

A CASE STUDY OF NONTRADITIONAL FEMALES IN TEACHER  
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Natasha Brown Spellman

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A Case Study of Nontraditional Female Students in Teacher Education Programs

by Natasha Brown Spellman

APPROVED:

COMMITTEE CHAIR

Deanna L. Keith, Ed.D.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Sarah C. Hutter, Ed.D.

Margaret Cole White, Ed.D.

CHAIR, GRADUATE STUDIES

Scott B. Watson, Ph.D.

### Abstract

Natasha Brown Spellman. A CASE STUDY OF NONTRADITIONAL FEMALES IN TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS. (Under the direction of Dr. Deanna Keith) School of Education, July, 2009.

This study examined the experiences of nontraditional female students age 30 and older as they persisted in teacher education programs. The impact of life roles, internal and external risks to persistence, and support systems were considered. Nontraditional students juggle many responsibilities including balancing a career, family, and coursework (Compton & Schock, 2000). The problem is that over half of nontraditional students enrolled in teacher education programs appear to be at risk of leaving college before completing their program of study. Case studies of five nontraditional female students from three university settings were conducted to understand the overall experiences, barriers encountered, and supports utilized in teacher education programs. Interviews, two-column memoing, and document analysis were used to triangulate data. The findings revealed that situational barriers, followed by institutional barriers, posed significant threats to persistence in teacher education programs. All of the nontraditional females struggled to balance home and school responsibilities at some point while enrolled in a teacher education program. Participants primarily relied on family members for emotional support throughout their programs. The major implication of this study is the need for teacher education programs to consider revising policies and procedures that limit participation by nontraditional students. Classes need to be offered at times convenient for nontraditional students and teacher education programs should try to

simulate the support provided by family members to help students persist to program completion.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this degree to my husband, Konata, and son, Jalen. The two of them never imagined that they would essentially experience the highs and lows of a doctoral program just as I did. Thanks for not complaining (much) when I was too tired to cook, too busy for family activities, and too cranky to be bothered. We did it!

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Nontraditional females enroll in undergraduate education programs at a high rate (Horn, Peter, & Rooney, 2002) but unfortunately, many fail to persist to program completion. Completing teacher education programs may be difficult for some nontraditional females because these women often have significant risk factors that may hinder program persistence (Peter & Horn, 2005). Though risk factors may be present, a number of nontraditional females manage to complete teacher education programs.

This study examines the beliefs, behaviors, and support systems of five nontraditional females to determine how they were able to persist in teacher education programs. The first chapter presents the background of the study through a brief discussion of the characteristics and risk factors of nontraditional students. The problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions and significance of the study are also addressed. The chapter concludes with the limitations of the study and definition of terms.

### Background of the Study

In the last decade, new faces have appeared on college campuses as students with varied life experiences and responsibilities have migrated toward higher education. The undergraduate population has become increasingly female, older, and diverse (Horn, Peter, & Rooney, 2002), with many students considered to be nontraditional. Nontraditional students are defined as age 28 and older (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007) with numerous responsibilities. Some of the responsibilities may include balancing a career, family, and coursework (Compton & Schock, 2000). Nontraditional female

students are likely to be 30 or older, starting college later in life, or returning to college after a long absence (Horn, Peter, & Rooney, 2002).

Horn, Peter, and Rooney (2002) found that female students choose to major in education almost three times more than men do. Enrollment in the field of education is common for female students but significant risk factors associated with program persistence may be present (Peter & Horn, 2005). Risk factors include: delaying postsecondary enrollment more than a year after high school graduation, working full-time, having dependents, attending school part-time, and being a single parent (Horn & Premo, 1995). Approximately 57 percent of nontraditional female students attend college part-time and up to 70 percent of female students are single parents (Horn, Peter, & Rooney, 2002). This suggests that over half of nontraditional female students are at risk of leaving college before completing their program of study.

#### Description of Nontraditional Students

The increasing numbers of nontraditional students on college campuses requires educators to understand the motivators prompting students to return to formal education as well as the subsequent barriers faced when returning to college (Milheim, 2005).

Nontraditional students are all adults but not all adult students are considered nontraditional. Nontraditional students may differ from adult students in several ways. According to Jalomo (2000), nontraditional students have often been separated from formal education for a number of years, may be academically unprepared for college courses, and may be minorities.

Minority students, with the exception of Asian Americans, often perform at levels below those of their white peers and are often required to enroll in developmental courses

(Jalomo, 2000). Kao and Thompson (2003) suggest that one reason why ethnic groups may differ in educational attainment is that cultural orientations of certain ethnic groups may promote or discourage academic achievement. Substantial gaps in achievement continue to remain between less advantaged groups including African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans and more advantaged groups including whites and Asian Americans. Kao and Thompson posit that the racial and ethnic hierarchy in educational achievement is apparent throughout the academic experience.

For students separated from formal education for a number of years, the college environment may be intimidating. It is sometimes difficult to get to know other students and instructors and it may take adult students a longer period of time to develop a sense of autonomy and self-efficacy than it takes younger students (Macari , Maples, & D'Andrea, 2005). Responsibilities outside of school limit the amount of time students are able to participate in the college environment or interact with faculty and peers (Graham, 1998). If students arrive on campus immediately before class, and leave right after class, they will be excluded from the mutual understanding and support that nontraditional students can provide each other (Macari et al., 2005) and may experience feelings of social isolation.

#### Barriers to Persistence

Social factors, financial distress, and family obligations interweave with the educational pursuits of nontraditional students (Geigerich, 2006). Nontraditional students are influenced by prior academic and life experiences and may differ from traditional students in their metacognitive knowledge and abilities (Donaldson & Graham, 1999). Older students are inclined to adopt a comprehension-focused approach to learning aimed

at comprehending content material instead of using study strategies aimed at rote recall (Richardson, 1995).

Paying for college may be a concern for hard-working nontraditional students who are responsible for supporting families. Nontraditional students who work full-time may not qualify for financial aid because financial need is the foundation of the federal aid system. Reed (2005) explains that financial aid rules were established decades ago when the majority of college students attended full-time and were in their late teens or early twenties. Bailey (2005) concurs that student loans and grants are intended to meet the needs of younger, full-time students. Making a salary that exceeds the financial aid guidelines does not necessarily translate into being able to afford college tuition (Hawley & Harris, 2005).

#### Problem Statement

When compared to traditional-aged students, nontraditional students are less likely to complete bachelor degree programs. Snyder, Dillow, and Hoffman (2008) found that students beginning postsecondary studies at the age of 18 completed bachelor's degree programs at a rate of almost 65 percent. Students beginning programs at age 30 or older completed programs at a rate of 10 percent. Students attending college full-time completed programs 63 percent of the time, while the rate for those attending part-time fell to approximately 24 percent. Non-working students had a degree completion rate of 65 percent and full-time workers only completed programs at a rate of 30 percent. Horn, Peter, and Rooney (2002) identified risk factors that may affect persistence. Such factors include having dependents, working full time and attending school part-time. Given that approximately 57 percent of nontraditional female students attend college part-time and

up to 70 percent are single parents responsible for supporting their families (Horn, Peter, & Rooney, 2002), it is likely that nontraditional female students will experience difficulty in persisting in a teacher education program.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of these case studies was to describe and analyze the thoughts, behaviors, and support systems of five nontraditional female students who persisted to degree completion in a teacher education program. The study also attempted to understand how and why the nontraditional females persisted in a teacher education program in spite of the risk factors commonly associated with nontraditional students. Though risk factors were present, the participants in this study managed to persist to program completion.

The focus of this research was the identification of common threads among each case in terms of experiences, risk factors, internal support systems, and external support systems relevant to the persistence of nontraditional female students in a teacher education program. The findings of the study can inform nontraditional female students of barriers commonly encountered and supports utilized by others with similar roles and responsibilities. Specific actions taken by participants provide ideas that nontraditional students can replicate to increase the probability of persistence in teacher education programs. Information gained can also assist faculty and administrators of teacher education programs in meeting the needs of nontraditional female students through the creation of external support systems on university campuses.

### Guiding Questions

The primary question that this study examined was: What are the behaviors,



beliefs, and support systems that facilitate the persistence of nontraditional female students in a teacher education program?

The following sub questions guided the writer in this research project:

1. *How do nontraditional female students describe their experiences in a teacher education program?* Experiences of students are not limited to interactions within the university. The experiences with family, employers and friends will also be considered, as nontraditional female students are more likely than traditional students to care for children and maintain household and family roles (Dukakis, Bellm, Seer, & Lee, 2007).

2. *What are the risk factors to nontraditional female student persistence created by internal sources?* Internal risk factors may include dispositional barriers, personal issues or a lack of hopefulness. Dispositional barriers include the students' self-perceptions and attitudes about their ability to succeed (Cross, 1981). Personal issues identified by MacKinnon-Slaney (1994) such as self-awareness, willingness to delay gratification, and sense of interpersonal competence may impact persistence. Hopefulness can be defined as a belief that an individual can find pathways to desired outcomes. Maintaining hope often serves as motivation for students to use the pathways available (Chao & Good, 2004).

3. *What are the risk factors to nontraditional female student persistence created by external sources?* External risk factors or barriers may be attributed to situational and institutional factors. Program policies and practices that make course participation difficult are considered institutional barriers (Cross, 1981). The standards of the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (2008) require students to have field experiences throughout their teacher education program. Students have to complete field

experiences in addition to classroom activities and homework. With the numerous roles and responsibilities of nontraditional female students, is it possible that the program requirements are creating institutional barriers to persistence? MacKinnon-Slaney's (1994) model of Adult Persistence in Learning suggests that an institution's environmental issues greatly affect the persistence of individual students. Environmental compatibility is a factor related to persistence.

4. *What types of support systems help nontraditional female students persist in a teacher education program?* Over half of nontraditional female students have risk factors that may create difficulty in completing programs. Some nontraditional students have risk factors, yet are able to persist in teacher education programs. What enables these students to persist? The need for support may be especially high for nontraditional female students because of the family variables of the students. The ages of children in their care as well as the age of the nontraditional student may create different needs in levels of support (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002).

#### Significance of the Study

Nontraditional students usually have risk factors associated with early departure in college programs (Horn & Premo, 1995). Situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers to program participation and persistence have been discussed for over three decades (Carp, Peterson, & Roelfs, 1974; Cross, 1981). This particular study expands upon previous works by not only looking at the roles and barriers to persistence encountered by nontraditional females, but also incorporates support systems utilized to persist in teacher education programs. It is hoped that the collective case study will extend existing knowledge about the factors related to the persistence of nontraditional

female students in a teacher education program. The study should also suggest relationships between barriers to persistence and student support systems.

Teacher education programs differ from many academic programs in several ways. Admission to the upper level teacher education courses usually requires a passing score on a standardized test or basic skills assessment. Teacher education programs also require a considerable number of hours outside of class, primarily in the form of field studies and clinical practice. Nontraditional female students spend time juggling many roles (Compton & Schock, 2000), and the additional requirements of teacher education programs may be too much for some students to manage. An understanding of the types of supports used by nontraditional women can help administrators and faculty members focus on creating conditions to encourage persistence.

The findings of this study have implications for university personnel beyond faculty and administrators. Counseling, advisement, admissions and other university departments may find the results of the study helpful in planning how to meet the needs of nontraditional female students on traditional university campuses as well as through distance education programs. As Horn, Peter, and Rooney (2002) found, female students choose to major in education almost three times more than men do, but may have significant risk factors associated with program persistence (Peter & Horn, 2005). If the findings of this study are used to create conditions that encourage persistence of nontraditional female students, the teacher education programs and communities could greatly benefit. Enrollment and persistence in the teacher education programs would likely increase and the local teacher shortages could lessen.

### Limitations of the Study

The participants in the study were selected from a non-random population. Given the parameters of the study, potential participants had to be identified as nontraditional females. Participants chosen for the study were either recent graduates of teacher education programs or students expected to complete degree requirements within a few weeks. Participants were identified as nontraditional females by the directors of teacher education at the selected universities and through public school personnel. Themes and patterns resulting from the individual interviews with participants may differ in a randomly selected sample that includes females of all ages. For this qualitative study, purposeful sampling was necessary to obtain rich data. Though nontraditional female students in different settings may have similar characteristics, the results of the study are specific to the teacher education departments at the selected universities.

### Definition of Terms

Dispositional barriers - the students' self-perceptions and attitudes about their ability to succeed (Cross, 1981)

Institutional barriers – policies and practices that prevent or make participation in activities or courses difficult (Cross, 1981)

Nontraditional female students - students age 30 and older who are starting college later in life, or returning after a long absence, while balancing numerous responsibilities including career, family, and classwork (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Horn, Peter, & Rooney, 2002)

Persistence - continuing in a program until completion, despite obstacles and barriers faced (Leppel, 2002)

Risk factors – personal or environmental characteristics that threaten the persistence of students (Peter & Horn, 2005)

Situational barriers – barriers resulting from one's situation in life at a given time (Cross, 1981)

Support system – a source from which strength is drawn; may include specific people, places, or actions (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002)

### Summary

Institutions of higher learning have become diverse with traditional and nontraditional students sitting side by side in classrooms. The number of nontraditional students on college campuses has steadily increased over the last decade, thus creating a need for a clear understanding of the hopes and challenges of this demographic group. Life roles and responsibilities, combined with the demands of teacher education programs, are risk factors that may make persistence difficult for nontraditional female students. The characteristics of nontraditional female students and models of attrition and persistence are discussed in Chapter Two.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter provides an overview of the characteristics of traditional and nontraditional students. The responsibilities, risk factors, and support systems are examined for nontraditional female students. The general standards and practices of teacher education programs are discussed and factors that support or hinder the persistence of nontraditional female students are described. Theoretical and empirical literature related to student attrition, persistence, and support systems is reviewed and previous studies of the persistence of nontraditional female students are presented.

### A Comparison of Traditional and Nontraditional Students

Student enrollment at institutions of higher learning increased by 26 percent between 1997 and 2007. The number of full-time students increased by 34 percent and the number of part-time students rose by 15 percent. Female enrollment increased by 29 percent while male enrollment saw a 22 percent increase from 1997 to 2007. During the period from 1995 to 2006, the number of traditional students rose by 33 percent, whereas the enrollment of nontraditional students increased by 13 percent. A shift in enrollment patterns is expected between 2006 and 2017 with a projected increase of 10 percent in the traditional student population and 19 percent for nontraditional students (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2009).

Traditional students are characterized as full-time students who enroll in college after high school and are dependent upon their parents for financial support. Most traditional students do not work during the school year or either work part-time. In general, traditional undergraduates are able to spend most of their time focusing on their

studies. Nontraditional students may be parents with family and work responsibilities and a limited amount of time and financial resources to devote to higher education (Choy, 2002).

Traditional and nontraditional students share at least two goals. One goal is to perform academically and the other is to progress in career development. Career development includes choosing and completing a major and securing a job after graduation (Spitzer, 2000). Spitzer posits that the academic performance of traditional college students can be predicted by self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and self-regulation. These factors also attribute to the academic performance of nontraditional students, yet nontraditional students appear to be more willing to ask for help from classmates and take a more active role in the learning process.

The degree attainment rate varies greatly between traditional and nontraditional students. A student's age upon enrollment may have a significant impact on degree completion. Snyder, Dillow, and Hoffman (2009) found students that began their education at a four year university at age 18 or younger completed bachelor degrees at a rate of 65 percent. Students entering college at the age 19 completed degrees 48 percent of the time. The percentage of students ages 25-to 29-years-old completing degrees was 23 percent, while nontraditional students age 30 and over were likely to persist to degree completion at a rate of 10 percent.

Traditional and nontraditional students often differ in their academic preparation and educational objectives. Traditional students usually enroll immediately after high school, whereas much variance exists in the enrollment delay of nontraditional students. Students who delay college enrollment are less likely to enroll in bachelor degree

programs than traditional students. Nontraditional students also differ in attendance and work patterns with nontraditional students being more likely to attend college part-time and work full-time (Horn, Cataldi, & Sikora, 2005).

Nontraditional students confront several problems when adjusting to a traditional academic setting. In comparison with the traditional student population, a disproportionate number of adult learners are women and members of ethnic minorities (Richardson & King, 1998). Today's group of diverse learners include displaced workers transitioning from the industrial to the information age, women who have delayed pursuing an education to raise children or care for aging parents, and adults facing career changes when they thought they would be planning for retirement (Bland, 2003). Some nontraditional students express fears about fitting in with eighteen to twenty-two-year-old students and may question their ability to understand and retain large quantities of information (Richardson & King, 1998).

#### Characteristics of Nontraditional Female Students

The success of higher education institutions may “depend on its ability to understand and accommodate the unique dispositional, situational, and institutional needs of nontraditional female students” (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002, p. 140). Women's undergraduate enrollment has increased three times as fast as men's since 1970. Women undergraduates are projected to comprise 60 percent of the postsecondary enrollment by 2016 (NCES, 2007). The life experiences and family configurations of nontraditional female students are diverse, yet these students often have several commonalities. Nontraditional female students are usually employed full-time and are caregivers for



children or aging relatives. Nontraditional female students may also be involved in their communities as leaders or volunteers (Fairchild, 2003).

Women are often laden with a disproportionate burden of household tasks and caregiver responsibilities (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002) when attending college. Managing multiple roles may be a source of stress for nontraditional female students. Parents may feel guilty about being unavailable when their children need them, with mothers of children under thirteen reporting the most conflict (Terrell, 1990). Women with older children may persist to graduation, whereas those with younger children may interrupt their education to fulfill family responsibilities (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Home, 1998).

Jacobs and King (2002) name several reasons why nontraditional females over age 25 are at-risk of leaving college before degree completion. The biggest risk for older students is part-time attendance. Nontraditional female students without children and attending college full-time have about the same chance of completing college as those in their early twenties. Jacobs and King believe that “older women, enrolled part time, who delayed entry into college, and who have become mothers are much less likely to complete their degrees” (p. 222).

Unsuccessful resolution of stressors may result in premature withdrawal from school (Burns, 1997). Women are usually the primary caregivers of children and incompatible demands of home and school may lead to role strain or contagion for nontraditional females (Home, 1998). Despite the role strain felt by nontraditional female students, it is common for these women to have high levels of intrinsic motivation and self-regulation. In general, nontraditional females perform better academically than

traditional students and are more focused on their career goals (Spitzer, 2000). If sources of stress can be managed, nontraditional females will likely persist to degree completion.

#### Reasons for Enrolling in Higher Education

The reasons that nontraditional students choose to enroll in higher education may include “making up for a missed opportunity in the past, obtaining skills and credentials, and gaining a learning experience for life enrichment” (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2007, p. 551). Though nontraditional students may enroll in college for these reasons, it appears that student enrollment is largely facilitated by economic necessity. Nontraditional females who are single or recently divorced may find it necessary to enroll in higher education to gain employment to support themselves and their families (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2007).

For both traditional and nontraditional students, the decision to attend college is likely tied to the expected payoff. The payoff may be job security, social acceptance, or financial reward. The difference in the enrollment decisions of traditional and nontraditional students may be that nontraditional students have a clearer picture about the expectations for their education. Most nontraditional students have experienced major life events such as getting married, entering the workforce and having children. The experiences and expectations of nontraditional students guide their enrollment decisions (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2007).

Institutional characteristics may have more influence on a student’s enrollment decision than student characteristics. Several factors have been found to influence nontraditional student enrollment decisions. The flexibility of programs, the registration process and services are important to nontraditional students. Additional factors that

influence enrollment decisions include program availability, faculty advising and support, ability to finish program in a short time period, and a reasonable commute to campus (Yadegarpour, 2006). The literature suggests that college enrollment for a nontraditional student is a two-part decision. The first part involves a need to return due to situational factors and the second is based upon institutional and program characteristics.

### Teacher Education Programs

Females were awarded 57 percent of all bachelor degrees conferred in 2006-2007. During this period, the field with the smallest increase in degrees earned by females was education (Planty et. al, 2009). It is possible that conflicts between the requirements of teacher education programs and responsibilities of nontraditional female students account for the small increase in education degrees earned. Teacher education programs develop a conceptual framework, core values, desired outcomes, and practices that distinguish them from other programs (Michiko & Zulich, 2007). Professional teacher education programs are monitored by accrediting bodies such as the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). NCATE (2008) expects programs to be dynamic, with ongoing planning, evaluation, and improvement. NCATE has six professional standards that teacher education programs are expected to meet.

### *Standards*

NCATE (2008) developed six standards to address the following issues in teacher education programs: (1) candidate knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions; (2) assessment system and unit evaluation; (3) field experiences and clinical practice; (4) diversity; (5) faculty qualifications, performance, and development; and (6) unit government and resources. Two of the standards outline what students should know and

be able to do. Standard 1 addresses candidate knowledge, skills and dispositions, and Standard 3 addresses field experiences and clinical practices.

Standard 1 ensures that “candidates preparing to work in schools as teachers or other school professionals know and demonstrate the content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and skills, pedagogical and professional knowledge and skills, and professional dispositions necessary to help all students learn” (NCATE, 2008, p.12). Professional and specialty coursework address content, pedagogical, and professional knowledge and skills. This standard concerns what candidates should know and be able to do.

Standard 3 addresses field experiences and clinical practice. Clinical practice evaluates the extent to which candidates are able to translate theory into practice. Teacher education programs partner with schools to design, implement, and evaluate field experiences and clinical practice in appropriate settings to ensure that teacher candidates are able to demonstrate the skills necessary to help all students learn. Teacher education programs require candidates to apply course work to classroom settings, analyze student learning and reflect on the experience. Field experiences and clinical practice are extensive and intensive to assist candidates in developing proficiencies in the roles for which they are preparing (NCATE, 2008).

#### *Impact of Standards on Nontraditional Females*

To comply with stringent accreditation standards, teacher education programs require students to spend many hours outside of class completing field observations and clinical practice. Field observations and clinical practice are critical components in the development of proficient teacher candidates. Attending college is one of many activities

that demand time from nontraditional students. Full-time employment, children, relatives, and the community may compete for the limited hours available to nontraditional students (Fairchild, 2003). The characteristics, roles and responsibilities of nontraditional females likely make it difficult to complete program requirements (Horn, Peter, & Rooney, 2002).

### Persistence Factors

Approximately 83 percent of traditional students who enroll in bachelor degree programs immediately after high school remain enrolled after three years of study. The number of independent, or nontraditional, students who remain enrolled after three years is about 50 percent (Berkner, He, Mason, & Wheeler, 2007). If 50 percent of nontraditional students persist after three years, that means that half of nontraditional students in college programs fail to persist to degree completion. Certain factors may help or hinder the persistence of students in college programs. The factors include internal and external sources such as self-perceptions, motivation, role demands, hopefulness, home or family situations, and institutional compatibility.

