristics may fail to graduate and those with at least two nontraditional characteristics may have less than a 15% chance at completion (Garcia, 2015; NCES, 2016 Shapiro et al., 2016;
Soares, 2015; Tremblay et al., 2012). These students may then leave college with school loans to contend with and no degree (Fain, 2012). Further, they will less be likely to earn a higher income over their lifetime and potentially face unemployment in the context of rising emphasis on credentials (Ma et al., 2016).

A more positive practical implication associated with the study is that Kansas universities are likely to revisit the roles of academic advisors and professors involved with traditional students with nontraditional features. Notably, this implication stems from the fact that the study has highlighted concerns regarding professors and advisors reading submitted student surveys and utilizing them to improve courses and student support practices, and administration using them as chief components in evaluating and implementing institutional process changes (Hittepole, 2019). Verifying the possibilities of this practical implication, Argyris and Schön (1974) posited in the organizational learning model that identified errors have to be corrected if organizations are to achieve desired changes. This means that for the Kansas universities to generate desirable changes in matters like tutoring and access to academic or library services, the institutions will have to reinforce professor and academic advisor behaviors and actions that are related to the intended and desired use of student surveys.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

Patton (2015) defined delimitations as restrictions established for the study. The multiple case study chosen for this study was appropriate for the purposive sampling of institutions and participants within a bounded system. Studying cases by sampling in this manner allows the researcher to look in depth at individual cases instead of working to generalize results from a sample over a larger population (Patton, 2015). The primary delimitation of this study was the decision to only include two institutions from the state of Kansas. This convenience sampling
decision was based on the willingness of each institution to participate, availability of
gatekeepers, and researcher’s access to the locations. Purposive sampling was used to identify
potential study participants, based on their age, and enrollment status. This participant group was
also selected based on their willingness and availability to participate.

In research studies, particularly qualitative, limitations are not unprecedented as they
generally the things that cannot be controlled by the researcher. One limitation for this study was
the small focus group size and that both participants were from the same institution. Different
responses may have been provided by students from the other institution. Another limitation of
this study is that it occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic, which reduced the availability of
potential participants as many students had left school. This meant that there were portions of
students who were inaccessible that might otherwise potentially have been a part of the study. It
also meant that I had to conduct the interviews and focus group via Zoom, which made
connecting with the participants and observing them completely, more challenging.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Given that a good portion of the literature used in this study came from the pre-COVID
era, it is highly recommended that future research focuses on current literature, and especially
literature and evidence from 2020 onward. This recommendation stems from the need to uncover
recent perceptions of traditional students with nontraditional features within the context of the
ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the possible learning environments and erudition mechanisms
in the post–COVID-19 world. I would also recommend that future studies work with
representative samples from various institutions of higher education, not just those four-year
institutions in Kansas. Based on the large student bodies of the institutions studied, it would be
beneficial to remove this factor for some participants to gain more diversity in responses when
considering the student experience.

It is likely that simply obtaining student shared experiences will be insufficient for many institution administrations to be compelled to effect change. Therefore, conducting a quantitative analysis of the needs of students with nontraditional characteristics from student support and services in tandem with their shared experiences is recommended. The data from such a study may prove more impactful. In addition, surveying students with nontraditional student characteristics who fail to persist and collecting data on how many are leaving and why they leave is also recommended, given the significantly high numbers of students with nontraditional student characteristics and their increasing enrollment. Having data that better understands nontraditional student needs from student support and services, as well as their persistence data could assist institutions in increasing overall student support and retention.

**Summary**

The purpose of this multiple case study was to describe the perceptions of institutional support and services of traditional-age students with nontraditional characteristics at Kansas universities. The study constituted five chapters inclusive of this final chapter. The study defined traditional students as students less than 25 years of age, enrolling in college immediately after high school graduation. On the other hand, nontraditional students were defined as students that satisfy the following criteria: age 25 years or older, have delayed enrollment, are part-time, work full time, are financially independent, have dependents other than a spouse, are single parents, have a GED or some other high school certification, are first-generation college students, are a member of a minority racial-ethnic group, are low income or disabled, are an immigrant or the child of an immigrant, or are military or military-connected. The study was guided by an overarching research question. The central research question for this study was, “How do
traditional students with non-traditional characteristics experience institutional support and services?” The study was guided by organizational learning theory (Argyris & Schön, 1974), the fundamental tenet of which is that organizations learn when stored understandings and information are called into question. The research was conducted at two four-year universities in the state of Kansas and involved 10 students. Data were collected using semi structured, face-to-face interviews, focus groups, and institutional records. Data analysis was completed utilizing several case study method strategies, primarily cross-case analysis. Study findings were used to generate recommendations to promote beneficial organizational changes for future traditional-age students with nontraditional characteristics.
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April 15, 2020

Stephani Johns-Hines (Greytak)
IRB Exemption 4183.041520: The Traditional Student Myth: A Multiple Case Study on the Experiences of Traditional Students with Nontraditional Student Characteristics

Dear Stephani Johns-Hines,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board 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 exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

(2) 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) if . . . the following criteria is met:

(iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes 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 B

RECRUITMENT LETTER

April 20, 2020

Kansas State University or University of Kansas

sent via email

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 Ph.D. in Higher Education. The purpose of my research is to discern how traditional students with nontraditional characteristics experience institutional support and services, and I am writing to you to participate in my study.