#### *Internal Factors*

Adults assess themselves before tackling the challenge of obtaining a college degree. Personal or internal sources that may affect persistence include self-perceptions, sense of competence, clarification of career and life goals, mastery of life transitions and self-awareness (MacKinnon-Slaney, 1994). MacKinnon-Slaney explains that self-awareness “relates to those relatively stable personality characteristics and qualities within individuals that propel them through the competitive environment of formal

education” (p. 270). Nontraditional students need a healthy sense of self, achievement motivation, and a strong academic self-concept each day to persist to degree completion.

A willingness to delay gratification to complete a degree requires students to believe in themselves and the educational system at large. A student’s ability to delay gratification is assisted by significant others such as family and close friends and is also influenced by prior educational experiences. Willingness to delay gratification is related to another personal issue labeled by MacKinnon-Slaney (1999) which is clarification of career and life goals. Clarification of goals and expectations is critical to the persistence of nontraditional students because it helps them to focus on attaining the goal.

Mastering life transitions is vital if nontraditional female students plan to persist in degree programs. Enrolling in college is a major transition that carries short- and long-term implications for most nontraditional students. Handling a transition requires commitment from adults with multiple life roles (MacKinnon-Slaney, 1994). Managing several life roles to meet personal responsibilities and the demands of others can be considered a source of stress for nontraditional females. As women become more confident in their parental and work roles, they become less overwhelmed by their multiple roles (Erdwins, Buffardi, Casper, & O’Brien, 2001), which suggests that self-perceptions improve and sense of competence increases in accordance with levels of confidence.

MacKinnon-Slaney (1994) explained that learning issues impact the persistence of adult students. Learning issues are internal and concern educational competence and intellectual and political competence. These issues must be addressed by the student. Educational competence focuses on the demands of formal learning. Students may ask

themselves if they are too old, if they will be able to study and if they can deal with the academic and technology requirements. They have to answer these questions honestly and adjust their actions and expectations accordingly.

Adult students attend college for educational reasons; however, formal education involves more than intellectual stimulation. MacKinnon-Slaney (1994) clarifies the role of politics in higher education, which may have a very real impact on students. The reality may be that course credit and degree completion are the primary focus of the institution and intellectual stimulation may be secondary. MacKinnon-Slaney implies that students need to understand cues from administrators, departments, and faculty to succeed in courses and programs. Verbal cues can be gained from instructors and written cues can be garnered from course syllabi or institutional policies.

Motivation, or a desire to finish college, is linked to persistence. Variables such as pre-college academic abilities, parents' education, and financial aid impact motivation and persistence (Allen, 1999). Intrinsic motivation helps students overcome challenges of the past. Students proving to be intrinsically motivated usually display autonomy and stick to the game plan to reach their goals. Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007) write that "strong intrinsic motivation may be necessary for nontraditional students to persist and succeed in the university environment over the long term" (p. 143). Students with high levels of intrinsic motivation toward academics were found to persist in their programs at a higher rate than students relying on extrinsic motivation (Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992).

Differences in one's motivation were found to be related to two education variables – previous levels of education and secondary school attended. Demographic variables

also impact motivation. Age, marital status, and the family life cycle stage determine the level of motivation one has to succeed in college. Motivation is necessary for persistence; however, the combination of high levels of motivation with difficult personal circumstances can be a dangerous situation if the student cannot balance the two (Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998). Chao and Good (2004) offer another factor that impacts persistence – hopefulness. Hopefulness is necessary for students to clearly see available paths before them.

### *External Factors*

External sources that tend to impact persistence include situational and institutional factors such as home environment, institutional policies and procedures, and environmental compatibility (MacKinnon-Slaney, 1994). An institution's structural and demographic characteristics, along with student peer climate are measures related to persistence at four-year institutions (Titus, 2004). Institutional services, the layout of campus buildings, student demographics, and processes and procedures help students determine if the environment is compatible to their needs. Situational factors may intermingle with institutional factors when determining environmental fit. Student situations may necessitate the availability of evening courses, childcare services, and work-study opportunities.

To persist in educational programs, the student and institution should be compatible. One factor affecting student comfort within an institution is the ability to retrieve information. Nontraditional students experiencing higher education for the first time may not be aware of the policies and processes in place. The students may not know what to ask or where to find answers. Knowledgeable counselors and the dissemination



of accurate information play a pivotal role in persistence. Being aware of opportunities and resources such as credit by exam, financial aid, and counseling services encourage persistence. (MacKinnon-Slaney, 1994).

Berger and Milem (2000) concur with MacKinnon-Slaney (1994) on the issue of environmental compatibility. Berger and Milem explain that institutional structural-demographic characteristics influence student outcomes such as persistence. Structural-demographic characteristics refer to the size of the institution, type of institution, selectivity and location. Student behaviors and perceptions of the social, academic, and functional aspects of the institution also influence persistence.

When students feel comfortable in a setting, they tend to persist. MacKinnon-Slaney (1994) expressed that environments that facilitate learning for adults are viewed as welcoming places. Adult students need to know that staff care about them and are willing to answer their questions and treat them with respect. Environmental compatibility concerns the general climate of the institution as well as the physical facilities. Physical facilities may include adequate lighting, desks to support adulthood weight or pregnancy, and close proximity to bathrooms. MacKinnon-Slaney stated that because of adult issues such as “back problems, degenerating eyesight, and weakened bladder sphincter muscles, attention to physical facilities and general comfort may make the difference between persistence and dropping out” (p. 273).

#### Barriers to Persistence

Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs (1974) developed and administered the Learning Interests and Experiences of Adult Americans survey to determine patterns in adult learning. Obstacles that might prevent adults from participating in higher education were

addressed in the survey. Obstacles were classified as (a) those that arose from a student's personal life, (b) those caused by inner feelings about learning, and (c) those brought on by policies and programs originally developed for younger students. The results of the study indicated that the following obstacles were the most difficult to overcome: (1) cost, (2) time constraints, (3) not wanting to be a full-time student, (4) home responsibilities, (5) job responsibilities, and (6) time required to complete program.

Obstacles to participation faced by adult learners stemmed from a variety of sources. Cross (1981) built upon the work of Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs (1974) to categorize barriers to participation in adult learning into three areas: situational, institutional and dispositional. As noted by Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs, three of the most difficult obstacles to overcome were time constraints, home responsibilities, and job responsibilities. These obstacles all relate to the roles of women.

### *Life Roles*

Multiple life roles may lead to conflicting demands and constant feelings of overload for nontraditional female students. The stress of managing all of the roles may lead women to withdraw from their studies for non-academic reasons. There are three dimensions of role strain among women – role conflict from simultaneous or incompatible demands, role overload, or role contagion or preoccupation (Home, 1998). Home explains that the demands from the family and student roles are the primary factors that predict the level of role conflict, overload, and contagion.

Nontraditional female students commonly support three life roles – employee, partner, and mother. These roles may have demands, expectations, and rewards that contradict each other. The role of employee offers individual recognition and

appreciation for adult women while the family provides close ties and is key to the psychological well-being of individuals (Kostiainen, Martelin, Kestila, Martikainen, & Koskinen, 2009). When the role of student is added to the list of roles, the level of conflict between the roles may increase.

### *Situational Barriers*

Cross (1981) explains that barriers resulting from one's situation in life at a given time are considered situational. Situational barriers that may hinder college persistence include: cost; home responsibilities; job responsibilities; no child care; no transportation; no place to study or practice; and friends or family do not support the idea of the student attending college. Mercer (1993) agreed that family and job responsibilities contribute to situational barriers but also views civic commitment as a potential situational barrier.

Fairchild (2003) highlighted the impact of finances on the educational experience. She stated that "finances play a significant role in the ability of adults to complete their academic goals" (p. 12). Expenses related to tuition are not the only expenses that nontraditional students are responsible for paying. The time and energy spent to meet the financial needs of the household can exhaust dedicated nontraditional students. Fairchild reasons that income levels cannot be negotiated like other variables and basic needs take priority over educational needs.

King (2003) concurs with Fairchild's (2003) stance that finances impact the completion of program goals in stating that students' choices are all financial to some extent. Decisions concerning attendance at an institution depend upon family resources available, tuition costs, and the financial aid available. The financial situation of a student is linked to persistence in that middle- and upper-income students are less likely to drop

out of college than low-income students (King, 2003). Family, work, and school responsibilities may create a situation in which the roles compete for time and attention. The battle between home, school, and work may consequently place nontraditional students at risk of failing to complete their degrees (Jacobs & King, 2002).

McGivney (2004) offers personal factors that hinder persistence in courses and in overall programs. Attendance factors that may prevent students from performing well in individual courses are described by McGivney as 'last-minute' factors. This includes not feeling well, family emergencies, transportation problems, or adverse weather. When students miss several classes due to last-minute factors, they may not see the need to continue the course. McGivney describes the reasons that students drop out of programs as 'fact of life' reasons related to work, home, family responsibilities, and health. It may be virtually impossible for nontraditional female students to overcome situational barriers such as conflicting school and work schedules or serious health issues when their personal livelihood or the livelihood of the family depends upon them.

### *Institutional Barriers*

Institutional barriers involve policies and practices that prevent or make participation in activities or courses difficult. Students have little or no control over institutional barriers. If students wish to succeed in higher education settings, they must manage institutional barriers to the best of their abilities. Barriers categorized as institutional include: do not want to go to school full-time; amount of time required to complete program; courses are not scheduled when students can attend; no information about offerings; strict attendance requirements; desired courses unavailable; and too much red tape in getting enrolled (Cross, 1981).

Instructional methods, availability of instructors, and lack of social or emotional connections with similar students are also viewed as institutional barriers (Fairchild, 2003). Fairchild notes another issue that may hinder students – class work may not incorporate life experiences into academic subject matter. Keith (2007) found that nontraditional students attributed stress caused by institutional barriers to five items: times of classes; class availability; parking; university flexibility; and increased tuition costs. The increased tuition cost was identified as the number one cause of stress and was followed by times of classes offered.

Financial issues present barriers in the situational and institutional categories. The personal financial situation of students determines if they can pay for tuition costs out of pocket or if additional resources are needed. If help is needed to pay tuition, students usually turn to the institution for financial aid. Grants, loans, expected family contribution, and assistance from other sources are deducted from the adjusted institutional price. The amount remaining after funding has been deducted from institutional costs is the student's unmet need. Because of the financial aid regulations at universities, students with loans or grants may still need to work to compensate for their unmet need (King, 2003).

#### *Dispositional Barriers*

Dispositional barriers include the students' self-perceptions and attitudes about their ability to succeed. Dispositional barriers may include: feeling afraid of being too old to begin college; low grades in the past and not confident of ability; not enough energy and stamina; do not enjoy studying; tired of school and classrooms; and do not want to seem too ambitious (Cross, 1981). With the existence of distance education

courses, insecurities about one's technological knowledge and abilities may be considered a barrier for some nontraditional female students (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). Other dispositional barriers include a personal uncertainty of how school will fit into a busy life schedule and questions about study skills and writing skills.

### *Other Barriers*

After nontraditional students complete course requirements in teacher education programs, the culminating experience of student teaching may present a new set of barriers. Time constraints caused by situational barriers present one challenge to the successful completion of student teaching by nontraditional females in teacher education programs. Klausewitz (2005) outlined additional challenges to mature age student teachers. One of the challenges mentioned by Klausewitz is novice status. Supervising teachers may assume that older student teachers have certain skills based on their ages and may lend little support in the classroom.

Another challenge that nontraditional student teachers may face is parochialism in which they feel that their way is the right way. Former military and industry personnel who are accustomed to working with adults in orderly environments may struggle when working with young students and may find that skills used in previous environments are non-transferrable to classrooms. For nontraditional female students entering teacher education as a second career, unrealized ideals may generate barriers. Teaching involves "dealing with multiple issues (students, parents and school administrators), deteriorating and inadequate school resources, and the poor attitudes of students and of their adult colleagues in the field" (Klausewitz, 2005, p. 50).

A major issue of concern for nontraditional females engaged in clinical practice may be finances. Student teachers may have a hard time adjusting to the realities of the classroom setting and may find it even harder to adjust to a new financial status. Students may encounter financial obstacles throughout their degree program but may be especially burdened by the time expectations and planning requirements of the student teaching experience. The full-time demands of student teaching make it difficult for students to work and often lead to financial hardships (Klausewitz, 2005).

### Support Systems

The life roles of nontraditional learners can make persistence difficult, but for some students, the roles actually assist them in meeting their goals. Actions that help nontraditional students succeed despite their challenges include: focusing their learning on skills and knowledge that is applicable to their lives; drawing upon their knowledge base; having authentic involvement and support from families, friends, and work; and making the most of their time in the classroom (Bradley and Graham, 2000).

In a study of adult basic education students, Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999) identified two factors associated with program persistence. One factor was previous educational experience and the other was having a specific goal. Comings, Parrella, and Soricone posit that prior experience with education may increase an adult's self-confidence about learning and, in essence, support persistence. Patterns emerged in the study that enabled four supports to persistence to be described.

### *Management of Positive and Negative Forces*

The first support to persistence identified by Comings, Parrella and Soricone (1999) is the management of positive and negative forces that help or hinder persistence.

Positive forces such as a desire to reach a goal or the expectation of a higher income can push adults to continue their studies, whereas negative forces push adults to drop out. To persist in educational programs, nontraditional students have to identify the forces that have an impact on their path and figure out how to strengthen the positive forces and weaken the negative forces. The strongest positive forces mentioned by students were the support of family, friends, teachers and peers. Self-efficacy and personal goals were also perceived as positive forces (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999).

Bertera (2005) noted that positive ties and supportive relationships can help meet one's basic social needs by providing acceptance, understanding, empathy and self-esteem. Social support assists students in maintaining their mental and physical health. On the other hand, social negativity can be detrimental to nontraditional students as they attempt to manage all aspects of their lives. Bertera found that female students reported high levels of support with relatives and friends as did the students in Comings, Parrella, and Soricone's (1999) study. Family support was described as a predictor of well-being measures by Walen and Lachman (2000) with family and friends serving as a buffer to strained interactions for nontraditional females.

Family relationships affect the psychological functioning of women. Having a partner to provide support has been shown to lower psychological distress in women. Kostianen, et. al (2009) found that women with high levels of support from partners, either married or live-in, rated their health and level of psychological functioning better than women without partners. Women with the lowest levels of psychological distress were involved with partners who supported them in all circumstances.



### *Self-efficacy*

The second support to persistence identified by Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999) is self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) defines self-efficacy as “a belief about what one can do under different sets of conditions with whatever skills one possesses” (p. 37). Appraising one’s capabilities is essential to effective functioning. The act of managing multiple roles does not determine educational success or failure in itself; the exercise of control largely determines the impact of the roles on individuals. Efficacy is a generative capability that involves exercising control of cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral skills to serve many purposes (Bandura, 1997).

Self-efficacy pertains to more than academics. Quimby and O’Brien (2006) emphasize the importance of student and parent self-efficacy for nontraditional female students with children. It is necessary for students to believe they are capable of managing their roles as a student and as a parent simultaneously. Nontraditional female students who are confident in managing their student and parent roles and have perceived social support demonstrate low levels of psychological stress and high levels of self-esteem. To support self-efficacy, Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999) suggest that educational programs do the following: allow adults to be successful in learning and have authentic evidence of that success; allow students to see role models who are like them; offer verbal assurances; and help students deal with stress that results from low self-efficacy.

### *Setting Goals and Making Progress*

The third support to persistence described by Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999) is the student’s establishment of a goal. Task-oriented students have a goal of

learning or mastering an activity and are perceived to be successful if the goal is reached. Students with high task orientation will approach tasks with high levels of effort and persistence (Zizzi, Keeler, & Watson, 2006). Goal orientation is similar to task orientation but instead of focusing on tasks, the emphasis is on the overall goal. Goals need to be established before enrolling in educational programs. Program faculty or advisors can help students define goals and create a plan of study. Goals should encompass all areas of a student's life including school, work, and family (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999). The last support offered by Comings, Parrella, and Soricone is progress toward reaching the goal. Students must make progress toward their goal and then be able to measure their progress to encourage program continuation.

Having a 'goal attitude' is necessary for goal attainment. Rand (2009) proposes a new construct of goal attitude comprised of hope and optimism. Rand explains that "goal attitude represents a global attitude that the act of pursuing goals is worth the effort and energy required to do so" (p. 252). Goal attitude has two components – belief about self and belief about the world. Belief about the self involves hope in which one has the abilities and energy to achieve goals. Optimism is one's belief that the world offers many things to be pursued and provides a reward when the goal is reached (Rand, 2009).

### *Institutional Support*

Self-efficacy and the support of relatives are important sources of support, yet additional support may be needed from institutions. Academic and financial support from universities can encourage the persistence of nontraditional students. One way that universities can support nontraditional students is by making financial aid funds available for students in time for registration (Hart, 2003). Communication between financial aid

and enrollment services can prevent enrollment delays due to an outstanding student account balance. Managing the financial aid process supports the academic performance of nontraditional students by allowing them to attend classes on the first day instead of waiting in line to discuss financial issues.

Academic support can come from a variety of sources within a university setting. Faculty members, departments, advising and counseling services may provide institutional support to nontraditional female students. As mentioned by Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999), support from instructors attributes to persistence. Academic advising also influences persistence decisions. Hale, Graham, and Johnson (2009) examined student satisfaction with advising styles. The characteristics of developmental and prescriptive advising were reviewed. Developmental advising is based on a personal relationship between the student and advisor and considers academic, career, and personal goals. Prescriptive advising is impersonal and based on authority rather than individual needs. Ninety-five percent of the respondents in Hale, Graham, and Johnson's study preferred developmental advising.

Institutions offering developmental advising can support students by treating them as individuals and offering solutions that help to balance academics and other responsibilities. Academic advisors are critical to the progress and success of nontraditional students. To support students, advisors should provide a detailed analysis of the student's academic ability and provide realistic advisement. Advisors should also serve as coaches through hardships and make connections with colleagues concerning the welfare of students (Hollis, 2009). Advising the individual rather than simply advising the student may impact persistence.

## Theoretical Framework

A theoretical foundation of student attrition, departure, and retention has been established by Spady (1970, 1971) and Tinto (1975, 1993). Spady (1970) was the first to propose a widely recognized model of college student dropout. Spady linked five variables to a student's dropout decision – academic potential, normative congruence, grade performance, intellectual development, and friendship support. Satisfaction and institutional commitment along with the five variables was thought to determine the dropout decision. In 1971, Spady found that academic performance was the dominant factor accounting for student attrition.

Tinto's (1975) student integration model was a longitudinal model that detailed the connections between the academic and social systems of the institution and those responsible for shaping the systems. This model focused on the concept of integration and patterns of interactions between students and members of the institution. One component of the student integration model is the compatibility of the student and institution. Compatibility is influenced by family background, race, gender, and prior educational experiences.

Tinto (1993) expanded his previous model to include additional reasons for student departure, such as adjustment, finances, and external obligations. Tinto suggested that even when students have positive interactions with the institution, external forces may still hinder persistence. He described the link between learning and persistence as one that comes from the interaction of involvement and the quality of student efforts. Tinto (1993) stated that “involvement with one's peers and with the faculty both inside

and outside of the classroom, is itself positively related to the quality of student effort and in turn to both learning and persistence” (p. 71).

Social and institutional integration were important factors in Spady’s (1970, 1971) and Tinto’s (1975) models but Bean and Metzner (1985) realized that nontraditional students did not fit into the models. Bean and Metzner (1985) developed the first model of nontraditional student attrition from models of traditional student attrition, behavioral theories, and literature on nontraditional students. This model identified the importance of behavioral intentions and intent to stay as predictors of persistence. Attrition decisions were found to be based on four sets of variables: poor academic performance; intent to leave; background; and environmental variables.

It is expected that students with poor academic performance will drop out of college at higher rates than high performing students. The intent to leave is mostly influenced by psychological outcomes with consideration of academic variables. Background variables primarily encompass high school performance and educational goals. The last factor that determines a student’s decision to leave or persist is environmental variables. Environmental variables directly impact the decision concerning persistence and are more important for nontraditional students than academic barriers (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Bean and Metzner propose that students with good academic support and poor environmental support will leave college. Students with poor academic support and good environmental support are likely to persist. Encouragement from family and employers aid the persistence of nontraditional students with poor academic support.

Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda (1993) went a step further than Tinto (1975) and Bean and Metzner (1985) in their study of nontraditional student persistence. Cabrera,

Nora, and Castaneda tested the convergent validity between Tinto and Bean and Metzner's theories. Aspects of Tinto's student integration model were combined with Bean and Metzner's student attrition model. The findings of their research suggested that intent to persist and support of friends and family have a large effect on persistence.

Cleveland-Innes (1994) critiqued Tinto's (1975, 1993) student integration model to see how the relationships within the model might vary based on student age groups. Cleveland-Innes defined nontraditional students as those aged 23 and above. Jarvis' (1987) view that differences in traditional and nontraditional students were mainly found in external, situational characteristics was adopted by Cleveland-Innes. Two characteristics that distinguish nontraditional students from traditional students were tested – the primacy role of the student and the quality of student-faculty relationships. Family background, individual attributes, precollege schooling, academic integration, social integration, and commitments were assessed.

Cleveland-Innes (1994) opined that Tinto's (1975) model was a better fit for nontraditional students than traditional students. To gain a better understanding of nontraditional student attrition, Cleveland-Innes proposed an adjustment in Tinto's model that changes family background to family situation. The construct of family situation would consider socioeconomic status, number of dependents, and amount of financial pressure. A measure of the length of time removed from formal education and individual perceptions of perceived load and perceived skills in terms of the student role should be incorporated into a model of nontraditional student attrition.

Perceived load and skills of students can be evaluated using MacKinnon-Slaney's (1994) Adult Persistence in Learning Model (APIL). The APIL model consists of ten

factors that affect persistence. The factors are separated into three components.

Component I addresses personal issues and has five factors – self-awareness, willingness to delay gratification, clarification of career and life goals, mastery of life transitions, and sense of interpersonal competence. Component II involves learning issues and has two factors – educational competence and intellectual and political competence.

Component III of the APIL model addresses three factors that relate to the environmental issues of a particular institution that impact individual learners – information retrieval from the college or university, awareness of opportunities or impediments in the environment, and environmental compatibility. Management of the three components of the model is imperative if nontraditional female students want to persist to program completion. MacKinnon-Slaney (1994) posits that the APIL model “provides a checklist of issues and survival skills that need to be mastered” to make persistence a reality (p.274).

Sandler (2000) posed a model of student persistence that focuses on finances, attitudes, behavior, and career development. The variables examined by Sandler were: career-decision making self-efficacy; perceived stress; attitudes toward the cost of school; academic integration; social integration; grade point average; family encouragement; institutional commitment and persistence. Sandler discovered that career decision-making self-efficacy had the most impact on all of the other variables and posited that a system of relationships is necessary for persistence.

College persistence and retention is the responsibility of both the student and the institution, with much of the success for each depending upon the actions of the other (Bender & Miller, 2002). Smith and Wertlieb (2005) assert that problems in the

interrelationship between the student and institution may lead to student departure. Yorke and Thomas (2003) posit that focusing on educational outcomes and possessing an understanding of factors affecting student success makes the difference.

To overcome barriers to persistence, nontraditional female students may choose to rely on support systems. Sustaining motivation and persistence in educational programs may depend on the following supports: management of the forces that may hinder or help persistence, self-efficacy, relationships, goals, teachers and peers, and a positive view of self (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999). Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) reported that adult students generally have fewer individuals available to support their school efforts than traditional-aged students. Nontraditional female students make great sacrifices to attend college and have little time to make social connections on college campuses. Fairchild (2003) suggests that educators should reach out to one adult student at a time and then work toward making institutions more accommodating to adult or nontraditional students as a group.

The theoretical foundation of this qualitative study is based on situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers as categorized by Cross (1981), the Adult Persistence in Learning Model developed by MacKinnon-Slaney (1994) and the supports related to motivation and persistence identified by Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999).

#### Studies Related to Student Barriers and Persistence

Byrd (1990) used Cross' (1981) classification of barriers with a group of adult students ages 25 and over at non-public, liberal arts institutions in the mid-south. The purpose of the study was to see which barriers would be most frequently reported. Byrd



found that the barriers most frequently reported were: not enough time; amount of time required to complete program; cost; home responsibilities; not enough energy or stamina; and job responsibilities. Sixteen years after Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs' (1974) study, similar obstacles to adult learning were reported by participants in Byrd's study.

Mabry and Hardin (1992) researched factors that hinder academic progress of adult students. Informational, procedural, situational, and psychological barriers were identified. Mabry and Hardin suggested that removing procedural barriers by providing trained admissions counselors, flexible registration periods, and convenient course schedules impact the academic progress of students. On-campus daycare, orientation programs, and personal counseling also assist in student retention efforts.

Whitmer (1999) researched two programmatic approaches designed to serve nontraditional undergraduate students. A weekend college program at a private institution was compared to an evening program at a public university. Institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers were investigated as well as student support services utilized by nontraditional students. The majority of participants in both programs were female. Data was gathered to determine the level of problem for each barrier and the level of satisfaction for each student support service.

Whitmer (1999) did not find a difference in the level of problem with situational barriers for the programs, but the weekend college students indicated fewer institutional and dispositional barriers than the evening college students. Females reported more problems with situational barriers than males and Caucasians reported fewer barriers in each category. Minority students reported more problems with situational, dispositional,

and institutional barriers than Caucasian students and older participants had more problems with situational and dispositional barriers than younger participants.

Bryan (2006) researched persistence among adult students majoring in ministry or business through adult degree completion programs in three Christian colleges. The experiences of twenty-two former degree-seeking students, both successful and unsuccessful, were examined. Motivation, reasons for enrolling, and the program structure and atmosphere were evaluated. The adult learners in Bryan's study shared many characteristics of adult learners in the general population but differed in that the primary source of motivation to persist was their faith. Other factors that encouraged persistence were studying one subject at a time, meeting once per week, a relatively short program of study, inviting atmosphere, and having instructors available when needed.

Geisler (2007) sought to understand nontraditional student persistence and attrition of a cohort of students enrolled in a nontraditional degree completion program in a small, private institution. Information was collected through interviews, observations, and data forms. Participants were placed in one of four groups: new students; persisting students; stopouts/withdrawn students; or faculty/administration. Findings were categorized in three categories – personal and academic background, external environment, and academic and social integration. Students were motivated by personal and career goals and developed coping strategies to persist to program completion.

Hunt (2007) examined motivational factors affecting adult student persistence at commuter colleges. The focus of the study was external, non-institutional factors associated with adult persistence. Environmental factors influenced the decision to drop out of college programs and psychological factors motivated students to return. Most

respondents in the study felt that their personal lives affected their ability to stay in school. Though issues such as work and family responsibilities were addressed in the study, the actual setting of the study was not a traditional college campus.

Cox (2007) researched the experiences of adult women enrolled part-time in a community college. The findings of Cox's study indicate that adult women persisted in college to better their lives. Adult women attending community colleges have many of the same characteristics as adult women enrolled in universities, yet the program requirements in community college settings can potentially be completed in two years, whereas a degree from a university requires an investment of four or more years for most people.

Allen (2008) attempted to find differences in the perceptions of African Americans and Caucasians in teacher education programs regarding program elements that were important to their success. No statistically significant differences were found in the perceptions of African Americans and Caucasian graduates. Elements important to program success were identified as advisors, professors and flexibility within the curriculum. Some components of Allen's study are found in the present study. African Americans and Caucasians in a teacher education program were interviewed to learn the secrets of their success and sources of support. Allen used a mixed-method design to gather data from more than two hundred students. The present study is a case study of five students. Allen's study takes place in a large, predominately white university and the current study takes place in three settings - a historically black university, a small Christian university, and a large state university.

Bryan (2006), Geisler (2007), Hunt (2007), and Cox (2007) all studied factors affecting adult or nontraditional student persistence but the studies targeted programs designed for adult or nontraditional students. Allen (2008) researched the differences in perceptions between African American and Caucasian students enrolled in a teacher education program but the study was not limited to nontraditional or adult students. The current study targeted a specific group of students, nontraditional females, in teacher education programs in three university settings. One student attended a Christian university as in Bryan's study and students of different races were included as in Allen's study. Motivational factors and barriers to persistence were examined in Geisler, Hunt, and Cox's research and were also evaluated in the current study.

Previous retention and persistence studies indicate that situational barriers pose many problems for nontraditional female students. Thomas (2001) asserts that many of the studies related to the educational experiences of nontraditional or adult women were based on the experiences of white women. Thomas articulates that women of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds enter higher education institutions with different sets of experiences, expectations, and psychological dynamics and often face situational and dispositional challenges that can hinder their academic progress.

According to Kao and Thompson (2003), ethnic groups may differ in educational attainment because cultural orientations of certain ethnic groups may promote or discourage academic achievement, with White and Asian American students usually performing at a higher level than other racial groups throughout the academic experience. Thomas (2001) and Kao and Thompson's (2003) work suggests that a study consisting of nontraditional female students of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds may yield

differences in perceived situational and dispositional challenges to persistence based on ethnicity.

This study looked at the experiences, behaviors, and beliefs of five nontraditional female students in teacher education programs. One of the participants was African-American, three were Caucasian, and the remaining participant had Swedish and Spanish roots. The youngest participant was thirty-five years old and the oldest was sixty-one. The internal and external risk factors, life roles, barriers encountered and support systems utilized by the nontraditional students were explored.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the beliefs, behaviors, and support systems that enabled nontraditional female students to persist in a teacher education program to completion. This chapter details the design and context of the study as well as the participant and site selections. Data collection, analysis, and validity are addressed and the role of the researcher is discussed.

### Overall Approach and Rationale

Qualitative research is a broad approach to the study of social phenomena that takes place in the natural world and uses multiple methods that are humanistic and interactive. Qualitative research approaches include ethnography, case studies, document or content analysis, and naturalistic observation (Creswell, 2005; Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006). Qualitative research is emergent and unfolds throughout the study (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Bogdan and Bilken (2007) identify the five features common to qualitative research as: naturalistic, descriptive data, concern with process, inductive, and meaning. Qualitative research is the appropriate method for this study because it meets the criteria according to Marshall and Rossman (1999) and Bogdan and Bilken (2007). The proposed study collected descriptive data and interpreted its meaning.

This study utilized a case study as the qualitative research approach. Before conducting a case study, one must consider the types of case studies often employed in educational research. A case may be a single individual or several individuals separately or in a group. A case may also be a program, events, activities, or a process with a series of steps (Creswell, 2005). Case studies provide intensive description and analysis of a

phenomenon or social unit that is defined within specific boundaries. An advantage of a case study is that it is “anchored in real life” and “permits an in-depth examination of factors that explain present status and that influence change over time” (Ary, et. al, 2006, p. 457).

Case studies may entail multiple methods such as interviews, observations, document analysis, and surveys (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In a case study, the goal is to determine why an individual behaves as she does. To accomplish this goal, researchers can probe the past and present actions, environment, emotions, and thoughts of participants. Intensive probing may present relationships that were previously unsuspected (Ary et.al, 2006). Qualitative case studies are differentiated according to the size of the bounded case and the intent of the case analysis. In a collective case study, an issue or concern is selected, with multiple cases illustrating the issue (Creswell, 2007). The issue in this study was the persistence of nontraditional female students in a teacher education program. Five students, or cases, are illustrated in the study, with an analysis of the collective data.

#### The Role/Qualifications of the Researcher

The role of the researcher is to build rapport with participants to create a level of comfort and trust. The researcher is currently serving as a program coordinator at one of the universities described in the study. The researcher did not have a personal relationship with any of the participants prior to the study, but had the opportunity to speak with the students on one occasion during a workshop. All of the participants were enrolled in clinical practice when the researcher was hired at the university, which means that none of the participants were taught by this researcher. The researcher did not meet the

participants from the other settings prior to the study, but was able to build rapport with participants through phone conversations. Professionally, this researcher has taught nontraditional female students at the community college and university levels over the last four years.

### Selection of Participants

Purposive, or purposeful, sampling is used in qualitative studies to select participants exhibiting certain criteria of interest to the study (Ary, et. al, 2006). In case study research, an issue is explored within a bounded system. The bounded system in this study is teacher education programs in three settings. The criterion for participation includes age, life roles, and student classification. Three of the participants completed teacher education programs in December 2008 and the other two participants were scheduled to complete program requirements in May 2009.

To recruit participants, the researcher distributed information about the study to directors of teacher education and public school staff. The information was passed to potential participants via an email containing the purpose of the study, parameters and expectations of participants. Sixteen nontraditional females over the age of 30 responded to the study announcement. After speaking with each participant to gather details about their prior experiences and reasons for enrolling in a teacher education program, five participants were selected. The experiences of each participant vary greatly, thus providing different perspectives on the issue being studied.

Three of the participants completed teacher education programs at a historically black university, one was educated at a small Christian university, and one chose to pursue a degree at a large state university. One of the participants is African American,



three are Caucasian, and one has a Swedish and Spanish background. Four participants are classified as degree seeking students and one is classified as a licensure-only student. The term “licensure-only” means that the student has a bachelor’s degree but has returned to college to seek teacher licensure. The student has to complete coursework and clinical practice to qualify for licensure. A brief description of each participant follows:

Nikki is a Caucasian female in her mid-thirties. She has two children and a live-in companion. Nikki worked in fast food restaurants and convenience stores most of her adult life. Nikki loves children and felt that it was time to build a career as well as fulfill her dream of completing college. In December 2008, Nikki completed a teacher education program at a historically black university as a degree-seeking student in elementary education.

Courtney is a forty-one-year-old Caucasian female, who is also a wife and mother. Courtney attended college twenty years ago but did not complete degree requirements. Courtney never considered enrolling in college until her husband faced life-threatening health issues. After much consideration, Courtney enrolled in a teacher education program as a means to provide for herself and her children in the event that her husband could no longer provide for the family. She will complete degree requirements in elementary education from a small Christian university in a few weeks.

Carmella is a 42-year-old Caucasian female. She is married with two daughters. Carmella attended college 20 years ago with a major in communication. She was unable to complete degree requirements due to family issues. Carmella is seeking a degree in special education through a distance learning program at a large state university. She will complete degree requirements within a few weeks.

Debra is an African-American female in her mid-forties who juggled the roles of wife, mother, and student to reach her goal. She has worked in public schools for a number of years as an administrative assistant and computer lab manager. This participant completed the teacher education program at a historically black university as a degree-seeking student in elementary education.

Susie is a sixty-one-year-old female with a Swedish and Spanish heritage. Susie was discouraged from pursuing higher education most of her life and decided to pursue teacher licensure to fulfill a life-long dream. Susie worked hard to complete the teacher education program as a licensure-only student in special education before becoming eligible for social security. She attended a historically black university.

#### Selection of Sites

Three universities located within a one hundred mile radius serve as the settings for the study. The settings were chosen because they represent three types of universities: a historically black university, a Christian university, and a large state university. The historically black university was chosen as a site for this study because of its history as a teacher college for African American students. The university has approximately 3,000 students enrolled and has expanded its program offerings in the last five years to meet the needs of the communities served. The university's primary service area includes twenty-one counties in the northeastern part of the state in which it is located; however, students from almost every state in the United States and several countries are among the attendees. The university is located in a small city with a population of less than 30,000 and is approximately one hour away from a major city in one direction and a popular beach in another direction.

Some of the services available to students include career services, counseling, tutoring, library, financial aid and health services. Students may also participate in programs such as athletics, Greek organizations, student government, and international programs. Cultural and social events are held on campus regularly to educate and entertain students. The school offers students a chance to unwind through bowling, billiards, and video games located in its commuter center.

A small Christian university located about fifty miles from the historically black university is the second setting in the study. A group of Baptist families founded the university in the 1800's. The university is located in a close-knit community and is within an hour's drive from a major city. Approximately 1,000 students hailing from over twenty states and ten countries are enrolled at the university. The university offers small class sizes, athletics, and opportunities to participate in clubs. Financial assistance is available to the majority of students. A library, instructional materials center, tutoring center, learning center, music studio and campus bookstore are available to meet the needs of students.

The last setting is a state university with an enrollment of nearly 25,000 students. The university is located about ninety miles away from the historically black university and less than fifty miles from the Christian university. The original purpose of the state university was to produce teachers. The university still supplies the majority of schools in its state with professional teachers but is also considered an emerging national research university.

The state university offers a wide range of services and activities to satisfy students academically and socially. The university's distance learning program has

allowed students in remote areas to complete degree programs. Athletics, arts and entertainment, a student center, large library, financial aid, career services and tutoring are a few of the services offered to students.

#### Data Collection Process

Using a collective case study as the framework, this study sought to understand factors related to nontraditional female student persistence at the target universities. Case studies employ multiple methods of data collection including observations, interviews, and document analysis (Ary, et.al, 2006). In this study, data was collected through interviews, home visits and document analysis. Document analysis included a review of academic transcripts, personal reflections documented in professional portfolios, and evaluations of field studies and clinical practice while enrolled in the teacher education program. Reflections within the portfolios are indicative of the participant's frame of thought during certain periods in the teacher education program. In each teacher education program, participants were required to provide work samples and reflect upon their experiences at established checkpoints.

Each nontraditional female participated in in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews took place over a period of time rather than in a single sitting. Participant interviews and document analysis were conducted over a period of two months. General interview questions were developed based on the research questions and theoretical framework of the study. The interview questions were used as a guide; additional questions were asked in response to information garnered from participants. One cannot readily predict the specific information from participants that may become relevant to a case. Quickly reviewing the responses of participants and asking "why" questions may

lead one to conclude that an immediate need exists to search for more evidence (Yin, 2009).

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and member checks were utilized to ensure accuracy of transcriptions. Member checks are also known as participant feedback. This is a process in which the researcher asks participants to review field notes or tape recordings for accuracy and meaning. A review of the researcher's interpretation of data allows the participants to identify or clarify any inaccuracies (Ary, et.al, 2006). Data collected during interviews were transcribed and reviewed by participants before subsequent interviews were scheduled.

Phone conversations and informal meetings between the researcher and participants were held to address participant questions and concerns prior to scheduling interviews. The purpose of the study and methodology were explained to the participants and consent forms were signed before interviews took place. After participants consented to the study, interviews and home visits were scheduled. The researcher scheduled interviews according to the availability and preference of each participant to obtain as much data as possible. The experiences, behaviors, beliefs, and support systems of individuals participating in the study were discussed during the individual interviews in the participants' homes. Interviews were audio recorded to guarantee the accuracy of transcriptions. Two-column memoing took place during home visits to record observations and running thoughts. Notes taken during the individual meetings did not contain identifying information that could be linked to participants; instead notes and transcripts contained pseudonyms. Data was collected for each guiding question as follows:

*Guiding question #1: How do nontraditional female students describe their experiences in a teacher education program?* To address this question, each participant reviewed reflections of her experiences in the teacher education program documented in their electronic portfolios throughout their educational journey. Reflections included major events and turning points as perceived by each participant. After written reflections were reviewed, participants were interviewed individually and asked to share the obstacles and triumphs experienced while enrolled in the teacher education program. Interviews were audio recorded to ensure accuracy in the transcription process. Professional portfolios compiled by participants while enrolled in the teacher education program, transcripts, and evaluations of clinical practice were reviewed by the researcher.

*Guiding question #2: What are the risk factors to nontraditional female student persistence created by internal sources?* To address this question, the definition of dispositional factors as categorized by Cross (1981) and examples of personal issues that may affect persistence as identified by MacKinnon-Slaney (1994) were explained to participants. Each nontraditional female participated in semi-structured interviews concerning the factors in their lives that had an effect on persistence. Interviews were audio recorded to provide a verbatim record of the responses. Documents including academic transcripts and evaluations during field observations and clinical practice were evaluated to see if obstacles faced during a given semester were reflected in student performance. Written reflections of participant experiences also provided data for this question.

*Guiding question #3: What are the risk factors to nontraditional female student persistence created by external sources?* This question was addressed through in-depth

interviews conducted in the participants' homes. External risk factors or barriers attributed to situational and institutional factors by Cross (1981) will be explained to participants. With the numerous roles and responsibilities of nontraditional female students, situational and institutional barriers may place participants at risk of attrition. MacKinnon-Slaney's (1994) model of Adult Persistence in Learning suggests that an institution's environmental issues greatly affect the persistence of individual students. Written reflections of participant experiences also addressed risk factors created by external sources.

*Guiding question #4: What types of support systems help nontraditional female students persist in a teacher education program?* All participants discussed the internal and external support systems perceived as necessary for nontraditional female students to persist in a teacher education program. Necessary supports identified by participants were compared to the actual supports that were available to the students when enrolled in the teacher education program. The four types of supports necessary for motivation and persistence may include relationships, goals, teachers and peers, and a positive view of self (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999). Interviews were audio taped for accuracy. Participants were asked to reflect upon the behaviors and beliefs that they credit as a direct link to their persistence in the teacher education program.

#### Data Analysis Procedures

Creswell (2007) explains that data analysis in a case study consists of describing the case and its setting in detail. Data was analyzed using categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, looking for patterns, and naturalistic generalizations. Categorical aggregation is a form of data analysis in which the researcher looks for meaning in a

collection of events, behaviors, or activities. Direct interpretation involves the examination of a single instance and draws meaning without looking for multiple occurrences. Pulling the data apart and putting it back together in a way that appears to be more meaningful is a part of direct interpretation.

As in other forms of qualitative research, patterns are established and the researcher looks for similarities and differences among categories. Cross-case analysis occurred when searching for patterns. The last step in the data analysis process is the development of naturalistic generalizations. Findings from the data were used to make generalizations that nontraditional female students can apply to themselves or that universities can apply to teacher education programs.

#### *Coding, Evaluation, and Interpretation*

Data was collected as outlined in this proposal. Data gathered from the individual interviews and documents was comprehensively analyzed, which means that it was organized, coded, recoded, summarized, and interpreted. Transcripts and audio recordings from the individual interviews were reviewed at least three times to ensure accuracy and to make sure that the researcher was familiar with all data. After the data was organized, preliminary coding occurred to place data into general themes and categories. The categories were internally consistent and distinct.

Coded data was reviewed several times and recoded as new categories emerged. Once all data was sorted, the researcher determined if any of the categories fit together in themes. Summarizing followed this step with the merging of categories into patterns by using connections in the data. After analysis and development of patterns, the data was interpreted to extract meaning and insights.



### *Justification of Analysis Methodology*

Analyzing the data through coding, evaluation and interpretation is the appropriate analysis methodology for this study because it allows data from interviews and documents to be categorized into themes. In order to construct meaning from transcribed data, it is necessary to repeat the process of coding, evaluation, and interpretation several times. Data for the individual interviews associated with each guiding question was coded, evaluated, and analyzed independently to identify patterns and themes in the data.

### *Triangulation of Data*

Collecting data from one source may lead to a narrow interpretation of the data. It is important to have checks and balances in a research study. One way to promote accuracy in a study is to collect data from several sources. Several sources of data were collected and analyzed to create a clear picture of the risk factors, behaviors, beliefs, and support systems of nontraditional female students. Two of the data sources involved direct participation by the nontraditional female students – in-depth interviews and written reflections.

Additional sources of data that gave a snapshot of the participants were examined. Student transcripts and evaluations during field studies and observations were reviewed to determine if performance aligned with periods of difficulty or high levels of support. Times of difficulty described by the participants may be reflected in academic performance by a decrease in the grade point average or poor evaluations for clinical practice. Times of great external support may also be evident through steady or improved academic performance.

Another source of data important to the study was notes written by the researcher in the form of two-column memoing during home visits. Facts documented by the researcher during in-depth interviews were compared to transcribed data. Running thoughts written during two-column memoing were checked against patterns that emerged in the data. Professional feedback was utilized as trends in the data became apparent to eliminate bias in interpretation as well as to guarantee accuracy in interpretation. Examining the various data sources helped the researcher present in-depth pictures of the participants individually and collectively.

### Validity Issues

The integrity of a research study is dependent upon issues of validity. Validity involves the accuracy and truthfulness of the research findings. In qualitative research, validity is referred to as credibility. Ary et.al (2006) lists five types of evidence through which credibility may be established. The evidences are structural corroboration, consensus, referential or interpretive adequacy, theoretical adequacy, and control of bias.

#### *Credibility*

This study ensured credibility through consensus. Peer review, or professional feedback, is one method in which consensus is demonstrated. Peer review is a process in which colleagues are given raw data along with the researcher's interpretation. The reviewers determine if the interpretation is reasonable based on the evidence provided (Ary et.al, 2006). After data was interpreted, two qualitative researchers reviewed the raw data and interpretation. If the interpretation was deemed unreasonable by the peer reviewers, the researcher would have repeated the analysis process and presented it to the reviewers until a consensus was reached by the researcher and reviewers.

A second type of evidence that provided credibility was referential adequacy. Member checks is a strategy used to guarantee referential adequacy. In member checks, participants are asked to review field notes or tape recordings for accuracy. This allows participants to clarify actions or recorded statements and eliminates misunderstandings that could jeopardize the findings of the study (Ary et.al, 2006). Member checks gave the participants in the study a chance to verify the researcher's interpretation of audio recordings and written reflections.

The last evidence that was used to ensure credibility was a control of bias. Bias may arise from "selective observations, hearing only what one wants to hear, or allowing personal attitudes, preferences, and feelings to affect interpretation of data" (Ary et.al, 2006, p. 507). To control bias, the researcher kept a journal that included a daily schedule of the study, a methods log describing decisions and rationale for those decisions, and reflections of thoughts, questions, and problems. Keeping this type of journal is part of a process called reflexivity. Reflexivity involves using self-reflection to recognize and seek out one's own biases (Ary et.al, 2006).

### *Limitations*

The study involved a small number of students from teacher education programs at three universities. Choosing one nontraditional female student from each department at the universities would make the study more relevant to the universities at large. The results of the study may not be generalizable to programs other than teacher education because the field observations and clinical requirements of teacher education programs may affect students differently than programs that do not have such requirements.