For the purposes of this study, the experiences of the students from their own perspectives are defined as the phenomenon. The study intends to explore the perceptions, challenges, and experiences of traditional students and may lead to the identification of recommendations for best practices in student support and institutional changes in perception, policy and procedure.

Study participants will include students who enrolled in college directly from high school and are 18- to 24-years old, with at least one nontraditional student characteristic (For reference, non-traditional student characteristics are included on the attached screening survey). If you are willing to participate, you will be asked to participate in an initial survey to determine eligibility. Upon confirmation of your eligibility to participate, the researcher will contact you to schedule a video-conference interview, a brief follow-up video-conference to ensure the accuracy of your interview transcripts, and a focus group video-conference session with other participants. It should take approximately two - three hours in total for you to complete the procedures listed. All participants who complete the interview will receive a $25 Amazon gift card. Your name and/or other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, complete and return the attached screening survey to me by email, [s.greytak@liberty.edu]. If you are selected to participate, I will contact you to schedule an interview and email you a consent document for your review and completion. Should you choose to participate, the consent document should be signed and returned to me by email at least a week before the scheduled interview session.

Sincerely,

Stephani Greytak
Liberty University
Doctoral Candidate
APPENDIX C

SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE FOR POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

1. □ Yes □ No I am currently attending college or have attended college within the last year.

2. □ Yes □ No I am between the ages of 18 to 24.

3. □ Yes □ No I enrolled in college immediately after graduating from high school.

4. □ Yes □ No I identify with at least one of the following characteristics:

   i. am financially independent (no one can claim me as a dependent on their taxes),

   ii. have one or more dependent (does not include children or spouse but could include parent[s]),

   iii. am a single caregiver (to child[ren]),

   iv. do not have a high school diploma (e.g., have a GED),

   v. am employed full-time,

   vi. am enrolled in college part-time.

   vii. first generation college student,

   viii. a member of a minority racial–ethnic group,

   ix. low income or disabled,

   x. an immigrant or the child of an immigrant, or

   xi. military or military connected.
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

1. Please introduce yourself.

2. Please tell me why you decided to attend college.

3. Why specifically did you choose to attend X institution?

4. What types of students attend X institution?

5. How would you describe a traditional student?

6. How would you describe a nontraditional student?

7. What elements of X institution are more aligned with the needs of a traditional student? With a nontraditional student? Both?

8. What elements of X institution do you find most supportive and why?

9. What elements of X institution do you find the most challenging and why?

10. In what ways does X institution seek student feedback and input about academic and student support and services?

11. In what ways does X institution use student feedback to modify existing academic and student support and services?
APPENDIX E

Focus Group Questions

1. Please introduce yourselves one at a time.

2. Do you have any follow-up thoughts about the interview questions or your responses?

3. Reflecting on the data from the interviews, it appears that X was a consistent theme regarding student needs. How does the group feel about that?

4. Reflecting on the data from the interviews, it appears that X was a consistent theme regarding institutional support/services. Share your reaction to that.

5. In what ways do you believe that your experiences are similar or disparate from other students and why?

6. What suggestions would you make to your institutions?
APPENDIX F

CONSENT FORM

THE TRADITIONAL STUDENT MYTH: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY ON THE EXPERIENCES OF TRADITIONAL STUDENTS WITH NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Stephani Greytak

Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study that seeks to discern how traditional students with nontraditional characteristics experience institutional support and services. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a student who enrolled in college directly from high school, are 18- to 24-years old, and have at least one of the following nontraditional student characteristics:

- enrolled part-time,
- work full-time,
- financially independent (from parents/caregivers),
- have one or more dependents (does not include children or spouse but could include parent(s)),
- a single parent,
- have a GED or some other high school certification,
- first generation college student,
- a member of a minority racial/ethnic group,
- low income or disabled,
- an immigrant or the child of an immigrant, or
- military or military connected.

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Stephani Greytak, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this case study is to describe the experiences of traditional students with nontraditional student characteristics. For the purposes of this study, the experiences of the students from their own perspectives are defined as the phenomenon. The study intends to explore the perceptions, challenges, and experiences of traditional students and may lead to the identification of recommendations for best practices in student support and institutional changes in perception, policy and procedure. Student participants will include
students who enrolled in college directly after high school and are 18- to 24-years old, with at least one nontraditional student characteristic.