The focus of the study was nontraditional female students; the views of

nontraditional male students in teacher education programs were not considered. It is possible that the risk factors and support systems related to persistence may be somewhat generalizable as several studies have shown similarities in the roles reported by nontraditional females and situational barriers faced (Cross, 1981; Compton & Schock, 2000; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). Though it is possible that the findings may apply to the general population of nontraditional female students, this study applies specifically to the research settings.

### *Ethical Issues*

It is the belief of this researcher that honesty, integrity, and consideration for all involved in the study are critical to the research process. This project was guided by the researcher's beliefs. Participants were never deceived or forced to answer questions that made them uncomfortable. Agreement or refusal to participate in the study did not help or hurt the participants in any way. Participants were not compensated for the study in any form. Reporting of the findings were truthful for each participant and were not skewed to please the target institutions or the researcher.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Nontraditional females over the age of thirty commonly have significant risk factors that may hinder program persistence (Peter & Horn, 2005). The beliefs, behaviors, and support systems of five nontraditional females were examined to determine how they were able to persist in teacher education programs. The focus of this research project was the identification of common threads among each case in terms of experiences, risk factors, internal support systems, and external support systems relevant to the persistence of nontraditional female students in a teacher education program.

The theoretical framework of the study employed the research of Cross (1981), MacKinnon-Slaney (1994) and Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999). The guiding questions were based on situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers as categorized by Cross (1981), the Adult Persistence in Learning Model developed by MacKinnon-Slaney (1994) and supports related to motivation and persistence identified by Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999). The study was guided by four research questions: 1) How do nontraditional female students describe their experiences in a teacher education program? 2) What are the risk factors to nontraditional female student persistence created by internal sources? 3) What are the risk factors to nontraditional female student persistence created by external sources? and 4) What types of support systems help nontraditional female students persist in a teacher education program?

Data for each participant was analyzed as separate cases. This chapter provides an analysis of the collective case consisting of five individual case studies. The research questions are addressed for the collective case to reveal patterns in experiences, barriers, and support systems. Five nontraditional females from three university settings

participated in the study. The settings included a historically black university, a small Christian university, and a large state university. The ages of the participants ranged from 35 to 61.

### Nikki

Nikki is a 35-year-old Caucasian female who describes herself as a mother, employee, volunteer, and live-in companion. Nikki has a son and a daughter in elementary school. She graduated from a small historically black university in December 2008 with a degree in elementary education. Before enrolling in a teacher education program, Nikki was a full-time employee at a convenience store.

In high school, Nikki was an A-B student who never got into trouble. After graduation, most of her friends moved away from her hometown to attend college. Nikki badly wanted to go to an out-of-state college but was urged by her father to attend a local community college for two years. Nikki felt out of place at the community college and did not find a degree program that interested her. She eventually dropped out of college and soon after, she met and fell in love with her current boyfriend.

Nikki had intentions of returning to college but changed her mind once she discovered that she was pregnant with her first child. She turned her attention to being a stay-at-home mom. Nikki decided that she would return to college when her son was old enough to attend public school. Nikki's plan to return to college did not work as expected as she once again delayed enrollment in college due to another pregnancy. After Nikki's daughter entered kindergarten, she created a plan of action and took the steps necessary to achieve her goal of degree completion.

### *Reasons for Entering Teacher Education*

After graduating from high school, Nikki allowed thirteen years to pass before committing herself to full-time study at a local university. Nikki worked in fast food restaurants and convenience stores for most of those years. She knew that she did not want to work behind a cash register for all of her adult life, yet she still did not know where she belonged. When Nikki's children began school, she observed many things taking place in the classrooms that were disturbing. Nikki's dissatisfaction with her children's teachers was the driving force behind her decision to enter teacher education.

Nikki explains

The reason why I started in the education field and the reason why I wanted to become a teacher is I have two kids of my own and I noticed different things. All children should have the chance to learn and with my youngest daughter struggling, I thought that she was not getting the proper education that she needed to expand her knowledge in school. So I thought that by going into the education field, I can not only help my daughter but I can also help other kids that are struggling in the everyday things. All students need good teachers and those who are willing to go that extra mile to help their students (personal interview, March 31, 2009).

As she reflected upon different events in her life, Nikki identified additional reasons for enrolling in a teacher education program. She feels that teaching is what she was supposed to do right after high school; it just took time for her to figure it out. Nikki recalled her experiences in high school and realized that the seeds were planted for her current career choice many years ago.

I think maybe that it all went back to high school. I always watched kids and everything and everybody always told me that you're good with kids and everything and one day maybe you'll be a teacher. I thought about it when I was in high school. I did the same things my parents did, you know, teach abc's and how to write. And it just come easy and I mean I didn't struggle with it or anything. So I think maybe back in high school and once I got older I got to my roots. I thought maybe I will go back to school and do teaching of some kids and everything (Nikki, personal interview, March 31, 2009).

Nikki stated that when she was a teenager, parents in her neighborhood always asked her to develop learning activities for their children. She has always been creative and said "Maybe I was going toward teaching; I just wasn't sure until I got to where I had kids of my own and really experienced what was going on in the teaching field" (Nikki, personal interview, April 29, 2009). Nikki felt that her prior experiences with children would help her succeed in a teacher education program.

#### *Experiences in Teacher Education Program*

When asked to describe her experiences in the teacher education program, Nikki quickly replied that it was a struggle. Juggling home, school and work proved to be much harder than Nikki ever imagined. She contended with internal and external factors that placed her at-risk of dropping out of the program. Nikki had dropped out of college once and did not want to let herself down again. Institutional, dispositional, and situational barriers made it difficult for Nikki to complete her degree, but she was determined to carve out a better life for herself and relied on a support network to overcome the barriers.



### *Internal Barriers*

MacKinnon-Slaney (1994) identified internal sources that may affect persistence as self-perceptions, sense of competence, and self-awareness. Nikki battled doubt and feelings of despair. She did not know if she would be able to juggle home, school, and work. She worried about her ability to complete her assignments, experienced guilt about spending less time with her children, and felt that school was causing problems in her relationship. Nikki recalled, “There were struggles, there were times I felt like I wasn’t gonna make it and having problems with the children, relationships and everything, there were points where I just wanted to quit and give up” (personal interview, March 31, 2009).

Nikki lacked a sense of self-competence at the beginning of her junior year in the teacher education program. The junior year of the program is when students are officially admitted to the upper division of teacher education. Nikki was overwhelmed by the program requirements and had a difficult time with her course schedule and children’s schedule. Nikki felt like she would fail and her transcript shows a decrease in her grade point average during the first semester of her junior year. Nikki earned at least one A each semester prior to her junior year. When making the official transition to the teacher education program, Nikki earned two B’s, a C, and a D, which resulted in a 2.25 grade point average for the semester. With support from others, Nikki rebounded the next semester as evidenced by making two A’s and 4 B’s for a 3.33 grade point average.

### *External Barriers*

Attempting to juggle all of her life roles led to self-doubt and the creation

of internal barriers for Nikki. The same issue also created external barriers. Nikki experienced external barriers when trying to fulfill the roles of mother, student, employee, and companion. Nikki described her experience

Overall, it was kind of a struggle being a full-time student along with being a mother. So also during that time I also worked. So, doing all that, it was a lot of struggle because it was hard to find people to help me to work around my school schedule. And also my work schedule, plus being a parent because having 2 children. And my son always played sports. So I had sports and everything on the side. It was hard to find time to do everything.... Sometimes having to find the convenience to sit in classes and fit in my kids time and, even though you are in college, you still have homework and everything. And doing that time, it took away from my kids because my kids still needed me to help them. So actually, during the whole school time, it took time away from my kids, which I didn't like (personal interview, March 31, 2009).

External barriers are those caused by others or may be the result of a current situation. In Nikki's case, her situation placed her at-risk of dropping out of her program. She needed to be in two places at one time, needed to study and help her children with their homework at the same time, and also needed to contribute to the family's income. Nikki's situation was overwhelming but with assistance from others, she was able to find a workable solution for the situation.

Situational barriers were not the only source of external barriers. Institutional barriers posed problems for Nikki. Course availability and field observations/clinical practice were two external barriers that created a hardship for Nikki.

Field observations were very hard. Especially during the last part, during student teaching 'cause during student teaching you have to be there the whole amount of time that your teacher is.... I mean, it was a struggle because sometimes I didn't get out of school until 4:30 or 5:00. And it took a lot of time to get everything situated but I got through it. Once I got into my junior year, the university I go to made it very hard because they rotated their classes. When I wanted to take a particular subject, I couldn't. I had to wait the following semester which that was putting me behind in graduating.... I think those of us who were nontraditional students that had children, I believe that the university could have helped out... with parents that had kids who went to school (Nikki, personal interview, March 31, 2009).

Nikki thinks that the university could have supported nontraditional students by offering more classes each semester or by providing a place for children to study or play during class hours. Nikki often felt that she had to choose between her children's needs and program requirements.

### *Behaviors and Beliefs*

One of the reasons Nikki enrolled in a teacher education program was because she believed that children needed fun, positive classroom environments. Nikki believed that she was the right person to create that type of environment for children. Majoring in teacher education was an easy decision for Nikki but she admits that the transition from mom to student was scary.

During the first two semesters that Nikki attended the university, she felt good about her decision to return to school. She adjusted to her new schedule with minimal

problems and focused on becoming a teacher. The first two years of study consist primarily of general education courses. Nikki was officially admitted to the teacher education program in her junior year and began taking professional and specialty courses.

In the third year, I kind of struggled and things got a lot harder to find the time to do everything.... So my grades started dropping and I was like 'I'm not gonna get through' or 'I'm gonna be here continuously on and on and on' because I couldn't fit the schedule in with my kids school. I never thought I was getting out....I was so close that I was not gonna stop. Just push and push and push through. So if I didn't have the strength to go any further, I wouldn't have never made it. My goal was I was gonna graduate in 4 years. No matter what I was gonna find a way and I was gonna graduate on time. And I did. I was proud of myself (Nikki, personal interview, March 31, 2009).

The beginning of the third year of study caused quite a few problems with scheduling and led Nikki to believe that she was not going to complete her degree program. Nikki began to unravel and subsequently found herself dealing with problems at school and at home. After conducting a self-assessment, Nikki vowed to continue her studies and changed her thoughts and beliefs. Nikki accompanied a renewed belief in her abilities with a change in behavior. Instead of shouldering all of the duties and responsibilities of home and school alone, Nikki asked for the support of others and created a schedule.

I had to have the time for school and kids, their tasks and everything, their sports and everything. I would write a whole complete schedule. I would give myself plenty of time where I could do my classes and have time for them and their

homework, my time for my homework and working at night. So I juggled everything with a real nice schedule (Nikki, personal interview, March 31, 2009).

### *Support Systems*

Nikki overcame internal and external barriers that presented challenges to persistence with support from family and peers. Connecting with other students helped Nikki realize that she was not alone in her struggle to balance family, work, and school. Nikki stated

By talking to my peers – I actually had some peers who had the same struggles that I did – a lot of the students, even though I’m older, there were some younger students that had kids too and were going through the same thing (personal interview, March 31, 2009).

Conversing with peers gave Nikki an outlet to vent frustrations about program requirements. The exchange of ideas between Nikki and her peers yielded solutions to some of the issues involving school and family.

The times that classes were offered posed a problem for Nikki. She did not want to spend almost every night in class because it would take too much time away from her family. Nikki asked her instructors to help her with this issue. The instructors brainstormed with Nikki to find a workable solution to her dilemma. Nikki fondly recalled the way in which a couple of her professors went beyond the call of duty.

I had two very good professors. When I was facing hardships, they would sit down and talk to me and tell me “Okay, you’ll get through this. Just don’t stress over everything.” They helped me figure out that I don’t need to stress as much. They helped me find other ways of doing things beyond...like some of them even

gave me the chance to, instead of coming to campus doing classes, they helped me find online classes through working on the computer and everything. That helped a lot through finding online courses (Nikki, personal interview, March 31, 2009).

Peers and instructors supported Nikki in her efforts, but the support that sustained her throughout her journey in the teacher education program came from her family members. Family members encouraged Nikki from the day that she mentioned her desire to return to college to complete a degree in education. Nikki's family had the following reaction when she told them of her decision to enroll in the local university.

Well, my parents really supported me. My father told me to "Go do it. If that's what you wanna do, go do it".... And my mama, she was very supportive and everything 'cause she's like "It's about time you want to do something besides work at fast food or convenience stores and everything". My boyfriend's parents – they were always supportive – like because when they would always see me, how I interacted with kids, they thought the teaching profession was the best way to go because of the way I interacted with kids (Nikki, personal interview, March 31, 2009).

Nikki relied heavily on her family for support during the junior and senior years of study in the teacher education program. The university's classes began before public schools opened, which meant that Nikki had to arrange childcare for her two children. In addition to that, field observations and student teaching required Nikki to spend many hours in classroom settings. Nikki declared that she could not have completed these requirements without her family.

I really wouldn't have ever got through if it wasn't for my parents and my boyfriend's parents. They really helped watching the kids here and there, especially when college started before school started. There was like a week in between school starting and college and they really took time out and took the kids for me for those weeks that college started before regular school started. Field observations were very hard...especially during student teaching...So basically, I had a good support system with that because their grandmother offered to watch them during that whole time, during the whole semester and watch them until I got out (Nikki, personal interview, March 31, 2009).

Another source of support was Nikki's confidence in her abilities to work effectively with children. As a teenager, Nikki gained experience in developing activities and managing small groups of children. Nikki drew upon her high school experiences, content taught in teacher education courses, and experience as a mother when completing field observations and student teaching. Nikki's age was viewed as an advantage during student teaching. She stated "I kind of knew that I had a little more feel of teaching and learning about children's experiences than some of the 18-, 19-, and 20-year-olds because they didn't have children of their own" (Nikki, personal interview, April 29, 2009). When she first enrolled in the university, Nikki thought that her age was a liability. By the end of her program, she knew that her age and practical experiences were two of the reasons why she overcame every obstacle and completed her degree.

#### *Summary of Nikki's Experiences*

Nikki had enjoyed working with children for as long as she could remember. At the age of 31, she decided to turn her hobby into a career by majoring in elementary

education at the local university. Nikki attended school full-time with a goal of degree completion within a four-year period. Nikki was ecstatic about the idea of returning to college. The feelings of ecstasy were short lived when the reality of class assignments, work, and family life was more than Nikki could handle alone.

Nikki began to doubt her abilities to keep everything together. She realized that needing help and support from others did not mean she had failed; instead it meant that she was not invincible. Peers, instructors, and family members agreed to help Nikki conquer the barriers in her path. Nikki developed a schedule to bring a sense of organization to her life. The schedule listed specific times for activities related to school and home. Abiding by the schedule, relying on family members to care for her children, and refusing to quit are the reasons that Nikki can proudly say that she is a graduate of a teacher education program in elementary education.

#### Courtney

Courtney is a 41-year-old married Caucasian female and is the mother of two sons, ages 14 and 18. When the first interview with Courtney took place, she was six weeks away from completing her degree in elementary education. Courtney attended a small Christian university in her community. She has lived in the same town her whole married life and felt at home at the university. Courtney's educational journey began in 1985 and culminates in the awarding of a bachelor's degree twenty-four years later.

After high school, Courtney attended college but was unsure of what she wanted to do with her life. In 1989, Courtney decided to get married and had her first child a year later. When her son was a toddler, Courtney enrolled in classes at the local community college. The decision to enroll in the community college was made primarily



for personal fulfillment. Courtney felt that she needed adult interaction and taking courses could meet that need. Courtney was happy at the community college and excelled academically. She earned A's in every class except one and the grade for that one class was a B.

Courtney became pregnant with her second child while attending the community college. With a couple of classes left to take, Courtney decided to leave the community college to be a stay-at-home mom. The instructors at the community college encouraged Courtney to complete her associate's degree but Courtney dropped out of college. Choosing to leave the college was easy for Courtney because she did not have any worries about life or money at that time.

#### *Reasons for Entering Teacher Education Program*

Courtney was content with her lifestyle as a stay-at-home mom. She loved caring for her family and having the time to attend her sons' school functions and extracurricular activities. She enjoyed her experience at the community college but did not have a burning desire to complete her degree. Everything in Courtney's life was going well and returning to school was not on her 'to-do' list. In 2001, one major event forced Courtney to make a decision. Her husband faced major health issues and Courtney faced the reality of her situation. Courtney explained

In 2001, my husband went to have some outpatient surgery done, thinking he had reflux.... He had a massive heart attack in the hospital and only had 10% of his heart working after this.... I started thinking I'd better have a plan B because I was shocked that this could happen, I was very vulnerable, and I realized that I could not support my children because I had not completed my education. And

my world was turned upside down. So I went back to college (personal interview, April 5, 2009).

Courtney recalled a trip to the pool with her family that made her assess her current situation and future needs. A gentleman walked up to Courtney's husband to offer words of encouragement and to wish him well in his recovery. Words that were meant to be uplifting had the opposite effect on Courtney. The gentleman's words served as an eye-opener for Courtney.

A gentleman told my husband "I'm so glad you made it. I don't know what Courtney would have done." And I really thought about that. It hurt my feelings and I thought "What would I have done?" I would have worked a minimum wage job and I wouldn't have been able to really support them. And I started thinking...you know...you can't hold on to today, you have to start thinking about tomorrow...and he's taken such good care of us. And I didn't think about there could be issues later on down the road (Courtney, personal interview, April 5, 2009).

#### *Experiences in Teacher Education Program*

Courtney viewed her experiences in a teacher education program as positive overall. During the three year period that Courtney was enrolled at the Christian university, she jumped over hurdles and confronted barriers that placed her at risk of attrition. Given her husband's health outlook, Courtney knew that she had to finish her degree to secure the family's future. She felt a sense of comfort and respect at the university.

### *Internal Barriers*

Internal barriers are those that affect how we think and feel about our abilities and ourselves. Courtney identified her age as a barrier. She felt that she was too old to return to college, but knew that she had to take this step for her family. Another barrier that placed Courtney at risk of attrition was that she did not personally embrace the idea of returning to school. When she enrolled at the university, it was for her family only. She did not have intrinsic motivation at the beginning of the program. She viewed returning to school as something she *had* to do instead of something she wanted to do.

Before entering the teacher education program, Courtney had a fear of computers. She worried that she wouldn't be able to use the new computers. Courtney had no reason to use computers on a regular basis and was afraid of the unknown. She also worried about class assignments and writing papers even before classes began. Courtney battled her fears and enrolled in the university with her family in mind.

### *External Barriers*

External barriers are those that arise from sources that one may not be able to control. Courtney mentioned issues at the university that were external barriers. Some of the course requirements were difficult for Courtney. She understood that certain courses were a part of the teacher education curriculum, but that did not change the fact that some courses were difficult. Of the coursework, Courtney said

Math is my biggest challenge. I've had math anxiety but I realize I can do math but its changed a lot. Like I didn't have a graphic calculator when I was in school. When my son graduated from high school, we bought him that \$100 graphing calculator but I never turned it on for myself. So, just the technology

got me, getting through the emotional math anxiety and learning how to write an APA paper were my strongest hurdles (personal interview, April 5, 2009).

When pursuing a degree, general education courses have to be completed in humanities, physical education, math, science, and other areas. Math was a big challenge for Courtney; however, another class was also challenging. That class was physical education.

The hardest thing for me to do since I've been in the university was taking the PE class.... I'll never forget one day in PE class we were playing basketball and we had to run as fast as we could and I was running as fast as I could and I fell flat on my face on the gym floor. And all the kids came running up to me asking "Mrs. Courtney, Mrs. Courtney, are you alright?" And I was like "no" (laughs) and we all learned to laugh about it. The PE and math were the hardest things (Courtney, personal interview, April 5, 2009).

Class schedules were a problem for Courtney. With very few night classes offered at the university, Courtney's only option was to attend classes during the day. After completing all of the courses, Courtney taught in a classroom for a semester under the supervision of a cooperating teacher and university supervisor. Courtney was required to remain at her school site for the entire time that the cooperating teacher remained at school. She attended staff meetings and all school functions. There were times when activities at the school conflicted with her sons' activities at their schools.

Barriers created by institutional policies or program requirements have been discussed. Another type of external barrier - situational barriers - posed risks to program completion. Courtney was thrust into the teacher education program because of her

husband's health status. She had not planned to return to college but was left with no choice. Juggling the needs of her husband and children along with full-time enrollment in the teacher education program tested Courtney's will, strength, and sanity.

### *Behaviors and Beliefs*

When she enrolled in the university, Courtney remembers thinking that she was going to complete the teacher education program. She knew that it would be a big transition, but there were no thoughts of dropping out. Courtney's success was too important for her family to entertain thoughts of quitting. Courtney said

Just knowing that I couldn't quit, that I didn't have a choice. Well in my situation, with my husband's health, that was the reality check. It's not like I can quit because I have to do this. I have to do this to secure my future and not make my husband worry about...he has his problems...you know what's going to happen to him. I just want to let him know we're going to be okay (personal interview, April 19, 2009).

Courtney believed that she was responsible for providing a future for her sons, and thus behaved in a way that ensured program success. She studied, completed assignments, and asked for help when needed. Completing a teacher education program would not only have financial rewards, it also had the potential to serve as motivation for Courtney's 18-year-old son to focus on his college courses. Courtney wanted to serve as an example for her son.

Well, my oldest son didn't think I could do this and also I wanted to prove to him that I could. 'Cause he thought I was gonna quit and then there was no way I was quitting. I was gonna show him and I feel like I helped him realize that although

he may not graduate, I *will* graduate. And he's gonna see me go across that stage, because he didn't think, because I had quit school before when I stopped going when I got pregnant with my second son, he didn't think I could do it. I wanted to prove to him that I could and I'm hoping along the way that will help him, not that I'm boastful and proud, but I'm hoping that he can see "yes, you can do it", to help him also (Courtney, personal interview, April 5, 2009).

Courtney believed that it was her duty to obtain a formal education which would allow her to be in a position to take care of herself and her sons in the future. Courtney was realistic about her family's needs, yet remained thankful that she had the opportunity to return to school before it was too late.

### *Support Systems*

The obstacles faced while enrolled in the teacher education program were many but Courtney's support network was more powerful than the barriers. One of the first things Courtney said during her first interview was that her husband and the faculty at the university supported her throughout the program. Courtney also credited the small town setting and small size of the university as sources of support.

The small Christian university that Courtney attended is not perfect. Courtney was not looking for perfection. Instead she was looking for a place to feel at home. The small size of the university proved to be an advantage for Courtney. She compared the Christian university to her experience taking a course at a large state university.

I'm very thankful for my decision to go to the small university. I went to a large university to take one class last summer and I was overwhelmed.... I know the professors (at the small university), most of them. A lot of them go to my church

and it's just...I know them. And they're there to help me. It's small enough that I can talk to professors that day or the dean or the provost...any of that. You can even talk to the president if you see him walking around campus. It's just real nice (Courtney, personal interview, April 19, 2009).

Community members and friends were another source of support for Courtney. She described her town as a small town where everybody knows everybody. Community members encouraged Courtney by asking how she was progressing in the program. Even if Courtney wanted to drop out of the program, there were too many community members invested in her well-being to allow her to quit.

I have so much support with my neighbors, with my church, and with the professors and....students. It has been a win-win situation and I have been so blessed to get a second chance and live in a small town where people support you and want the betterment for you and your family (Courtney, personal interview, April 19, 2009).

The professors were great, community members were encouraging, and peers provided emotional support. Courtney was appreciative of the support from these sources, however, the primary sources of support for Courtney were her faith in God and her husband. Courtney's husband supported her financially and emotionally throughout the teacher education program. He attended school functions with their younger son and was willing to do anything to help Courtney complete her education. Courtney thanks God for second chances and readily acknowledged the role that her faith had during the last three years in the teacher education program.

Faith played a big part and it stills plays a big part.... I just said “God, use me in some way. I hope I can help somebody. Let me get through this so I can help a young person”. I may be the only stable person that a child has seen all day and I...I’ve been blessed and I want to pass that blessing along (Courtney, personal interview, April 19, 2009).

### *Summary of Courtney’s Experiences*

After several false starts, Courtney committed to a teacher education program at a small Christian university. She was extrinsically motivated to complete the program because of her husband’s health problems. Courtney’s reason for enrolling in teacher education was to position herself to take care of her family, if necessary. The experiences in her teacher education program can be characterized as positive overall.

Courtney had many fears before she enrolled in the teacher education program, but quickly discovered that her fears were much worse than the reality of returning to school. Juggling family responsibilities and coursework was a difficult task. Support from God, family, professors, and community members sustained Courtney during her educational journey. She is grateful to all who have made the journey worth the effort.

### Carmella

Carmella is a 42-year-old Caucasian female. She is a native of California but spent most of her youth in Canada and the United Kingdom. Carmella is married with two daughters, ages 11 and 16. In a few weeks, she will complete all program requirements for a degree in special education. About three years ago, Carmella returned to school after a considerable absence. She first enrolled in a college program twenty years ago in pursuit of a degree in communications. Family circumstances prompted



Carmella to leave college before completing her degree. Carmella moved on with her life and several years later, she settled comfortably into the roles of wife and mother.

*Reasons for Entering Teacher Education Program*

Carmella found fulfillment in homeschooling her daughters and had no immediate thoughts of returning to college to complete the degree she began years ago. The decision to enroll in teacher education was impelled by a change in her husband's employment status. When her husband's job was moved overseas, Carmella had to make a decision about her role in the family. Carmella explains

My husband worked in textiles at the time and we traveled a lot, which actually went along very well with home-schooling. With what happened to textiles moving out of the country, my husband, four plus years ago, went and made a lateral change into education. In doing so, that was a big change for us financially, relocation, the whole works. At that point, I knew that it was probably time that I was going to be entering the working field and to do so, I wanted to go back and become a teacher. I had enjoyed home-schooling my children very much, so I went back into school and have been there for the past three years getting this all finished up (personal interview, April 4, 2009).

Twenty years after Carmella enrolled in college, she returned to complete her degree through a distance education program at a large state university. Course work was completed online with occasional seminars offered on the university's campus. The journey to degree completion was filled with small bumps and one major hurdle.

### *Experiences in Teacher Education Program*

Carmella received credit for general education courses taken at other universities and entered the teacher education program classified as a junior. Internal and external factors presented barriers to Carmella's persistence in the teacher education program. With support from several sources, Carmella was able to overcome every barrier to complete her degree.

#### *Internal Barriers*

Carmella had to overcome several barriers while enrolled in a teacher education program. Although grades had never been an issue for Carmella in her previous educational endeavors, dispositional barriers emerged when Carmella experienced moments when she doubted her ability to succeed in the teacher education program. Carmella knew that she could excel in the courses, but she was not sure if she could live up to the high expectations that she set for herself academically and personally. Carmella feared that she would be unable to perform well in school and at home at the same time. Carmella stated that it "certainly has been a struggle balancing with home life" (personal interview, April 4, 2009).

#### *External Barriers*

Distance education was not Carmella's first choice for course delivery. Her desire was to complete her degree in a traditional setting with face-to-face classes and scheduled times to meet each week. There are two private colleges within a close proximity to Carmella's home. After consulting with representatives from both colleges, Carmella found that many of the general education courses taken during her first stint in college did not fit into the teacher education programs. Unwilling to take an extra year of

coursework, Carmella decided to pursue another avenue – distance education. Carmella described her reason for choosing a distance education program.

When I was pursuing an avenue to go back... I had transcripts from actually several different colleges where I had picked up, dropped off, picked up, dropped off, you know, trying to go on. Most of my transcripts come from state schools. Locally... we don't have state schools. We have private colleges. And they looked at my transcripts, and while grades were not an issue, they would be looking at well, where's your religion course, or this course, or well this doesn't transfer to fit into this box over here. All of my transcripts basically showed that I would have been in the hole another year to run and catch up with what private schools were looking for in the transcript to get into the program. When I looked at the state university and they looked at my transcript, everything plugged in nicely. Yes, this is your psychology course, this is your English, this is your composition course or this is your math course. Everything had a place to go from about 20 years ago, which meant that I was coming in and really just needing the teacher education courses for special education courses and my methods courses. I didn't need to run and do that catch up work (Carmella, personal interview, April 18, 2009).

The general education courses were accepted into the teacher education program at the state university. Having the courses transfer to the university decreased the time necessary for degree completion. Though it seems as if distance education was a perfect solution for Carmella, there were still institutional barriers threatening to derail

Carmella's progress. From Carmella's standpoint, the institutional barriers resulting from the distance education format included

Missing that face-to-face contact. There are some things you cannot replace like, you know, being able to look in someone's face and reading expressions, being able to get answers to questions when you have them... to feel like you are a person, not just a number. When you are online, you're just another name on the discussion board and it's hard to put a face to someone that way. It's also harder to exchange information and work in group work. They have us working collaboratively; that's very hard to do online, to work collaboratively (laughs). So I think those are some of the large barriers there. You're missing that personal connection, that bit of humanity there that goes, you know, makes the connection (personal interview, April 4, 2009).

Carmella did not always like learning through a distance education program, but she realized that this was the only viable option and was determined to make it work to her advantage.

Carmella was confronted with a mammoth situational barrier that left her questioning herself in every area of her life. The change in her husband's job and the decision to enroll in a teacher education program meant that Carmella could no longer home school her daughters. The transition to public school had ominous consequences for Carmella's older daughter. Being unsure of herself and trying to find where she fit in the public school setting precipitated an eating disorder. Carmella identified the period of treatment for the eating disorder as the biggest barrier during her time in the teacher education program. Carmella was responsible for transporting her daughter to a treatment

center twice each week for one year. The needs of her family took priority over school, and Carmella could not fathom how she could possibly be supermom and super student at the same time.

### *Behaviors and Beliefs*

Dispositional, institutional and situational barriers threatened Carmella's completion of the teacher education program. What enabled Carmella to persist to program completion? MacKinnon-Slaney's Adult Persistence in Learning Model posits that certain issues and survival skills need to be mastered if adult students are to persist to degree completion. Carmella mastered the following personal issues during her time in the teacher education program: self-awareness, willingness to delay gratification, clarification of career and life goals, mastery of life transitions, and sense of interpersonal competence. She also mastered the learning issue of educational competence as well as found ways to manipulate the distance education program to master environmental issues within the university.

Personal issues were addressed effectively by Carmella throughout her educational journey. Carmella was extremely aware of her role in the family and prioritized accordingly. When speaking of the period in which her daughter received treatment for an eating disorder, Carmella emphasized that her daughter was her first priority. After taking care of her daughter's needs, Carmella focused on her classes and managed to complete all of her assignments on time. In fact, the stability of the courses helped Carmella sort through the personal issues she faced. Carmella stated

And at that point, I knew no matter what, it was what she was going to need and at that point, I quit working totally so that I could be here to take care of what we

had to, to get her through that. And I still maintained, somehow (laughs), I still maintained what I had to do to get through my schooling during that time... And I know there are always times, when, sorry, an assignment may be late. But I didn't have even one late assignment. Somehow, I managed to keep it all going and I think in a lot of ways, that was also something that I felt I had control over. When I didn't have control over this going on over here with my daughter, I still had control over *that* (personal interview, April 4, 2009).

Before enrolling in the teacher education program, Carmella's greatest gratification came from home-schooling her children. She made the choice to discontinue home-schooling to provide a better future for her family. Once enrolled in the teacher education program, Carmella was always clear about her career and life goals. She often reminded herself of the reasons why she returned to college. The transition to a distance education program was not easy for Carmella; however, she was able to draw from her experiences in making successful transitions in the past.

Learning issues were not a concern for Carmella. She never doubted her academic competence and expected to excel in all of her classes. The learning environment, or distance education program, was viewed as both a challenge and a blessing for Carmella. With clear goals, Carmella decided to complete her education through the avenue that was best for her family. Carmella said

It has been a both a blessing, being a virtual student to do this because otherwise I would not have been near enough to the university to complete my education. So being a virtual student has made it possible for me to actually go back and continue that education. But it was a lot more work, I think, virtual education

experience versus the face to face education experience (personal interview, April 4, 2009).

Carmella's beliefs and accompanying behaviors led to a mastery of personal and educational issues presented by a distance learning program. Carmella never believed that returning to school would be easy but she always believed that she would complete the degree requirements. When enrolled in the teacher education program, Carmella thought

That it was a long road ahead...getting from here to there pretty much, but that I was gonna make it. 'Cause I'm gonna make it. I feel that in my younger years, it was easier for me to give up and say I'm going to do it later. And now I'm looking at it and I realize each day is a gift. If I don't do it now, when am I going to do it? (personal interview, April 4, 2009).

Carmella believed that this was her appointed time to complete a teacher education program. The fact that she did not complete a degree years ago did not mean that she was destined to follow the same path this time. Carmella reflected upon a quote by Mark Twain when she needed motivation to continue along the path she had chosen.

I think of... a quote from Mark Twain basically saying twenty years from now, I don't want to regret the things that I've done, but I would hate to regret the things I didn't do. And it's been 20 years in this time from where I left off in my degree program, in my personal education, and that has been 20 years. I don't want to let it go again. I don't want to look back and regret the things I didn't do (Carmella, personal interview, April 4, 2009).

### *Support Systems*

Carmella acknowledged many sources of support during her time in the teacher education program, yet one source of support was repeatedly mentioned – her husband. Carmella acknowledges “...without a doubt, I couldn’t have gotten through the program without the support of my husband” (personal interview, April 4, 2009). Relationships, goals, teachers and peers, and self-efficacy are supports that play a major role in motivation and persistence (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999). Carmella’s relationship with her husband and daughters served as her primary source of support, yet other types of support were evident.

The distance learning environment was challenging for Carmella when she first entered the teacher education program. She missed the face-to-face contact with teachers and peers but discovered the power of internet connections. Carmella recalled

I received an email from an instructor that was a praise of my interaction on the discussion board, to bring in another dimension of interaction that is lacking sometimes in an online course. You know, before, we talked about some of the struggles in distance education, missing some of that interaction and well, she just made me feel very positive about the interaction, about the role that I have filled there online. And she talked about the interactions that strengthen the school or any system. She mentioned that my leadership skills are truly grand (voice changes, gleeful) so it just made me feel good knowing that even online, we are able to communicate who we are and people on the other end can pick up on that (personal interview, April 18, 2009).



Carmella expressed her gratitude for the instructor's encouragement via email. The support of instructors was instrumental in easing Carmella's nervousness about distance education programs. Shortly after entering the distance education program, Carmella realized that communication and support did not have to be limited to face-to-face environments. Peers also reached out to Carmella and supported her during times of despair through online discussion boards. Carmella explained

And actually, in the cohort that I am in, there were those that I connected with and I was able to share what was going on and that provided a relief. I, in turn, actually through those I had known in school, had a support network. I had a support network. It was online, some were personal calls that way, but mostly online. It was still a support network. And sometimes I look back on it and we wonder how I got through. In my cohort, there are others like myself, all in my age, situation, with family, returning to school. They've had to deal with death in the family, or moving, whatever (personal interview, April 4, 2009).

Support from immediate family members, teachers and peers, and a close friend helped Carmella focus on class assignments. Carmella maintained a 4.0 GPA while contending with the barriers in her path. Clearly defined goals and a positive view of self provided motivation to persist to program completion. Throughout her journey in the teacher education program, Carmella reminded herself that she wanted to be "able to say that I did it...I've made it. It's something that never can be taken from me" (personal interview, April 4, 2009).

### *Summary of Carmella's Experiences*

Carmella returned to college after a change in her husband's employment status. The decision to enroll in college was made primarily as a means to secure the family's future financially but the decision was also personal in that Carmella had a desire to create school environments in which children could feel safe and happy. As a child, Carmella sought security within the school setting and as an adult, she understands how schools can positively impact the lives of children.

Internal risk factors faced by Carmella included doubts about being able to handle teacher education coursework in a distance learning format. An internal battle between home and school priorities led to feelings of guilt that had to be overcome. Eventually, Carmella rationalized that her decision to complete her degree was a priority for her family because after all, she enrolled in school to help the family. External risk factors included the distance learning format and family issues. Carmella missed the face-to-face interactions of traditional classroom settings and had many sleepless nights when dealing with a family situation.

Components of the teacher education program such as class assignments, field observations and clinical experiences were not considered to be major risk factors to persistence. Situational barriers presented the biggest risk to program completion. Support from several sources assisted Carmella through the rough patches while enrolled in the teacher education program. Spousal and family support was the number one source of support that Carmella relied on to persist to program completion. Other sources of support included instructors, peers, and personal goals.

## Debra

Debra is a 45-year-old African-American female with two sons – ages 14 and 22. She has been married for almost ten years. Debra attended a historically black university located in her community and completed a degree in elementary education in December 2008. Debra's experiences in a teacher education program were not her first experiences in college. Debra obtained an associate's degree in business from a community college and then enrolled in courses at her local university in 1991. After attending the university for four or five semesters as a part-time student, Debra was unable to handle the pressures of marriage, work, and school.

I started when I was...well, actually I started back in '91, so that was a good while ago. And then I got married and that kind of took a toll on the education part. And I was like, okay, let me put that on the back burner for a little bit. Then I started back when I was 42 (Debra, personal interview, March 31, 2009).

Debra put her formal education on hold, yet learned more than she could have hoped for from her jobs as a secretary and computer lab manager in public schools. The observations made and experience gained throughout Debra's tenure in education helped her analyze situations more effectively when conducting observations for field studies and planning for clinical practice. Debra's real-life experience in school settings was also helpful when completing course assignments.

### *Reasons for Entering Teacher Education Program*

Debra has over twenty years of experience in an educational setting. She has observed and participated in the education process in a variety of ways. When asked why she enrolled in a teacher education program, Debra replied

One, as a secretary, I often noticed the need for strong, highly qualified teachers. I worked at a school located in a low economic status situation. There were a lot of level one and two students at that school and I felt that I had something that, well I felt like I had something I could offer to those types of students. In addition to that, students that would come to the office for behavior problems, I found myself sending for their books, asking if there was some work that they could do in the office, and I would often sit down in my spare time and help them, with especially with reading and math. And I could see just from spending that little bit of time one –on-one with them, that it helped. And as I continued to do that for approximately 7 years, about 7 and a half years, I knew deep down inside that this was something that I really needed to pursue. The office was no longer what I needed to stick with. I needed to get into the classroom and so with that in mind, plus my husband constantly saying “Why don’t you go back to school?”, the principal at the school saying “I enjoy having you as a secretary, but I would enjoy it more with you as one of my teachers, so why don’t you go back to school?” And so I did just that (personal interview, March 31, 2009).

Debra’s desire to help children, the realization that she was no longer content with her current position, and encouragement from her husband and principal led her to pursue a degree in elementary education. Working within the school system allowed Debra to see how the educational system works and helped her make an informed decision as to whether a teacher education program was the right choice for her.

### *Experiences in Teacher Education Program*

Debra completed her degree as an honor graduate, but quickly pointed out that all of her experiences in teacher education were not good. Debra faced situational and dispositional barriers head-on and continually pushed herself to complete the program requirements. Health problems and financial issues were the two barriers that had the potential to end Debra's dream of obtaining a degree in elementary education. Debra described her experiences in the teacher education program.

Overall in the teacher education program, I've had some good and bad experiences. The good experiences involve working with other students who were in my age group, who were going through some of the same struggles that I was going through, who had the desire and had set goals to get to the same place where I wanted to be.... As far as the university... there are weak areas, weak areas that I would like to see dissipate because there are many students like myself who really wanted to do well (Debra, personal interview, March 31, 2009).

### *Internal Barriers*

Debra was not adversely affected by internal barriers when enrolled in a teacher education program. Debra knew that teacher education was the right program for her and refused to let anything stand in the way of completing her degree. There were times when Debra could have doubted herself and questioned her decision to pursue her degree, but she knew how much impact she could have on the lives of children. Instead of letting obstacles become a hindrance, Debra chose to look at the positive points in every situation. When asked if she thought she was too old to be in school, Debra replied

No, I didn't feel like I was too old because... with my age I felt like I was mature enough, I knew it was what I wanted to do, I had had the opportunity to be in the classroom as a computer lab manager and I knew I was capable. No, as far as age being an internal barrier, I felt like my age contributed greatly to me making the decision that I made (personal interview, March 31, 2009).

Debra's age and prior classroom experience were an advantage when completing assignments, field observations and clinical practice. Debra was able to reflect upon her experiences in school settings to easily transition into the role of student teacher.

#### *External Barriers*

Internal barriers did not pose a problem for Debra; however, external barriers placed Debra at risk of failing to persist to program completion. Institutional and situational barriers are the external sources that caused Debra turmoil. The lack of availability and communication by the university professors was a huge barrier for Debra. Concerning the professors, Debra stated

I do have to say that there were times to where I needed the help and trying to find ones in the office to get the help and it didn't happen. There were times to where I called to the university – to different offices- trying to get help, leave a message, no response. And even though, yes, I did graduate cum laude, actually it was 3.66, I felt like if I had of gotten the additional help that I was requesting, I could have done much better. And I'm not beating myself up about that because I think at 45...a 3.66, I think I did well. But I just, I want that part...you know I would love to see some of the professors who are in education make themselves more available. I know there are a lot of students and when you look at the ratio of

students to professors, its really huge, but somehow, I think they can be more available to students. That's what I would've wanted – more time with professors (personal interview, March 31, 2009).

Another institutional barrier that almost ended Debra's dream before it began was the requirement that students must pass the Praxis I exam before being admitted to the teacher education program. After completing her general education courses, Debra took the exam. The Praxis I exam consists of three sections – reading, writing, and math. Debra did not pass the reading or math sections the first time. Since the exam was mandatory, Debra knew that if she wanted to become a teacher, she would have to find a way to pass the exam. Debra passed the exam the second time, but feels that the exam should not be the only way to determine if someone should be admitted to teacher education programs.

I was determined , number one, that I was not going to let a test keep me from what I desperately wanted to do, number one. Number two, I knew that with some additional practice work, with talking with the instructors, getting as much help and insight from them...I knew I could get more information from them. Um...this instructor told me to make sure I got an 8<sup>th</sup> grade algebra book, I did that. All of the advice that different ones gave me...you know, a couple of websites I could go to. I knew that if I utilized my resources...just from looking at the test the first time...yeah, I missed okay, I missed it by 3 points. So I knew that it was within my reach. All I had to do was utilize my resources, get more insight than I already had, and go on back and take the test (Debra, personal interview, April 30, 2009).

Another external barrier that had to be dealt with was the family's financial situation. Debra had to take a leave of absence from her position in the school system to complete the clinical practice (student teaching) requirements. Depending upon others to pay bills during the student teaching period was uncomfortable for Debra.

As far as the student teaching piece, it was very difficult. Had it not been for family, my husband taking on side jobs to pick up my end where I was used to having a check for 20 years, my parents being there just saying "I know you're not asking them for anything, but I know you're not on payroll...here you are". If it wasn't for that, it's no way I could have made it through. And then on top of that, had it not been for the fact that I was in the consortium program...they paid tuition with the exception of a small fee that I had to pay out of my pocket. There's no way in this world I could have completed the education program...there is no way. So definitely the financial barrier and at times it made it difficult to study and apply myself. When I, in the back of my mind I was thinking "How in the world are we going to pay X, X, and X?" I can't study thinking about that, but here again my husband would come back and say "You don't need to worry about that right now, I have it covered (Debra, personal interview, March 31, 2009).

The last issue identified as an external barrier is the health problems that Debra faced prior to student teaching. During the last year of enrollment, Debra began having health problems that became progressively worse. Debra described one incident involving her health.



That last year, I had health problems really, really bad. I went into a grocery store two days prior to the five-day summer workshop for teachers – student teachers- and passed out. The ambulance had to come get me. And from there, it was just one thing after another. Actually, it was about 5 days before the student teacher workshop because I was in the hospital and 2 days after coming out of the hospital I had to start the workshop. So and then back and forth to the doctor from the local hospital to another hospital and, here again, starting up student teaching, finances – worrying about that (Debra, personal interview, March 31, 2009).

Debra battled external barriers that may have seemed insurmountable to others. Throughout the last year of study, Debra managed to maintain a high grade point average, with one C, four B's, and ten A's in her courses. With determination and support from others, Debra worked through every obstacle that stood in her path.

### *Behaviors and Beliefs*

Debra has always believed that she is a winner and can do whatever she wants. After realizing that an elementary classroom was where she needed to be, Debra adopted a set of beliefs and behaviors to sustain her throughout her time in the teacher education program.

I had a love for education, I have a love for children- and especially now in this day and time you must have... you must have people in place who are, who not only love children, but who are highly qualified to teach children. There's a difference. You can love children but not be qualified to teach them. I knew it was what I wanted to do... and I knew I was capable. I made a vow to myself that

this is the goal and I'm not just setting a goal to graduate as a teacher but I'm setting my goal high (Debra, personal interview, March 31, 2009).

From the day that she decided to return to college to the day she graduated, Debra stayed focused on her goal of completing the teacher education program. She refused to let barriers spoil her plan of action.

Completing the teacher education program involved more than a set of beliefs. Debra had to couple her beliefs with specific behaviors to successfully complete her degree. Along with telling herself that the goal was still within her reach, Debra was proactive with scheduling and asking for assistance from others. At the beginning of each semester, Debra pulled out her calendar and wrote down due dates for each assignment. As she completed assignments, she highlighted them and put a grade beside each item. When looking through the calendar, Debra constantly reminded herself that each assignment completed placed her a step closer to her goal.

### *Support Systems*

Debra had a strong support system before enrolling in a teacher education program, during the program, and after program completion. Debra's husband and the principal of the school where she was employed supported her decision to enroll in the local university. When Debra visited the university to inquire about the teacher education program, she received assistance and direction from many staff members.