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

1. Complete a video-conference interview with the researcher. *The interview should take 30 to 60 minutes and will be recorded.*
2. Participate in a follow-up video conference with the researcher to comment on and provide feedback pertaining to preliminary findings and interpretations of initial interview session (ensuring accuracy). *This should take approximately 30 minutes.*
3. Participate in a video-conference focus group session with other participants. *This should also take approximately an hour and will be recorded.*

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

**Benefits:**

- Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.
- Benefits to society are that this study has the potential to educate advisors, educators, enrollment departments, and anyone else directly connected to students, especially those motivated to develop a more nuanced understanding of who students are and what they need to persist in their educations. By better understanding the experiences of traditional students with nontraditional characteristics, institutional administrations will be better informed and more able to adjust their assumptions of student needs. This multiple case study will provide the information necessary for administrations to develop and provide support and services in a way that has the potential to improve the experiences of traditional students with nontraditional characteristics.

**Compensation:** Participants who complete the surveys and interviews will be provided with a $25 Amazon gift card.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym and interviews and focus groups will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- 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. Data may be used in future presentations, but after three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Kansas State University or the University of Kansas. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How 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, apart from focus group data, 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.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Stephani Greytak. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at [redacted] or [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty chair, Dr. John Duryea, at [redacted].

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.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: 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 me as part of my participation in this study.

______________________________________________________________________________
Signature of Participant _______________________________ Date ______________

______________________________________________________________________________
Signature of Investigator _______________________________ Date ______________
## APPENDIX G

### Source:
A – Institution Alpha  
B – Institution Beta  
D – document

### CODES

| Academic advising; | A, B, D  
| Academic advisor not helpful; | A, B  
| Access to services available to everyone; | A, B  
| Night classes; | A, B, D  
| Advisors used to working with traditional students; | A  
| Being with other nontraditional students; | A, B  
| Federal TRIO program; | A, B, D  
| Change if majority of students shared the same feedback; | A  
| Changes only because of COVID situation; | B  
| Changes take time; | A  
| Counseling Service; | B  
| Depending on the advisor; | A  
| Difficult to reach academic advisor; | A, B  
| Dining; | A  
| Easier because of covid, meetings moved online; | A  
| Evaluating activities or courses; | A, B  
| Faculty advisor more helpful; | A, B  
| Financial aid; | A, B, D  
| Fixed schedule during business hours; | A, B, D  
| Mentoring; | A  
| Flexible hours; | A  
| Freshman only; | A  
| Freshman transition activities; | B  
| From the student govt; | A, B  
| From the union; | A  
| Giving out incentives in exchange for participation; | A, B  
| Handling many students; | A  
| Health and wellness; | A, D  
| Housing; | A, D  
| Learning style; | A, D  
| Long, click through to get it done; | A, B, D  
| More affordable; | A  
| More for traditional students; | A  
| Navigating; | A  
| Night classes; | A  
| Not all professors care about feedback; | B  
| Not effective; | A  
<p>|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not focused on academic services; Not involved; Not so helpful beyond freshman year; Online learning program; Peer support; Physical spaces; Professors are helpful; Required online survey; Scheduling; Small class sizes; Socially integrated; Some professors are accommodating; Student government voice for the student body; Student input not implemented; Student organizations; Students have to miss out on class; Support from extracurricular activities; TA’s could help to pass on feedback; Too many; Tutoring; Unsure about communication; Working on campus is challenging.</td>
<td>A, B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX H

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>CODES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support aligned for nontraditional students</td>
<td>Access to services available to everyone; Night classes; Online learning program; Flexible hours; More affordable; Peer support; Being with other nontraditional students; Federal TRIO program; Small class sizes; Some professors are accommodating; Students have to miss out on class TA’s could help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support aligned for traditional students</td>
<td>Academic advising; Advisors used to working with traditional students; Fixed schedule during business hours; Mentoring; Dining; Financial aid, Housing; Freshman only; Freshman transition activities Learning style; Physical spaces, Scheduling; Tutoring; Working on campus is challenging; Not so helpful beyond freshman year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic advisor</td>
<td>Academic advisor not helpful; Depending on the advisor; Difficult to reach academic advisor Easier because of covid, meetings moved online; Handling many students; Faculty advisor more helpful; To pass on feedback; Professors are helpful; Support from extracurricular activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Evaluating activities or courses; From the student govt; From the union; Too many; Not effective;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsere about communication;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Not focused on academic services;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Required online survey;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Long, click through to get it done;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student input not implemented;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Changes take time;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giving out incentives in exchange for participation.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

| Have not seen major changes |
| Change if majority of students shared the same feedback; |
| Changes only because of COVID situation; |
| Not all professors care about feedback; |
| Student organizations; |
| Health and wellness; |
| Navigating; |
| Not involved, |
| More for traditional students; |
| Student government voice for the student body; |
| Socially integrated. |