Once enrolled in the teacher education program, Debra relied on God, herself, family, peers and colleagues for motivation and encouragement. Debra felt in her heart that she was destined to be a teacher and prayed that God would bless her throughout the program.

My prayers were out there. The Almighty Father knew that's what I wanted to do. He supported me. I presented it to him and never did I get the vibe that no, Debra, this is not for you. It was always you take one step and I'll take the rest for you.

And that's what happened (Debra, personal interview, March 31, 2009).

Debra's faith and relationship with God served as the fountain from which strength, joy, and peace emanated during periods of illness and frustration. Next to God, family was Debra's major source of support. Debra affectionately spoke of the adjustments that her family made to accommodate her school schedule and change in employment status during student teaching.

When I say my family was supportive...they were extremely supportive.

Especially my husband taking on a lot of duties that I was used to doing...

cooking, the laundry, the cleaning. I mean, if it had not been for him, especially, it would have been very difficult. I probably would still be in school right about now. Even when it came to my sons, they would pick up extra duties to do. If they would see me at the computer... just answering the phone for me, asking if I wanted something to drink. I'm telling you, at home it was wonderful, just wonderful (Debra, personal interview, March 31, 2009).

Debra's immediate family lived through all of the changes that occurred throughout the teacher education program. The concern and patience demonstrated by Debra's husband and sons is something for which she will be forever grateful.

Working in a school system was beneficial for Debra because she was surrounded by colleagues who could relate to her experiences. Many of Debra's colleagues provided emotional and professional support when needed. Debra also bonded with students in her

age group who were juggling family, work, and school. Talking to peers with similar issues, desires, and goals helped Debra see that she was not alone.

*Summary of Debra's Experiences*

Debra's time in the teacher education program was filled with ups and downs. She encountered illness, financial problems, and a disruption of family life, but was able to obtain employment within weeks of completing her degree. Debra sums up her experiences in the following way

Overall in the teacher education program, I've had some good and bad experiences....And even though there were little barriers here and there, from time to time, I would deal with the barrier, but I wouldn't let the barrier get me down and keep me down. Sometimes they got me down a little bit, but I kept telling myself "Your goal is still there, you have to reach it".... And I worked hard. I said there's a goal. I'm trying to get there. I kept reminding myself of where I wanted to be, what I wanted to do, and why I wanted to do it....My family would see the stress and they would see me taking the medicines from the stress and they would see me just sitting up 12:00, 1:00, 2:00 in the morning trying to get it done.... The main reason I completed the program is because it is what I wanted to do.... I'm glad that I took the steps that I did. I am so happy to be in the classroom. It's a challenge and I knew that before I started. It's a challenge that is well worth my time. I am loving it (personal interview, March 31, 2009).

Institutional and situational barriers presented challenges for Debra. Dispositional barriers were not a risk factor in that Debra was convinced that she was capable of

achieving all that she wanted to do and more. Support was received from numerous people in a variety of places. Home, work, the university, and church were safe havens for Debra. Debra set a goal of degree completion and never looked back.

### Susie

Susie is a 61-year-old female with a rich family history. Susie's great grandparents on her mother's side immigrated from Sweden and her father's great grandparents were from the Basque region in Spain. Susie's father enlisted in the military at the age of 17. After retiring from the military, her father enrolled in a college program to become a teacher. As a teenager, Susie discovered that her father was fluent in Spanish. Susie explained that her father did not speak Spanish early in his military career because "for his generation fitting in was most important and therefore calling attention to one's ancestry was not as acceptable as it is today" (personal communication, March 25, 2009).

As Susie talked about her family and childhood experiences, she appeared to have been transported back in time. There was a dreamy look in her eyes and she smiled as she recalled memories of her childhood in Europe. Susie's family moved frequently and during second grade, she attended three schools. Susie described herself as an average student during high school. After graduation, Susie accepted a job offer and worked for three years before pursuing another job opportunity with a law firm. She worked with the law firm for eight years before enrolling in college. Susie attended school for two semesters and then decided that she could not juggle work and college at the same time.

In the late 1990's, Susie enrolled in an accelerated degree program and completed a bachelor's degree in criminology and sociology in 2000. After completing

the degree, Susie was disappointed to find that her age prohibited her from applying for a job as a federal probation officer or FBI agent. Susie completed certification requirements for special education in December 2008. She attended a historically black university and joked that her primary goal was to complete the program before becoming eligible for social security.

#### *Reasons for Entering Teacher Education Program*

Susie enrolled in a teacher education program for several reasons. One reason was because of the influence of a school counselor. Susie's high school counselor looked at her courses and grades and helped her decide on a curriculum track. "I credit my high school counselor with me being where I am today" (Susie, personal interview, March 29, 2009). Fond memories of a caring counselor helped Susie see the importance of guiding students.

Susie obtained certification as a mediator when working as a legal assistant. She was asked to attend a training for mediators to assist an attorney with mediation involving criminal and domestic matters. Susie had a life-changing experience during the training.

I went to a training one time and in that training we were with judges and lawyers and psychologists and all kinds of professionals, educators and you know that who were doing this mediation training. And I was sitting next to a lady at one these trainings and I was sitting next to my boss and then ... this woman was sitting on the other side of me and she knew my boss and she asked me... "What is your profession?" And I said, "oh", I said, "I'm... a legal assistant." And she goes, "oh." And she turned her back on me. It was almost like, "Well you can't do anything for me". I have never forgotten that. As long, as long as I live I will

never forget that. And it was, that was one of the things that inspired me. And not only that but during that time too, the qualifications for mediating were changing. They were going to start requiring that ah, mediators have a bachelor degree. Now that wasn't going to affect me, because I was already certified as a mediator. And ah, but it was just one of many things, one of several things...that kinda prompted me to go on (Susie, personal interview, March 29, 2009).

The actions of the woman at the training made Susie feel like she was an imposter in a room full of professionals. She began researching universities and wanted to enroll in college to prove that she belonged in a room with all of the lawyers and judges. Susie enrolled in and completed a bachelor's degree program.

Susie's prior success in college also gave her the confidence necessary to enroll in a teacher education program. Susie made the dean's list the first few terms enrolled in an accelerated degree program. When she started making A's, her standards increased because she liked receiving good grades. The teachers at the university made accommodations for Susie when she injured her back and gave her out-of-class assignments.

When working an entry level job with a local probation office, Susie held numerous conversations with one of the corrections officers. The officer had returned to school to pursue a degree in education. It was through the conversations with the officer that Susie realized that she made a mistake in her choice of degree programs. She became interested in education programs but could not afford to attend school full-time. It was not feasible for Susie to attend school full-time; however, she was willing to attend part-time. As she tried to find a teacher education program to meet her needs, Susie's dad

made a request for her to move back home. Susie's father was dying and wanted Susie to attend a university near his home. Susie agreed and the decision to pursue certification at a small historically black university was made as a result of her circumstances.

### *Experiences in Teacher Education Program*

Susie enjoyed going back to school for teacher certification and thinks that the positive experiences far outweighed the negative. Six years prior to enrolling in the teacher education program Susie earned a bachelor's degree. She felt that she was capable of fulfilling the requirements for teacher certification but did not know that she would still face numerous obstacles along the way.

### *Internal Barriers*

In her previous educational experience, Susie made the dean's list numerous times and graduated with honors from her bachelor's degree program. The teacher education program presented unexpected challenges to Susie. The intense course content and program requirements led to worry and self-doubt. Susie worried that she was too old to return to school and doubted her ability to comprehend the course material.

I'll tell you one of the things, one of the drawbacks for me, of course that's getting back into studying. But ah, something that always worried me was um, being older was in studying was trying to retain information because you truly do lose, you lose, you lose some of that ah, short term memory. And I, I realize in order for me to maintain my grade, and to do that I had to study longer and harder than um, even, even then when I did before. Again it didn't come easy. It just didn't come easy. I'm, I'm a slow reader and um, and I'm still a slow reader and I always felt like that (Susie, personal interview, March 29, 2009).



Susie was able to devote lots of time to her studies during her first two semesters in the teacher education program. She eased into the program by taking two courses during the first year. During the third semester of study, Susie decided to take four courses. It was during this semester that Susie's grades dropped because she had to divide her study time among four courses. Susie developed test anxiety because she was afraid that she had not obtained enough information to pass the tests. She revealed that she was always the last one to finish tests.

### *External Barriers*

Susie's financial situation posed a huge challenge to persistence. She worked during the first semester of study and part of the second semester. During the second semester, Susie quit her job and used her savings to pay for her courses. Susie realized that she needed to attend school full-time to complete the program requirements in a timely manner, but had no idea how quickly full-time study would deplete her savings. Susie stated

The biggest thing was money of course, that was the biggest problem. And when I had to work... I was limited as to the number of courses that I could take. And it just felt, I thought I'm going to be doing this forever...I finally just said, "Alright, I got to. .. I just got to go to school fulltime. So the last year, I went to school fulltime. And the problem was I went through my savings very, very quickly, very quickly just trying to... pay bills.... And I, even though I was living with my mother and you know I didn't have to pay rent.... I was just totally dependent on my mother. And then here I am at...sixty years old depending on my mother and having to say, "Mom, give me cash. Mom, I don't have any

money. Could you write this, write a check for me please?" So that was really, really difficult, you know (Susie, personal interview, March 29, 2009).

Susie's financial situation was further complicated by the lack of part-time jobs available in her area. Susie lives in a resort area that thrives in the spring and summer and offers very little employment in the fall and winter. There are many applicants for the few positions available during the fall and winter. Susie's class schedule made it difficult to obtain a position because the employer would have to work around her schedule. The lack of employment opportunities forced Susie to rely on her mother financially.

The primary institutional barrier that threatened Susie's persistence in the teacher education program was course offerings. Courses that Susie needed to take were not offered each semester and those that were offered did not always fit into Susie's schedule. The task of arranging her course and work schedule is one of the reasons that Susie decided to stop working in favor of full-time study. Another obstacle encountered at the institution was a lack of variety in the presentation of course materials. Susie described herself as a visual and kinesthetic learner. Some of her instructors primarily lectured and Susie felt that she did not get the most out those classes.

### *Behaviors and Beliefs*

Susie entered the teacher education program with preconceived notions. She believed that going to school to become a certified teacher was the right thing to do. She viewed school as a caring and nurturing place where she could build friendships and assumed that she would excel in her courses as she had in her accelerated degree program. Susie also believed that her age could hinder her success.

Susie felt that becoming a teacher would give her a sense of purpose. She felt good about her decision to enroll in a teacher education program because obtaining teacher certification would allow her to do something important. Susie served as a volunteer for youth involved in the court system and wanted to help children in a greater capacity. Susie explained, “I’ve never been married and sometimes you look back on your life and say, ‘What did I do that was really important’ or ‘Where did I ever make a difference?’ ...I thought I would make a difference” (personal interview, March 29, 2009).

Susie entered the teacher education program as a student seeking certification in elementary education with the intent of teaching second or third grade. After completing a bachelor’s degree program in criminology and sociology, Susie’s career opportunities were limited because of her age. When Susie noticed that her classes were filled with traditional students, she began to fear that job opportunities would be limited once again.

I was in elementary education... I thought... I’d like to teach second or third grade or you know maybe even fifth grade. And so once again I started looking around and... I’m going, “Huh”? All these young girls. Here I go again. I’m going to be competing against all these young girls and I thought, you know, and I’m going, “Am I doing the right thing”? And so I started doubting things. And then I had, I had of course I had to take Introductory to Special Education which everybody is required to take. And one day the light went off and I thought, “You know what, this is what I need to do”. The instructor brought people from the field to speak to our class. And it was during one of those, and I don’t remember which one, one it was, one of the speakers and I thought, “This is what I need to

do. This is what I need to do”. And I talked to her after class.... You know, so we talked about it... a lot. And she goes... “This is a good thing for you. I think you would, you would be a good fit”. And she really encouraged me when I...changed to Special Education. And... so on two counts it’s really good because I’m not competing with all those young girls for the elementary, for the elementary positions...and there’s the need. The bigger need... is in Special Education. And so it ended up working out really, really well for me (Susie, personal interview, March 29, 2009).

Susie’s belief that she could not compete with young women for elementary education positions prompted her to evaluate her career goals. A guest speaker inspired Susie to enter the world of special education. Susie believed that her age and experiences would be an asset in the special education field and after much consideration, she changed her major.

After changing her major to special education, another one of Susie’s beliefs was tested. Susie thought that she would perform in the teacher education program the same way she had in her accelerated degree program. The course requirements were much more than expected and Susie had to change her behaviors. Susie increased her study time, stopped working, and reached out to professors for help. Susie renewed her determination and told herself that she was going to complete the certification requirements.

Susie had always been independent and did not like to depend on anyone for financial support. Susie analyzed her situation and began to believe that receiving help from others was acceptable. Instead of being ashamed to ask her mother for financial

help, Susie began to embrace her situation and gratefully accepted help from family members.

### *Support Systems*

Susie acknowledged the love and support of her family as the force that sustained her throughout the three years she was enrolled in a teacher education program. The biggest obstacle that Susie faced was a lack of finances. Susie spent most of her savings on her courses and struggled to pay her bills. Before he died, Susie's father asked her to move in with her mother to keep her company and to assist her as needed. Susie sacrificed her lifestyle to move in with her mother and in return, Susie's mother provided financial support. Susie was able to leave her job and focus on her courses because of the generosity of her mother. Susie's mother, along with other family members continuously expressed their approval of her goal to obtain teacher certification.

The source of support that motivated Susie to complete the program requirements was her personal goals. Susie wanted to leave a legacy of making a difference in the lives of children, just as her high school counselor and teachers made a difference in her life. The educators showed an interest in Susie at a time when she was unsure of her future.

I just wanted to make a difference in somebody's life, you know. A child's life, you know. I want somebody to say about me, what I've said about those teachers, and, and those teachers and that counselor because I feel like I owe my life to them.... I wanted to be a part these kids lives like, you know, that... that was what got me through school (Susie, personal interview, March 29, 2009).

An experience that seemed negative when it happened became a source of motivation for Susie. Susie spoke of an incident in which a woman turned her back on

her at a conference because she did not have the same credentials as the others in attendance. Susie was deeply hurt by the incident and pictured the woman's face when she lacked motivation. Susie was determined to prove that she belonged in a room filled with professionals. Referring to the incident, Susie commented

I think that was a great motivating factor. I really do. I think that I always...I think I had always felt somewhat, when I got in social situations...I felt like...an intruder or fraud or something, you know. And I think too, when I worked I was always surrounded by professionals. And...and ...I think that was a motivating factor. I...I think I just wanted to be a legitimate professional. But I think it was mostly that lady who turned her back on me that time. I wish I could find her and thank her (personal interview, May 7, 2009).

Susie was overwhelmed by the amount of work required for her courses in the teacher education program. She approached her professors for help and was delighted to receive support from two of the special education professors. Susie often sat in the office of one of the professors seeking advice. The professors listened to her concerns and helped her find solutions. If the professors were unable to help Susie with a particular issue, they would refer her to other resources. One of the professors eased Susie's concerns about finding a teaching position at her age. The professor assured her that her maturity may be a benefit in some settings and life experience can outweigh book knowledge in certain instances.

#### *Summary of Susie's Experiences*

Susie first attended college over thirty years ago and after two semesters, she left college to work full-time. She returned to college and completed a bachelor's degree

program at age fifty-two. Susie accepted a position in a probation facility and felt that she was trapped in a career for young people. She later decided to enroll in a teacher education program. Susie reached her goal of completing the requirements for teacher certification before the age of sixty-two.

Susie enrolled in a teacher education program for a variety of reasons, with most reasons involving the influence of others. As Susie continued in teacher education, she examined her goals and motives and was pleased to discover that she really wanted to teach children with special needs. Rigorous courses, scheduling conflicts, and financial problems presented challenges to Susie's persistence in the program. Emotional and financial support from her mother and long conversations with instructors are the primary factors to which Susie attributes her success.

#### The Collective Case

Five individual cases were analyzed to determine how and why nontraditional females persisted in teacher education programs. The collective case is a compilation of data from the individual cases that paints a picture of the experiences of nontraditional females in teacher education programs. The collective case looks at the similarities of the five cases to answer the guiding questions of the research.

#### Question One: Overall Experiences in a Teacher Education Program

Patterns emerged in the reasons that the nontraditional females enrolled in teacher education as well as in the barriers faced and support systems utilized. A pattern was found in the reasons that the students enrolled in a teacher education program. All of the participants were prompted to enroll in teacher education for both personal and family reasons. Personal reasons included self-fulfillment, a desire to return to college to

complete a degree, and the ability to be self-sufficient. Another purpose for enrolling in teacher education programs was to add to the family's income. Teaching was considered to be a stable and fulfilling career.

At some point in the program, each participant felt anxious and struggled to balance home and school responsibilities. A pattern that emerged when reviewing the collective case was the magnitude of the obstacles attributed to situational barriers. Situational barriers presented the biggest challenge to the students, although each participant also confronted dispositional and institutional barriers. Three participants viewed their experiences in the teacher education programs as positive overall; two participants thought that positive and negative experiences were relatively equal. With the support of others, all five nontraditional females completed the requirements for their respective teacher education programs.

#### Question Two: Risk Factors Created by Internal Sources

Cross (1981) described dispositional barriers as those that affect the students' self-perceptions and attitudes about their ability to succeed. MacKinnon-Slaney (1994) identified self-perceptions, sense of competence, and self-awareness as internal sources that may affect persistence. All of the nontraditional females in the study were concerned about their ability to balance home, work, and school. Four of the five women had school-aged children in the home and at times wondered if they were competent enough to manage all of the tasks in front of them. One of the women, Susie, did not have children but she still struggled with balancing home, school, and work just like the other participants.



Two participants, Susie and Courtney, viewed their age as a liability at various stages in the program. Susie enrolled in a teacher education program at a historically black university at the age of 58 and completed the program at 61. Susie's age concerned her for two reasons – she was worried about retaining information presented in class due to short-term memory loss and she was afraid that her age would make it difficult to compete against younger teacher education graduates. Courtney returned to college at the age of 38 and completed program requirements at age 41. Courtney identified her age as a barrier and had to adjust to a new way of learning. Age was viewed as an asset by Debra and Nikki. Both women thought that their maturity and experiences were helpful when completing assignments and clinical practice. Carmella did not feel that her age posed a risk to persistence.

All of the females had a high level of self-awareness. They were in touch with their thoughts and feelings and possessed the qualities and characteristics necessary to persist in teacher education programs. The reasons for entering teacher education programs varied but all of the nontraditional females had something in common. They all had a high level of determination and vowed to complete their respective program requirements. All of the participants had attended college at some point in their lives prior to enrolling in the teacher education programs. The women were in combat mode and refused to let barriers stop them from completing their programs.

### Question Three: Risk Factors Created by External Sources

Cross (1981) categorized situational barriers as those resulting from a student's situation in life at a given time and institutional barriers as policies and practices that prevent or make participation in activities or courses difficult. Risks to persistence were

generated by situational and institutional barriers for each of the participants in this study. Situational barriers posed the highest risk to persistence in the teacher education programs. Three women –Susie, Nikki, and Debra- stated that financial issues threatened persistence. All three of the women worked when they began the teacher education programs, but stopped working prior to clinical practice or sooner. Field study observations, clinical practice, and home responsibilities conflicted with work schedules. Susie listed financial issues as the biggest barrier faced during the program.

Debra and Nikki dealt with financial issues but both acknowledged having other situational barriers. Nikki has two children in elementary school and was pressed to find childcare for them. With only one income supporting the household, Nikki was unable to afford childcare. Arranging her class schedule and work schedule around her children's school schedule was nearly impossible. Family members eventually agreed to take care of the children when necessary. With the childcare issue resolved, Nikki felt that the rest of the time in the teacher education program would pass without incident. It did not take long for Nikki to realize that adjustments have to be made regularly. The last situational barrier that Nikki had to overcome was a conflict in her roles as mother and student. Nikki's children needed help with homework assignments and she needed time to complete her own homework.

The family's financial status concerned Debra; however, she encountered another issue that concerned her more. During the last year of study, Debra battled serious health issues. Debra felt that she was too close to completing the teacher education program to quit, but she knew that she had to consider her health.

At times when I started thinking about my health problems, there were times when I said “Man, am I causing myself more harm by pushing myself? Do I really need to stop for a while?” But then I thought to myself, um, I started in '91. I stopped after 4 or 5 semesters. Do you want to wait 4 or 5 more years before you start again? So I asked myself questions. I knew I had to do what my doctor wanted me to do because he was interested in my health. But at the same time, I said there's a goal. I'm trying to get there. I kept reminding myself of where I wanted to be, what I wanted to do, and why I wanted to do it (Debra, personal interview, March 31, 2009).

Health problems were the primary situational barriers that threatened to derail Courtney and Carmella's continuance in the teacher education program. Neither of the women was sick themselves; instead immediate family members faced health crises. Carmella's daughter developed an eating disorder and required treatments once and sometimes twice each week for a year. The treatment center was located more than two hours away from Carmella's home. The reason Carmella was able to continue in the teacher education program during this time was because she was completing her program requirements through a distance learning format.

Courtney enrolled in a teacher education program because her husband had a life-threatening health condition. What appeared to be a reflux problem was actually a heart problem that resulted in a massive heart attack. Courtney's husband was fortunate to receive a heart transplant. The lives of those in Courtney's family changed overnight with the restrictions and predictions that accompanied the transplant.

Situational barriers posed the greatest threat to persistence and institutional barriers followed. Policies, processes, and environmental issues within the university can potentially impact persistence. Four of the five participants expounded upon the difficulties of creating course schedules at their institutions. Course availability was limited and courses were offered at times that often conflicted with work and home responsibilities. Nikki, Debra, Susie, and Courtney all adjusted their home and/or work schedules based on course offerings. Carmella did not have a problem with course schedules because her courses were offered online.

Program requirements were mentioned by all of the women as another institutional barrier. Field studies and student teaching led to financial issues and decreased the amount of time spent with families. Nikki said “Field observations were very hard. Especially...during student teaching ‘cause during student teaching you have to be there the whole amount of time your teacher is” (Nikki, personal interview, March 31, 2009). Courtney missed some of her son’s extracurricular activities during student teaching and Debra missed her paycheck during student teaching.

Environmental compatibility was a risk to persistence for Carmella when she enrolled in a distance education program. Carmella had always enjoyed traditional classed and was not thrilled with the idea of taking classes online. Carmella enrolled in a distance education program out of necessity. Her first choice was to attend a traditional program. When she was unable to find a program to meet her needs close to her community, she decided to enroll in a distance learning program. According to Carmella, the downfalls of completing a degree online are the lack of face-to-face interaction and

the complexity involved in completing group assignments. Susie, Nikki, Courtney, and Debra all reported that the universities attended were a good fit for their needs.

#### Question Four – Support Systems

Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) posit that there is a relationship between the multiple roles of nontraditional female students and their psychological well-being. The quality and quantity of social support is identified as a factor that mediates the relationship between juggling life roles and student responsibilities. Greater emotional support may reduce the psychological consequences associated with the increased roles and demands of nontraditional female students. Nontraditional students who are satisfied with their emotional support systems report greater satisfaction than those who are less satisfied with the support available. Carney-Crompton and Tan found that traditional students reported more sources of emotional support than nontraditional students. The primary sources of support for nontraditional students were spouse or partner and children.

Nikki, Susie, Debra, Carmella, and Courtney all gave credit to their families for supporting them throughout their time enrolled in a teacher education program. Nikki claimed “ I really wouldn’t have ever got through if it wasn’t for my parents and my boyfriend’s parents” (personal interview, March 31, 2009). When speaking of her husband and children, Debra said “...they were just really supportive of me. And I appreciate all that they did” (personal interview, March 31, 2009). Courtney praised her husband and acknowledged “I relied on my husband. He’s been really good” (personal interview, April 5, 2009). The support of her family sustained Carmella while enrolled in the teacher education program. “It could not have been done...without the support of my

husband and both of my children, especially. That's what made it work" (personal interview, April 4, 2009). Susie credits her family, particularly her mother, as being an integral part of her success.

My mother has been here to support me financially and emotionally and you know. She's been my cheerleader. You know, she's always talking about how proud she is of me and that kind of thing, so those are...great motivators. I had the family and support system here...that was why I was able to do it here (Susie, personal interview, March 29, 2009).

Positive ties and supportive relationships can help meet one's basic social needs by providing acceptance, understanding, empathy and self-esteem (Bertera, 2005). The nontraditional female students in this study identified family support as their primary source of strength and encouragement. Family support is a predictor of well-being that shields students from some of the chaos around them (Walen & Lachman, 2000). Family situations created obstacles in some instances, yet the participants viewed the role of family overwhelmingly as a source of support. High levels of support from partners lessen psychological distress (Kostiainen, et.al, 2009). The four nontraditional females with partners agreed that partner support was vital to their successful completion of teacher education programs.

Barriers were encountered in each university setting; however, assistance and support from peers and instructors were also found in each setting. Debra, Susie, and Nikki attended a historically black university. All received emotional support from peers at the university. Nikki and Susie received substantial academic and emotional support from their instructors as well. Courtney attended a small Christian university. The

campus environment felt like one big family and Courtney received support from both peers and instructors. Carmella was pleasantly surprised to learn that completing a distance learning program at a large state university did not prohibit the formation of friendships. When dealing with her daughter's eating disorder, Carmella's peers demonstrated that concern and emotional support can be expressed through discussion boards.

The last source of support common to each case was the participant's goal of program completion. Carmella enrolled in a teacher education program for the benefit of her family and also had a desire to complete her program for personal reasons. She felt that it was time to finish the degree that she was unable to finish 20 years ago. Susie wanted to be the type of teacher that children would remember the rest of their lives. She recalled fond memories of her high school teachers and counselor and wanted to impact the lives of others as her life had been impacted. Courtney entered a teacher education program to assure her husband that she would be able to take care of their sons in the future. Her goal was clear; finish the program...period...no excuses.

Nikki's goal was derived from her dissatisfaction with her children's teachers. She felt that she could be more effective than some of the teachers currently employed and wanted to make learning fun. Her goal was to complete her degree and give back to the community by serving students in her area. Debra's years of experience in educational settings led her to pursue a degree in elementary education. She had received many positive comments from students when assisting them in the computer lab and knew that she could do more for the children as a classroom teacher. Debra attended

college for 4 or 5 semesters in 1991 and then stopped. She was determined to reach her goal of degree completion this time.

### Summary

Common issues were faced by each participant without regard to age or the university setting. All of the participants in the study enrolled in teacher education programs for personal or family reasons. Situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers were encountered in each case but situational barriers posed the greatest threat to persistence. Juggling family responsibilities, paying the bills, and health-related issues were the primary sources of situational barriers. Dispositional barriers were displayed when each participant felt doubt about her ability to continue in teacher education programs at some point. Institutional barriers included course schedules and availability of instructors.

Each participant believed that program completion was a must and used that belief as motivation. During the course of the teacher education programs, the students realized that help from others was necessary for persistence. The support of instructors and peers was helpful to participants but the primary source of support was family members. Every participant passionately acknowledged the support of a spouse, parent, or children as the catalyst for program completion.



## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF STUDY

Snyder, Dillow, and Hoffman (2008) reported that students who begin educational programs at age 30 or older completed their programs at a rate of 10 percent as compared to a 65 percent completion rate for traditional students. Some of the risk factors associated with program persistence include delaying postsecondary enrollment for more than a year after high school graduation, working full-time, having dependents, attending school part-time, and being a single parent (Horn & Premo, 1995). The five nontraditional females studied all had at least two of the risk factors listed above but managed to persist to program completion.

The purpose of these case studies was to describe and analyze the thoughts, behaviors, and support systems of five nontraditional female students who persisted to degree completion in a teacher education program. The study also attempted to understand how and why the nontraditional females persisted in a teacher education program in spite of the risk factors commonly associated with nontraditional students. The focus of this research was the identification of common threads among each case in terms of experiences, risk factors, and support systems relevant to the persistence of nontraditional female students in a teacher education program.

Five nontraditional women from three settings participated in the study. The settings included a historically black university, a small Christian university, and a large state university. The youngest participant in the study was 35; the oldest was 61. Three Caucasian, one African-American, and one female with a Swedish and Spanish heritage participated in the study. Participants in each setting reported both positive and negative

experiences while enrolled in teacher education programs. Geigerich (2006) identified social factors, financial distress, and family obligations as factors that may pose barriers to program persistence. Kao and Thompson (2003) posit that differences in educational attainment may exist because cultural orientations of certain ethnic groups may promote or discourage academic achievement. The participants experienced the barriers mentioned by Geigerich but ethnicity did not appear to play a role in the experiences or educational attainment of the nontraditional females.

Internal and external factors presented risks to persistence, with situational factors posing the greatest threat to persistence. All of the women sometimes struggled to balance home and school responsibilities, with three women attempting to balance home, school, and work during periods in their programs. At varying points in their programs, each participant wondered if she would survive the pressures created by program requirements and home responsibilities.

Family situations caused dilemmas for four of the five participants and left them questioning the decision and timing of their return to college. In actuality, family is the one constant that had a positive and negative impact on persistence. Families were the first priority for all of the participants and their needs sometimes placed the women in a precarious position. Interestingly, the same families that posed a risk to persistence also provided the greatest support and encouraged persistence. The nontraditional females in this study appeared to have common experiences, risk factors and support systems without regard to age, ethnicity, or the educational setting.

### Related Studies and Theoretical Framework

In 1974, Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs developed and administered the Learning Interests and Experiences of Adult Americans survey to determine patterns in adult learning. The study indicated that the following obstacles were the most difficult for adults to overcome: (1) cost, (2) time constraints, (3) not wanting to be a full-time student, (4) home responsibilities, (5) job responsibilities, and (6) time required to complete program. Four of the six obstacles listed were also identified as obstacles in the present study. Cost, time constraints, home responsibilities, and job responsibilities presented challenges for the nontraditional females in teacher education programs.

Cross (1981) categorized barriers to participation in adult learning into three areas: institutional, situational, and dispositional. Cross' categorization of barriers is one of three works used to form a theoretical framework for the present study. Institutional barriers include: do not want to go to school full-time, amount of time required to complete program, courses are not scheduled when students can attend, no information about offerings, strict attendance requirements, desired courses unavailable, and too much red tape in getting enrolled. Two of these institutional barriers impacted four of the five nontraditional females in this study – courses not scheduled when students can attend and desired courses unavailable.

Situational barriers consist of the following: cost, home responsibilities, job responsibilities, no child care, no transportation, no place to study or practice, and friends or family do not support the idea of the student attending college (Cross, 1981). All five women perceived home responsibilities as a potential barrier to persistence. Work responsibilities were a barrier for three women and one female identified childcare as a

situational barrier. None of the participants contended with friends or family opposed to the idea of completing a degree or teacher certification.

Of the dispositional barriers identified by Cross (1981), one barrier was mentioned by two participants – feeling afraid of being too old to begin college. Additional dispositional barriers include: low grades in the past and not confident of ability, not enough energy and stamina, do not enjoy studying, tired of school and classrooms, and do not want to seem too ambitious. No other dispositional barrier was perceived as a challenge by the nontraditional females.

MacKinnon-Slaney's (1994) Adult Persistence in Learning Model (APIL) is the second component of the theoretical framework utilized for this study. The APIL model consists of ten factors that affect persistence and addresses personal issues, learning issues, and environmental issues within the university. The APIL model was developed as a tool to assist counselors working with adult students. Mastery of the factors likely increases persistence. The five nontraditional female students in the current study had difficulty mastering some of their personal issues and environmental issues within the university.

Supports to motivation and persistence reported by Comings, Parella, and Soricone (1999) are the last component of the theoretical framework. The results of this study concur with Comings, Parella, and Soricone's finding that support of family, friends, and peers has the greatest impact on persistence and motivation. All of the nontraditional females in the study unequivocally identified the support of family as the reason they were able to persist.

Whitmer (1999) compared two programs designed for nontraditional students to see if differences existed in the barriers faced by students. A weekend program at a private university was compared to an evening program at a public university. Significant differences in the barriers and satisfaction levels of students in the programs were not found. Whitmer noted that females reported more problems with situational barriers than males and Caucasians reported fewer situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers than minority students. The nontraditional females in the current study reported problems with situational barriers as in Whitmer's study. There did not appear to be a difference in the number of barriers reported based on race/ethnicity.

Bryan (2006) researched persistence among adult students in adult degree completion programs in Christian colleges. Bryan discovered that the primary source of motivation for the adults to persist was their faith. One of the five participants of the present study, Courtney, attended a Christian university. When asked to describe her sources of support, Courtney replied, "Really, I relied on the good Lord, first and foremost" (personal interview, April 5, 2009). Courtney also talked about support from her church. One other participant, Debra, discussed her faith and dependence on God.

#### Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that the life roles, barriers and support systems of nontraditional female students in teacher education programs are somewhat predictable in university settings. Nontraditional female students are often mothers or caregivers, work or volunteer outside of the home, and are responsible for many duties at home. Situational barriers appear to impede persistence for many nontraditional and adult students. The support of family, peers, and instructors is central to persistence in teacher

education programs. A major implication of the study is that teacher education programs need to consider the life roles, barriers, and support systems of nontraditional female students if they wish to attract and retain this demographic group. Specific recommendations for institutions include: find out the specific needs of nontraditional females enrolled, revise policies that limit participation of nontraditional students; increase communication, provide opportunities for nontraditional females to interact with instructors and peers; and simulate family support systems by building a sense of community within specific programs and throughout entire departments.

To increase the level of institutional support, institutions must identify the needs of students. The needs of nontraditional female students can be assessed in several ways. Assessment should begin before students are admitted to the university. Information sessions or open forums for students interested in attending college should be held throughout the community in which the university is located. Listening to student questions provides insight into their needs and preferences.

The admissions process is the next avenue in which a needs assessment should take place. A questionnaire addressing student needs should be included with the application for admission. The questionnaire should ask students about their preferences for communication, class delivery format, and services they intend to use. Students should be allowed to write in desired services if the services are not currently available. Responses to questionnaires should go beyond the admissions office. Data should be analyzed and distributed to the respective departments with the authority to make changes. This process will help institutions identify the initial needs of various subgroups. Just as class evaluations are distributed each semester, a short questionnaire addressing student needs

could also be distributed to allow institutions to remain abreast of the current needs of students.

Teacher education programs need to revise policies and procedures that limit the participation of nontraditional students. Programs should assess their course schedules and offer more evening and online courses. Small universities may not be able to offer several sections of a class due to low enrollment or a limited need for certain courses. To help with this problem, cohorts can be formed. Cohorts of students will matriculate through teacher education programs by taking the same classes. Cohorts are often formed at the graduate level but can be formed at the undergraduate level as well. This guarantees a certain number of students in each class for planning purposes and prevents students from spending hours trying to select courses and times that fit into their lives. Cohorts also provide students with a support group consisting of peers. Cohorts should begin upon admittance to the upper level of teacher education programs to help with the transition from general education to professional courses.

Communication skills are emphasized in teacher education programs yet teacher education departments and universities often fail to communicate with students. Monthly student forums should be scheduled to provide students with general information concerning the department and to allow students to ask questions or express concerns. Nontraditional females often have busy schedules. Planning and distributing information about the sessions at the beginning of the school year will give students time to mark their calendars for the meetings. In a technologically advanced society, face-to-face meetings should not be the only venue for communication. Students unable to physically attend student meetings should be able to attend online or by phone.

Nontraditional students need opportunities to interact with faculty, staff and peers regularly. One of the participants in this study felt that faculty and staff should make themselves more available to students who may have questions or need extra help with assignments. The participant recalled a time when she could not locate any faculty or staff members to answer her question. The experience was incredibly frustrating as the student walked from office to office in search of answers. Departmental faculty and staff should participate in the monthly student forums to answer questions that students may have. Monthly student forums also provide an opportunity for peer interaction among students.

Family has been identified as the primary source of support for nontraditional female students. To emulate this type of support, teacher education programs can attempt to create a family atmosphere within the program. A family atmosphere has to be created in every class to build a sense of community among students. The thought of completing two years of coursework individually or as a cohort may be overwhelming for some students. Students have to complete courses one at a time and may need the support of others to do so. Communities are the contexts in which people connect with each other. When nontraditional students feel connected to a place, they tend to invest in their learning (Larrotta, 2009).

Larrotta (2009) explains that the first step to building community is trust. Faculty can build a sense of community by building trust among class participants. It is not enough for students to have trust in each other; they must also trust the instructor. Gaining the trust of students will require faculty members to show that they are humans



with dreams and concerns. After trust is built, students need opportunities to work collaboratively to develop relationships within the classroom.

Program faculty can not be substitutes for partners, children, and friends but they can offer similar types of support provided by family and friends. Faculty can listen to students' concerns about academics and other areas of their lives because after all, problems in one area may spill over into another area. Referrals should be made to campus counselors or others as appropriate. Faculty members have more contact with students than anyone on campus. Women with high levels of support from partners rated their health and level of psychological functioning better than women without partners (Kostiainen, et. al, 2009). Faculty and nontraditional female students are partners in education and support should be offered to help students persist.

Creating a sense of community in individual courses and throughout programs is a skill that must be learned by faculty. Professional development will be required for faculty responsible for creating a family atmosphere for each course and should begin by addressing the differences between pedagogy and andragogy. Andragogy focuses on adult learning and differentiates between the educational needs of adults and children. Strategies to build communities in online and traditional formats should also be addressed through professional development. Suggestions to build community in online courses include general forums related to community events, weekly chats between the instructor and students, and opportunities to share personal experiences related to course material.

#### Limitations

Five nontraditional female students between the ages of 35 to 61 participated in the study. The youngest participant enrolled in a teacher education program at the age of 31.

Variables not considered for this study may have influenced the experiences of the participants. The settings included a historically black university, a small Christian university, and a large state university in one state. Although the findings are consistent with those of other studies, the findings are specific to the five participants and the three settings selected. Results may differ for a group of nontraditional female students in other universities or states.

#### Recommendations for Future Research

This study employed a small number of participants. Given the nature of qualitative research, it is difficult to obtain rich data with a large number of participants. One suggestion is to study nontraditional females in one setting with a larger number of participants to see if the barriers and support systems align with the current study. Another suggestion is to replicate the study at three universities with the same classification. For example, nontraditional females from three historically black universities or three Christian universities can be studied.

Significant differences in participant experiences, barriers, and supports were not found in regard to age and race. A study which compares nontraditional females in certain age brackets to females in other age brackets could possibly reveal a difference in barriers and supports. For example, the experiences of nontraditional female students in their thirties could be compared to students in their fifties. Nontraditional students in their thirties are more likely to have children in the home than nontraditional students in their fifties. The barriers encountered and support systems utilized by nontraditional students with and without children may yield findings with significant differences.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

## Appendix A

**INFORMED  
CONSENT FORM***A Case Study of Nontraditional Females in Teacher Education Programs*

You are invited to participate in a research study designed to assist universities in understanding the experiences and needs of nontraditional female students in a teacher education program. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a nontraditional female student who has recently graduated from a teacher education program or you are expected to complete degree requirements within a few weeks. *Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.*

This study is being conducted by:  
Natasha Spellman, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

**Background Information**

The purpose of this study is to describe and analyze the thoughts, behaviors, and support systems of nontraditional female students who persisted to degree completion in a teacher education program. The study attempts to understand how and why nontraditional females persisted in a teacher education program in spite of the risk factors commonly associated with nontraditional students.

**Procedures:**

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

- Participants will describe experiences in teacher education programs during in-depth interviews conducted during home visits.
- Participants will provide researcher with copies of transcripts, evaluations, and reflections written while enrolled in a teacher education program.
- Be available to meet with researcher during a six week period for interviews and member checks (review of transcribed data from audiotapes to ensure accuracy).

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study**

There are no risks associated with this study. The benefits include: an opportunity to process personal experiences in a teacher education program by analyzing obstacles and support systems, the potential to help other nontraditional females



succeed in teacher education programs, and the potential to help universities create programs to meet the needs of nontraditional females by describing obstacles and supports.

**Compensation:**

Participants will not be compensated.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. Any report or article published from the data will not include information that will make it possible to identify participants. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without penalty.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is: Natasha Spellman, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact Natasha at nspellman@liberty.edu.

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:**

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

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

Appendix B  
Participant Interview Questions

### **Participant Interview Questions**

1. Describe your experiences in the teacher education program.
2. Did you face any barriers while enrolled in the teacher education program that were caused by others (external sources)?
3. Did you face any barriers or obstacles as a result of a decision that you made or a behavior you displayed (internal sources)?
4. What type of support did you have when enrolled in the program and from whom (relationships, goals, teachers and peers, positive view of self, other)?
5. Name some of the actions taken to keep you on track when enrolled in the program.
6. What did you believe about yourself when enrolled in the program?
7. What did you believe about others when enrolled in the program (family, friends, peers)?
8. Why did you complete the teacher education program?

Appendix C  
Participant Analysis

## Theoretical Framework Analysis

Name Carmella

<b>Cross (1981): Barriers to Participation in Adult Learning</b>	
<b>Situational barriers</b> – barriers resulting from the student’s situation in life at a given time	Daughter developed an eating disorder and priorities had to shift
<b>Institutional barriers</b> – policies and practices that prevent or make participation in activities or courses difficult	-Lack of face-to-face contact in distance education program  -Hard to do group work
<b>Dispositional barriers</b> – the student’s self-perceptions and attitudes about her ability to succeed	-Positive perception of self and no concerns about ability to succeed academically  -Was concerned about using technology in the distance education format  -Doubted whether she could continue program and handle family issues
<b>Summary:</b> Carmella had positive academic experiences throughout her life and knew that she had the academic ability to succeed. The experience with her daughter’s transition to public school and subsequent eating disorder was the biggest threat to persistence. The distance learning format and lack of face-to-face interaction posed a slight risk to persistence.	
<b>MacKinnon-Slaney (1994): APIL Model (Adult Persistence in Learning)</b>	
<b>Component I –personal issues</b>	
<b>Self-awareness-</b> personal qualities and characteristics within individuals that drive them through a formal educational environment	-Extremely aware of her thoughts and feelings  -Understands her role in the family and prioritizes accordingly
<b>Willingness to delay gratification-</b> believing in oneself and the effectiveness of the educational system enough to put one’s life on hold	-Greatest gratification was from home-schooling children, delayed this in order to give family a better future  -Willing to delay personal interests such as volunteering and serving as a tennis coach

<p><b>Clarification of career and life goals-</b> committing to goals and believing that education is the vehicle through which the goals will be reached</p>	<p>-Committed to program because she felt that teaching was the right career based on her homeschooling experiences</p> <p>- Believed that program completion would be fulfilling personally and professionally</p>
<p><b>Mastery of life transitions-</b> balancing home, school, and work responsibilities; renegotiating boundaries with others</p>	<p>-Managed home and work responsibilities through a change in family expectations</p> <p>-Successfully handled transitions related to husband's job many times prior to enrolling in program</p>
<p><b>Sense of interpersonal competence-</b> socially competent, able to relate to professionals and peers</p>	<p>-Was comfortable and sure of her competence in the roles of wife, mother, and student</p> <p>-Was able to relate well socially to individuals of different cultures, ages, and professional status</p>
<p><b>Summary:</b> Carmella possessed an awareness of her role and responsibilities in the family and in the educational system. She had a clear reason for returning to school and was able to manage transitions to persist in the teacher education program. Carmella was willing to delay gratification for the benefit of her family and believed that her education was important to the whole family.</p>	
<p><b>Component II – learning issues</b></p>	
<p><b>Educational competence</b> – relearning how to learn (ex. Memory skills, reading, writing, listening)</p>	<p>Had to adjust to distance education format</p>
<p><b>Intellectual and political competence</b> – understanding the political climate of the educational environment and its relationship to the learning experience</p>	<p>No issues</p>
<p><b>Summary:</b> Carmella knew that she was capable of excelling in her classes but had to adjust to the distance education format. She had to adjust to the lack of face-to-face interaction.</p>	
<p><b>Component III –environmental issues within the institution</b></p>	
<p><b>Information retrieval from the university</b> – knowing what to ask and where to get answers</p>	<p>- Was not on campus on a regular basis and did not know about many campus events</p>

<p><b>Awareness of opportunities or impediments in the environment</b> – knowing which institutional processes and practices are helpful and which are hindrances</p>	<p>-Opportunities – connecting with peers and instructors through email and discussion boards for encouragement and information</p> <p>- Hindrance – lack of face-to-face contact</p>
<p><b>Environmental compatibility-</b> general climate is welcoming, caring, and compatible socially, academically, and physically</p>	<p>- Online community was welcoming and more supportive than expected</p> <p>-Distance education format was a good fit for family responsibilities</p>
<p><b>Summary:</b> Carmella found the online community to be caring and helpful both academically and personally. She would have had a difficult time completing program requirements in a traditional format.</p>	
<p><b>Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999): Types of Support Systems</b></p>	
<p><b>Relationships</b> –support from family, friends, teachers and peers</p>	<p>-Primarily relied on husband for support</p> <p>- Received support from peers through online discussions and emails</p> <p>-Received validation and support from instructors</p>
<p><b>Self-efficacy</b> – belief in one’s ability to succeed at present task</p>	<p>- Believed that she possessed the skills necessary to complete teacher education program</p>
<p><b>Goals</b> – desired outcome</p>	<p>-Wanted to complete program for personal reasons (finish degree that she was unable to finish 20 years ago)</p> <p>-Wanted to complete program for her family</p>
<p><b>Progress toward goal</b> - able to measure progress</p>	<p>- Able to look at grades for encouragement</p> <p>-Able to check off courses on plan of study</p>

<p><b>Management of forces that may hinder or help persistence</b> – understanding and identifying strong forces that affect persistence and manipulating them to one’s benefit</p>	<p>-Identified internal and external factors that created risks to persistence and managed those factors with help from others</p> <p>-Identified sources of support that help persistence</p>
<p><b>Summary:</b> Carmella set goals and was motivated to achieve those goals for personal and professional reasons. She relied on family, peers, and instructors for support but gives most of the credit to her husband for encouraging her throughout the program. The distance education format was a hindrance at first, but Carmella used it to her advantage to take care of her family’s needs.</p>	



## Theoretical Framework Analysis

Name Courtney

<b>Cross (1981): Barriers to Participation in Adult Learning</b>	
<b>Situational barriers</b> – barriers resulting from the student’s situation in life at a given time	-Husband had serious health problems and Courtney never knew when he would be sick (hospital/doctor visits sometimes conflicted with class schedule)
<b>Institutional barriers</b> – policies and practices that prevent or make participation in activities or courses difficult	-University did not offer many night classes -University did not offer many online classes -During student teaching, she had to remain at school the entire time the teacher was there and missed some of her son’s activities
<b>Dispositional barriers</b> – the student’s self-perceptions and attitudes about her ability to succeed	-Worried about her age and fitting in - Feared the transition of returning to college (later said her fears were much worse than reality)
<b>Summary:</b> Courtney enrolled in a teacher education program out of necessity. She made the decision to enroll because her husband had life-threatening health problems. Courtney needed to make sure that she could provide for her sons when her husband was no longer able. Courtney encountered barriers in each category, however, she was able to overcome each obstacle in her path.	
<b>MacKinnon-Slaney (1994): APIL Model (Adult Persistence in Learning)</b>	
<b>Component I –personal issues</b>	
<b>Self-awareness-</b> personal qualities and characteristics within individuals that drive them through a formal educational environment	-High level of determination because she knew how much her degree would mean to her family
<b>Willingness to delay gratification-</b> believing in oneself and the effectiveness of the educational system enough to put one’s life on hold	-Postponed 3 years of her life because she believed an education would allow her to care for her children if her husband was no longer able to provide for the family

<p><b>Clarification of career and life goals-</b> committing to goals and believing that education is the vehicle through which the goals will be reached</p>	<p>-Committed to program because her goal was to be able to provide for her children when her husband was no longer able due to health issues - Knew that program completion was necessary for the family</p>
<p><b>Mastery of life transitions-</b> balancing home, school, and work responsibilities; renegotiating boundaries with others</p>	<p>-Managed home and work responsibilities through a change in family roles with husband and sons handling more tasks -Learned to say no to activities that interfered with school</p>
<p><b>Sense of interpersonal competence-</b> socially competent, able to relate to professionals and peers</p>	<p>-Related well to staff and faculty at university because she knew most of them outside of the university setting -Was able to relate well socially to individuals of different cultures and ages, and found that she had more in common with the younger students than expected</p>
<p><b>Summary:</b> Courtney vowed to complete the teacher education program at any cost. She was reminded daily of the importance of program completion when looking at her husband's health issues. Courtney stated that she did not enroll in the program for herself; rather the decision was made for her family. Courtney put everything on hold except school, family and God. She said no to all other activities that threatened persistence.</p>	
<p><b>Component II – learning issues</b></p>	
<p><b>Educational competence</b> – relearning how to learn (ex. Memory skills, reading, writing, listening)</p>	<p>-Had to adjust to technology -Had to learn how to study again -Had to learn new methods in math (very difficult)</p>
<p><b>Intellectual and political competence</b> – understanding the political climate of the educational environment and its relationship to the learning experience</p>	<p>Since Courtney knew many of the faculty and staff at the university, she had a good understanding of the political climate and could identify the power players.</p>
<p><b>Summary:</b> Returning to school was an adjustment for Courtney. She was a bit leery of the new technology employed in classroom and clinical settings. Learning how to study and solve math problems presented a challenge. She had a good understanding of the political climate at the university and its impact on learning at the university.</p>	
<p><b>Component III –environmental issues within the institution</b></p>	

<p><b>Information retrieval from the university</b> – knowing what to ask and where to get answers</p>	<p>- Courtney was already familiar with the university and knew where to go for answers.</p>
<p><b>Awareness of opportunities or impediments in the environment</b> – knowing which institutional processes and practices are helpful and which are hindrances</p>	<p>-Opportunities – took classes on campus and was informed about opportunities that could be helpful, was able to talk with professors and administrators often          - Hindrance – institution’s lack of evening and online about course offerings</p>
<p><b>Environmental compatibility-</b> general climate is welcoming, caring, and compatible socially, academically, and physically</p>	<p>- Felt comfortable at university because it was located in her community and she knew many faculty and staff members</p>
<p><b>Summary:</b> Courtney was comfortable at her university because it was a familiar place. She knew many staff and faculty members personally and interacted socially in settings outside of the university. Information retrieval was a positive aspect within the environment. Courtney stated that she could talk to the dean and even the university’s president when needed.</p>	
<p><b>Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999): Types of Support Systems</b></p>	
<p><b>Relationships</b> –support from family, friends, teachers and peers</p>	<p>-Relied on God first and her husband next          - Received support from professors and administrators at the university          -There were not a lot of nontraditional students in program, but she was able to bond with younger students</p>
<p><b>Self-efficacy</b> – belief in one’s ability to succeed at present task</p>	<p>- Struggled with this issue at first, worried that her age would be a hindrance          -Later realized that she could succeed with the help of others</p>
<p><b>Goals</b> – desired outcome</p>	<p>-Goal was to complete the program to provide for her family, wanted to ease husband’s fears that she could take care of their sons          -Wanted to say that <i>she</i> is capable of providing for her family</p>

<p><b>Progress toward goal</b> - able to measure progress</p>	<p>- Able to look at grades for encouragement</p>
<p><b>Management of forces that may hinder or help persistence</b> – understanding and identifying strong forces that affect persistence and manipulating them to one’s benefit</p>	<p>-Identified external factors that created risks to persistence (husband’s health and course schedule) and managed those factors with help from husband and children  -Talked with husband about needs of children and divided tasks</p>
<p><b>Summary:</b> Courtney set a goal and was motivated to achieve that goal because she knew that the future of her family was tied to program completion. She relied on God and her family for support. Surprisingly, Courtney was able to relate to the younger students and received support from them. Courtney is the first college graduate in her family and said that her family was proud of her, but didn’t realize what college really involved.</p>	

### Theoretical Framework Analysis

Name Debra

<b>Cross (1981): Barriers to Participation in Adult Learning</b>	
<b>Situational barriers</b> – barriers resulting from the student’s situation in life at a given time	-Health problems during last year of study -Financial issues especially during student teaching
<b>Institutional barriers</b> – policies and practices that prevent or make participation in activities or courses difficult	-Instructors not available in offices when needed -Many faculty and staff did not return phone calls -Courses not offered when needed - Did not pass Praxis I the first time, feels that testing requirement makes it difficult for some students to be admitted to teacher education program
<b>Dispositional barriers</b> – the student’s self-perceptions and attitudes about her ability to succeed	-No concerns about ability to succeed academically -Wondered how she could succeed in program in the midst of health and financial issues
<b>Summary:</b> Debra had a positive self-perception and never doubted her ability to succeed. Health problems, along with financial issues, worried Debra at times but she fought through the issues. Debra expressed very strong opinions about institutional barriers. Her biggest criticism of the university was that professors were rarely available to provide extra help to students.	
<b>MacKinnon-Slaney (1994): APIL Model (Adult Persistence in Learning)</b>	
<b>Component I –personal issues</b>	
<b>Self-awareness-</b> personal qualities and characteristics within individuals that drive them through a formal educational environment	-High level of determination -Knew she possessed the skills to succeed
<b>Willingness to delay gratification-</b> believing in oneself and the effectiveness of the educational system enough to put one’s life on hold	-Put everything on hold except family and education because she knew that she belonged in an elementary classroom
<b>Clarification of career and life goals-</b> committing to goals and believing that education is the vehicle through which the goals will be reached	-Committed to program because she was certain that teaching was what she was supposed to do - Believed that program completion would give her a chance to help children in a greater capacity than in her

	position as a computer lab manager -Knew that program completion would benefit family financially
<b>Mastery of life transitions-</b> balancing home, school, and work responsibilities; renegotiating boundaries with others	-Managed home and work responsibilities through a change in family roles with husband and sons handling more tasks
<b>Sense of interpersonal competence-</b> socially competent, able to relate to professionals and peers	-Was comfortable and sure of her competence in the roles of student and professional -Was able to relate well socially to individuals of different cultures, ages, and professional status
<b>Summary:</b> Debra exhibited a high level of determination throughout the teacher education program. She pushed herself when dealing with health problems because she felt that this was her time to complete her degree. Debra's immediate family were vested in her education and helped with household duties. Debra's experience in public education made it easy for her to communicate with peers and instructors about educational issues. Debra was willing to make sacrifices to reach her goal.	
<b>Component II – learning issues</b>	
<b>Educational competence</b> – relearning how to learn (ex. Memory skills, reading, writing, listening)	-Had to adjust to course assignments while working full-time -Had to learn how to study again.
<b>Intellectual and political competence</b> – understanding the political climate of the educational environment and its relationship to the learning experience	Since Debra knew many of the faculty and staff at the university, she had a good understanding of the political climate and could identify the power players.
<b>Summary:</b> Returning to school was an adjustment for Debra. She had to adjust to course assignments and develop new study habits. She had a good understanding of the political climate at the university and its impact on learning at the university.	
<b>Component III –environmental issues within the institution</b>	
<b>Information retrieval from the university</b> – knowing what to ask and where to get answers	- Debra was already familiar with the university and knew where to go for answers. (did not always receive answers, but knew who to ask and where to go)
<b>Awareness of opportunities or impediments in the environment</b> – knowing which institutional processes and practices are helpful and which are hindrances	-Opportunities – took most classes on campus and was informed about opportunities

	<p>that could be helpful</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Hindrance – institution’s policy/schedule about course offerings presented problems</li> </ul>
<p><b>Environmental compatibility-</b> general climate is welcoming, caring, and compatible socially, academically, and physically</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Felt comfortable at university because it was located in her community and she knew many faculty and staff members</li> <li>-Wasn’t sure if faculty really cared about the issues facing nontraditional students</li> </ul>
<p><b>Summary:</b> Debra was comfortable at her university because it was a familiar place. When she first expressed an interest in enrolling at the university, many staff members offered to assist her because they already knew her. Debra knew which offices to go to for answers, but often was left without answers. Course offerings/scheduling presented a problem for Debra.</p>	
<p><b>Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999): Types of Support Systems</b></p>	
<p><b>Relationships</b> –support from family, friends, teachers and peers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Primarily relied on husband and children for support</li> <li>- Received emotional and academic support from colleagues in the school in which she was employed</li> <li>-Bonded with other students in her age group</li> <li>-Relationship with God helped sustain her throughout program</li> </ul>
<p><b>Self-efficacy</b> – belief in one’s ability to succeed at present task</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Believed that she possessed the skills necessary to complete teacher education program</li> </ul>
<p><b>Goals</b> – desired outcome</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Wanted to complete because she believed that she belonged in a classroom</li> <li>-Wanted to complete program for her family (financially, example for sons)</li> <li>-Wanted to say that she had finished what she started</li> </ul>
<p><b>Progress toward goal</b> - able to measure progress</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Able to look at grades for encouragement</li> <li>-Used a calendar to mark off assignments and courses; always looked at where she began, where she was at the moment, and where she wanted to be</li> </ul>

<p><b>Management of forces that may hinder or help persistence</b> – understanding and identifying strong forces that affect persistence and manipulating them to one’s benefit</p>	<p>-Identified external factors that created risks to persistence (health and finances) and managed those factors with help from husband and children          -Identified sources that could help persistence – extra help with household chores</p>
<p><b>Summary:</b> Debra set a goal and was motivated to achieve that goal because she felt that her calling was to be an elementary teacher. She relied on family, peers, and colleagues for support but acknowledges that no one truly understood her trials throughout the program except her immediate family. Checking off assignments and courses on her calendar served as a motivational tool. The main reason that Debra always felt confident about her ability to complete the program was because she prayed before enrolling in the program and believed that God approved of her choice to return to college.</p>	



## Theoretical Framework Analysis

Name Nikki

<b>Cross (1981): Barriers to Participation in Adult Learning</b>	
<b>Situational barriers</b> – barriers resulting from the student’s situation in life at a given time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Financial barriers existed because there was only one income during the last year of study (boyfriend)</li> <li>-Had to make arrangements for childcare</li> <li>-Had to spend a lot of time helping children with their homework before doing her own</li> </ul>
<b>Institutional barriers</b> – policies and practices that prevent or make participation in activities or courses difficult	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Course offerings were limited</li> <li>- During student teaching, she had to remain at school the entire time the teacher was there , which created a hardship at home</li> </ul>
<b>Dispositional barriers</b> – the student’s self-perceptions and attitudes about her ability to succeed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Worried about being able to juggle home and school during junior and senior years of program</li> <li>-Grades slipped and she lost her confidence</li> <li>-Felt out of place with 19 and 20-year-old students</li> </ul>
<p><b>Summary:</b> Nikki enrolled in a teacher education because she was dissatisfied with the practices in her children’s school. She had worked with children as a teenager and received encouragement from family to return to school. Situational barriers presented huge challenges, but institutional and dispositional barriers also impacted Nikki’s performance.</p>	
<b>MacKinnon-Slaney (1994): APIL Model (Adult Persistence in Learning)</b>	
<b>Component I –personal issues</b>	
<b>Self-awareness-</b> personal qualities and characteristics within individuals that drive them through a formal educational environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-High level of determination</li> <li>-Felt that she was good with children and could make learning fun</li> </ul>
<b>Willingness to delay gratification-</b> believing in oneself and the effectiveness of the educational system enough to put one’s life on hold	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Put a lot of things on hold including large purchases and fun trips with her children</li> </ul>
<b>Clarification of career and life goals-</b> committing to goals and believing that education is the vehicle through which the goals will be reached	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Committed to program because her goal was to create learning environments that were engaging and fun</li> <li>- Knew that she was capable of</li> </ul>

	more than working in fast food or convenience stores
<b>Mastery of life transitions-</b> balancing home, school, and work responsibilities; renegotiating boundaries with others	-Managed home, school, and work by asking for help from family members
<b>Sense of interpersonal competence-</b> socially competent, able to relate to professionals and peers	-Loves to talk and was not afraid to ask questions of peers and instructors -Was able to relate well socially to individuals of different cultures and ages
<b>Summary:</b> Nikki wanted to leave the life of fast food and gas stations behind. She worked with children as a teenager and felt that her experience as a mother would benefit her as a classroom teacher. Limited household income required Nikki to delay purchases and created a problem with childcare. Nikki would not afford childcare and was fortunate to be able to make arrangements with her parents and boyfriend's parents for childcare.	
<b>Component II – learning issues</b>	
<b>Educational competence</b> – relearning how to learn (ex. Memory skills, reading, writing, listening)	--Had to learn how to study within limited time frames
<b>Intellectual and political competence</b> – understanding the political climate of the educational environment and its relationship to the learning experience	Not considered by Nikki
<b>Summary:</b> Nikki had to learn how to study and juggle her family responsibilities. Time was limited because she had to assist her children with their homework before doing her own work. Intellectual and political competence were not discussed by Nikki.	
<b>Component III –environmental issues within the institution</b>	
<b>Information retrieval from the university</b> – knowing what to ask and where to get answers	- Relied on advisor and staff within teacher education program for answers
<b>Awareness of opportunities or impediments in the environment</b> – knowing which institutional processes and practices are helpful and which are hindrances	-Opportunities- could talk with advisor during scheduled office hours - Hindrance – institution's limited course offerings
<b>Environmental compatibility-</b> general climate is welcoming, caring, and compatible socially, academically, and physically	- Felt comfortable at university because it was located in her community - Good social environment because many nontraditional students were in teacher education program

<p><b>Summary:</b> Nikki was comfortable at her university and was able to socialize with several nontraditional students with similar issues. She relied on her advisor for information. Limited course offerings made it difficult for Nikki to coordinate her school, work, and home schedules.</p>	
<p><b>Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999): Types of Support Systems</b></p>	
<p><b>Relationships</b> –support from family, friends, teachers and peers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Depended on her parents and her boyfriend's parents for childcare and emotional support</li> <li>- Received emotional and academic support from professors</li> <li>-Talked to peers for emotional support</li> </ul>
<p><b>Self-efficacy</b> – belief in one's ability to succeed at present task</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Felt great and was full of confidence during the first two years of study</li> <li>-Upon admittance to teacher education, Nikki became overwhelmed and began to doubt her ability to succeed</li> </ul>
<p><b>Goals</b> – desired outcome</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Goal was to complete the program because she wanted to be a teacher and make a difference in children's lives</li> <li>-Wanted to contribute to family's income</li> <li>-Wanted to be a good role model for her children</li> </ul>
<p><b>Progress toward goal</b> - able to measure progress</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Able to check off courses on plan of study</li> </ul>
<p><b>Management of forces that may hinder or help persistence</b> – understanding and identifying strong forces that affect persistence and manipulating them to one's benefit</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Identified external factors that created risks to persistence (finances and childcare) and managed those factors with help from husband and the children's grandparents</li> <li>-Created a schedule to manage responsibilities, wrote everything on schedule and stuck to it whenever possible</li> </ul>

**Summary:** Nikki completed the teacher education program with support from family and by creating a schedule to help her balance her responsibilities. Nikki felt that she would be an effective teacher and set a goal to complete program requirements to make learning fun. Nikki was able to manage factors affecting persistence by asking for help from others and relying on her internal strength and determination to overcome obstacles in her path.

## Theoretical Framework Analysis

Name Susie

<b>Cross (1981): Barriers to Participation in Adult Learning</b>	
<b>Situational barriers</b> – barriers resulting from the student’s situation in life at a given time	-Financial barriers existed because Susie stopped working to concentrate on program
<b>Institutional barriers</b> – policies and practices that prevent or make participation in activities or courses difficult	-Course offerings were limited - Needed more hands-on activities instead of lectures
<b>Dispositional barriers</b> – the student’s self-perceptions and attitudes about her ability to succeed	-Was concerned about being able to retain information at her age
<p><b>Summary:</b> Susie completed a bachelor’s degree before enrolling in the teacher education program. She entered the teacher education program to complete requirements for licensure. Money was the biggest problem for Susie. She realized that attending school part-time would simply take too long to complete the program requirements. She fully committed to the program by attending full-time. She quickly depleted her savings and eventually applied for student loans. The professors at the university lectured in most cases and Susie felt that hands-on activities would have benefitted her more than lectures. Susie worried about being able to retain enough information to pass exams given her age.</p>	
<b>MacKinnon-Slaney (1994): APIL Model (Adult Persistence in Learning)</b>	
<b>Component I –personal issues</b>	
<b>Self-awareness-</b> personal qualities and characteristics within individuals that drive them through a formal educational environment	-Felt she was capable of succeeding in courses because of prior success in degree program -Thought she had a lot to offer to the world of education
<b>Willingness to delay gratification-</b> believing in oneself and the effectiveness of the educational system enough to put one’s life on hold	-Put social life on hold -Made financial sacrifices to attend program full-time
<b>Clarification of career and life goals-</b> committing to goals and believing that education is the vehicle through which the goals will be reached	-Goal was to complete program and be the teacher who makes a difference (just as her high school teachers and counselor made a difference in her life) - Wanted to be a legitimate professional
<b>Mastery of life transitions-</b> balancing home, school, and work responsibilities; renegotiating boundaries with others	-Managed school transition by redefining her role and relationship with her mother

<b>Sense of interpersonal competence-</b> socially competent, able to relate to professionals and peers	-Loves to talk and was not afraid to ask questions of peers and instructors -Strong sense of self
<b>Summary:</b> Susie experienced a high level of success in her bachelor's degree program prior to enrolling in teacher education. She enrolled in the program because she wanted to be a teacher that impacted students' lives years after being in her classroom. She also wanted to be considered a professional by others. Susie's mother was instrumental in helping her through the transitions faced at home and school.	
<b>Component II – learning issues</b>	
<b>Educational competence</b> – relearning how to learn (ex. Memory skills, reading, writing, listening)	--Slow reading speed was a problem -Had to adjust to learning from lectures instead of hands-on activities
<b>Intellectual and political competence</b> – understanding the political climate of the educational environment and its relationship to the learning experience	Not considered by Susie
<b>Summary:</b> Susie's slow reading speed meant that she had to spend many hours studying. She did not realize that reading and studying would be a problem for her until she changed from part-time to full-time study. Susie is a kinesthetic and visual learner and instructional techniques did not match her learning style.	
<b>Component III –environmental issues within the institution</b>	
<b>Information retrieval from the university</b> – knowing what to ask and where to get answers	- Relied on advisor and professors for information
<b>Awareness of opportunities or impediments in the environment</b> – knowing which institutional processes and practices are helpful and which are hindrances	-Opportunities- could talk with advisor during scheduled office hours - Hindrance – institution's limited course offerings, instructional methods
<b>Environmental compatibility-</b> general climate is welcoming, caring, and compatible socially, academically, and physically	- Felt comfortable at university because there were several nontraditional students in her classes - Felt that the instructors cared about her
<b>Summary:</b> Susie relied on her professors for information and visited them regularly. The availability of her professors by phone and email provided an opportunity for academic and emotional support. Susie was comfortable in the university setting and enjoyed spending time on campus.	
<b>Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999): Types of Support Systems</b>	

<p><b>Relationships</b> –support from family, friends, teachers and peers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Depended on her mother for emotional and financial support</li> <li>- Received emotional and academic support from professors</li> <li>-Talked to peers for emotional support</li> <li>-Received encouragement from family and community members throughout program</li> </ul>
<p><b>Self-efficacy</b> – belief in one’s ability to succeed at present task</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- When she first started the program, Susie was confident that she would excel in the program</li> <li>-Susie became overwhelmed and began to doubt her ability to succeed once she became a full-time student</li> </ul>
<p><b>Goals</b> – desired outcome</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Goal was to make a difference in children’s lives</li> <li>-Wanted to be recognized as a professional</li> <li>-Wanted to prove the lady that made her feel less than human at a conference wrong</li> </ul>
<p><b>Progress toward goal</b> - able to measure progress</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Able to look check off courses on plan of study</li> </ul>
<p><b>Management of forces that may hinder or help persistence</b> – understanding and identifying strong forces that affect persistence and manipulating them to one’s benefit</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Identified factors that created risks to persistence (finances and reading speed) and managed those factors with help from mother and instructors</li> <li>-Said “no” to activities that detracted from study time</li> </ul>
<p><b>Summary:</b> Susie completed the teacher education program with support from family, professors, and community members. Susie does not have children of her own and wanted to impact the lives of children for many years after leaving her classroom. Susie had a desire to be a professional and wanted to prove to herself and others that she is a true professional. Susie’s experience with the lady who turned her back on her at a conference motivated her to complete a bachelor’s degree. Her desire to make a difference motivated her to complete the teacher certification program.</p>	